



Editing

Justin Chan



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Introduction

It is a well-known axiom that editing is the only cinematic discipline that did not precede the cinema itself. For centuries, writers, directors, actors, dancers, composers and production designers had a natural outlet for their talents in the theater, while still photography existed long before the key innovation of movement that gave rise to cinema. Even then, the act of filming required merely a camera and an object of the camera's attention. But the act of filmmaking suddenly required an editor, a creative technician who could step in after the performance had been captured and complete the illusion by arranging it into a form worthy of projection.

Editing is not only unique to cinema but a uniquely difficult discipline to comprehend, let alone discuss—a state of affairs to which this book is intended as some small corrective. Yet even some of the film editors interviewed here have difficulty articulating the precise nature of their work and the strategies they apply in the cutting room. “I can't explain how I do what I do,” Michael Kahn admits, while Anne V. Coates offers, “I just cut the way I feel.” One has only to witness the famous match cut from **Lawrence of Arabia** (1962) or the D-Day sequence that opens **Saving Private Ryan** (1998), to single out but two examples from these remarkable careers, to know that on the level that matters most, they know exactly what they're doing.

For more concrete language on the subject, both Kahn and Coates directed me to their colleague Walter Murch, who has done more than anyone else inside or outside his profession to illuminate the public understanding of his discipline. Murch has described film editing as synonymous with film construction—the careful assembly of a motion picture, scene by scene, shot by shot, frame by frame. Yet in his book *In the Blink of an Eye*, he also addresses a seemingly contradictory idea, which is the old adage that film editing is just “where you cut out the bad bits.” And he concedes that this shopworn notion, annoyingly reductive though it may be, nonetheless holds a kernel of truth.

Editing, after all, is an art achieved largely by subtraction, by a negation of those elements that do not serve the final product. Assembly, one of the most frequently used terms in the editor's lexicon, can only take place after a significant amount of disassembly. Whatever tools the editor may be using, it is his or her job to comb through the footage, isolate the desired elements, and arrange them into a coherent and entertaining shape. More often than not, that shape is determined as much by what is taken out as by what is left in.

In any given film, then, the actors may impress us with the intensity and focus of their performances, and the cinematography may dazzle us with its sweep and beauty, but it is the film editor who maximizes the impact of these elements, sometimes by limiting rather than extending their duration. It is the film editor who, by dropping a few frames, can make the crucial difference between a joke that kills and one that overstays its welcome. Everything you see in a film is there because the editor decided to show it to you, and you can be assured that there is plenty more that the editor opted to withhold.

Thus, even the finest editing job, however elegant or economical, may be impossible to fully appreciate unless the viewer has seen the raw materials and thus has some sense of what has been discarded in the first place. As you read this book, from time to time you may catch a glimpse of those unseen, unheard moments: the snippets of song that Virginia Katz

had to leave on the cutting-room floor of **Dreamgirls** (2006), the hilarious Robin Williams scene that Lee Smith saw scrapped from **Dead Poets Society** (1989), the extended Mexican wedding sequence that Stephen Mirrione ended up trimming for **Babel** (2006), or the lengthy dialogue passages that Valdís Óskarsdóttir had to excise, to her anguish, from **Julien Donkey-Boy** (1999).

This book is not a technical treatise but a series of conversations (from which my own voice has been excised) with 17 of the world's leading practitioners of film editing, sharing their personal and professional insights into the movies they've cut, the directors they've collaborated with and the ever-changing nature of their specific medium. While the bulk of the interviews were conducted with editors based in the US, they also include contributions from Asia and Europe, hopefully providing a counter-perspective on the dominant mode of editing practiced within the Hollywood studio system. And just as a film editor may construct a picture with an eye toward establishing echoes, parallels and contrapuntal rhythms between individual scenes, so these chapters were assembled with the hope of placing these contributors in conversation with one another, creating an implicit dialogue between their respective views and methodologies.

