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# SELECTED TAKES

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Film Editors  
On Editing

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Foreword by Robert Wise

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to work with; that the editing was all done after the animation was complete. I didn't know whether people would appreciate all the difficulties and the technicalities that went into trying to pull it all off.

I had never quite had an experience like *Roger Rabbit*. I couldn't wait to get to work everyday. I would go and turn on the KEM and it would just energize me, and that happened every day. The film had an energy that came off the screen. It just kept saying, "I'm really special."

*Do you feel you are a better editor now than in the earlier days of your career?*

Yes, I hope so, just because I've got that many more films behind me. I feel that I am learning on every film. Every film is a new experience and sometimes you just get the feeling that you haven't been there before. I don't want to say that you are faking it every time out, but I know by the third day on a new film, Verna Fields used to say, "Well, they're going to catch up with me on this one." It happens to everybody because every movie is different and presents different challenges. I think there are moments when you feel terribly insecure and wonder if you can still do it, but that's just part of the whole insecurity of the business. There was a moment half-way through *Roger Rabbit*, when for the first time I consciously said to myself, "I think you finally know what you are doing."

## Carol Littleton

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Oklahoma-born Carol Littleton studied French literature and music and was a Fulbright Scholar before making a transition to film editing in the early 1970s.

Littleton is married to cinematographer John Bailey, with whom she has worked on numerous films including *The Big Chill*, *Silverado*, and *The Accidental Tourist*. Those projects are part of Littleton's long-term collaboration with director Lawrence Kasdan.

In 1982 Carol was nominated for an Academy Award for editing one of the most popular films of all time, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, directed by Steven Spielberg.

In addition to the demands of her busy editing career, Littleton is working to improve the status of editors as president of the West Coast Film Editors' Guild.

1975	<i>Legacy</i>
1978	<i>The Mafu Cage</i>
1979	<i>French Postcards</i>
1980	<i>Roadie</i> (with Tom Walls)
1981	<i>Body Heat</i>
1982	<i>E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*</i>
1983	<i>The Big Chill</i>
1984	<i>Places in the Heart</i>
1985	<i>Silverado</i>
1986	<i>Brighton Beach Memoirs</i>

1987	<i>Swimming to Cambodia</i>
1988	<i>Vibes</i>
	<i>The Accidental Tourist</i>
1990	<i>White Palace</i>
1991	<i>China Moon</i> (with Jill Savitt)
	<i>Grand Canyon</i>

\*Academy Award nomination for best achievement in film editing.

*What kind of research have you done for the films you have edited?*

Before I did *Body Heat* I saw and read a lot about film noir. I read a lot of Anne Tyler before starting *The Accidental Tourist*. I read anything I feel is remotely related. I realized when I was cutting TV commercials that ideas come from everywhere; you simply bring yourself to the work in so many ways. If I can delve consciously into the subject matter and deal with material which is emotionally related, I find that I'm better prepared. When Larry Kasdan and I were talking about *Silverado*, he was very specific about the emotional feeling of the picture. He had said it was very important that *Silverado* represent the optimism of the opening of the American West. Larry really wanted to capture the feeling of John Ford and Howard Hawks, rather than the realism of the end-of-the-era Westerns. So I looked at a lot of early era pictures, but I also read a lot of the Big Sky books of Alfred Guthrie and a number of books by William H. Goetzmann, including *New Lands, New Men*, which was an historical account of the discovery of the West. They gave me a sense of the grandeur of the canvas on which we were going to be working. I felt I wanted to get back into the optimistic state of mind of discovery and exploration. Looking at other films and reading source material and fiction of the same era allows you to know more than what is in the confines of the script.

