
SELECTED TAKES

Film Editors
On Editing

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Foreword by Robert Wise

PRAEGER

New York
Westport, Connecticut
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Susan E. Morse

Susan E. Morse attended the New York University Graduate Film School and simultaneously launched her editing career as Ralph Rosenblum's apprentice.

After assisting Rosenblum on Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* and *Interiors*, Morse became the director's editor on his next film, *Manhattan*. Their relationship has spanned 14 years and 15 films.

Woody Allen and Susan E. Morse have developed a unique working method. A first assembly is constructed during or immediately after shooting. The director and editor then spend marathon sessions discussing the film. Out of these sessions new scenes are planned, shot, and integrated into the final cut of the film.

Since 1980, beginning with *Stardust Memories*, Morse has cut all of Woody Allen's films at the director's postproduction facility, the Manhattan Film Center. The center is equipped with two Steenbecks, a MoViola, a coding machine, a turntable, a dual cassette player, a CD player, microphones, a Nagra and transfer facilities for mag track, a scratch-mixing console and dubbers, 35mm and 16mm projectors, and video transfer equipment. This complete working environment has given the editor and director the resources and control necessary to produce such challenging films as *Zelig*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, and *Hannah and Her Sisters*, which was nominated for an Academy Award for best film editing in 1986.

1979

Manhattan

1980

Stardust Memories

1981	<i>Arthur</i>
1982	<i>A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy</i>
1983	<i>Zelig</i>
1984	<i>Broadway Danny Rose</i>
1985	<i>The Purple Rose of Cairo</i>
1986	<i>Hannah and Her Sisters*</i>
1987	<i>Radio Days</i>
	<i>September</i>
	<i>Another Woman</i>
1989	<i>New York Stories</i> (Woody Allen segment, "Oedipus Wrecks")
	<i>Crimes and Misdemeanors</i>
1990	<i>Alice</i>

*Academy Award nomination for best achievement in film editing.

Have you had any life experiences other than artistic ones that influenced your desire to become a film editor?

It would be a mistake to say I ever actually decided to become a film editor or even that I wanted to become a film editor per se. I think I'm temperamentally suited to it because I've always enjoyed problem solving—math was one of my great strengths in school—and I've always enjoyed team sports. I guess the analogy I'm stretching for is that filmmaking is fundamentally a matter of team work, and editing is an opportunity—the last chance, in fact—to highlight each team member's strengths and downplay each person's weaknesses, all in hopes of making the entire team look good.

How have you applied those experiences to film?

A film has the greatest chance of succeeding if everyone is working for the good of the film rather than for his own glory. On Woody's films we have been lucky enough to hold together essentially the same team for years. We know each other's strengths and weaknesses and help each other so the end result hopefully shows everyone off well. Woody is the key in that his perfectionism inspires everyone to try his hardest, but Bobby Greenhut as Woody's producer also deserves a lot of credit for giving each department enough autonomy to allow for creativity. He gives honest and incisive feedback and gives us each a pat on the back when it is deserved.

How did you get your first job in editing?

A month after arriving at the NYU Film School a friend and I discovered a notice on the lobby notice board announcing a job opening in

the cutting room of a film that Roberta Hodes, one of our teachers, had directed. We both made a beeline for her office and were told that we were the first candidates for the job and that the only requirement was that we could splice. Well, we both had that down so it was simply up to Roberta to choose between us. She chose me.

How did you become Ralph Rosenblum's assistant?

I was a quick study on Roberta's film, so Jack Sholder, Roberta's editor, recommended me to Ralph Rosenblum as an apprentice. I'm very grateful that I was in film school at the same time I was working in professional cutting rooms. By day, I'd watch an experienced editor grapple with and solve cutting problems, and by night, I'd face similar problems in my own films and attempt similar solutions. Each experience enriched the other.

On which films did you assist Ralph Rosenblum?

The first one was called *Remember Those Poker-Playing Monkeys*, which didn't even open in New York until three years later under the name *The Great Georgia Bank Hoax* and lasted perhaps one weekend. The next film was *Annie Hall*, a job I elected to take in lieu of returning to NYU for my second year of graduate school. I preferred to be paid while learning, rather than to go more deeply into debt. I gambled that Ralph and Woody would give me an education, which they certainly did.

What was that experience on Annie Hall like?

