THE PARADE'S GONE BY... Kevin Brownlow

University of California Press
Berkeley • Los Angeles • London

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An editor's job is no more limited to the joining up of scenes than a poet's to the rhyming of words. Both are essential functions, but both are merely mechanical stages in a creative process.

Editing is directing the film for the second time. To gauge the psychological moment—to know exactly where to cut—requires the same intuitive skill as that needed by a director.

The director controls the action and judges the point at which it should occur. So does the editor. The editor's field of operation is narrower, because he has to work with what he has been given. If a director is dissatisfied with the contents of a scene, he can augment it, or subtract from it, and then reshoot. The editor has to put up with what he has, or discard it. But by careful placing and selection, he can transform an inferior scene into a perfectly acceptable one. With the director and cameraman, the editor is one of the three major contributors to the quality of a motion picture; he is capable of destroying a well-directed film and of rescuing poorly directed material. But his efforts are never fully appreciated, except by the director. The producer, and the members of the unit, seldom realize the effort that goes into the various editing stages. It is small wonder that those outside the industry have the idea that an editor merely joins up the scenes as they come from the studio.

This, however, is the way he operated in the most primitive days. At that time, the scenes were lengthy and generally required a title to separate them from the next scene. The material was screened in the projection room; the director would tell the cutter how he wanted the scenes to go. The cutter would make notes, and would take the material to the cutting room, where he would join up the shots in the order described.

As filmic storytelling became more imaginative, so the cutter's job became more complex, more responsible. The role of editor was created. Editing gave the cinema an identity of its own. The pioneer's strict adherence to stage tradition and practice was undermined by several elements. One was the work of D. W. Griffith. But his experiments were counterbalanced by a large number of routine and frequently dull films, made much as any other director might have made them. Experiment took time; Griffith was paid by men who were satisfied that the industry had made all the progress it needed and it was not often that he could spare that time.

The real impetus to break away from the confines of the stage was provided by the comedy producers. They were not obliged to imbue their films with an aura of dignity, as were the dramatic producers. The less dignity the better. They realized that to keep the audience laughing continuously, the action had to move and more *fast*. All dead footage was therefore ruthlessly slashed. Instead of a character-leaving shot . . . *hold it* . . . *hold it* . . . *cut to next* . . . *hold it* . . . *hold it* . . . *character enters*. . . . Instead of this deadly routine, the editors of comedy pictures adopted a different rhythm—and cut on action, before the screen was empty. The transition was as fast as it was smooth, and this technique made some of the musty, stagebound dramas look so ponderous that around 1914 they began to follow suit.

Fast cutting was not a conscious invention, but a logical development. In many ways, film making was a game, and with youthful enthusiasm the comedy

Tom Miranda, Goldwyn editor.

producers sought ways to make the game more enjoyable, more elaborate. Soon, the work of the leading comedy producer, Mack Sennett, was hailed as art—a term which shook him into self-consciousness. Like Chaplin, he was made acutely aware of his talent, and he depended upon outside influence for judgment, rather than relying on his own intuition. But until that time, the Keystone rough-and-tumble, guided by such fine directors as F. Richard Jones and Del Lord, produced a constant stream of real cinema, the influence of which cannot be overestimated.

The ability to cut quickly does not necessarily imply an ability to cut well. The complexities of editing are not solved simply by speeding up the pace. But at least this fast cutting, in its influence on the dramatic film, brought about a refreshing metamorphosis.

Scenes were no longer photographed from one fixed position in one long take. They were broken up into a form which was to become the basic grammar of motion pictures—long shot, medium shot, and close shot. For a while, around 1914-15, the cinema carried on with a solidly based grammar, but with no syntax. The long shot was followed by the mid-shot, which was followed by the close shot; there was little attempt at rearrangement to heighten the effect.

The work of Griffith certainly changed all that. *The Birth of a Nation,* released in 1915, was the first feature film to exploit fully the extraordinary power of editing. In the truest sense of the word, this was a masterpiece; it served as an example for the rest of the industry.

