Saved By the Edit

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I have always admired cinema and how effective it is as storytelling and evoking emotion. So many things go into making a movie, and as a creative, I try to emulate that in my own work. One of my favorite aspects is editing. Editing is one of the most important aspects of film but is often the most overlooked. However, this is often the goal for an editor, to create an edit unnoticed by the viewer so that the events of the film unfold naturally before them and not as a precisely calculated sequence of clips.

If an editing style is noticed by an audience, it is often because it is done poorly. One example that has actually gone viral because of this is the most recent Oscar Winner for Best Editing, *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018). Most of the editing is acceptable, but one scene in particular is edited so horribly that John Ottman, the editor of the film, has come out and apologized for it due to high volumes of criticism online (Miller).

The failure of this scene may have been due to Ottman’s effort to make the scene feel fast paced and tense. After all, editors do use specific techniques that have hidden psychological effects to influence the audience's experience. However, there are core concepts in editing that have and will hold true to filmmaking. These are continuity, which means within a scene, every shot is consistent with the previous. Timing and rhythm, which means the cuts between shots should have a natural or specific pace that helps elevate the scene. This is where Ottman failed. And lastly shot-reverse-shot, which mainly applies to conversational scenes, is used to add variety in a static dialogue scene and show the entire face of characters, rather than the profiles that you would get in a longshot with both characters (Keil).

I knew I wanted an editing based project, so I sought out inspiration. One video I came across was an analysis done by Tony Zhou. He breaks down a scene in *Silence of The Lambs* (1991) to show “who wins”. One of the core concepts in his video is camera placement. When a
character is winning the scene, the camera is facing directly or looking up at the character (refer to image 1). When a character is losing the scene, the camera is off center and looking down at the character (image 2).

Another inspiration of mine, was the entire movie *Whiplash* (2014), the Academy Award winner for Best Editing in 2015. This movie is most notable for its editing to time and music, but
one overlooked aspect is how well the film deals with conversations. Vinit Masram breaks down how Tom Cross, the film’s editor, can amplify the emotion of a conversation with just editing. The main concept for this scene is, again, camera placement. The scene is of a first date and it starts off with a master shot that has both characters in frame (refer to image 3). The air is tense, and the characters have yet to talk, establishing this as the “awkward” shot. As chemistry grows the camera pulls closer into mid-shots of the two (image 4). When Andrew, the main character, asks a question that is important to him, the camera pulls in again to close-ups (image 5). When his date doesn’t respond exactly to his liking, he gets critical, and the camera pulls back out to the master shot. The air is awkward again. It isn’t until Andrew’s date speaks up that we go back to the natural flow of the shot-reverse-shot. Next when she mentions how she is homesick, the camera is back into close-ups. He responds encouragingly, and the scene ends with a cutaway of her feet gradually getting closer to his and a close-up of a smile. Every cut is deliberate and amplifies the emotion of a scene.

(Image 3)
While *Silence of the Lambs* shows how an editor can help a character “win” a scene, *Whiplash* shows a more dynamic way of editing dialogue. I decided to combine these two concepts and form my thesis: can I persuade an audience to favor a character?

There are many things that drive an editor to make the cuts they do. Some include action, choreography, music, scene staging, and camera framing. Even editing programs themselves have an influence on editors. However, for the focus for this study, I chose dialogue.

I will be quite honest. I should have spent more time planning my approach to this study. Film making is usually broken down into three parts: pre-production, production and post-
production. The main steps for pre-production are usually scripting, storyboarding, and location setup.

I restricted the project to a 2-minute clip of a conversation based scene. The purpose of my edits was to sway the audience to favor a certain character. Initially, the scene was a dungeons and dragons game because it would have clear detailed storyline of an adventure, without the visuals. However, I felt the storyline of this concept was too linear and the character archetypes too obvious. Finding enough actors for the ensemble also proved difficult. Instead, I opted to change the concept to a breakup scene. This gave me the option to have the character in the right be a bit more ambiguous. I used my limited knowledge in script writing to portray this. Cited below is my script for the scene.
Scene opens up on couple eating at a restaurant. Both taking a few bites looking at their food. Olive looks up to Tyler (who is still looking down) then goes back to eating.

**Olive:** How was work?

*Tyler doesn't really pay much attention to her, he rants with his mouth full.*

**Tyler:** Work was awful! David was up my ass again about every little detail. And Janet was idiotic as usual. Like, I don’t know why he doesn’t give her shit because she-

*Olive is looking at him, then sighs and looks at her food.*

**Olive:** I wanna breakup.

*Silence*

**Tyler:** What?

*Silence*

**Olive:** I want t-

**Tyler:** I heard what you said, but why? Are you cheating?

*This is said kinda loud. Customers turn to look.*

**Olive:** What? No! *(Looks around restaurant)* Look, I know it’s just because you’ve been busy, but you’ve been so absent recently. You cancel our plans all the time, and when you do hang out with me, all you do is complain about work.