*What other methods besides research do you use to prepare to cut a film?*

When I work on films, I ask the director if I can attend rehearsal, because it gives me an extraordinary advantage to see the script performed all in one take. I'm only going to be seeing the film one scene at a time while I'm working on it. If I have a fix in my mind of how the film is going to unfold emotionally, then essentially I can plug myself into that arc from the very beginning of my work. I find exploring performances in the editing to be the most interesting. If you work with a director who really delves deeply into the characters when the film is being shot, then you really have a lot to work with. Larry Kasdan has been extremely generous in letting both John and me attend the last week of rehearsal. A rehearsal helps me find the emotional tone of a

film earlier than I would through the material a day at a time. When Larry has a rehearsal, it's a safe time for the actors to explore the life represented on the pages of the script and the life that is outside of the script—the complex emotional relationships between the characters that existed before the script or extend beyond the end of the script. So my being privy to that helps me in innumerable ways. Like music, it becomes part of the overall emotional life of the piece, so I am more apt to recognize it looking at dailies and deciding to use one take over another. It becomes very practical at a certain point. It filters through me in ways that I'm not even able to articulate; it enriches my perception of the film even before I start.

Before I start on a movie I'm always terribly nervous, I really don't think I can do it. It's a very anxiety-provoking state of mind. Every film is very different, and I'm always a little frightened before I start. I say to myself, "This is going to be difficult, can I really do this?" Preparing myself by reading and learning about the subject matter helps me.

*What happens to that anxious state when you are sitting at the KEM after you have prepared yourself and the material starts to come in?*

It kind of disappears once I start doing the work. Once I'm sitting there in front of a scene, I realize it's like every large task; it's simply one day at a time. I don't have to do all of this at once. I do have the luxury of quiet reflection, which people on the set don't have.

*Many editors say that they drop the script after the material begins to come in. Do you?*

No. I refer to the script all the way through the cutting. A lot of times when a film starts to get off track, the best thing to do is go back and read the original version.

*How important is it for a film to have a good script?*

If you have a bad script, there's no place to go. The film is rarely ever going to rise above the level of the script. We've gotten to the point where a lot of movies only give you style. You've sat there for two hours and you're hungry. You walk away like you haven't been fed; nothing was there. That's why I really consider my choices very carefully. You want to make sure the script is something you can relate to in one way or another, emotionally or artistically. You want the script to be as good as it can be.

*How do you work with material as it comes in while the film is being shot?*

A scene may be shot out of sequence, so I usually keep scenes just as individual cut scenes. And when I get several I can hook up, I put them together and then revise that section. Many times I'll revise it completely because I wasn't working with enough information when I cut the individual scene. Essentially, what I do is to block it out in a very rudimentary way. If it's a case of multiple characters when person A is speaking, I'm on person A; when person B is speaking, I'm on

person B. No overlaps, nothing. I'm literally blocking it out to just see how it flows. Usually, it looks like hell, it's terrible. It's clearly just an assembly. Then I start going through again. When the performer is best, he stays on camera; when it starts to fall apart, I go away. That's the second level, to get the best out of each person's performance. Then I go for the rhythm and the presentation of the scene, what is most pleasing to the eye and ear. Then I look at it again and again and refine it in a lot of different ways. Sometimes I've been so careful and so neat and so precise that what it really needs is a shocker, so then I just do something in the scene that seems sort of outrageous.

*I understand you were originally a music student. How has your musical training helped you as an editor?*

I'm aware of a certain musicality in my editing. I'm respectful of the inner rhythms and the cadences in the material, whether it be the speech or the images, but it's not enough just to hit the notes. Playing a passage with feeling is the important thing. What I really hope to achieve in a scene is to heighten its emotional life.

*While the crew is shooting, how long are your days?*

Those are long days because the crew looks at dailies at the end of the day. We've been working since eight o'clock in the morning and it may be eight or ten o'clock at night by the time we're through. By the time I've looked at dailies, talked to the director, and gone back and dealt with the film that has to be shipped out, it's probably a minimum 12-hour day. More than likely, it's a 14-hour day, six days a week. For the first stages of editing, when the shooting is over until it's turned over to sound, we average a ten-hour day. That's kind of comfortable. My mind starts to flag after ten hours. I don't do very good work.

