

ABSTRACT

Film and Intuition:
An Exploration of Rhythm, Pace, and the Moving Image

Patrick C. Shen, M.A.

Mentor: Christopher J. Hansen, M.A., M.F.A.

Well-edited films are deeply rooted in the concepts of rhythm and pace. Many film editors argue that this sense of rhythm and pace is born out of a generalized sense of “intuition.” This concept of intuition is very rarely explored in academic scholarship. This paper explores and deconstructs the concept of the film editor’s intuition into definable methods of acquisition and usage. These methods are formed through the development of both a theoretical and practical frameworks.

Film and Intuition:
An Exploration of Rhythm, Pace and the Moving Image

by

Patrick C. Shen, B.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Communication Studies

David W. Schlueter, Ph.D., Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

Approved by the Thesis Committee

Christopher J. Hansen, M.A., M.F.A., Chairperson

Corey P. Carbonara, Ph.D.

DeAnna M. Toten Beard, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School
December 2011

J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this time to recognize the individuals that made this thesis possible. First I would like to thank Brian Elliot for allowing me to be apart of the creative process on Strangers and Aliens, and for helping me in the primary research of this project. I would also like to thank Chris Hansen for his guidance and help in the thesis project, and my graduate experience. I would also like to thank all the members of my thesis committee for their generosity with their time and wisdom.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Walter Murch, editor of such films as *The Godfather* (1972), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *The English Patient* (1996) and *Cold Mountain* (2003), stated, “The invention of editing is the thing that allowed film to take-off. It was the equivalent to the invention of flight.”¹

In light of this statement, what makes a well-edited film? More specifically, what gives a “good” film its sense of shape, flow, and pace? These are all concepts formed by the editor. His or her job is to choose what shots and sounds will coalesce into a compelling scene, sequence, and eventual story. Many editors describe their creative process as one of intuition. The choice of a cut comes from a “feeling.” In *First Cut, Conversations with Film Editors*, editors such as Carl Kress and Bill Pankow state that rhythm and editing are like “magic” and “exclusively in the realms of intuition.”² Even so, the question remains: Beyond the concept of intuition, what are the specific tools and processes available to an editor to shape rhythm, pace and time to create an effective narrative? In the academic scholarship of film, the concept of rhythm and pace has rarely been explored as a subject unto itself. Unfortunately, most descriptions hover around the

¹ Wendy Apple, *The Cutting Edge: The Magic of Movie Editing*, Documentary, N/A.

² Gabriella Oldham, *First Cut: Conversations with Film Editors* (University of California Press, 1995).

unspecific notions of intuition and rhythm. Film theorist Don Fairservice said in his book *Film Editing: History, Theory and Practice*:

Any discussion about film editing will inevitably sooner or later raise the matter of rhythm. It tends to be used rather as a compendium word, a sort of catch-all which tends to obscure as much as it reveals about something that is difficult to define.³

It is because of this fact that this thesis will explore the various theories and concepts concerning rhythm and pace— how it is defined, how it is shaped, and how it can be used to create effective storytelling.

In the second chapter, I will go through a brief history of film editing. This section will concentrate on the major innovations in editing methodology and their contributions to the narrative craft. This survey of the evolution of editing will help to provide a context for understanding the concepts discussed in the rest of the thesis.

In the third chapter, I will define and explore the concept of an editor's "intuition". This often generalized and ineffable quality is used by critics to describe an editor's ability to make a good cut. In a more specific sense, this thesis will discuss "intuition" under the assumption that an editor's editorial instincts are the product of two sources— the rhythms of the world the editor experiences and the rhythms of the editor's body which experiences them.⁴ Simply put, intuition is the culmination of various conscious and subconscious processes that form a physiological and psychological knowledge base from which an editor can make creative decisions.

³ Don Fairservice, *Film Editing: History, Theory and Practice: Looking at the Invisible* (Manchester University Press, 2002).

⁴ Karen Pearlman, *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit* (Focal Press, 2009).

