

Chapter 2: Editing Finished, Never-ending Editing

From *Le Montage au Cinéma*

by Dominique Villain, Cahiers du Cinema, 1991

1. What is “good editing”?

At the 1987 Festival de l’Image in Châlon-sur-Marne, films were shown without sound so that viewers could focus better on the image. How can one separate the editing of a film from the film itself? What would a festival focused on editing look like, other than a festival dominated by films using editing techniques?

Lev Kuleshov argued that there were two schools of editing: one in which editing was visible and one in which it wasn’t. When the editing is visible—as in the films of Michel Deville, for example—it was often being planned and imagined already at the shooting stage.

How should one describe or judge the work involved in editing? The Oscars or Césars should have an award for films saved by editing. But how would one know that this was the case? Is it even possible to make something out of nothing, or close to nothing?

To evaluate the way in which a given film was edited, one would need to see the original footage. One would also need to know the intentions of the director and the amount of freedom given to the editor. The question of whether or not it is possible to blame someone for “bad” editing has never been settled. One would first have to ask: what *is* bad editing? That of a film which did not enjoy box-office success?

What are the essential qualities of a film editor? First of all, a flexibility which does not exclude the clarity, sharpness, and the authority necessary to practice this profession. An editor has a specific period of time, a number of concrete tasks, and a team to organize. His/her main quality consists of “being in synch”¹ with the film and the people with whom one works on it. In no case does it involve imposing one’s personal style on the film.

Conflicts are not rare but are more private than those that arise during the shoot. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet say they “fight” over which take to use, that this is a key moment in their editing practice, a moment of heartbreak. But how do they decide? Who convinces whom?

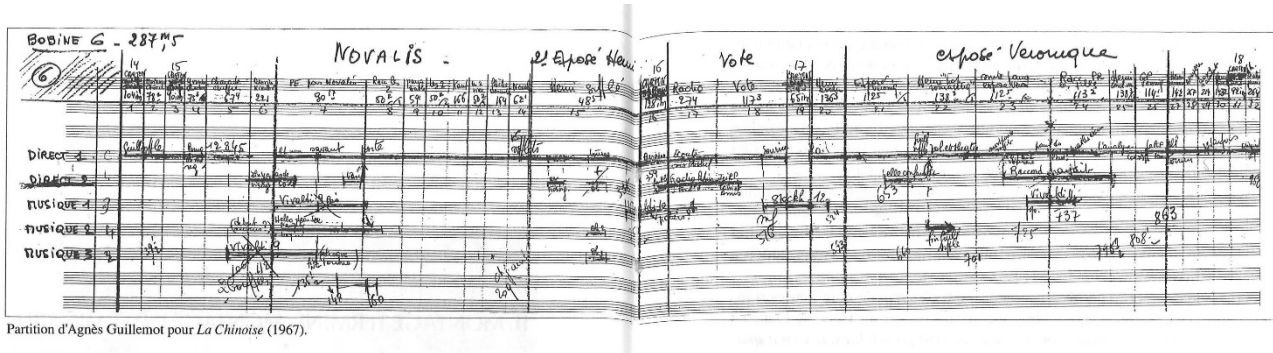
Knowing How to Convince: “the Scores”

Knowing how to be persuasive is an essential quality for a film editor. Whether this is done gently or forcefully depends on the character of the individual.

Agnès Guillemot claims that she never says no. She begins by trying to do what the filmmaker wants. Then, if she has another idea, she makes another cut to present to the filmmaker. Then comes the time to decide. One cannot keep second-guessing all the way until the end of the film or even after it is finished. (Although this happens.) Especially when one has

¹ Colloquial for “avoir l’intelligence de...” - being intellectually/emotionally one with, or fully comprehending, the film and the people with whom one works on it.

already tried twenty-five different solutions. When she feels that a sequence more or less “breathes well,” she makes a contact copy of it in case the filmmaker does not agree with her and decides to destroy it. She then makes the changes that are asked of her. Then, if they finally decide to go back to her version, she doesn’t have to redo all the work. According to her, the soundness of a solution can be demonstrated using a visual overview of the entire film’s structure—which she calls either “scores” or “small trains.” This consists of sheets of paper that resemble cue sheets (below, and there’s a full-size image of it at the end of the article), but which are prepared at the beginning of the editing process and evolve with it.² This is, essentially, a cut of the film on paper which allows one to feel its rhythms and repetitions.