*What kinds of scenes do you feel are the most difficult to cut?*

I think the most difficult scenes to cut are those with large numbers of people. When you get four, six, eight, ten people who are actively involved in a set piece, those are really difficult. One-to-one dialogue scenes are also difficult, because it's literally about the very thin connection between two people and that connection can't be violated. You have to be aware of it all the time. They may be connecting or not connecting emotionally, but you have to be aware of what's happening between them the whole time.

*You have edited many films on which your husband, John Bailey, was the director of photography. Do you feel you know more about cinematography than other editors because of your relationship with him?*

I've learned a great deal from John because we've been lucky enough to work on a lot of movies together and we're both involved and excited by film. We talk about film a lot, even about films we have seen rather than ones that we have worked on. Obviously, notions of photography and editing come up in our conversations. I have had a kind of insider's

education. I have a familiarity with the problems as well as the dramatic devices of cinematography and I use them in the editing because I recognize them very readily. I can very much tell the thinking behind the camera placement, the camera moves, angles, and sizes, of how both Larry Kasdan and John were thinking about a scene when it was conceived on set. Usually my first cut is very faithful to their thinking.

*All editors have had to delete shots that are beautiful pieces of cinematography because they didn't work in the context of the film. Is it harder for you because you know what labor has gone into it?*

If a pretty shot ends up on the floor, it's because it simply didn't work dramatically for the film. When you're rewriting a film in the editing you have to take many things into consideration. Sometimes that means you have to eliminate shots that are perfectly gorgeous but simply do not work for the streamlined narration. That's what we are after when we are editing—the most economical way of telling the story.

*Are you aware of a cinematographer's style when you are cutting?*

I'm very sensitive to the personalities that have preceded me in the filmmaking process. I'm very aware of the person behind the lens when I'm working, as I am very aware of how different directors deal with material. A good editor needs to be aware of the other contributions and heighten them, to bring out their best qualities in performance, art direction, cinematography, or the direction of a film. It's really my job to be the interpreter of other people's work and ultimately to rewrite the film using image and sound.

*What limitations does the editor have in this rewriting process?*

I'm using materials that are defined. I can't just use every word that is in the dictionary. My dictionary is restricted. I once had a sweet child about eight or nine years old who loved E.T. say to me, "Oh, you edited the movie, that's wonderful. Can I ask you a question? Where do you put the orchestra when you are shooting?" I thought, of course, in a child's mind everything's done at once.

*What was it like to work with Steven Spielberg on E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial?*

Steven is a consummate filmmaker who knows every person's job in every aspect of filmmaking, whether it be cinematography, editing, or art design. He knows everything about his film more intimately than anyone ever possibly could. He has an extraordinary mind not only for detail but for the grand scheme. I worked with him pretty early on in my editing career and, literally, it was like taking a course in post-graduate work in editing. I learned a lot from him.

*How were E.T.'s sequences cut so he appeared to be really alive?*

Anytime E.T. did anything complex, a whole roll of film was shot. Steven and I combed through the material to get the best possible moments for E.T., and the scenes were essentially constructed around E.T.'s best moments. We cut around that.

It's like what a friend of mine, Suzanne Baron, a very fine French editor who has cut most of Louis Malle's films, did on *The Fire Within*. At the very end, Maurice Ronet is walking around in a room and it's a series of jump cuts. It's extraordinary because it represents his state of mind. I asked Suzanne how she happened to do that and she said it was by mistake. They had a lot of coverage of Maurice Ronet doing all of these things in the room as he contemplated suicide: looking at the photograph, handling the gun he was going to be using to commit suicide, items of clothing, different memorabilia. When she cut it straight, it didn't work. She said, "I'll just go back and cut out the best of every scene and put it together, and we'll see how it will work." She showed that to Louis and he said, "This is it. This is a sequence that does everything that I wanted to have happen. Just forget everything else."

It's that sort of serendipitous thing that sometimes happens in cutting. In a way that's what happened with E.T. We put the best of him together and then we discovered how the scene needed to be constructed. It was sort of a backwards way of thinking, but in many respects it gave us the freshest results.

