

## **Editing to Make a Point**

### **Flow Conference 2008 roundtable**

*Opening response to the organizing question.*  
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The invitation to this roundtable reads, in part, “Usually editing is employed to create the illusion of movement and action. But sometimes... editing *is* used ‘to make a point’.” I had an immediate and strong reaction to these words. I was shocked shitless.

Eisenstein, Bazin and Griffith all must be spinning in their graves! For, on this, they all agreed: editing ALWAYS makes a point. Bazin preferred long takes and wider shots exactly because he wanted filmmakers to avoid the kind of point-making editing creates. Maintain the illusion of a captured reality. Let the audience form their own interpretation. Eisenstein, in contrast, embraced the syntax of editing as the essence of moving images. When shot A and shot B collide, a new meaning C, is the necessary product. As this inevitable serves as commentary, why not harness it’s rhetorical power to the progressive ideals of the revolution? Griffith, of course, split the difference. Classical editing confines it’s point-making to the interior psychological world of the story. It tells us who to identify with, what conflicts are occurring, how the characters react to the situation, what the most important elements of the scene are, how the action is structured.

All of this, of course, is the stuff of any Film and TV 101 class, the basic definitions of film-style that have framed the field, at least since the first edition of Gianetti’s *Understanding Movies* appeared somewhere back in the Meozoic era. How can anything as hip as Flow be so far out of the loop?

Ah, but Television Studies is defined by its close ear to the populist pulse. Could Flow’s dramatic underestimation of the power of editing be symptomatic of something deeper in the Zeitgeist?

So here are some questions I would like to explore:

1. How does the general TV audience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century understand editing, if they understand it at all?
2. How can we theorize the broader state of editing practice today? Has TV editing somehow evolved beyond the classic tripartite spectrum of film style, and how does that relate to how viewers understand the medium.

I do have hypotheses to propose. First I contend that the audience understands editing not at all. Second, I contend this is due in part to the fact that the spectrum of film style has collapsed into a kind of PoMo monostyle that maintains Bazin’s ideology of the facticity of photographic images while employing construction methods as manipulative as anything Eisenstein could imagine, yet with a subtlety that would make Griffith beam with pride.

3 key points of historical change underlie my argument.

A. The development of Direct Cinema television documentaries, their diffusion through broadcasting to the point where their stylistic markers become part of the broader visual language, employed regularly in fiction films to evoke an unmediated real, a style I shall call ‘subjective realism.’

B. The rise of Reality Television as the dominant mode of prime time entertainment. This fiction/documentary hybrid is created by having unskilled performers 'play themselves' without a written script. Thus, in order to generate the entertainment values of defined character and conflict from this raw, raw material, the footage is heavily edited to conform to melodramatic convention within narrative frames devised by the producers. However, this synthetic story is still presented and consumed under the rubric of the real.

C. Television programs are increasingly our primary source for anything resembling a traditional Bazinian photographic real, due the fact that popular films (and TV commercials) have succumbed to the hegemony of CGI special effects in which no sense of a physical real whatsoever may be applied. Now, we can believe no images merely on their face. Ads show what appear to be unedited home movie footage in which Toyota trucks plunge off of cliffs, or get tossed about by sea monsters without damage. The best index of an image's verisimilitude now is our knowledge of the budget and production methods used in creating it. We imagine Tim Gunn to be as tall as he appears on Project Runway because we can't believe the show has the budget to turn him into a dwarf.

If classic Eisensteinian montage produces overt propaganda, the functional invisibility of even the most obvious editing manipulations within the postmodern monostyle constitutes nothing less than an insidious ideology. As such I submit that 'critical editing literacy' must be at the core of media pedagogy.

One way to build such a practice might be to play off the popular concepts of remix's and mash-ups employed in pop music. All edited sequences represent merely one mashup of the pro-filmic event. Whether as thought experiment or actual production exercise, we can ask students to imagine alternate ways sequences can be assembled, and what differences in meaning might result.