I was flattered by the degree to which Ralph and Woody asked my opinion and seemed to take what I said under serious consideration. I was certainly busy at the time with standard assistant's tasks—pulling select takes, putting away trims, filling out room tone, and double splicing—but I was always keeping one ear cocked to the conversation between Ralph and Woody. It was always interesting to hear why certain takes were preferred over others, where they felt they had left too much slack, how the pacing affected the humor, and how the jokes sometimes obfuscated the story line and undercut the emotional impact of the film.

My most vivid memory was the day that Ralph suggested a memory montage of moments that Annie and Alvy had shared for the end of the picture. While Woody and Ralph chatted about the pros and cons of such a notion, I envisioned such a sequence in my mind and began flipping through the log book in search of likely candidates. By the time they had decided to go ahead with it, I had pulled out virtually all of the cuts you see in the final version. When Ralph turned around to ask me to look for the raw material they would need, I could simply hand it to him. It was a terrific moment for me because I felt very much a part of the process. I'm sure it was a great moment for them because they didn't have to break stride between the decision to try something and the chance to execute that decision.

I think the greatest lesson I learned from Ralph was to think of the

film I was working on as raw documentary footage crying out for coherence, rather than strictly as a linear script. It's a very liberating approach to let the footage lead you, even if it means deviating from the emphasis implicit in the script. *Annie Hall* found itself in the cutting room, which is neither to say that the dailies weren't terrific—which they were—nor to give all the credit to Ralph. Ralph deserves a lot of the credit for the success of that film, but what I witnessed in that cutting room was not one man's handiwork. It was the teamwork, the collaboration between Ralph and Woody, that made the reworking of the film a success and that, tangentially, inspired me to stick with editing, at least for a while.

Manhattan is the first Woody Allen film you edited. How did the spectacular montage of New York City, which opens the film, develop as a sequence?

The daytime material was cut in a regular rhythm and carried by the "Chapter One" voice-over, which united the images, introduced you to Isaac, the central character of the film, and let you know you were about to see a comedy. Equally importantly, it focused attention on the style as well as the content of the photography. Only in the nighttime footage did the cutting rhythm become more energetic as "Rhapsody In Blue" did, still striving not to distract from the photography. The point was to convey Isaac's idealized view of the city and to introduce Manhattan itself as a character in the film. Making the cutting itself more flashy would have distracted from both of these intentions. Woody had originally conceived of that montage as a sort of overture to the picture. We were always a little bit wary of how it would play, so for months, whenever we discussed the running time of the film, we made a point of qualifying it as the running time with the montage, so we could subtract in our minds and find out what the real running time was.

How did the editing help to create the illusion of documentary reality in Zelig?

The whole point was to disguise the seams between the old and new footage. People always compliment us on the scenes when Fanny Brice serenades Zelig on the rooftop of the Westbury Hotel and the Nazi rally being disrupted by Zelig waving frantically behind the podium where Hitler was speaking. In neither case had we done anything extraordinary in the editing. When people tell you they loved or hated a sequence, it is important to look to the preceding material for the reason. We got credit for miracle making because of the way we introduce Zelig. The opening glimpses of him in the tickertape parade are convincing throw-aways. We matched the production footage to the stock footage convincingly in lighting, contrast, flicker, and grain, but it was obvious that the stock shot was extremely wide while our footage was much closer and shot from a distinctly different camera angle. However, after a grainy still photo, we next show Zelig live with Babe Ruth. Woody is in the background of the shot, his feet are in frame and his shadow follows

his actions. Ruth's bat dissects Zelig's body when he swings at a pitch and nothing looks fake! We convince the audience that we can do anything. This is unmistakably Woody and unmistakably Babe Ruth. That shot, for me, is the key to the success of the documentary style of the film as a whole. We established what we could do and thereafter could get away with a little bit more. That "we" is not exclusively editorial. It includes Woody; Gordon Willis, the director of photography; Mel Bourne, the production designer; and Santo Loquasto, the costume designer; with a strong assist from Joel Hynek and Stuart Robertson of the optical house, R/Greenberg Associates. The masterpiece was the Babe Ruth optical, and leading with it established a level of expectation in the audience, which their expectations fulfilled for us as much as we fulfilled it for them.

How did the nightclub montage in The Purple Rose of Cairo develop during the editing process?