The fourth chapter of this thesis will discuss methods of practical application. These methods will concentrate on recognizing and defining certain physical and psychological rhythms common to edited scenes.

The concept of filmatic rhythm and pace is a complex and overlooked subject of academic scholarship. Ultimately, all of the principles in these chapters explore those interactions and propose the theory that rhythm in film editing is, what Pearlman describes as, "...the culmination of timing, movement and energy shaped by timing pacing and trajectory for the purposes of creating cycles of tension and release."⁵

Framework

A bulk of the literature on film editing and rhythm, involves basic mechanical guidelines on rhythmic pacing and timing. Though these tools are useful in training the mechanical functions of editing, there still remains the need to offer a more specific definition to an often overlooked and under researched topic. The purpose of this thesis is not to apply specific rules on rhythm. Conversely, it is meant to get editors to understand and expand their knowledge of their own rhythmic intuition. Through this understanding, editors will be able to access and expand the creative possibilities in their own works.

This thesis will be utilizing David Bordwell's *cognitivism* method for the purpose of exploring rhythm. *Cognitivism* is the method "that seeks to understand human thought, emotion and action by appeals to processes of mental representation, naturalistic processes and rational agency."⁶ Simply put, Cognitivism looks at the way humans are

⁵ Pearlman, *Cutting Rhythms*.

⁶ David Bordwell, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 9th ed. (McGraw-Hill, 2010).

naturally hardwired. This in turn affects the way things like film shape their perceptions. Taking it a step further, one could argue these perceptions are not just mental but also physiological. Consciously and subconsciously our bodies are constantly reacting to the world around us. These reactions are born out of the notion that the mind and the body think, learn, and react conjunctively. Thus rhythm is not just a process of perceived thought, but also feeling. This is the pool of experience from which the editor's decisions are born.

CHAPTER TWO

Film Editing History

Early Film

Rhythm has always been an important part of film and its evolution. As the medium has grown and evolved, so has the understanding of the editors that shape it. At its infancy, film editing could have been considered a static art. The 1890s saw the rise of filmmakers like the Lumiere Brothers and Thomas Edison.¹ Early filmmakers simply pointed a camera and filmed what interested them. Each film consisted of single shots portraying everyday happenings: a train passing by, a man watering his lawn. These were the cumulative and rudimentary narratives of film. This simplistic nature proved to be problematic for film and its marketability to the public. Editor and film historian Walter Murch went so far as to say that August Lumiere, one of the fathers of early cinema, considered cinema to be an invention without a future.²

In 1903, film saw its first huge jump in narrative evolution. Edwin S. Porter, in his film *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903), discovered that by intercutting two unrelated shots together, one could create an emotional impact on the audience, thereby creating a conventional narrative.³ By showing a shot of racing fire engines down the street, coupled with the shot of a burning building miles away, Porter was able to show

¹ Ken Dancyger, *The Technique of Film and Video Editing, Fourth Edition: History, Theory, and Practice*, 4th ed. (Focal Press, 2006).

² Apple, *The Cutting Edge*.

³ Apple, *The Cutting Edge*.

that people in the building were in danger and, in a separate shot, the firemen in the trucks were racing to save them. This in turn created a new emotional desire in the audience to see the people in the building get saved. This film introduced the concept of psychological affect on perception and pacing in editing.

The next filmmaker to evolve and advance film editing came in the form of filmmaker D.W. Griffith. More than a decade after Porter, Griffith continued to experiment with the idea of psychological connection in cutting. Examples of these experiments can be seen in the cutting styles of *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916). Along with this, he went on to explore the concept of inventing and intercutting the close-up, medium, and wide shot. This led to what we now know as the concept of the “invisible cut.” The “invisible cut,” also known as “match cut,” stipulates that from shot to shot motion should be continuous and fluid for the purposes of masking a cut, thereby allowing the film watching experience to be more organic.⁴ An example of this principle would be a wide shot of a character picking up a gun. On the medium shot, the characters hand will spatially match where it was in the last frame of the previous shot. Moving on the same principle would apply to the close-up, and so on. This theory and style of editing was and remains the standard in contemporary editing.