The editing of this film, although often frenetic and uncontrolled, is still powerful. But it lacks the polish that Hollywood was later to become famous for; it lacks *smoothness*. This is a quality common to most other American film makers which Griffith, strangely enough, seldom displayed.

For Griffith, the master of editing, could conceive the most complex and amazing cutting. But when it came to its execution, he seemed to lose interest. It is one of the incomprehensible features of this great man that he was capable of the most meticulous staging, ensuring the correctness of every detail, yet he could be blind to glaringly mismatched editing.

A long shot would be taken in bright sunlight; the following shot would be dull and overcast. A warrior would sheathe his sword in the long shot; in the close shot he would sheathe it again.

Andrew Stone worked with Griffith's editor, Jimmy Smith. "Jimmy Smith said, as I recall, that Griffith had a great habit of shooting everything in long shot. He'd then sit in the projection room and decide where he wanted close-ups. Jimmy often bemoaned the fact that Griffith just never gave a damn about matching. He'd pick out where he wanted his close-ups and then he'd go on to any stage with any background and get these beautiful art close-ups and cut them in. Now, number one: it's very difficult to look at the action in a projection room and then come back and try to repeat it for the close-up. If you do it at the same time, fine—you repeat the same action at the same speed. But if you do it a month or two later, well, the other action may have been faster, it may have been slower. You're just relying on memory. When you put the two shots together, you'll see how wrong you are! If you're going to make a retake of a close-up today you first study the film in the projection room, then you take the Moviola out on the set and you have the cutter study the master shot while you shoot the cut-in—just so the section matches exactly. If an actor sits down in the master and he's taking off his jacket, you can't have him sitting down in the close-up taking off his tie! And this is why Jimmy Smith was so sore about Griffith never giving a damn about matching."[1]

A theory has been put forward[2] that this was a deliberate style, that Griffith, in common with several other directors, quite intentionally created these obvious double actions. This could be true—and it is interesting that Griffith's early Biograph films and his 1919 *The Greatest Question* had none of these overlapping cuts. *Intolerance* (1916) and *Orphans of the Storm* (1922) were riddled with them.

So while Griffith forced an awareness of the power of editing on the industry, and while he laid its foundations, the refinements and polish were supplied by others.

Editing, in common with other aspects of techniques, settled down to a solid professionalism around 1918. Astonishingly, most editors worked without the animated viewers considered essential today. They cut in the hand. Modern film editors are baffled by this; how could they possibly judge the pace, or the rhythm? William Hornbeck, one of the great film editors, insisted that it was perfectly

[1] *Andrew Stone to author, London, April 1962.*
[2] *Notably by Ray Angus, editor of the* Silents Please *TV series (conversation with author, New York, March 1964).*

simple once you grew accustomed to it and that he still uses that method occasionally.

Animated viewers, particularly the celebrated Moviola silent head,[3] which operated by foot pedal and was motor driven, appeared in the twenties. There were also some hand-cranked models, and other experimental bits of machinery. But most editors preferred to use the ordinary ground-glass screen on their bench, which had a light beneath it, enabling them to examine the frame; some of them fitted a magnifying glass on a rotating stand, which they could swing across for close examination.

Experience in the cutting room, ideal training for directors, was also sought after by people from other departments.

When Bebe Daniels was making comedies for Paramount in the mid-twenties, she used to work with the writers.

"One day, the editor, Dorothy Arzner, came to me and said, 'Bebe, you could have heightened this scene a great deal. . . .' She started to explain, but I didn't get it. 'Come up to the cutting room some night and I'll show you what I mean.' So I went up with her, and I became fascinated. I went up every night, if I wasn't working at night myself. It taught me more about writing for motion pictures than anything in the world could have taught me.

"Dorothy used to hold the film up to the light and cut it in the hand. I remember my first lesson; she held the film up and said, 'Well, now, look—this is dead from here to here—we're going to put this close-up in here—so we'll go to here. We don't need this—wait a minute, we can come in here. . . .'