**Tyler:** Well, I’m sorry, but work is taking up a big chunk of my life. I pick up hours so we can do things like this *(gestures to restaurant)*. Plus, I never cancel plans with you “just because”. Every time I’ve done it, it’s because I really don’t feel well. You should be concerned.

**Olive:** I try, I do, but I just can’t handle it anymore.

**Tyler:** You’re being selfish!

**Olive:** So I’m not getting any affection and I’m just supposed to deal with it?

*Silence*

**Tyler:** Look, I’ve just been busy recently. This is temporary.

**Olive:** Is it?”
For the purposes of this study, a storyboard was not necessary. Since my shots aren’t visually complex and the purpose was to challenge myself as an editor, I just needed to get as many shots as possible of the scene and restructure the story with edits. Therefore, I opted for a shot guide that detailed every shot I would need for the project. I did this while finding a location. The setting for the scene was in the loft of a local restaurant. I took test shots with my camera to create the shot guide. However, retrospectively, I realized I should have gotten all the equipment I would’ve needed for the shoot so that I could test the lighting and audio. It wasn’t a huge set back but would have made filming a lot easier and neater. Also due to cancellations and setbacks, casting was a bit of a rush job. However, I was able to find two talented actors to portray the couple. I gave them instructions to practice their lines and be ready to have near exact deliveries the day of filming. Again, in retrospect, I should have had a rehearsal day to see their performances and give notes; however, I put my faith in their abilities to interpret a script, and they delivered well.

Despite setbacks, production was fairly easy. I got the main shots I needed; however, I was a bit pressed for time so I missed a few supplementary shots I would have preferred to have. Another big issue I had was mistaking the boom mic I rented for a directional boom mic, so my audio was very muddled from background noise. So I had to reschedule my actors to do voice overs, which they were not expecting and didn’t really prepare for. Because of this the voice overs weren’t done perfectly, and I had to do a lot of audio mixing. On the bright side, I ended up learning how to use a new program, Adobe Audition, because of this.

As I was editing, I also did more research into different editing techniques that aren’t necessarily used in my previous examples. Here are a few concepts that I learned during my studies. Timing of the cuts are very important. You can often get a feel for film just by knowing
the Average Shot Length (ASL). Recently, with fast-paced action movies, cuts have become faster. For instance the ASL for The Bourne Ultimatum, a high-action stunt movie, is only 2.17 seconds (Keil). However, if you want emotion to get across, use longer shots. Emotions take time, and the audience needs to sit in them.

Another trick done by editors, provided these shots are taken, are to use cutaways. Showing a facial expression and cutting away to certain scene implies certain emotions a character may be feeling. An example Alfred Hitchcock once gave was having a shot of an old man smiling. If the camera cuts to a women holding a baby, you may think he is kind and sympathetic. Conversely, if you replace the footage of the woman and child with a woman in a bikini, you may then be inclined to think he is a pervert.

I tried to keep these in mind while editing. I really wanted to show the emotions of the character that I wanted to audience to feel for. So I gave time to that character. One method I used for this was overlapping audio, which also helped with some of the voice over mistakes. For example, when Tyler was defending himself, I tried to place a shot of Olive in frame. This is a purposeful breaking of an important rule of editing which requires an actor to be on screen if what the character is saying is important (Shimamura). This shows that she did sympathize with what he was saying while simultaneously undermining what he was saying. I also made an effort to mimic the concept that was shown in Whiplash. When something is important to the character, the camera cuts closer to their face.

However, there were a few concepts I failed at. For instance I got shots of cutaways that I could use to influence how someone viewed a character; however, the shots messed with the continuity of the scene, and I decided against using them. Having a lack of continuity would just confuse the audience and take away from their focus on emotion. Secondly, I wish I had gotten a
few more dynamic shots of the characters actually getting up or sitting down from the table. That way I could’ve better mimicked the technique used in *Silence of the Lambs*.

This project proved very educational. I learned a lot about audio recording and mixing and production planning. Furthermore, from my studies, I learned a lot about editing and how to improve my edits. Skilled editors often make these choices naturally, and I hope to achieve that level of mastery. In conclusion, I do believe that editing does have an effect on the audience; however my execution of this could have been better.
Works Cited


Shimamura, Arthur P. "How Attention Is Driven by Film Edits: A Multimodal Experience."


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