It is delightful, if not downright perverse, to imagine a direct conversation between Walter Murch, with his precise hierarchy of priorities of when and where to cut based on the emotional effect and visual continuity of a scene, and William Chang Suk-ping, for whom the joy of editing lies in his ability to flout every rule and convention in pursuit of a restless cinematic poetry. Certainly the two of them would disagree on the advisability of having an editor present on set: Chang, who typically serves as both production designer and editor of the same film, sees these dual duties as a way of informing the total look of a film, whereas Murch considers the editor as a stand-in for the audience and rigorously avoids visiting the set whenever possible, so as to ensure that his first impressions will come from the dailies alone.

It would be similarly instructive to draw comparisons between the work of Christopher Rouse, who structures the action movies of Paul Greengrass in hyperkinetic fragments, and that of the Taiwanese editor Liao Ching-sung whose assembly on Hou Hsiao-hsien's **Flowers of Shanghai** (1998) contains fewer cuts in its entirety than any five minutes of **The Bourne Ultimatum** (2007). That pulse-quickening action picture won Rouse the Academy Award for best editing, a significant institutional endorsement of a cutting-edge style, so to speak, that has admirers and detractors alike.

If Rouse's and Greengrass's style seems emblematic of an overall, arguably generational shift toward ever more rapid cutting in modern cinema, so does another film that recently won the Oscar for best editing: David Fincher's **The Social Network** (2010), the architecture of which is discussed here at some length by Fincher's editors, Angus Wall and Kirk Baxter. Together with Fincher, Baxter and Wall are also at the fore of an even more pervasive trend: the industry's seemingly inexorable shift toward the digitization of filmmaking across the board. It's a transformation that has already swept through cutting rooms the world over, where flatbed machines like the KEM and the Steenbeck have long been replaced by non-linear systems such as Avid and Final Cut Pro.

Many of the editors interviewed here, among them Anne Voase Coates, Joel Cox, Hervé de Luze, Tim Squyres and Dylan Tichenor, first learned how to cut on film, and several of them concede that they would not have survived and thrived had they not gone with the

electronic flow—a transition that some of their less remembered colleagues were not willing to make. As Richard Marks opines, “If you aren’t willing to change, you shouldn’t be editing.” Still, no less an editorial giant than Michael Kahn managed to hold out for longer than any of his contemporaries; only this past year, when editing Steven Spielberg’s **The Adventures of Tintin: The Secret of the Unicorn** (2011) and **War Horse** (2011), did Kahn switch to an Avid, setting his Moviola aside.

Both Kahn and Dylan Tichenor observe that among less experienced editors, digital editing—with its ability to store infinite versions of a scene and thus eliminate the fear of making “the wrong cut”—may encourage a certain mindlessness in post-production, a lack of focus and forethought that would never have been tolerated in the days of editing on film. They are not wrong. Nor would they necessarily disagree with their fellow contributors here that in the right hands, the non-linear system can be a powerful, even indispensable tool.

But a tool it remains and no less than the hot splicers once used by editors such as the late Dede Allen, the digital apparatus requires a skilled, focused editor at the helm in order to maximize its efficiency. This is the glory of film editing: Final Cut Pro may have rendered trim bins and grease pencils obsolete, but it has no more eliminated the need for an editor than Microsoft Word has eliminated the need for a writer. As every editor interviewed here will tell you, their work requires a hundred creative decisions each day that a computer can merely enable them to make. These decisions directly involve not merely rhythm and tempo, music and sound, but also the quality and range of a performance, and thus the emotional content of the entire film.

One of the most important decisions the editor can make concerns the degree to which his or her hand will be visible to the viewer. It is worth bearing in mind that every cut, whether it is intended to heighten the reality of a moment or point out its artificiality, represents a disruption, a rip in the film’s fabric, and perhaps the cinema’s most irrational gesture. As Murch notes in *In the Blink of an Eye*, “The instantaneous displacement achieved by the cut is not anything that we experience in ordinary life”—a more reasoned phrasing of Jean-Luc Godard’s famous maxim that “Cinema is truth 24 times a second, and every cut is a lie.”

