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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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PRAEGER

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# Tina Hirsch

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Tina Hirsch was introduced to film production when she observed the making of Brian DePalma's *Greetings*. Intrigued by the editing process, she became an assistant editor on Robert Downey's *Putney Swope* and DePalma's *Hi Mom*. She established herself in independent films by editing her first feature, *Cornucopia Sexualis or Does Size Really Count?*, co-written by and starring Paul Bartel.

The job as Thelma Schoonmaker's assistant on *Woodstock* gave Hirsch the opportunity to work on the West Coast where she eventually settled and began to work as an editor.

In 1973 she cut *Macon County Line*, a box office sleeper that helped to launch a new era in B movies. Tina then joined the long list of Hollywood notables to work for the king of the B movie, Roger Corman. She cut several films for New World Pictures including *Eat My Dust*, *Big Bad Man*, and Paul Bartel's cult classic *Death Race 2000*.

In 1984 Tina Hirsch edited the box office smash *Gremlins* for another Corman alumnus, director Joe Dante, and worked with him on *Explorers* and his episode in *Twilight Zone, The Movie*.

1972	<i>Cornucopia Sexualis or Does Size Really Count?</i>
1973	<i>Macon County Line</i>
1974	<i>Big Bad Mama</i>
1975	<i>Death Race 2000</i>
1976	<i>Eat My Dust</i>

1977	<i>Assault on Paradise</i>
1978	<i>The Driver</i> (with Robert K. Lambert)
1979	<i>More American Graffiti</i>
1980	<i>Xanadu</i> (with Dennis Virkler)
1981	<i>Heartbeeps</i>
1982	<i>Independence Day</i> (with Dennis Virkler)
1983	<i>Twilight Zone—The Movie</i> (Joe Dante segment, "It's A Good Life")
1984	<i>Gremlins</i>
1985	<i>Explorers</i>
1991	<i>Delirious</i> (with Bill Gordean)

*How did you become interested in film editing?*

When I got out of college I went to work as an assistant to a fashion photographer. One day someone came into our studio to shoot a pilot. We went to see dailies on a double-headed Moviola. I thought, "Gee, this is so much more exciting than still photography." In 1968 I started going out with my future husband, who produced *Greetings*, a film that Brian DePalma directed. I watched them make it. I was really intrigued by the whole process. My husband's brother, Paul Hirsch, was working at a trailer company as an assistant editor and I thought I should go over there to volunteer my services and learn. I had to argue with the owner of the business for half an hour. I kept saying, "I don't want any money, I'll do whatever you want, I'll get coffee. I just want to hang around and learn." Finally, I convinced him to let me work there. I had been there about two weeks working with a trailer editor, when the Bob Downey movie *Putney Swope* moved in; Bud Smith was the editor. I thought, "Boy, I'm going to learn a lot more in there than I'm learning in here." So I said, "Thank you very much," to the trailer editor, and I went next door and learned something about features.

*How did you become an assistant editor?*

Paul Hirsch was given the job of editing *Hi Mom*, the sequel to *Greetings*, and he hired me as an assistant. That's when I learned an important lesson about the editing room: when to keep your mouth shut. Paul and Brian DePalma were working on a scene. They were moving some pieces of film around and I was standing behind them putting trims away. Then they ran the rearranged scene and I said, "You can't do that, the characters are talking about something that hasn't happened yet." Paul and Brian both slowly turned their heads around, didn't say anything and then turned back to the Moviola. I realized right away

that I had done something wrong. When you're working, you don't want some half-pint interrupting you. What they were doing was a very private thing and I wasn't sensitive to it because they were my friends and it was my first job in a cutting room. I was fired that night. My next job worked out a lot better. I was Thelma Schoonmaker's first assistant on *Woodstock*. I was in charge of all the documentary footage. I had to make sure that everything was in sync and figure out systems for coding. It was incredibly challenging and convinced me more than ever that I wanted to work in film.

*What was the first feature you cut as editor and what was the experience like?*

The first feature I cut was *Cornucopia Sexualis* or *Does Size Really Count* that my husband had directed. Paul Bartel co-wrote it with him and starred in it. We had shot it in 16mm. I had no idea of how to cut a dramatic movie. I had only worked on documentaries and industrials. I assembled all of the masters together and then I started cutting in coverage.

