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The Nuances of Film Editing

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The word "edit" has a bad reputation. To lay folk, the word brings to mind overindulgence, censorship, and the property neighbored by "File" and "View." But people in film know better. Walter Murch, the editing savant behind *Apocalypse Now* and *The English Patient*, once compared film editing to translation in that the challenge is not so much to find ways to cut things out, but rather to leave things in—to find ways in which ideas and emotions make sense in one context (the printed page) and still resonate in a completely different one (reels of celluloid). In cinema, the editor is just as much of a storyteller as the screenwriter; it's not uncommon, after all, for editors on documentaries to take codirecting credits.

For this article, I spoke to three established film editors about the challenge of artistic transubstantiation.

Melody London

Anyone who loses sleep over jittery music videos and CNN promos is likely to take comfort in the work of film editor Melody London. At first, it might seem odd to even refer to her minimalist style as "editing"—London-edited films like Jim Jarmusch's *Down By Law* and *Stranger Than Paradise* have fewer cuts per hour than most car commercials.

"I think it's often the case that less is more," says London, who is currently editing Charles Randolph-Wright's *On the One*. "I mean, it's a visual medium. Unless you're doing *My Dinner with Andre*, where the dialogue is the story, I find that often we lose a lot of the expository scenes and go for the essence, the throughlines of the expository scenes."

To be fair, not all of the films London edits rely on long takes or a minimalist style: In *Joe the King* and *Novocaine*, the editing may have more of a "traditional" feel, but London's still applying a carefully measured sense of storytelling. "I think of the film as the final rewrite of the script," London says, explaining her approach to collaborating with directors, or writer/directors—negotiating the latter, London says, can require a special kind of diplomatic skill. "I've worked with a lot of writer/directors," she explains, "and often there tends to be a kind of attachment to the script, more so than, for example, the person I'm working with now [Randolph-Wright], who did not write the script." (The *On the One* screenplay was written by Kevin Heffernan and Peter E. Lengyel of the Broken Lizard comedy troupe, from a story by Monica Lengyel Karson.)

When dealing with a director like Randolph-Wright, London says, "there's a greater freedom, actually, with the material, because [the director] has also worked with the script in a detached way. It's not as personal to them—it doesn't reflect some kind of personal experience, or autobiographical kind of sentiment. . . . I think they're more objective, which an editor needs to be, so there's almost an equality in that sense."

Still, London has come up with an assortment of strategies she deploys when dealing with writer/directors. "You have to make a writer/director understand that you're working with them, so I wouldn't suggest making any real 'interpretations' on the material. Even if you have a strong opinion about something not working, I would include it in the first cut and make sure [the director] had viewed everything. Usually, it's much clearer and simpler to show people how something may not be working, rather than interpret it."

London also credits the advent of nonlinear editing systems (like Avid and Final Cut Pro) to improving negotiations between directors and editors. "Because now one is generally working with Avid, there is much more freedom to try things and experiment, and if they don't like it, it can always be put back in a flash. [Before nonlinear editing], I think it was a question of trying to encourage the director to try things, and see how they work."

Often, all it takes to instigate change—for better or for worse—is a shift in perspective. "I think there's also a danger in getting used to the flow of material in a certain form," London says. "You get used to the scenes playing in a certain rhythm with all the dialogue, and then when you see parts excised, it's kind of a shock. The questioning leads to more looking at it, and then looking at it again, and then looking at it again, before you reject that new form (or shape) that it might be taking."

Surprisingly, one of the most famous scenes in a London-edited film—in fact, probably one of the most famous scenes in any American independent film—was almost left behind in a fit of reevaluation. "In *Down By Law*, we had a situation where we had many scenes that were taking place in prison with the three characters: Roberto Benigni, John Lurie, and Tom Waits," London recalls. "And that section of the film was just running too long. There wasn't a problem with the performances, or the scene playing well, or anything having to do with the writing—it was just a question of that portion of the film running too long. So we tried viewing the film with certain portions of that taken out. And we'd look at it again and again, and see what was being sacrificed, and often we'd try to change the order of those scenes and put them back, and let the film run longer. And curiously, one of the parts we tried taking out became one of the most quoted scenes in the film: the 'I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream!' scene."

London ultimately cautions against trying to apply generalities, and encourages a sort of receptiveness to others and, ultimately, one's self. "Each story is unique to each given project," she says. "It has to do with the style of the film and what the

director is trying to achieve. Each director has a unique approach to their material, and you have to understand what their process is, as well as [your] own."

Sam Pollard

It would be tough to find an editor as fearless as Sam Pollard. "There's no material that frightens me!" he says, laughing. Pollard is the rare film editor who is equally at home with narrative features as he is with documentaries. In the realm of feature films, Pollard is perhaps best known for having edited Spike Lee's *Mo' Better Blues*, *Jungle Fever*, and *Clockers*, among other features in Lee's repertoire. But he's also an omnipresent figure in the world of documentary editing. Pollard's credits here include Lee's *4 Little Girls and Jim Brown: All American*, as well as numerous nonfiction projects for PBS. (Most recently, he produced an installment of The Blues miniseries, and directed, wrote, and produced public television's *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow* miniseries.)

"Working in documentary has given me a tremendous sense of confidence," he says. "Most docs, you have to create a palate, create the script while editing."