Russian Revolution

At the same time filmmakers in Hollywood were experimenting with rhythms in narrative films, the Europeans began exploring the psychological and political aspects of rhythmic editing. During the early 1900s, amid the communist revolution, Russian filmmakers began to research editing and its effects on psychological and emotional

⁴ Apple, *The Cutting Edge*.

effects on audiences, or what they referred to as “the masses.”⁵ One of the most famous of these was Lev Kuleshov. Kuleshov experimented with perceptions by juxtaposing two different shots together to create a new meaning. In this experiment he took a single shot of a man staring at the camera. He intercut this shot with three other shots individually. One shot was of a bowl of hot soup. Another shot was of a small girl playing with a doll. The final shot was of a woman weeping over a casket. He discovered that when he juxtaposed each of these shots with the shot of the staring man, he got a different interpretation from the audience⁶. Each audience would talk about how hungrily he looked at the bowl of soup, how tenderly he looked at the little girl, and how sorrowfully he looked at the weeping woman. This concept of two images combining to make a new meaning led other Russian filmmakers like Ziga Vertov and Eisenstein to create the editing style of montage. Montage sought to rapidly increase the pace and rhythm of film. It rejected the editing style of Griffith’s invisible cut, exchanging it for the revelry in the very deliberate “collision” of images and their creation of an emotional response

The Sound Era

In the 1930s film began using sound. Though sound was originally introduced in the early 1920s, in such films as *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the 1930s saw its mainstream inception into mainstream Hollywood filmmaking.⁷ Its introduction ushered in new stylistic elements in pacing and rhythm. Films began to have standardized musical

⁵ Apple, *The Cutting Edge*.

⁶ Karel Reisz and GAVIN MILLAR, *Technique of Film Editing, Reissue of 2nd Edition, Second Edition*, 2nd ed. (Focal Press, 2009).

⁷ Dancyger, *The Technique of Film and Video Editing, Fourth Edition*.

soundtracks that could be used to direct a cut from shot to shot. Other sound innovations such as dialogue changed the very nature of actors' performances and how editors cut them together. Rather than cutting to a dialogue card, editors could compress or draw-out performances from a group of shots.

Modern Film and Pacing

The 1960s ushered in many new innovations through unconventional experimentation in film. Many of these innovations were the product of filmmakers who sought to defy the rules of pacing and rhythm set down by Griffith and Porter. Films that illustrated these changes in editing convention included Jean Luc Goddard's *Breathless* (1960), Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969). All of these films practiced the usage of jump-cut-- the phenomenon where, through a cut, an object seems to jump or jerk from one screen position to another. This can be from a direct consequence of a misaligned angle or temporal manipulation.⁸ These films would go on to be the foundations of what is now known as the MTV style of editing. This style was first illustrated in its modern form in the music videos of the 1980s and films like *Top Gun* (1986). This style was built on the premise of accelerated the pacing and rhythm of editing, thereby enacting a sort of "minimal time, maximum information" editing style.

⁸ Herbert Zettl, *Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics*, 6th ed. (Wadsworth Publishing, 2010).

CHAPTER THREE

Defining Intuition and Rhythm

Intuition

The formal meaning of *intuition* can be defined as such: “a non-sequential information-processing mode, which is comprised of both cognitive and affective elements and results in direct knowing without any use of conscious reasoning.”¹ In *The Intuitive Practitioner*, writer Guy Claxton breaks intuition down further into six types/stages of creative processing:²

1. Expertise- the unreflective execution of intricate skilled performance
2. Implicit learning- the acquisition of such expertise by non-conscious or non-conceptual means
3. Judgment- making accurate decisions and categorizations without, at the time, being able to justify them
4. Sensitivity- a heightened attentiveness, both conscious and non-conscious, to details of a situation
5. Creativity- the use of incubation and reverie to enhance problem solving
6. Rumination- the act of reflection on the experience so as to extract its meanings and implications

By looking at these definitions we can see that rhythmic intuition for a film editor is an acquired knowledge. With instinct, a person simply reacts without comprehension or thought. It is an action that is born from an innate reflex. Unlike instinct, which

¹ Marta Sinclair and Neal M. Ashkanasy, “Intuition,” *Management Learning* 36, no. 3 (2005): 353 -370.