*How did you come to work for Roger Corman?*

After I did *Macon County Line*, one of the guys on the crew who was close to the Cormans recommended me to Julie Corman, who called me in for something. She said, "We're paying \$250 a week." I said, "That's what I made as an assistant editor." She said, "I guess you don't need the job." I said, "I guess I don't," and walked out of the office. I thought about it the next day and I said, "You idiot! You just turned down a film! How could you do that! You just messed up your whole life!" A week later she called me back and said, "I've got another film here, *Big Bad Mama*, \$350 a week. Do you want it or not?" I said, "Well, I'd like to read the script and meet the director." She said, "God, you're picky." I read the script, met the director, and decided to do the picture, and that's how I started working at New World.

*Did working for Roger Corman live up to its legendary reputation?*

It certainly did. It was great. Of course, there's no money. You have to save up your money so you can afford to work for him, but it's really worth it in many ways. The reason he turns out so many really good people is because he is willing to take a chance. He gave me a chance. I can't think of a studio in town that I would rather work for. He's the most knowledgeable studio person I've ever met, and I don't think I would offend anybody by saying that. I cut three films and directed *Munchies* for him, and I never really disagreed with him on anything. I certainly can't say that about the decisions that are usually handed down at most studios.

*What are the schedules like on a Corman film?*

The schedules can really be horrendous. When I realize the amount of time I was given to work on the segment of *Twilight Zone—The Movie*, I know why it looks so good. I had the time to use nail clippers instead

of paper shears. I really got to go in and finesse things. The limitations at Corman's New Horizons are really impossible. I just got a call the other day from a guy who said, "Roger is telling us we can't have apprentices anymore." I said, "I hate to say this to you, but we didn't have them in the old days." He said, "How in the hell did you get dailies out on time?" I said, "Dailies? We never had dailies." It's true, we never ran the film. The director never saw the film, never, never! If he wanted to come into the cutting room and I didn't have too much to do, I'd run some film for him; that was it. Nobody ever saw dailies. Roger wouldn't pay for a screening room. Are you kidding me? I never saw the film until it was on my bench broken down into little pieces.

*In The Driver there is a great action scene in a parking garage where Ryan O'Neal gives the guys who were trying to set him up an idea of his driving skills. How was it put together in the cutting room?*

Originally, it was storyboarded as a realistic scene, and it was shot as a linear scene. When we ran the dailies the director, Walter Hill, said to me, "Forget reality, I want you to do something crazy." I was stumped. I sat there and I ran the footage, I ran it, and I ran it. I just kept looking at it. Then I assembled selected sections. At the end of the select roll, there was a bunch of cuts of the car slamming into the support poles and smashing lights. I suddenly had crash, crash, crash and I said, "This feels right, this is what it should feel like." I kept running that little section over and over again to get the rhythm inside me. Then I went back to the beginning and I started doing the same kind of jump cuts in that section. Then I ran that series of cuts over and over again. I had to get into a groove until I got up enough speed to go on to the next cut. I have never looked at a section of film so much in my life. Once I had a series of five or six cuts, it became easy. The problem was solved, but I didn't have a clue, until I saw that little hunk of film at the end of the roll.

*What technical problems did you come up against in cutting the creature sequences in Gremlins?*

The creatures were lifeless, expressionless. Cutting puppets is not like cutting a dog. A dog has expressions. You can get a dog to appear intelligent. All you have to do is hold something in front of him and he gets a quizzical look in his eyes. With the puppets, I'd run the footage and wait for a little glimmer in the eye, something that showed any expression. I would mark up those pieces and put them into a select roll. I had all this MOS footage and nothing to listen to. It drove me crazy. I would turn on National Public Radio and listen all day long to the shrinks, psychics, and wizards so I wouldn't fall asleep. Kathy Kennedy came up with the idea that the Gremlins should breakdance in the bar scene. The picture was cut, finished, the crew's wrapped, everyone's gone. The director, Joe Dante, said he was too busy finishing the film