Woody had wanted to create a 1930s-style nightclubbing montage with multiple superimpositions. He shot a dozen or so set-ups, but once you start layering them you find that's not much to work with. I found a couple of Times Square shots from our *Zelig* stock footage to use as background in the beginning of the montage. With the help of friend and film buff extraordinaire Jim Davis, I located a half-dozen such montages in 1930s films and came up with a short list of key shots that said "1930s": a rotating prism shot of swirling champagne glasses, a piano keyboard, neon signs, hands chilling a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket, and an extreme close-up of champagne bubbles. I put together a rough version of the montage on video in a couple of hours, to demonstrate to Woody the need for more material. It was a pleasure to be able to show Woody what I wanted rather than have to describe it in arduous detail. Once I had Woody's feedback on that preliminary version, he asked Gordon Willis to pick up whatever I needed. The original dozen or so shots became the narrative line of the montage, and the additional shots we picked up provided the layering that enabled me to mimic the thirties' style. Of course, in trying to evoke a recognizable style, you exaggerate to make your point, but that's the fun of it. I went back to the video house to put together a final version and then turned that over to the optical house, R/Greenberg Associates, along with a chart of the five interwoven strands, and told them to give me the equivalent on film.

What other responsibilities have you handled on Woody Allen's films?

On *Radio Days* I was responsible for hiring the musicians, coordinating the recording sessions, negotiating with the music publishers and record companies, and even putting together a model shot—the U-boat Joe sights from the beach. On several of Woody's films I've recorded voice-overs and done a great deal of scratch mixing. I guess I learned in film

school or team sports or more likely, from my parents, that you simply do whatever needs to be done without worrying about whether it falls under your job description.

How much impact can editing have on the style of a film?

Godard has always been given enormous credit for his audacity in using jump cuts in *Breathless*. I would be very surprised to hear that he began shooting the film with that thought in mind. I would much more readily believe that he and his editor threw caution to the winds in the cutting room in an effort to solve pacing problems, because it made emotional and philosophical sense in that picture to break the traditional rules of filmmaking. I don't know this for a fact, but I do know that such stylistic elements often evolve in the cutting room rather than spring full-grown from an auteur's mind. By the same token, if editing solutions work to the point of being truly seamless, it is entirely possible that no one will see through them and therefore no credit will be given for them.

Woody and I had a good chuckle over a comment someone made in a recent screening to the effect that the film looked as though it had been shot that way, that nothing had been discarded and reshot or in any way reworked—this on a film where the reshoots ultimately comprised 40 percent of the final film and where the climactic scene had not even been a part of the original script. As is the case with most of Woody's films, the editing solutions overlap to such a degree with rewrites and reshoots that it would be more correct simply to call them postproduction solutions and not attempt to pigeonhole them more exactly. The point remains, if they work, they feel organic to the film and therefore invisible.

Do you think an editor can have a style?

An editing style is intrinsic to the style of a given picture, as in *Breathless* or *Zelig*. One could point to certain signature devices that given editors use repeatedly. A friend of mine always seems to find an excuse for using a lyrical pair of slow dissolves to link three establishing shots together in his films. It's simply a recognizable flourish, like a handwriting flourish that tells you who wrote a line. I'm not sure I can give you an example in my own work. Maybe my style is to be invisible.

Arthur Schmidt

Arthur Schmidt's first exposure to editing occurred in his father's cutting room, where the elder Schmidt edited *Sunset Boulevard* and *Some Like It Hot*.

Schmidt initiated his career as an apprentice at Paramount and continued to build his credentials as an assistant on *Little Big Man* and *Souther*. His assignment as standby editor on *Marathon Man* proved pivotal when he became Jim Clark's assistant, gained Clark's confidence and ultimately garnered an associate editor credit.

As editor, Arthur Schmidt has collaborated with Michael Apted on *Coal Miner's Daughter*, for which he received an Academy Award nomination, and *Firstborn*. He worked on Caleb Deschanel's *The Escape Artist* for Francis Ford Coppola's Zoetrope Studios and edited *Ruthless People* for the trio of Zucker, Zucker, and Abrahams.

Schmidt has had a long relationship with director Robert Zemeckis, editing *Back to the Future* and its two sequels. Zemeckis offered him the challenge of his editing career, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, which achieved near perfection in combining animation and live action with an attention to detail never before accomplished. The complex technical requirements stretched Schmidt's role as an editor with countless demands on his time and talent. His enormous contribution to the film was rewarded with the 1988 Oscar for best editing.

1976

Marathon Man (with Jim Clark)

1977

The Last Remake of Beau Geste (with Jim Clark)