"Gradually I began to understand, and learned to cut film myself. We used to mark the frame with a wax pencil, scrape the emulsion off with a razor blade, apply the glue, then put the other piece of film on top and press it down hard. Then we'd check our sprocket holes, and examine the cut under the magnifying glass. Dorothy used to cut as we went on those comedies, and it was very helpful to see the cut rushes in the morning. We could keep the pace right. We might have slowed down as we went along, but seeing the cut rushes kept us to the right speed.

"Every night I'd trudge up there and work with Dorothy until seven or eight, then I'd go home with my nails full of glue. I remember saying to Dorothy that I didn't want to bore her by coming up all the time.

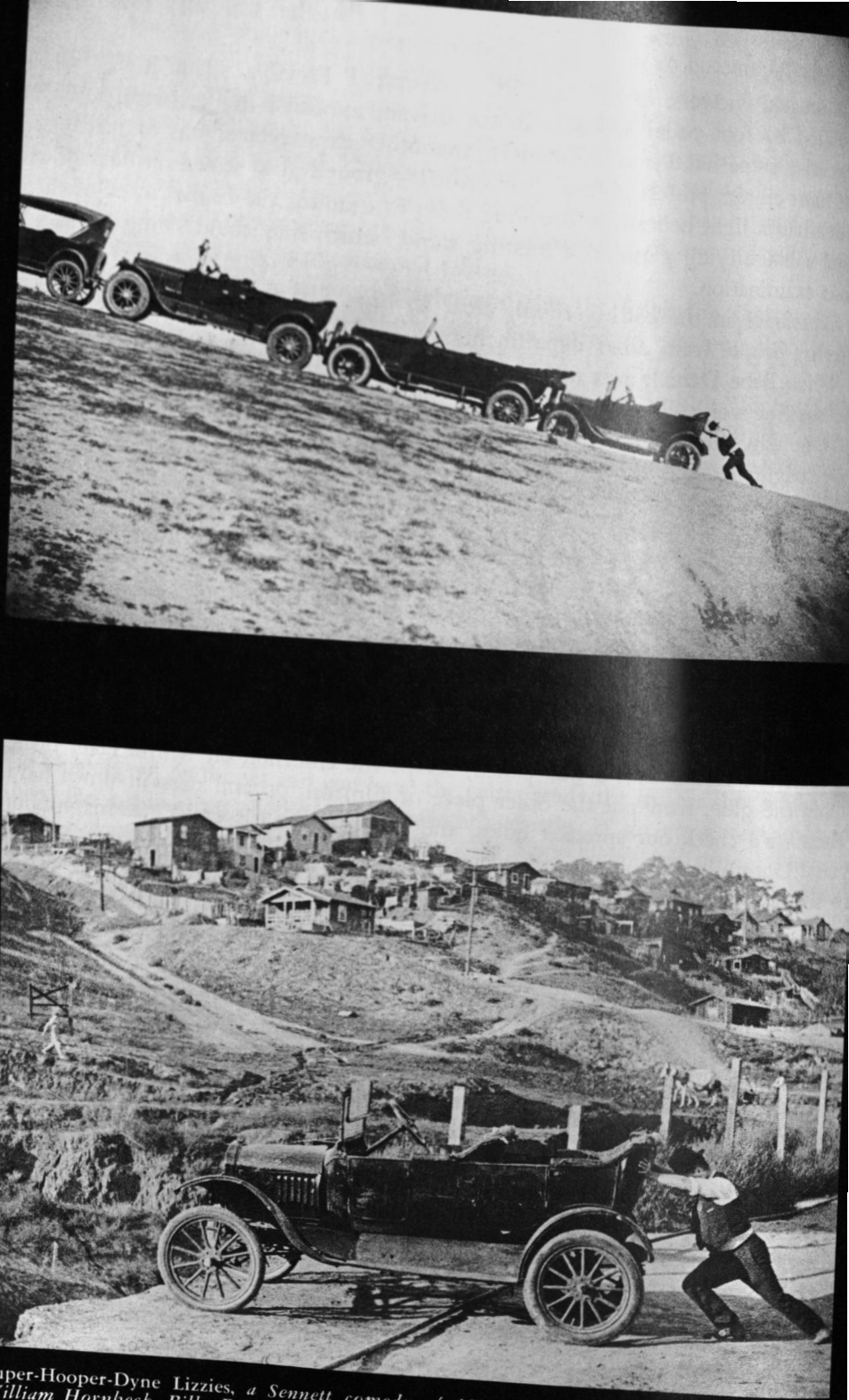
" 'Bebe,' she said. 'I love this.' "[4]

