

The lost art of film editing

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RECENTLY, THE BIG-SCREEN VERSION of "Miami Vice" and the 25th birthday of MTV reminded us of how the small-screen fare of the 1980s ushered in a flashy, high-velocity aesthetic that transformed the moving image as we knew it. The timing seems especially apt because, at least for this viewer, 2006 marks the moment that the dizzying pinball effect of hyperspeed editing has finally permeated every last corner of mainstream American cinema—not just the ADD-inducing action spectaculars that breed in summertime, but also the character-driven, explosion-free films offered as an alternative to the blockbusters.

Even though moviegoers who never before gave a thought to film grammar can now put together epics on their laptops using iMovie and Final Cut Pro, film editing remains perhaps the least heralded and least understood of the cinema's technical arts. The editor Walter Murch, whose astonishing resume includes the "Godfather" films, "Apocalypse Now," and "The English Patient," has said that film editing "could just as easily be called 'film construction.'"

From a daunting surfeit of footage shot out of sequence, the editor works with the director to extract and weave together the best material, their every decision shaping the film's rhythm and mood. Superb editing can whittle down a chaotic production or a bewildering script into 90 sleek minutes of coherent screen time. It can deliver a jab to the viewer's solar plexus with a mere song cue or cutaway. An editor can change the timbre of an actor's entire performance simply by deciding to shorten or lengthen a pause. And, if he's good, he can do all this without the viewer even noticing his craftsmanship.

"The greater purpose is to make a cut that works dramatically but doesn't draw attention to itself," says Andrew Hafitz, who has edited films by Whit Stillman and Larry Clark as well as MTV's "True Life" series.

Yet this summer's movies have fallen startlingly short of this goal. Take, for example, the much talked about scene in "The Devil Wears Prada" when Meryl Streep's imperious fashion editor delivers an exegesis on "cerulean blue," cutting the movie's heroine down to size in the process. This is the moment when Streep's fearsome authority comes into crystalline focus, when she commands the rapt, terrified attention of her underlings and the movie audience both. If the film had been made even a decade earlier, one might imagine the camera slowly tracking in on Streep, helpless to turn away, registering every flicker of expression as the monologue curls from her lips like a fragrant poison gas. Instead, the movie's eyes dart nervously back and forth between actors and objects, conjuring an air not of awe and dread so much as desultory mania.

A sympathetic viewer might counter that the editing expresses the young protagonist's understandable panic, but the entire movie is assembled in this jittery style—one that's become all too typical. Even smaller, nominally independent pictures aren't immune.

Consider the episode in the Sundance hit "Little Miss Sunshine" when Steve Carell's suicidal academic stumbles into a humiliating incident involving porn magazines and an ex-boyfriend at a highway rest stop. The scene depicts an awkward meeting of public and private that leaves a bruise, and yet it's sliced and diced from every conceivable angle, from what are noticeably different takes. It's constructed less like a painful encounter between two people than a car chase or a shoot-out.

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Why has this chaotic, rat-tat-tat style of assembly, the kind usually associated with Michael Bay-brand megatonnage, been cropping up in such unlikely places?

One explanation boils down to background. Whereas film directors and editors used to spend the bulk of their careers in some wing of feature film making, "More and more film directors are pulled from the ranks of television commercials," says Steve Hamilton, whose own career bridges the divide between art and commerce: He has edited most of indie auteur Hal Hartley's films, worked as a sound editor for Ang Lee, and cut promos for Dunkin' Donuts and

the memorable Priceline.com commercials featuring William Shatner.

Years spent assembling 30-second spots can influence a filmmaker as deeply as a youthful encounter with Fellini or Bergman. "They are forced to focus on raw, surface-level impact because, to use the words bandied about by market researchers, a TV commercial must 'break out from the clutter,'" Hamilton says. "And they're trained throughout their careers to work collaboratively and to provide every possible option, because television commercial production is all about the committee."

Indeed, many scenes in this summer's movies unfold as if each member of the cast and crew had chosen a favorite take and left the editors to stitch them together. Coincidentally or not, Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, the directing team behind "Little Miss Sunshine," made their names directing music videos as well as commercials for Sony PlayStation, the Gap, Target, IKEA, and other mega-clients.

Of course, filmmaking by committee is nothing new—countless auteurs have had to battle with the suits over final cut—but the size and power of the committees have grown in the last couple of years, as digital technology has made it possible to burn multiple copies of a rough cut onto DVDs in a matter of minutes. That means more comments and criticisms from anyone involved in the production—be it a producer, sales agent, publicist, or personal assistant—who happens to get his hands on a cut.

"You always hear things like, 'We need to put more energy into this scene,'" says Tim Streeto, who edited "The Squid and the Whale" and has also worked on films by Ang Lee and Steven Soderbergh. "That can translate into quick editing, where you go back and forth between two characters like a ping-pong match."

This exhausting back-and-forth approach doesn't even necessarily require dialogue. For the protracted kiss at the climax of "Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby," the movie ricochets between camera setups as if the scene were a heated cross-examination instead of a comical clinch. In contrast, Woody Allen's zany comedies of the 1970s used far more wide shots and far fewer cuts: Two or more characters could occupy the screen together and the crackling dialogue provided all the necessary ping and pong.

"There is much more pressure on an editor to try to do something 'noticeable,'" Hamilton says, "or perhaps there are more editors who've grown up thinking that they have to make edits that are noticeable, whereas before the goal was simply to tell the best possible story and to do so relatively invisibly. I think this mentality is leading to a mistrust of the shot."

Perhaps it's only apt that recent American cinema has seemed so rushed and frazzled, desperate as it is to hold its ground in the losing battle between the haughty silver screen, that decrepit diva who insists on your silent attention, and the accommodating computer screen, the loyal manservant whose command is your every wish.

"The power of the gaze has been circumvented by technology," Hamilton concludes. "We can't look our matinee idols in the eye anymore."

Jessica Winter is the author of "The Rough Guide to American Independent Film," due out next month. ■