*How was E.T. made to speak? Was that done in postproduction?*

Every time Steven shot E.T. doing any movement, it was in pantomime. The people who were manipulating the puppet made him say his limited vocabulary, but other than that, E.T. didn't speak until we put the words in his mouth. We always had a scratch track of him saying the words. Either Steven or his friends would come in and record sounds that we could use. It was not the final recording. The scratch track was all replaced by sound designer Ben Burtt's personalized E.T. creation.

*In the bicycle chase at the end of the film, just before they fly off, there are two jump cuts on Elliot reacting to the road block. How did this come about?*

Steven and I had chosen a piece of music, the Romantic Symphony No. 4 by Howard Hanson, for the temp track. There was a climactic portion in the last movement where the fiddles in the orchestra are sawing away, there's an accelerando that stops abruptly, and there is a hold for a bar in 4/4 time. Then there is a very quick reprise, a coda which we used when they take off, and the bicycle is in the sky. In the very pronounced retard in the last couple of bars before the hold, it just seemed like it cried out for something to punctuate it pictorially. We were looking back and forth at all the footage on the other picture head on the KEM. Steven said, "We have to find something to punctuate it and I don't want to go to the guy with the shotgun."

In retrospect, Steven wished that he had not used guns because he realized this was a children's film and he did not want them to associate feelings of being lost and running away from home with being punished with guns. The only cutaways we had were of men taking out guns and aiming them. So I said, "Why don't we just jump cut it?" It came from

working with Howard Hanson's music and doing something musical to match what was happening in that particular moment in our temp track.

*What were the challenges in cutting Swimming to Cambodia, which is a filmic record of Spalding Gray's one-man show?*

I was very aware that the editing was being controlled by the actor in *Swimming to Cambodia*. That was the most difficult film I have ever worked on. Imagine an editor not having any of the devices we use when we're in trouble, no cutaways. What do you do when you have one actor sitting in one position, where the only variables are the performances from night to night? We used three different performances, and a lot of pick-up shots and material we knew was going to be integrated in certain areas of the film. The only variables were his performance, his position, the lighting, and the camera moves—nothing else. You can't hide anywhere.

The director, Jonathan Demme, and I tried a lot of things because we wanted to use the best of Spalding. We were really aware that without the storytelling art, the film wouldn't hold up at all, so we had to keep his narrative alive and respect Spalding's performance as much as possible. Many of the things that we tried just didn't work, so we cut them out. I was extremely aware of Spalding Gray's cadence and his idiosyncratic way of speaking and telling a story. If I tried to force anything upon him in any way, it simply didn't work. I had to be totally respectful of his style. So I had to find an editing pattern and a style that worked with his idiosyncracies. If I tried to do something fancy or became editor and used the art of montage to get around something, it just simply didn't work. I had to restrict myself and get back to the basics.

*You have had a long relationship with director Lawrence Kasdan. What is the process of choosing the selected takes when you work with him?*

Since we have done so many pictures together, Larry says less and less because he knows that I instinctively know what he likes and dislikes. When he really is working to get something and says, "That's it," I do make a note and I put that in the first cut, but he might look at five or six takes and say nothing at all. When he says something, I know that it's very important; otherwise he doesn't clutter up my mind. He hopes that I will have more time to go over it when I'm cutting and make a lot of the choices myself. I am sensitive to what his needs are and what he wants out of a scene.

*In the group scenes for The Big Chill, where you were dealing with the majority of characters in one scene, what was the coverage like?*

I could be anywhere I wanted to be at any time. For instance, the big climactic scene, where they have an argument about who really loved and appreciated Alex the most, was shot from head to toe in each camera position that you see in the film now. We called that the Big Chill scene, because all of the themes are in that scene. There were about 20 shots and

each was shot from the beginning to the end of the scene, so I had the choice of being anywhere I wanted at any time. It's a largely static scene; people are seated. What do you do? A scene like that could be an absolute killer. Larry Kasdan, John, and I went through the script and talked about the key moments in the dialogue, because Larry really wanted to heighten certain moments either with a slow push-in or a two-shot.