Partition d'Agnès Guillemot pour *La Chinoise* (1967).

For Agnès Guillemot, film is closer to music, with its themes and variations, than to a story which addresses itself to our intellect and challenges our comprehension. Written down previously on musical sheet paper, this “score” with which Agnès Guillemot is in constant dialogue is now written down on accounting paper whose vertical lines help her note the different shots. She reads them horizontally and is always surprised that others use this paper vertically.

The reading of a “score” of direct sounds dictates, for instance, the use of a given sound at a given moment. The score is also useful when it comes to questions of structure because it can signal that a ten-minute sequence squeezed between two three-minute sequences might be a problem. The score looks different at different stages in the editing of a film and varies between films. In some cases, it is the dialogues which are written down, with the passages that will be post-dubbed specially marked. In others, it is the characters, if there are many of them—in order to know when they enter and exit, or even the music... Sometimes, this helps one to see that all the music has been placed at the beginning, or that a scene constructed elliptically is referenced four film reels later and so one needs to remember it... It is a kind of “submission to what there is.”

Agnès Guillemot does not prepare these “scores” in the editing room, but at home, while listening to music or talking to her family... These sheets also serve as a mnemonic device. When one wants to go back to an earlier version of the cut, she can show that this version has already been tried. It thus avoids unnecessary regressions.

Agnès Guillemot is one of those editors who try out a great number of solutions. According to Yann Dedet, who was her assistant on four of François Truffaut’s films: “When it comes to editing, one knows that out of one hundred solutions, forty-six will be useless, thirty or

² Sound mixing involves balancing the different sounds that make up a film, including words, noises, ambient sounds, and music—and how these are combined together. Cue sheets recapitulate on paper what each track looks like, note the beginning and end of each sound, as well as, sometimes, its particular qualities—that the level needs to be lowered, for instance. These are normally drawn up at the end of the editing process, after the last corrections.

so might be interesting, [...] eighteen will be worth thinking about, and there will be two which are, respectively, the best and the good. Of these, Agnès Guillemot tries eighty. She really tries. She re-edits the same shot three times, tries to find ways to cut in the middle of a shot, works on the substance of the film as if it were a living body and she was a surgeon.”

For example, on Alfredo Arias’ film, *Fuegos*, which she loves very much, the beginning was hard to pin down. At a certain point, everyone said “it’s alright as is.” Agnès Guillemot thought it *wasn’t* alright. She asked the director and the producer for a bit of time to keep looking. And she found the real solution - not her own, but the *real* solution to the editing. There was some information about the film as a whole which it was necessary to communicate, but which wasn’t visually conveyed in the sync shots. So she included it using “fake sync”³ in another shot. It seems to her, in fact, indefensible to keep a shot which rings false simply because it communicates the necessary information.

Yann Dedet, even if he hasn’t, according to Agnès Guillemot, learned his lessons from her (except that of freedom), loves to make his films “pivot,” to re-organize the order of the “cubes.” He even thinks, paradoxically, that if a film is easy to play around with in the editing room that means the script was particularly good. Just like the shooting stage, the editing stage should transform a film. He likes films where, at the editing stage, one needs to start writing all over again.

Jean-Luc Godard, for his part, says he starts to write the script at the editing stage.

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<http://womenfilmeditors.princeton.edu/>

To see Guillemot’s page on the website:
<http://womenfilmeditors.princeton.edu/guillemot-agnes/>

To see Dominique Villain’s page:
<http://womenfilmeditors.princeton.edu/cut-to-14-the-seventeen-editors/>

To see the French original:
http://womenfilmeditors.princeton.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Dominique_Villain_Montage_au_Cinema_chap-2.pdf

³ In other words, she used one take which had the best the action/performance, and replaced the audio for it with that from a different/better take.