² Atkins, *Intuitive Practitioner*, 1st ed. (Open University Press, 2000).

occurs naturally, *intuition* is something good editors can and have acquire, develop, and enhance through practical and theoretical experience. This leads us to the bigger question: What informs this rhythmic intuition? The answer is observed rhythm.

Rhythm

Zettl refers to rhythm as, “the flow within and among event segments and to a recognizable time structure- a beat.”³ The physical world we experience is one of rhythmic physicality. The movement of the stars, the growing cycles of a flower, and the passage of time are all examples of universal rhythms. In addition to these rhythms, human beings experience their own rhythms in things like life/death, running/standing still, and inhaling/exhaling. Therefore these experiential rhythms are the same ones that inform the formation of an editor’s creative intuition. Each deliberate cut in a film at any given moment is a repurposing of information. Russian filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky illustrated this best:

“Cinema is able to record time in outward and visible signs, recognizable to the feelings. Rhythm in cinema is conveyed by the life of the object visibly recorded in the frame. Just as from the quivering of a reed you can tell what sort of current, what pressures there is in a river, in the same way we know the movements of time from the flow of the life-process reproduced in the shot.”⁴

Ultimately, it is the editor’s job to recognize the rhythms located in the material he or she is editing. Dailies (raw uncut footage from which a film is made) ultimately

³ Zettl, *Sight, Sound, Motion*.

⁴ Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Tarkovsky The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art* (University of Texas Press, 1989).

provide a window into a new world of rhythm unique to every given film. Like Eisenstein's notion of collision, the sheer act of putting two shots together creates a whole new meaning and rhythm. These acts of creation can spark additional innovations in the perception of rhythm in both the editor and the viewer.

So what are some methods an editor can use to acquire knowledge of rhythmic intuition? Walter Murch would say that one of the primary methods is working with other editors.⁵ This type of collaboration produces a cumulative knowledge of the rhythmic universe for an editor to draw decisions from. In the book *The Conversations*, Murch said, "You pick up the good things that other editors are doing and you metabolize those approaches into what you're doing, and vice versa. It's kind of like women who live together eventually having their periods at the same time."⁶

In addition to collaboration, editors also acquire rhythmic knowledge through the focused observation of their own bodies. As human beings, one of the ways editors most commonly perceive rhythm is in the way they observe music and sound. This interaction with music can often lead to a soundtrack that dictates where a certain cut should go. This form of sound-driven editing is demonstrated in films like *Moulin Rouge!* (2003).⁷

In addition to sound, a study of rhythmic editing can also include observations on reflexive reactions such as rhythmic blinking, the frequency with which a person blinks for both physiological and psychological circumstances. When looking at

⁵ Michael Ondaatje, *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film* (Knopf, 2004).

⁶ Ondaatje, *The Conversations*.

⁷ *Moulin Rouge!* (20th Century Fox, 2003).

footage of an actor delivering a line, an editor often syncs the cuts with the movement of the actor's eyelids. The difference between whether or not a cut "works" can be dependent on whether or not the last frame of the previous cut had an actor's eyes closed or open, a distinction that can accentuate connection or disconnection to the audience.

Editors can also look to other bodily rhythms such as breathing. In any given live performance, an audience will often sync to the breathing of a character.⁸ These breathing patterns speak to thoughts and feelings created by the actors' performances. In film, the editor handles these breathing rhythms. In essence, the editor must recognize, predict, and control the cadence of breath, which in turn produces drama in the performance.