There were a number of things that were conceived in the direction itself. When Meg Tilly says something like, "I don't know, I haven't been around too many happy people," there were plenty of static shots of her, but there was one that had a delicate push-in on her. Obviously, that is her whole persona as well as her experience. I knew that was important. When William Hurt gives his long speech about, "You don't really know anything," we had that as a static shot and also with a very slow push. There were a couple of over-shoulders that were from across William to Michael, the Jeff Goldblum character, and also to Sam, the Tom Berenger character. Those three characters represented a kind of triad and those over-shoulders were meant to be used for those exchanges. So there were a lot of clues to the scene.

When I put it together the first time, I literally followed the blueprint of the shooting. It didn't say, "Cut here, cut there," but it was obvious from the coverage and the direction. With the exception of a couple of additional reaction shots, that scene did not change from the first time I put it together. I don't take any credit for that. I say that is a scene that is beautifully conceived photographically, well photographed, and well directed. I had very little to do with that scene; all I had to do was to be sensitive to the way it was done and it never changed.

*Was the scene shot with multiple cameras?*

No, it was all single camera.

*That's the real art of filmmaking.*

Oh, that's tough. It's difficult doing ensemble work that way, but I think it's the most successful because you're able to devote total attention to one thing at a time. With multiple cameras, you don't. Something suffers along the way somewhere; the lighting and angles are compromised, your attention is split, the director can't be on two people at once. You are only able to get attention to detail when you shoot with a single camera. I'm talking about acting, I'm not talking about getting a car crash from all different angles because you're only going to do it once; that's a different set of circumstances.

*Were there any scenes deleted from *The Big Chill* because it became apparent during the editing process that they were not necessary?*

There was a controversial scene at the end of *The Big Chill* which was a flashback of what these characters were doing on Thanksgiving Day in 1969, 15 years before the actual events of the film. It had the whole

notion that the seeds of who we are appear when we are very young, and that we simply play out the script of our lives in one way or another. Both writers, Barbara Benedek and Lawrence Kasdan, felt it needed to be in the film because it wrapped up all of the themes and clarified part of the story about Alex. What did he really look like? What was he like? All of the questions you might ask about him. It was a good scene. When I first read the script I felt it was a scene that the writers needed to be able to write in the script, but the themes and concerns of the film were so clear throughout the film that this very final sequence was simply not necessary. We screened the film any number of times while we were working on it, and we tried all different versions of this flashback. When we started previewing the film, a lot of the audience really felt that the flashback made it too specific. The Alex in the mind's eye of our imagination was far stronger than the Alex who was dramatized on camera. The tragedy of Alex's life was very real within the body of the script, we didn't need to see it dramatized at the end. It weakened the drama. So for one preview screening we put on an alternate ending and decided not to show the film with the flashback. It was far more successful.

*I understand that Kevin Costner played Alex in that scene. This was to be his first role in a film.*

Yes, I suppose I derailed his career for a number of years. . . . I think he's doing pretty well.

*One of the things that editors often do is make the decision not to cut. Can you think of an example when you made the decision not to cut and to let something play?*

Certainly for the last shot of *Places in the Heart*. We had all kinds of different footage. It could have been done any number of ways. Clearly, the most transcendental moment in the film is that single, long, tracking shot and its most powerful presentation was the single shot.

*That shot shows all of the characters together in church, including those who had died. I understand the director, Robert Benton, was concerned as to whether this concept would work.*

Yes, I remember the day they were shooting that. He called me out on the set and said, "Carol, I really don't know if this is going to work at all, what should I do?" I had faith in the fact that this was something he had talked about from the very beginning. The notion of the brotherhood of man and forgiveness was the whole reason he made the movie. Not to have the film transcend at that moment and to be literal would have been the worst thing possible. If we had used cuts, it simply wouldn't have had the power; it would not have been unusual.