Viewed through this prism, it took only six years for the purity of the Lumière Brothers’ single-shot **Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat** (1896) to be corrupted by the influence of cross-cutting in Edwin S. Porter’s **The Great Train Robbery** (1903), and in the many years since those twin railway-themed milestones, audiences have long become inured to the cut as a staple of cinematic grammar. It may represent a lie, but a century’s worth of cinema shows that it is capable of enabling a deeper kind of truth.

The rules of traditional Hollywood filmmaking exalt editing that is seamless to the point of invisibility, deepening the viewer’s immersion in the story without calling attention to itself. Joel Cox, who has edited nearly 30 films in this vein for Clint Eastwood, is one of the staunchest proponents of this classical method. For him, a great cut is “a cut you didn’t see, and indeed, the slow, devastating accrual of emotions in pictures like **Million Dollar Baby** (2004) and **Letters from Iwo Jima** (2006) requires a subdued touch, a willingness to let images breathe and speak for themselves.

And yet there is no shortage of editors who break this rule all the time, superbly: One thinks of Lee Smith, juxtaposing multiple lines of action in **The Dark Knight** (2008) and **Inception** (2010); or Stephen Mirrione, in **21 Grams** (2003) and **Babel**, spanning time as well as space in a single cut; Valdís Óskarsdóttir, dodging in and out of Jim Carrey’s

consciousness in **Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind** (2004); or Richard Marks, who spent months perfecting those long, luxuriant dissolves between past and present in **The Godfather: Part II** (1974). One is never unconscious of the editing when watching these films, and yet awareness is no hindrance to engaging with the stories they're telling.

And as Tim Squyres observes, editing is the rare job in filmmaking "where you're involved in telling the whole story," nailing one of the few ideas that perhaps every person interviewed here can agree upon. Indeed, these 17 editors were chosen because of their unusually deep investment in the art of storytelling, and their concern for the quality of any film that bears their name. This commitment is apparent not only in the discrimination with which they choose their projects, but also their willingness to follow their directors wherever they go, sometimes at the risk of foregoing greater commercial success.

One should never assume that this is universally the case. As Hervé de Luze points out, while editors and directors are all but joined at the hip in France, Hollywood does not always command the same loyalty or the same longevity of collaboration. The 17 editors you will meet here are happy exceptions to the rule, and it is with no small measure of awe that I thank them for entrusting me with their own stories, and for giving so generously of their expertise and time.

I am also enormously grateful to the many who made this book possible, not least my own editor, Mike Goodridge, for entrusting me with this project on a tight deadline and showing endless patience with my questions, concerns, and the occasional late copy. Deep thanks and appreciation as well to Zara Larcombe, Natalia Price-Cabrera, and Tara Gallagher of Ilex Press for their enthusiasm and commitment to the FilmCraft series; to Katie Greenwood and the Ivy Group team for providing me access to the invaluable Kobal Collection image archives; and to Jenni McCormick for her incredible generosity on behalf of the American Film Editors.

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Thank you to my mother, for your love and support in all things great and small, not least your steadfast conviction that your children need not conform to narrow and unimaginative pathways in life. Thank you to my sister, Stephanie, for always looking out for me, and for teaching me not only to pursue my passions, but to temper them with an ever-deeper knowledge and understanding of the world.

To my amazing girlfriend, Lameese, who has given especially generously of her time, energy and boundless patience during these difficult past few months: In walking alongside me you have comforted, delighted and replenished me when I needed it most. If you are reading this, it means you can have me back now.

Justin Chang

Walter Murch

“I love working with other people and sometimes achieving that miraculous collision of ideas, which makes the finished film something greater than the sum of its parts.”