Author Ross Gibson underlines the importance of breathing and blinking on stage: "By blinking and breathing in sync with the performer, you can feel the actor representing you in the world of drama. And through the proxy of the actor you can feel the imaginary world course through you. Your representative breathes you and blinks you and thereby helps you imagine experiences other than you own."⁹

Ultimately we can translate that to film in much the same way. For example, director M. Night Shyamalan, in the movie *The Village* (2005), utilized stage actors for minimal cutting and long takes. In many of the scenes he allowed his actors breathing and direction of eye to guide the pace of each scene. This allowed for what he called "an organic sense of rhythm".¹⁰

⁸ Pearlman, *Cutting Rhythms*.

⁹ Pearlman, *Cutting Rhythms*.

¹⁰ *The Village* (Buena Vista Home Entertainment / Touchstone, 2005).

CHAPTER FOUR

Methods

Practical Application

In terms of practical application, I will be using a number of scenes from the film *Strangers and Aliens* to illustrate the concepts of rhythm and pace discussed in this thesis. *Strangers and Aliens* is a short film written and directed by Brian Elliott and was shot in the summer of 2010. This section will concentrate on select scenes within reference to the style, pace and timing of the editing. These scenes will also include breakdowns of their context, and an analysis of each scene through the guidelines of traditional editing training text, as well as the methods discussed previously in the rhythm section of this Thesis.¹ These processes will include:

1. The actor's physical rhythmic performance
2. The physiological reference of the editor
3. Other various rhythmic factors in the scene itself

In addition each sequence will be more generally deconstructed by:

1. Defining the conflict
2. Noting the value at the beginning
3. Breaking the scene into beats
4. Survey the beats.

In addition to the scene breakdowns, this section will also discuss my role on the film as editor and on-set consultant during principle filming. In light of this fact, I will

¹ Pearlman, *Cutting Rhythms*.

address perceptions, problems and solutions unique to my dualistic role in both the production and post-production of the film.

Ultimately, these scene breakdowns and their various rhythmic components will illustrate how an editor can acquire, recognize and manipulate rhythm to create effective storytelling.

Sequence 1 - Scenes 5-8

The context of this first sequence involves an unconventional comedic chase scene that follows the protagonist, Harley, as he is sling-shotted from his newfound adoptive home, into the busy streets/allies of the city and into the eventual care of a drunken homeless man. Much of this sequence's rhythm and pacing is derived from the actual music itself. Coupling the visuals with the song *Misirlou* by Dick Dale and His Deltones, I tried to create a very frenetic and fast-paced feel. My experiential point of reference was the feeling of dancing at a party. Each cut represented a beat or movement in the dance. So as a dance is often guided by the music played, I let each beat of the song direct specific cuts.

In terms of performance, most of the actors are only on the screen for a limited number of shots. In light of this fact, most of the performances come from the moving cradle. The cradle acts as character that emotes through it's pace and movement through the shots. If we were to look at the energy of this sequence, we would see that it is a transference of motion and rhythm that starts with the little boy, to the cradle, and finally, the homeless man. It is also interesting to note that in addition to music, movement seems to guide the rhythm and pacing of the sequence. Starting out, I tried to reference this sequence with my experiences in long-distance running. In a race, a runner will start

slow. As his body acclimates, it increases the pace. When the goal is reached, the body then winds itself back down. Similar to running, editing employs the same cycles experienced by the body. These cycles are marked with periods of compression, expansion and release. The cradle acts as a mode of compression, as it motivates fast cutting and increased visual awareness.

The actors themselves have very static performances, which in turn calls for expansion through minimal cuts and slow pacing. Ultimately, this leads to the “release” of the final scene when the homeless man yells “Score!”.

Stylistically, I attempted to mold the sequence to resemble chase scenes in the movie *Raising Arizona* (1987). Both films share a whimsical hyper-reality coupled with frenetic performance, therefore allowing for things like jump-cuts, quick crosscutting.

In terms of production, the original footage was shot very sparingly. The accelerated schedule and minimal shot-list demanded that we get more footage to make the transition between scenes seem less abrupt.

Sequence 2 - Scene 16

In this sequence, Harley is seen in a series of flash-forwards in time. Each scene change is meant to represent Harley’s becoming a different persona in attempts to become a more desirable adoption candidate. This particular scene involves a 10-year old Harley talking to a room full of orphan babies like a general addressing his troops.

