

The Cinephile

Shirley Hamburg

1967

Film Editing

"We'll save it in the editing."

Though true of James Cruze, Griffith, Stroheim, this maxim was hardly any longer true of Murnau, Chaplin, and becomes irretrievable untrue with sound film. Why? Because in a film such as Eisenstein's "October" (and still more so with "Que Viva Mexico") editing is above all the supreme touch of direction. Elena, just as Mr. Arkadin, is a model of editing because each in its class is a model of directing.

"We will save it all in editing," is, then, a typical producer's statement. The most that good editing will bring to a film otherwise devoid of all interest is precisely, first, the impression of having been directed. It will restore to the lifelike the ephemeral grace which the snob and amateur disregard; of it will transform chance into destiny. Is there greater praise than that the public rightly confuses editing with cutting?

If to direct is a glance, to edit is a beating of the heart. To anticipate is the characteristic of both. But what one seeks to foresee in space, the other seeks in time. Suppose you see an attractive girl in the street. You hesitate to follow her. A quarter of a second. How to convey this hesitation? The question "How to approach her?" will be answered by direction. But in order to make explicit this other question "Am I going to love her?" you will have to grant importance to the quarter of a second during which both arise.

It is possible then, that it is no longer up to the direction of an idea, or its abrupt bursting forth in the course of the narration, but to the editing. When? Each time that the situation calls for it, be it in the middle of a scene, when a shock effect demands an arabesque, or be it that the basic continuity of the film requires, as the scene changes, superimposing the description of a character upon that of the plot.

The above exemplifies the fact that to speak of directing is automatically to speak, yet and again, of editing. When the effects of editing carry it off in effectiveness over the effects of the direction, the beauty of the latter will find itself redoubled; its charms will consist in disclosing the unforeseen by an operation analogous to that in mathematics which makes an unknown entity evident.

Those who yield to the temptations of editing also yield to the appeal of the short scene. How? By making the glance the major part of the game. It is in fact to bring out the soul under the mind, the passion behind the scheme, to make the heart prevail over the intelligence through destroying the notion of space in favor of that of time. The renowned sequence of the cymbals in Hitchcock's remake of "The Man Who Knew Too Much" is the best proof of it. To know how long one can make a scene last is already a part of the problem of shooting.

A very cleverly directed film gives the impression of having disposed entirely of directing. On the whole to give the impression of duration through movement, of a close-up through long shot would be one of the aims of directing and the reverse one of the aims of editing. One improvises, one invents in front of the moviola just as one does on the set.

Cutting a movement of the camera in quarters can reveal itself more effective than keeping it as it has been filmed. Editing, therefore, at the same time that it denies, announces and prepares the way for directing; they are inter-dependent. To direct is to plot, and one speaks of a plot as well—or poorly-knit.

That is why to say that a director owes it to himself to supervise closely the editing of his film is the equivalent of saying the editor owes it to himself to forsake the odor of glue and film for the heat of the spotlights. Wandering on the set he will see exactly where the interest of a scene lies, what the strong or weak moments of it are, what the motives for changing scenes are and therefore he won't be tempted to cut them solely on the basis of harmonizing movement, the ABC of editing, to be sure, but on the strict condition that it is not used in too mechanical a fashion—as for example those who cut a scene at the moment when it is going to become interesting. And, on the way, he will make the first steps from editor to filmmaker.

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