

One of the most powerful (and often invisible) visual codes is that of editing. Usually editing is employed to create the illusion of movement and action. But sometimes, in subtle or not so subtle ways, editing is used “to make a point.” How do professional editors and teachers of film and television studies use editing to make a point—for entertainment, for enlightenment, for instruction, to create a visual simile or metaphor? How does this kind of editing fit into the longer work that is being created? And how does this kind of editing fit into a larger “history of editing”?

Mary Beth Haralovich RESPONSE:

This response offers some observations about editing and what “a point” can be in television drama: editing without a point; editing for sincerity; editing for caesura; editing onlooker surrogates; and the roles of sound.

Editing helps present coherent narrative space and situates characters in relation to each other, thus helping audiences make sense of the tv show. There is narrative sense, to be sure -- what actions are happening, who is doing what to whom. But there is also “making sense” from the perspective of values, discourses, and subject positions. Editing helps the viewer make both kinds of sense.

*Editing Without a Point.* A tv show with no overt invitation to a message uses “zero-degree” editing, editing that moves the story forward. One can, of course, discuss the discourses that inform the characters and actions, but let’s say that editing of image and sound to tell the story is “zero-degree,” a baseline foundation from which to identify editing that makes a point.

*Editing for Sincerity.* Zero-degree shows use editing to summon together shots of several characters to give the appearance of sincerity and shared concern. This editing arrays together a group of characters as they try to convince another character to take an action. The story has reached an emotional place.

Editing for sincerity makes the point that several characters agree about what should be done. The viewer can join with the group (yes, have a baby shower!) or side with the solitary character (it’s not my thing).

This over-determined sincerity is a means of welcoming the viewer into the collective. This editing is useful in melodrama as it invites empathy.

*Editing for caesura.* Consider the “music video” sequence that occurs at the end of some tv episodes. This sequence comments on the action using a song, both lyrics and music, with shots of various characters in their different spaces.

This sequence makes the point that all of the characters are drawn together within a concept expressed by the song. The sequence implies what the characters share in common -- family, wistful yearning for love, impending doom. Perhaps the sequence is used ironically, to underscore the deadly secrets that some characters don't know about yet.

The “music video” sequence is a summary of character relationships at this point in the story and a suggestion of what will develop in the weeks to come. It also provides caesura, a pause in the action for reflection before we pause for a week until the next episode airs.

*Editing onlooker surrogates.* Legal drama comments on issues in civic life, using onlooker characters as surrogates for the tv audience. A story is set up and followed through the episode, culminating in the spectacle of courtroom or confession. Editing establishes this space of observation, an arena where the law plays out as the civic audience watches.

In the courtroom, the attorneys give speeches, question witnesses and suspects, challenge the opposing attorney and the judge. The television show exhorts the civic audience (diegetic and at home) to probe law and justice. Through onlooker glances and expressions, editing offers up responses and positions as courtroom drama delves into the issues of today ... Abu Graib, political protests, nuclear power, separation of church and state.

In police drama, law and culpability are more clear-cut. In the interrogation scene, performance and editing situate cops and criminals in shifting relations of power. Editing communicates the closed small space, the immobilized perpetrator, and the authority of the interlocutor as the law attempts to wipe the smug expression off the face of the perpetrator. Representatives of the law watch through one-way windows, unseen, like the television audience.

Whether courtroom drama or police drama, the on-looker is a type of “Greek chorus.” The on-looker observes the action and comments on it, often

without words. Through eyes, gestures, and body, the on-looker communicates perspectives about law and justice – bemused detachment, opprobrium, resolve, clarity, frustration, and so on. The onlooker offers the television audience avenues into the show, cues about how one might understand the civic politics of the story. The onlooker is crucial to making a point in tv legal drama.

*The roles of sound.* The effectiveness of all of this editing supposes that people are watching the television screen. For editing to make its point, do we have to be looking at the screen?

For a multi-tasking viewer, sound can give the point “visibility.” Music punctuates action and provides emotional truth and commentary. The grain of the voice elaborates character traits and contributes to narrative redundancy. Effects articulate space and actions.

Sound contributes an emotional register to editing that makes a point: the impassioned pleas of the courtroom; the interactive play of voice in police interrogation; the melodramatic murmurs of collective sincerity; and the themed music video.