Cutting in the hand died out when sound brought synchronization problems—but it continued long after the introduction of Moviolas.

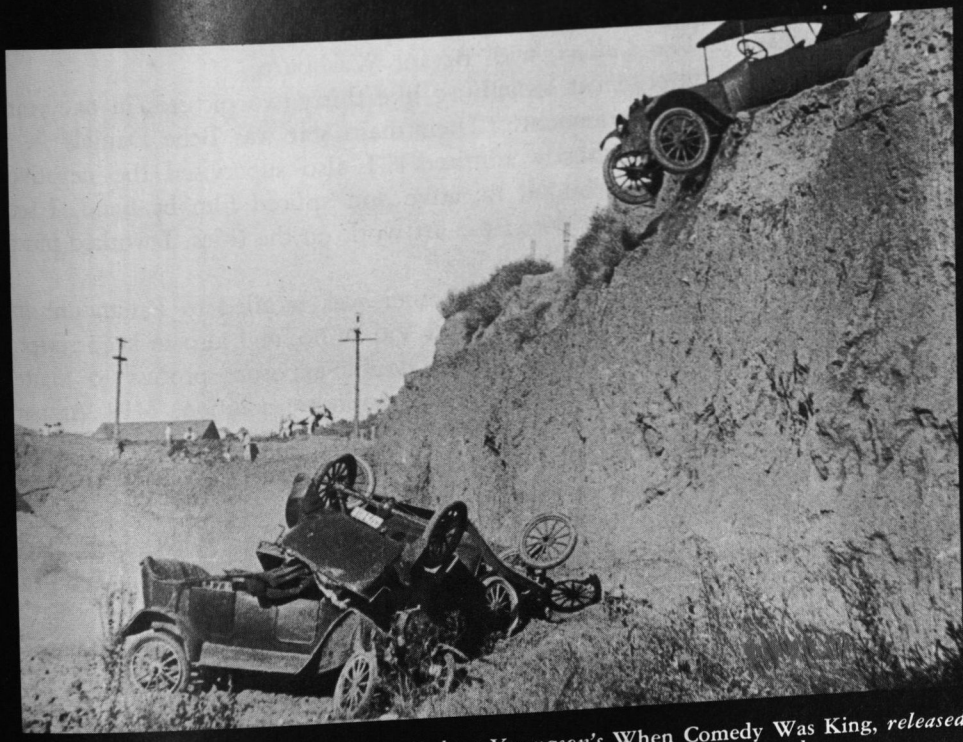
"The old cutters would not use them," said Bebe Daniels. "They were like old cooks who refused to use pressure cookers."

That cutting in the hand produced satisfactory results with surprising speed cannot be denied; the best editors maintained the rhythm of sequences to perfection. And rhythm is the basis of film editing, just as it is in music. A change of shot, or movement within a shot, sets up the beat, and once this is established it has to be preserved. Some editors cut without bothering about the beat of the scene; few people are aware of the mistake, just as few people notice when a

[3] *The first Moviola appeared in 1904.*
[4] *Bebe Daniels to author, London, July 1963.*



Super-Hooper-Dyne Lizzies, *a Sennett comedy of 1925, directed by Del Lord, edited by William Hornbeck. Billy Bevan disturbs some parked cars as he pushes his old jalopy up*



the street. This sequence appeared in Robert Youngson's When Comedy Was King, *released by Twentieth-Century Fox, from which these frame enlargements were taken.*

shot is slightly soft. But while an audience may not remark on it, or even be aware of it, such errors are subliminally disturbing. One feels slightly uneasy without knowing why. In silent pictures, the rhythm of the picture was especially important—and a bad cut could be as offensive esthetically as a missed beat in a symphony.