to shoot it. So he sent the producer, Mike Finnell, up to Industrial Light and Magic and Mike got four or five shots: one of the little feet going up and down like in *Flashdance*, one of a Gremlin spinning on its back, and a couple of other shots. When Mike came back we looked at the film and we just sat there in silence. Joe said, "It's terrible." I sent my assistant to transfer a *Flashdance* song to 35mm. I knew I couldn't use it in the finished film, but it would be good beat to cut the picture against. So I sat there with this footage of these dumb little feet going up and down. I thought, "You call yourself an editor. You can't even come up with something interesting to do with this footage. You're a wimp." I called myself every name in the book. I thought of the garage scene in *The Driver* and I said, "Look, you did that, you came up with something there." Then I thought, "I wonder how many frames it takes for a foot to go up and down?" It was seven frames. I chopped the foot shot into little seven frame pieces. I put one in right side up, one flopped, one upside down, and then, upside down and flopped. The rhythm was right in sync with the music. It really got you into it. Once again I kept running it over and over, trying other pieces that maintained the rhythm. I found all the footage of them "walking" that we had taken out of the bar scene and tried it against the music. Now they looked like they were dancing. Suddenly, this unusable footage was appropriate with music behind it.

*The scene where the Gremlins attack the mother in the kitchen is very nicely cut.*

Yes, that was pretty easy except for the plates.

*You had to match cut the plates?*

Yes, that was rough. There were two people creating each throw: one person moving the Gremlin arm, and another throwing the plates. The arm and the plate had to sync up. It's not easy to do. They could never do two in a row. You had to keep cutting away, to give the illusion that the plates were being hurled one after the other.

*How would you describe your work routine? Organized? Disciplined?*

Both. I know there are editors who are very sloppy. They run the film on the floor, throw their film into the bin without hanging it on the hooks, and they don't write down the code numbers on short pieces. Their results may be good, but I could never work that way. How can you waste your assistants' time, having them clean up after your disaster? Being sloppy costs you time and money.

*How do you work with your assistants and your apprentices? What do you expect out of them?*

As far as I'm concerned, the first assistant runs the room. I go in my cutting room, shut the door, and do my work. He comes in and says to me, "It's time for dailies." I leave it up to the assistant to hire an apprentice. I've worked with assistants who do amazing things. They

come to me at the end of the day and say, "We almost had the rug pulled from under us, but it's all taken care of." They protect me.

*Many editors today complain about the pressure put on them to get films out faster and faster. How do you feel about this?*

You've got big films out there with directors playing with three and four cameras. They're printing 600,000 feet for a 90-minute film and they just expect the editors to put the film together on a six-month schedule. That's why there are so many films that have multiple editors. That's why people aren't able to do as good a job as they might, why they have to work all those weekends. Almost everyone I know works seven days a week for an extended period of time, and I think it's criminal because the human body can't function well working that way. The studios that think they're saving money or time are probably only getting the equivalent of five days a week, because people just generally slow down after a while. When I've had to work seven days a week, I have the assistant and the apprentice switch off Saturday and Sunday, so they only have to work six days. More and more, studios are giving chances to people to direct first or second films when they really don't know what they're doing. Their solution is to shoot more film, print more takes, hire more editors. Let the editors make the movie. And I think the editors are undervalued. For the last two movies I did, they produced a fan magazine that had chapters on each of the producers, the DP, the special effects supervisor, the writer—everybody but the editor. If you didn't have a good special effects person you wouldn't have good puppets or good opticals, but I really think of the editor as being up there in that group of the people who make the movie.

*When you are watching other people's work, are you aware of problems that were confronting the editor?*

I was looking at something the other night and there were two very loose over-the-shoulder shots. The actress's reactions on one side were completely different than the other. What do you do? She's smiling in one shot and you cut around to the other side and suddenly she's very serious. I felt sorry for the poor editor.

*In the future, do you think that editors will get more recognition for their contributions to films?*

I certainly hope so. The fault lies mostly with the directors. They have really been unwilling to give editors credit. How many times do you hear a director say, "I'm editing my film now," as if he's doing the job? I think it's more ignorance than maliciousness. Many of them really don't understand most of what we do.

*What personality traits do you think are necessary to be a good editor?*

You have to be a team player. You have to be very supportive of the director. In many ways it helps to be a positive person as opposed to a negative one. It's all very well to see what's wrong with something, but

you also have to be able to see what's right with it, and how to make it better. It takes a lot of patience. Film editors are the finest people I know. I don't think I've ever met an editor I didn't like. They're the most wonderful, dedicated, hard-working people I know. They work for the satisfaction it gives them and never expect a thank you, because they rarely get it—rarely.