"Editing to Make a Point"

Andrew Garrison Response

The Code of Poetry

I need to start by resetting the terms in the question. Editing is not solely about the visual. Editing is a filmmaking process and creative act, not a code. Talking about editing as "employed" to create some effect in a film is like talking about writing as "employed" to create some effect in a poem or composing as "employed" to create some effect in a piece of music.

A film with a script can be accurately said to be composed and re-composed in three main stages. The script, of course. And in production, the director and actors may substantially amend the screenplay, lopping off or combining scenes, changing meaning with art direction, camera framing, movement, and the casting itself. In editing, the film is written again. Now in the best of situations this makes everything that came before work as it was intended and better. It may also mean losing scenes, combining scenes or change performances. In the case of certain documentaries editing is when the story of the film is really shaped. There are exceptions to all of this and even films that are not edited after shooting, but these are rare.

I am confused by asking how editors use editing to make a point. I hope I am not just being stubborn. Editing is always purposeful. Editing always wants to elicit a certain effect or response. So I am launched, instead, into asking, "How do professional editors think?"

When Walter Murch tries to figure why editing works at all, he is left to suppose several things. Perhaps we are comfortable with time and space shifting in editing because it happens in dreams. But in editing, how much is too much shifting? How does an editor know when a shot is long enough? Murch suggests we may signal with an eyeblink when we've reached the frayed end of our attention span and will no longer sustain undivided attention. But what is this state of consciousness called "attention"? How and why does it change? What is the focus of this state of consciousness? I think most editors wonder about this, though rarely out loud and as articulately as Murch. Most editors are asking themselves while they edit, "Does this work? Have I still got the audience engaged? Have I allowed enough time to experience this moment? Does this happen at the right time, is it the right device, is it the right length to hold the audience and advance the film story?" Murch is unusual because he likes to write about these ideas and ways of thinking. Dede Allen, editor of "The Hustler," "Dog Day Afternoon," "Bonnie and Clyde," "Little Big Man," "The Breakfast Club," among many others, was invited to speak at the School of Sound in 2003. She said, "Me? You should get Walter. He is so good at thinking and talking about what he is doing."

Editing--imagining possible sequences that have not yet been made, solving problems, shaping the flow and sense of a film or the feeling at any moment in a film, is an act of analysis and creation different from the reverse engineering of analyzing a finished movie. Analyzing the editing in a finished film adds to our storehouse of ideas and teaches us more about the plasticity of human consciousness while watching, reading, apprehending media--but it does not necessarily lead to better or new ideas in editing. To return to the music metaphor, music theory

may inform a composer, but music composition began and continues with or without formal music theory. I would bet that if brain activity were scanned and compared during those two different activities we would see some of the same areas start to light up, followed by several other new brain areas going on.

Of course analysis is a part of editing but it is the beginning of it, then put away, and then brought back as needed.   When editing, I often start with a scene idea but switch into a rhythm of editing that is not about thinking but about placement and duration. I might play music when I am engaged in this kind of editing. Or I may be staring at a scene, thinking about a problem and have a seemingly spontaneous idea for a solution. Or I may lay out my scenes as a series of index cards, each scene named on a card. I will rearrange cards until their sequence makes better sense, then work from a more gut-level response as I actually place shots and sounds in this rearranged order.

Teaching about editing or examining a finished film to reveal the editing are very different from editing.

Inventive editing is more imaginative, less cognitive. It may start with a cognitive problem-solving process, but the task is eventually turned over to a non-cognitive part of the brain. When Michael , in "The Godfather," is approaching Sollozo and McCluskey to kill them in the restaurant, the screech of the wheels of the elevated train overwhelms the sound track. Is this a simile? Is it like the blood pounding in Michael's ears as he knows he is about to murder these men? Is it a scream foretelling the act? Is it Michael's anxiety? Is it a "real" sound, something that we are to believe is happening in that movie-world but amplified through Michael's hyper-sensitized perception? Arguments can be made for all and they may all be right. The act of creating that idea and then putting it into practice, while it may have started with a cognitive analysis of the scene and what it was for--that little piece of editing was arrived at through a non-cognitive act.