*You have cut several comedies. What is your philosophy in working with comedic material?*

You don't want to do what they do in situational comedies on TV

where you open up a space so you can get a big laugh. You don't want to cut so the scene is just about a gag. You want the scene to be about something, some conflict. One person's agenda is not the same as another's. Comedy is usually based on the conflict of agenda. You want to cut the scene for its meaning and then deal with the comedic aspects. One of the more valuable things in cutting comedy is to realize that everything is a brick and you're building bricks in the comedy. It's not just one gag and one gag and one gag. Once the audience gets the gag, they're going to want another one and another one and another one. All you are doing is accelerating the tempo and you're not dealing with the real comedy, which is born out of character and incident. I just hate a lot of American comedies these days because they are so cheap. They don't respect the drama behind the comedy. When you look at a Charlie Chaplin film, you've got to agree that the man knew comedy. He knew all about gags, but he knew that comedy was about an underlying pathos and he was very careful to preserve the story.

*Jerry Greenberg told me that films are details and details within details. Do you agree, and how does this affect the film editor?*

Yes, and it's exponential. It grows and grows. As you narrow the film down, the detail becomes more and more dense. I think editors absolutely have to be detail-oriented. You have to realize that each solitary detail counts. There are so many things that can go wrong. There are a lot of technical considerations that take very careful attention to detail and you just don't want to forget those. Many times I will go through a credit sequence again and again, making sure that everything is fading out and coming up again at a certain moment in the music. Should it pop on or should it fade in? Should it fade on in two feet and pop off? I dare say there are very few people looking at a credit sequence who could ever tell you whether a credit popped on or faded on, but because I'm very aware of the musicality of the images working with the music, I try to get all those things to coordinate. It's sort of an obsessive personality trait.

*Do you think that women make better editors?*

I think the qualities of good editing have very little to do with gender. We may be a little more patient because we've grown up dealing with a lot of dirty work, so we may have a little more tolerance for it. A lot of the details are kind of messy.

*Nowadays all feature film editors work freelance, as opposed to the days when most editors worked on staff for the studios. What are some of the problems of working freelance?*

The main thing is you are always fearful you'll never work again, so you put yourself in the horrible position of working all the time. I made myself take three months off at the end of *The Accidental Tourist* because I had done four pictures back to back and I was starting to go crazy. I

was getting very, very tired and I was starting to feel claustrophobic about entering the cutting room. I knew if I started to hate entering into that world, I'd better stop for a while. I've given myself a good period of rest, I've been reading a lot, and taking care of the kitty.

*What films do you think are landmarks in film editing?*

*Bonnie and Clyde. Breathless. Tom Jones.* These are all kind of related because they are akin to the French New Wave films. It's when film editing was finally freed from the literal notions of time and space. I think the films that came along in the middle and late 1960s opened my mind to looking at film in more radical ways. In the language of film editing, those films are truly landmark films because they shook us up.

*In addition to all the responsibilities of your work on features, you are also the president of the West Coast local of the Film Editors' Guild. What interested you in getting involved in these activities?*

Hollywood has changed so much in the ten years since I have been in the union. The guild system had ossified, editors were working more and more in freelance situations with a lot of nonunion work. The working conditions were getting more and more eroded. It was just clear that we needed to revitalize the guild system and it wasn't going to happen unless we did it from within. I thought maybe I should do something and I ran thinking I wouldn't be elected. I was, so here I am.

*Where do you think film editing is going as a craft?*

We're always going to have very fine movies and consequently, very fine editing. I don't think you can separate the two. What disturbs me about a lot of the editing I see today, that I would just call grist-for-the-mill editing, is that it's very derivative, repetitious, and boring. By nature, a lot of what we see on television has to be done so quickly that it's formulaic. I can sit and say, "Okay, two-shot, single, long shot." I can anticipate what they are going to do before it even happens. The other side is the whole notion of style versus content. So many young filmmakers spend so much time on style and not actually on what they have to say that a lot of movies simply don't work because they are just style, just acrobatics. I hate to see that happen. I have a feeling that what we're seeing coming into film by way of MTV is largely experimentation; it will find its level. What's good about it we'll keep, and what isn't will be culled out. Editing is like everything else. It's a reflection of how people think about their times and how we react to the medium. You can look at a film made in the 1960s and know if it was made in 1963 or 1969. Editing is a lively art and it changes with the seasons. So we're always going to have something new and something unusual coming up.