Born in 1943 in New York City, Walter Murch is widely recognized as one of the leading authorities in the field of film editing, as well as one of the few editors equally active in both picture and sound. A graduate of the University of Southern California's School of Cinema-Television, he received his early sound credits mixing and sound-supervising Francis Ford Coppola's **The Rain People** (1969) and **The Godfather** (1972), and George Lucas' **THX 1138** (1971) and **American Graffiti** (1973), before picture-editing his first feature, Coppola's **The Conversation** (1974), which he also sound-designed and mixed. He also wore dual hats on Coppola's **Apocalypse Now** (1979), for which he and his collaborators devised the now-standard 5.1 sound format.

Murch has edited picture and mixed sound on films including Coppola's **The Godfather: Part III** (1990), **Youth Without Youth** (2007) and **Tetro** (2009); Jerry Zucker's **Ghost** (1990) and **First Knight** (1995); Anthony Minghella's **The English Patient** (1996), **The Talented Mr. Ripley** (1999) and **Cold Mountain** (2003); Kathryn Bigelow's **K-19: The Widowmaker** (2002); and Sam Mendes' **Jarhead** (2005). He has been nominated for nine Academy Awards and won three, for best sound on **Apocalypse Now**, and best sound and best film editing on **The English Patient**. Murch's contributions to film reconstruction include 2001's **Apocalypse Now Redux** and the 1998 re-edit of Orson Welles' **Touch of Evil**. He is the director and co-writer of **Return to Oz** (1985).

Walter Murch

“Apocalypse Now remains the longest post-production experience of any film I’ve been involved with.”

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The wonderful thing about film construction is that it’s such a new thing in the human experience. We’ve been doing this for barely a hundred years, and we’re only just beginning to unlock the possibilities. One of the key discoveries we’ve made is that the audience can take in more information, faster. We’re always pushing the limits of that perceptual envelope, whether it’s through complicated visual effects, dense soundtracks or fast cutting.

But I do think there is a limit. If an orchestra is playing Beethoven’s Fifth faster than the mind can grasp, it just becomes noise, and that’s certainly true visually as well. On the other hand, you can’t play it too slow, either. You can’t give an audience just one thing to think about. Imagine if all the instruments of an orchestra played the same melody at the same time in the same register—it would be like one big harmonica, boring and not worth the effort. What’s interesting instead is when you hear the violins doing something different to the flutes, which are doing something different to the cellos: harmonic interaction.

My rule of thumb is generally to not present more than two-and-a-half thematic layers to the audience at any moment, because I’m interested in the balance between clarity on the one hand and density on the other. If you shove four simultaneous layers at an audience it just becomes a spectacle; they’ll catch one or two things, but they won’t enjoy the harmonic integration of all the elements, and the number of layers that seems optimal for this is two and a half. In other words: two full layers and another layer coming in or going out, all of them shifting every ten or 15 seconds. Ideally, it is like a good shell game where the audience is kept guessing about where the pea is.

While the pace of editing has generally become faster over the decades, the average number of cuts per minute in **The Birth of a Nation** (1915) is exactly the same as in **Tetro** (2009), made almost a hundred years later: on average, one cut every five-and-a-half seconds. Dziga Vertov’s **Man With a Movie Camera**, made in 1929, has a section with the fastest cutting I’ve ever seen; it’s a Cuisinart of frames going by. But the level of apparent density is also determined by how the information is being presented to you. **His Girl Friday** (1940) doesn’t have many cuts per minute, but the audience is fire-hosed with rapid dialogue and just barely able to keep up; if Hawks had added fast cutting on top of that, it would have been overwhelming. However, David Fincher in **The Social Network** (2010) combines rapid cutting with rapid dialogue. What I’m saying is that this style comes and goes: counterbalancing Vertov’s **Man With a Movie Camera** is Sokurov’s **Russian Ark** (2002), which has no cuts at all, something that was only made possible with the arrival of digital cameras and massive hard-drive storage. But over time the trend is generally for faster cutting.