On features, Pollard has a set way of working. "Usually, I read the script first, and see how I respond to the characters and the situation and the storyline. I usually don't read the script again, unless it's a very complicated scene, with a lot of [additional] improvised dialogue." Pollard says he's worked this way pretty consistently since 1981. "For the first couple features I did, I kept the script in front of me at all times," he says. "The one film that changed from script to screen that I worked on in the feature category is a little-known horror film—the first feature that I ever edited—called Gamma 693," a film, according to the Internet Movie Database, also known as *Battalion of the Living Dead*, *The Chilling*, and/or *Night of the Wehrmacht Zombies*. "It did not turn out to be very good, even with all the changes—but I tried."

Pollard stresses the importance of an editor understanding the shape of cinematic storytelling. "I usually start a project when they start shooting," he says. The

process, he says, breaks down into these elements: "There are three levels of storytelling. Level one, the director has an idea, and prepares a script with that idea. Level two, they find a location, a cast, and get a crew in place. That changes the script; it changes the energy and level again, because someone's reading your words, and blocking it, and shooting it.

"And then the third level of storytelling is in the editing room. When you look at the credits to a John Sayles movie, you'll see it says, 'Written, directed, and edited by John Sayles.' Why did he take all three jobs? Because he knows that that's the evolution of the storytelling process."

Ultimately, though, this evolutionary process can't be rushed, and Pollard, like London, opts for a thorough approach. A difficult set of dailies should be approached, Pollard says, by "editing sequences first."

"That approach usually gives the editor the opportunity to get comfortable with the material," he says. "I will usually sit down with pen and paper and write down all the sequences, and then start to develop a structure. I always suggest patience when approaching this task, because most times, this structuring process goes through many permutations before figuring out the arc of the film."

Kate Evans

If Walter Murch is right, and editing a feature from a screenplay is like translating words from one language to another, editing a feature from a screenplay based on a novel must be like some cruel game of telephone. Kate Evans, editor on the film adaptation of Tracy Chevalier's best-selling novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, directed by Peter Webber, found that some major changes had to be made in the editing room to match the structure of Chevalier's work of speculative historical fiction about a Johannes Vermeer painting.

"When we finished shooting, we had a rough cut of about three hours and thirty minutes," Evans says, "and that was fairly faithful to the book!" Evans went on to compare the editing process to working on a documentary: "Almost every

sequence was moved around." Evans is especially proud of one particular sequence midway through the film in which we see, in steady succession, Vermeer's maid Grete learning Vermeer's wife is pregnant; Grete seeing Vermeer and his wife flirting; and Grete flirting with her boyfriend. "None of those sequences in the original film followed each other," says Evans. "Those three scenes work brilliantly together, though they came from completely different places. We didn't have a grand design of what the structure was going to be."

Evans says that she was ultimately glad that they had as much footage to draw from as they did. "I think Peter knew quite a lot of the time when he was shooting that some things weren't going to work, but sometimes you need to shoot things, because the actors have read the script and expect them to be shot—essentially, for political reasons." Much of the material that ended up being cut was dialogue. The film version of Girl with a Pearl Earring incorporates many near-wordless sequences like the aforementioned flirting montage. Grete's artistic talent is established in a silent kitchen sequence, and many of the scenes that establish her relationship with Vermeer are similarly still.

"I think one of the things about period movies that can be especially difficult is the dialogue," says Evans. "Even if it's absolutely correct for the time, it can take you out of the movie. We wanted to avoid any line that jarred." She laughs. "You have to listen very closely to the dialogue, so you don't get any 'forsooth!' kind of lines."

Another obstacle Evans faced in editing Girl was when—or even if—to incorporate footage of the actual Vermeer painting the story centers around. "We felt we had to include it, but both Peter and I felt very strongly that when you really look at the painting, she doesn't look very much like [lead actress Scarlett Johansson]," says Evans, who resolved to work around this by not showing the painting until right before the credits roll. "Because you haven't seen the painting, you feel she looks exactly like it. But if you actually put the painting next door, you would feel the differences."

For the final product, Evans's own gauge of what to keep in and leave out

amounted to a not-so-complex formula of common sense. “I mean, really, we used the best bits. That’s what it comes down to. You can’t be too reverent to the original text, because people want a film that works within its own terms. Even Tracy Chevalier is pleased with our film, because it works. And that’s what people want—they don’t want to see something ‘faithful,’ if in fact they’re asleep before the end.”

After talking with this diverse trio of editors, I thought that in the end, perhaps one of the greatest apocryphal bits of film editing advice is the pointer that Stanley Kubrick allegedly gave Jerry Lewis. The two were said to have crossed paths sometime circa 1968, when they were working in adjacent editing rooms. (Kubrick would have been editing *2001*; Lewis, The Big Mouth). In despair over a difficult sequence, Lewis lamented, “You can’t polish a turd,” to which Kubrick reportedly responded, “You can if you freeze it.”

Again and again, the advice proffered by the editors I spoke with broke the art of editing down into two simple necessities: time and space. Pollard is a strong advocate of the latter. “I believe that to get the best creatively out of people, you need to give them room to create,” he says. Evans, too, confirms the importance of creative freedom. Though she had worked with director Peter Webber on several prior projects, she was nonetheless grateful for the space she was given. “We look at the film together, and then we decide what needs to be done,” she explains. “And then I do it, without Peter there, and then he’ll come back and look at it again.” Evans says she found that this method was ultimately beneficial for the director, too. “Peter found that he wanted to keep his distance from the actual physical cutting so that he could try and have some freshness and objectivity when he saw the film again. If he was there when I was literally making the cuts, he found he became too involved in the actual cutting.” She chuckles. “We work very well together.”