This scene begins with an upbeat and light tone. Stylistically it was meant to be visually and comically reminiscent of the opening in the film *Patton* (1970).

Rhythmically, the editing was done with the actor’s performance in mind. The pace itself was deliberately derivative of the main character’s breathing. This played

itself out in the bombastic nature of his speech. This meant that I tried to edit to the cadence of his words, much in the way one would perceive a public address. Most of these cuts existed on the stressed annunciation of certain words or phrases like “Hoot’n Hell for a man who’s lost...”. This created a slow and steady pace composed of mostly static wide shots.

In terms of production, reshoots are still needed for the shots of the babies’ reactions. This was deemed necessary so as to increase the comedic feel of the scene.

Sequence 3 - Scene 20

The context of this scene is that Harley has just been kicked out of the orphanage and wandered into the city. In an attempt to connect with his past, he goes to the address that was printed on letter attached to his cradle as a child. This letter was written on the stationary of a local auto repair shop. When he arrives at his destination, he discovers that the auto repair shop is now a tattoo parlor. While standing outside, he meets a psychic who happens to work inside the parlor. The remainder of this scene focuses on Harley and his frustration with the task of having to define his existence in a world where he has no “history”.

This scene, unlike the previous scenes, is composed of mostly dialogue. The pacing varies from medium to slow. The actor’s performances are calm and almost toned-down.

In terms of rhythm, I approached this piece much like a tennis match. The actors would be the players and the camera would be considered the ball. The pace of the cuts was a product of their performance and the “exchange” of the camera. Similar to a tennis match, the flow of conversation was steady in its moments, both at its emotional highs

and lows. I used various kinds of performance cues to develop these beats. This included things like eye movement and breath. Eye movement was an effective tool for directional exchanges in both proactive and reactive moments in the characters' story arcs. When Harley states that he, "Just wants to know where he belongs..." he passes a sort of somber emotional energy in his performance. Louise in turn tells Harley that "We are all orphans and aliens...and not belonging is what makes us all the same." This essentially converts his rhythm and energy into something more positive. Thus, cutting on these marks created a steady "flow" of emotional editing.

Referencing breathing patterns in the character established another form of dramatic rhythm from which to cut on. By recognizing each character's breathing state, I was able to establish a reactionary editorial pace. Whenever a character delivered a dramatic line or look, a breath was used to create an emotional rhythm of space and contemplation. This is illustrated in Louise's reaction to the Harley's fortune. Her long dramatic breaths provided an effective emotional indicator as to when to cut. Thus, her shots were longer than the ones in the scenes like the chase scene.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Final Thoughts

I began this paper seeking to explore how editors acquire, develop and implement their senses' of rhythm. First, I looked at the history of film to establish a framework of editing method and style. Through this viewpoint I examined concepts such as invisible cutting, jump-cuts, and collision.

Next, I looked at the definitions of intuition and rhythm and how they interact in a editorial setting. The research shows how instinct and intuition are different and that an editor acts more out of conscious and subconscious processes that have been developed over time rather than mere feeling. Further study explored how these conscious and subconscious processes are informed by perceptions of the rhythmic world. This interaction takes place on both a physical and mental plain.

Finally, through practical application of these ideas to *Strangers and Aliens*, I imposed a sort of forensic examination of my own intuition and “thinking body”.¹ This study provided an interesting playing ground from which to view editing choices in pacing.

Ultimately, the goal of this project was not to create the perfect formula for editing, but rather to look at the creative processes occurring in the artist during a moment of creation. Though the research into this topic was extensive, it was not completely exhaustive, given the field's wide breadth and the fact that the visual medium

¹ Pearlman, *Cutting Rhythms*.

is constantly evolving. Other areas of interest that could be expanded include: an in-depth look at the physicality of music, the interaction of an editor with specific types of audiences, and cutting for specific genres. Even so, hopefully this study can provide useful information to other editors and filmmakers who are looking to advance their skills in rhythmic visual storytelling.

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