It was one of those happy accidents that I started working in features when technology had progressed, thanks to transistors, to the point where there was no reason the sound editor or

a film couldn't also mix it—kind of the sound equivalent of the director of photography also being the camera operator. Right after I'd done **The Godfather** (1972) and **American Graffiti** (1973), Francis' next film was **The Conversation** (1974). "This is a film about sound," he said. "You're a sound person, and you've edited documentaries, so why don't you edit the picture as well?" I thought, great! While it was another notch up in responsibility, it fit the general feeling we had at Zoetrope that the technology, though primitive by today's standards, had reached the point where one person could take on these different roles. It's something I've continued doing for the last 40 years.

Digital technology has only accelerated this merging. In Final Cut Pro, you can have 99 soundtracks with 24 outputs, and so you are almost obliged to take advantage of that resource. The multi-track sound we now create as we edit picture is more complex than the finished soundtracks of some films from the 1950s. And today's editing machines—Avid, Final Cut Pro—allow us to have control of sound levels, equalization, reverb, etc. The technology encourages this merging of disciplines, which was the original dream of Zoetrope Studios back in 1969.

The Conversation was challenging because it was the first feature I edited, and also the first time I'd used an eight-plate KEM editing machine—I'd worked on *Moviolas* and *Steenbecks* before that. And **The Conversation** was a spare, but thematically, complicated picture. Francis' goal for the film was to blend a murder mystery with a character study: Hitchcock meets Hermann Hesse. Yet neither of those themes was complete unto itself—by design. Francis wrote a screenplay where these two themes leant against each other, so that the leaning itself provided the dynamic structure of the film. We simply didn't have the material to make it either purely a murder-mystery or a character study. Getting those two elements to balance was very tricky, but it was a lovely challenge.

Production had to stop with ten days of shooting left to do. Francis asked Richard Chew and me to put the film together the best way we could, and then we'd see what was missing—at which point we would go to Paramount and ask for a couple of days shooting to fill the gaps. In the end, we restructured the film so that we only needed one extra shot. In the original script Meredith seduces Harry to steal the plans for his microphones, but in the finished film she steals the tapes that he recorded, folding her into the main storyline and making the problem of the un-shot days evaporate. To clarify this plot twist we had to shoot an over-the-shoulder of Harry pulling a reel off the recorder and finding that it was empty. We did this at Paramount Studios in L.A. in late 1973, building a corner of Harry's workshop on the set of **Chinatown** (1974), and borrowing John Alonzo's camera to shoot it with. If we had kept the camera running, the shot could have panned from Gene Hackman as Harry Caul to Jack Nicholson as Jake Gittes waiting for us to finish so he could get back to work.

We re-mastered **The Conversation** about ten years ago for DVD. So I had the film up on the Avid 30 years after editing it on the KEM: I was curious to see if I could discover some stylistic signature of the difference between the two machines, but it looked perfectly fine. I don't believe the machine on which you edit adds a telltale flavor. Any differences are more attributable to the sensibility of the director, the editor and the zeitgeist. Digital creation and manipulation of the image itself is another matter—that has clearly changed things, turning the fresco of analogue filmmaking into the oil-painting of digital.

I don't think film students who are now learning how to edit are hurt by the fact that they may never have worked with physical film. It is a fact, of course, that when you were

confronted with the physical reality of 1,250,000 feet of film, as we were on **Apocalypse Now**, you had to strategize carefully about what you were doing. With digital editing there is no weight to the media; but a minute of 35mm workprint and sound weighs a pound. For **Apocalypse Now**, that added up to more than seven tons of film. Yet we also had to be able to reach into that seven-ton mass and extract the one frame, weighing a hundredth of an ounce, that would improve a cut. Editing 35mm workprint was a lot of physical work, like ditch-digging, but very precise at the same time, like watchmaking. I am really glad to have experienced it.

Apocalypse Now remains the longest post-production experience of any film I've been involved with. I was on it for two years, but I was the junior partner; Richie Marks was on it for three. At the same time, we were also creating the 5.1 format at Francis' instigation: he wanted the audience to be surrounded by a swirl of sound and to feel the explosions as well as hear them. And we were also constructing a purpose-built mixing studio—it was the first time a computerized board had been used to mix a film.