Editors are passed over by film historians because their work, when successful, is virtually unnoticeable. No historian, without knowing the problems, without knowing the director's working methods, or without being an editor himself, could possibly evaluate the editor's contribution. As Anthony Wollner, A.C.E., pointed out: "An editor need not be a writer, but he must know story structure; he need not be a cameraman, but he must understand pictorial composition and the compatibility of angles; he need not be a director, but he must feel the actors' performances and the dramatic or comedy pacing as surely as the director."[5]

Editing is an art, completely satisfying in itself. At the same time, editing experience is ideal training for direction. Dorothy Arzner, following her years as an editor, became Hollywood's most successful woman director.[6] She began at Famous Players in 1919, typing scripts. These scripts gradually aroused her interest, and she discussed them with the cutter. At that time, the cutter also acted as script clerk on the set; this was known as "keeping script."

"One cutter, Nan Heron, was particularly helpful," said Dorothy Arzner.[7] "She was cutting a Donald Crisp picture, *Too Much Johnson;* I watched her work on one reel and she let me do the second, while she watched and guided every cut. On Sunday I went into the studio and assembled the next reel. On Monday I told her about it and she looked at it and approved. I finished the picture under her guidance. She then recommended me to keep script and cut the next Donald Crisp picture, *The Six Best Cellars,* with Bryant Washburn.

"I was a very fast cutter. I cut something like thirty-two pictures in one year at Realart, a subsidiary of Paramount. (Their main star was Bebe Daniels . . . whose courage and talent I greatly admired.) I also supervised the negative cutting and trained the girls who cut negative and spliced film by hand. I set up the film filing system and supervised the art work on the titles. I worked most of the day and night and loved it."

After about a year with Realart, Miss Arzner was recalled to Paramount to cut and edit *Blood and Sand* starring Rudolph Valentino, and also to keep script. Paramount planned to spend $50,000 on a double-exposure process to matte Valentino into the Madrid Bull Arena. As a temporary solution, Miss Arzner cut the three bullfights from existing stock footage. She then asked to shoot some close-ups of Valentino to match the long shots. The result was so effective that the picture was released with Miss Arzner's bullfights intact.

"I was running *Blood and Sand* in the projection room when Jim Cruze passed through to reach the adjoining theater. He paused to watch. Suddenly I heard

[5] *Quoted in* The Cinemeditor, *Spring, 1965, p. 17.*
[6] *Dorothy Arzner's first directorial assignment was* Fashions for Women *(1926) with Esther Ralston. Brooks Atkinson commented: "If fashion pictures must be made, let Dorothy Arzner make them." It is often claimed that Miss Arzner was Hollywood's first and only woman director. She was undoubtedly the most successful, but other women directors included Alice Guy-Blache, Lois Weber, Lillian Gish, Mabel Normand, Ida May Parks, Ruth Jennings Bryan, Grace Haskins, and Jane Murfin.*
[7] *Dorothy Arzner in letter to author, April 1967.*

an exclamation. 'My God, who cut that picture?' I wasn't sure if this meant approval or disapproval, but I quietly admitted I did. When the lights went up, he asked me if I would cut his next picture, *The Covered Wagon.*"

It was her association with *The Covered Wagon* that brought Miss Arzner's name into the film history books—the only editor from the entire silent period to be officially remembered.

Editing became more complicated mechanically with the introduction of sound, but it was never more challenging esthetically than at the height of the silent era, when, with bravura action sequences like the chariot race from *Ben-Hur,* the land rush from *Tumbleweeds,* and the battle scene from *The Big Parade,* it exploded in a pyrotechnic display of cinematic ferocity. Such sequences still stand as supreme examples of the editor's art.