I was the last editor to join the picture team on **Apocalypse Now** because I had been in England working on **Julia** (1997) while **Apocalypse** was shooting. Early on, in August of 1977, there was an editorial lunch meeting with Francis, Richie, Jerry Greenberg, Dennis Jakob, and me during which Francis said, "I want **Apocalypse Now** to get crazier and crazier as it goes along, and by definition anyone who has worked on this film for any length of time has gone crazy. Dennis, you're clearly the craziest of all, so I want you to edit the ending, and Walter, you're the sanest because you're the newest, so I want you to edit the beginning." The irony is that the beginning is arguably the craziest section of the movie.

When Francis started shooting **Apocalypse Now** in 1976, no film of comparable heft had dared to tackle Vietnam, which was still an open wound in the American psyche. We all felt the responsibility—Francis, obviously, most of all—to tackle this in the deepest way, which involved journeying into a psychic domain that a straight-ahead war film would have avoided. Each time we screened the film, we could track this crazier-and-crazier arc because we were the ones implementing it. But audience reaction was different, I think because of their in-built expectations about what a war film is. The film seemed more normal to them than it really was, up to a point. But it kept bending and bending, and they would resist the bend until they couldn't anymore. Then they would suddenly realize: this is really strange—thinking that the suddenness was in the film itself rather than in their perceptions of it. It's our fault as filmmakers, I guess, that we weren't able to make them follow the bend progressively, but we did the best we could. Audience reactions to **Apocalypse** are different now, just through familiarity.

We tried to redress this to some extent with **Apocalypse Now Redux** (2001), which was one of those projects that began as a sapling and turned into an oak. The original impetus was just to make a DVD for the French market with the French plantation scene added as an extra scene. But that scene didn't exist as a complete lift. In the editing of the original **Apocalypse Now** we had whittled the plantation scene down to just five or six shots dissolved together, and then ultimately cut it out completely. So in 2000 we had to go back to the original negative and reconstruct it from scratch. Then Francis thought, "Well, if we're going to all this trouble, let's see if there are any other scenes that we can add." One thing led to another and **Redux** wound up being around 50 minutes longer than the 1979 original. The result is a very good approximation of the screenplay that Francis had when he first

went to the Philippines.

~~I take two layers of notes on the material I am cutting. The first time, in dailies screening, I'll sit there with my laptop, screen darkened, and take free-association notes on whatever has been shot the day before. Then, later on when I'm getting ready to cut a particular sequence of scenes, I will look at all of those dailies again and take another layer of notes, this time being more analytical in my approach, with time-code attached. The first notes, I'm really just letting it wash over me. That first impression only happens, by definition, once. The closest you're ever going to come to how the audience feels is how you felt the first time you saw the material. So I'm very assiduous in capturing whatever it was I was thinking or feeling when I looked at the material for the first time.~~

Preserving that first impression is an aspect of what I like to call “seeing around the edge of the frame.” If you're there on set, witnessing the birth of this material (which the director, the cinematographer, the art director and the actors obviously are), then when you see a scene, you can remember that it was perhaps raining on the day it was shot, and admire how well-hidden that fact is. Or perhaps, “There was a terrible argument right before we got that shot.” Or, “It took us eight hours to get this shot—it is (it had better be!) fantastic.” It is very hard to unburden yourself of those layers of mental baggage if you have been on set during filming. But as editor, I believe you have an obligation to be as ignorant of all that as possible, because the audience won't know any of it, either. They won't know—or shouldn't know—what the set actually smelled like, or how a small room was made to look big using an 18mm lens, or whatever the associations happen to be. The editor is the ombudsman for the audience, and has to put himself in their shoes as much as possible.

The first assembly of **The English Patient** (1996) was four hours and 20 minutes. We cut an hour and 40 minutes out, which necessitated the reinvention of many of the transitions between the two time-frames of the story. The internal chronology of each of the two stories—the present in the monastery, and the past in the desert—was not fundamentally different but how the two of them blended with each other, how that particular deck of cards got shuffled, changed significantly. In the script, there were perhaps 40 transitions, and five of them remained as they were originally, but the other 35 had to be reinvented because so much time had been removed. We were always on the search for new aural and visual transitions, because if you're going to go back and forth that many times, the transitions have to be interesting and entertaining; you can't leave the audience feeling, “Oh my god, here we go again.” By way of comparison, in **The Godfather: Part III** there were originally fourteen time transitions, but after previewing the film, Francis reduced the number to seven.

Because I mix sound as well as edit picture, I sometimes have this image of myself on a football field, playing both quarterback and a wide receiver at the same time. In editing picture and sketching out the sound, I can anticipate what I will probably be able to do six months later, when we mix the film. (The only other person I know who also does both these jobs is Ben Burtt, and the curious thing is that we have the same birthday, July 12. Make of that what you will!) But the whole nature of filmmaking, after all, is collaborative. I wouldn't want to push this one-man-band idea too far—I love working with other people and sometimes achieving that miraculous collision of ideas which makes the finished film

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something greater than the sum of its parts.

THE CONVERSATION

The first film Walter Murch picture-edited was Francis Ford Coppola's **The Conversation**, which blended a psychological study of an intensely private individual, Harry Caul (Gene Hackman), with a murder-mystery. "Neither of those themes was complete unto itself— by design," Murch says. "Getting those two elements to balance was very tricky. It was not an obvious film construction from the beginning, and there were many screenings where we had to ask, 'What is this film?'"





Zoetrope/United Artists

APOCALYPSE NOW

Murch was the last editor hired to work on this iconic film, joining fellow editors Richard Marks, Jerry Greenberg and Dennis Jakob. Coppola asked Murch to edit the first part of the film, on the principle that the film should turn increasingly strange as it progressed, and Murch, as the newest addition to the team, was theoretically the sanest. “The irony is that the beginning is arguably the craziest section of the film,” Murch says.

Indeed, the film’s famous opening sequence is an intricate, slow-moving series of hallucinatory dissolves, conjuring nightmarish images of napalm explosions in the Vietnam jungle while also introducing the tormented dreamer, Capt. Willard (Martin Sheen), in his Saigon hotel room. No less intricate than the weave of overlapping images is Murch’s soundscape, blurring the whir of chopper blades with the whir of a ceiling fan, while the Doors’ “The End” underscores the sense of total immersion in a war- and alcohol-induced haze.





The rule of six

When should you cut? Few editors have put as much rigorous thought into answering that question as Murch, who has compiled a hierarchy of priorities for when and where to transition from one shot to the next. As Murch writes in his book *In the Blink of an Eye*: “The ideal cut (for me) is one that satisfies all the following six criteria at once:

1. it is true to the emotion of the moment
2. it advances the story
3. it occurs at a moment that is rhythmically interesting and “right”
4. it acknowledges what you might call “eye-trace” —the concern with the location and movement of the audience’s focus of interest within the frame
5. it respects “planarity”—the grammar of three dimensions transposed by photography to two (the questions of stage-line, etc.)
6. and it respects the three-dimensional continuity of the actual space (where people are in the room and in relation to one another).”

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The early footage of Willard experiencing a trauma-induced psychotic episode was filmed as a getting-into-character exercise for Sheen and was never originally intended to be in the finished film. But Coppola found the material too compelling to discard, and Murch found a way to accommodate it into the film's opening sequence—just one example of the many ways in which the writing of **Apocalypse Now** continued well into the post-production phase.

Early drafts of John Milius and Coppola's script had made use of voiceover narration, an idea Coppola had initially discarded. But in August 1977, with a December deadline looming, Murch needed away to structure the difficult opening scenes and recorded some of the voiceover himself from the original script. War correspondent Michael Herr was brought in to write fresh narration, and his own battle-scarred voice turned out to be an ideal match for Willard's.



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