C R E A T I N G   A   S C E N E

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ABSTRACT

This workshop was informed by the central tenets of the conference – the connections and continuities between the critical, the creative and the cultural; to connect some of the themes from my Critical workshop and the various keynotes and to provide a basis for delegates to develop their thoughts and ideas onto the creative group task. The ultimate objective was of course to give delegates the confidence to produce effective and engaging creative projects with their students.

The workshop was designed to encourage delegates to conceptualise and then work on two ideas; firstly, how to construct a continuous scene by editing a short sequence together from given materials and secondly, to build on this first activity and explore how to create different atmospheres through editing style by creating their own short scene based on a brief and a series of given questions.

The intention was for delegates to have an opportunity to experiment and develop ideas and skills in editing, asking questions about why we film scenes in a certain way and to suggest ways to build effective scenes that create compelling narratives. This is an approach that runs through much of Film Education's work with teachers and learners – that in order to do this, you need to learn about editing and giving yourself creative choices before you can think about filming. Due to restricted time, the workshop concentrated only on the visual aspects of editing. An extension activity or second workshop could explore the importance of sound to the editing process.

THE CURIOUS POWER OF EDITING

'…to make a picture the director must compose the separate filmed fragments, disordered and disjointed, into a single whole and juxtapose these separate fragments into a more advantageous, integral and rhythmical sequence, just as a child constructs a whole word or phrase from separate scattered blocks of letters.'

<div align="right">Lev Kuleshov, 1917</div>

The simplicity and pervasiveness of digital technology seems to have engendered a move towards recording and showing – single-take events on film, rather than filmed events that use the power of editing and shot choice to create engaging and dynamic wholes from these fragments. We shouldn't underestimate the powers of persuasion embodied in the creative choices that we can make in joining shots together – in editing – if different images are edited together then it can affect how each of them individually are interpreted.

Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov first examined this 'effect' (which now bears his name) around 1918. In his experiment he filmed Mozhukhin, a famous Russian actor and shots of a bowl of soup, a little girl playing with a teddy bear, and a dead woman laid out in a coffin. He then cut the bits of film so that the shot of the actor was seen first being followed by the soup, the girl and lastly the dead body. Each time the same Mozhukhin sequence was used. Viewers were asked what they made of what they had seen and many felt the shots of the actor conveyed different emotions, though each time it was in fact the same shot. They praised him for his changes in mood – from thoughtfulness concerning the soup, joy at seeing the child and sorrow concerning the dead woman.

In this way Kuleshov used the experiment to indicate the usefulness and effectiveness of editing or montage. It became the director's belief that inter-cutting film, rather than performance, was the prime basis of filmic expression and provoking emotional impact in an audience. Careful editing or montage weaves images together to create suggestive combinations in which the meaning is often far greater than the individual elements on their own.

To illustrate the Kuleshov effect, delegates watched three different versions of this sequence to explore whether they imputed different meanings to the sequence dependent on the order of the images. Although Kuleshov's original film has been lost, there are lots of reinterpretations of the experiment online and it is an easy and effective activity to use with students of all ages, either using materials produced by others or asking students to shoot their own bowls of soup and actors etc.

THE ART OF EDITING

'For my style, for my vision of the cinema, editing is not simply one aspect: it's the aspect… The images themselves are not sufficient. They're very important, but they're only images. What's essential is the duration of each image and that which follows each image; the whole eloquence of cinema is that it's achieved in the editing room.'

Orson Welles, interview with Cahiers du Cinema, quoted in
'The Conversations, Walter Murch and The Art of Editing', Michael Ondaatje (Bloomsbury, 2002)

Editing could be described as being a process of eliminating unwanted material and then joining the other bits together, but Welles suggests that it is only in the editing process when the filmmaker has total control over the film – that it's a creative and aesthetic process that considers the:

- ■ duration of each shot
- ■ relationship between one shot and another
- ■ relationship between shots, sound and music
- ■ contribution that each shot makes to the overall narrative under construction

Bordwell and Thompson suggest four areas of study in relation to editing which can act as both theoretical and practical guides to an aesthetic approach to cinematic construction and help students to make decisions about how they can join shots together most effectively:

> The **graphical** relationship between shot A and shot B

The pictorial relationship between one shot and another. Key graphic elements which will influence the choice of shots are: the mise-en-scène; the lighting and settings, amongst other factors as well as the behaviour of the characters in time and this space and cinematography – the framing of each shot and movement of the camera

> The **rhythmic** relationship between shot A and shot B

Editing allows the filmmaker to decide how long each shot should be. When the editor adjusts the length of each shot in relation to each other they are controlling the rhythmic potential of editing. The editor needs to make appropriate choices that consider the scene's tempo (are long shots appropriate in an action sequence?), beat (the most appropriate moment to cut) and accent (where we see the action from and the feeling within the scene). Within any scene there may be a variety of rhythms as the accent of the scene changes.

> The **spatial** relationship between shot A and shot B

A film's action takes place in cinematic space. This is often created through the use of an establishing shot, although it can also be built up through the showing of the component parts of the space. An editor can also create illusions of cinematic space. For example, we might assume that all of the action in a film takes place within the building that we are shown in the long shot. However, it could be that the two main locations (street and office interior) were filmed many miles apart. Thus editing can allow the filmmaker to relate any two points in space, developing a parallel narrative through similarity and development.

> The **temporal** relationship between shot A and shot B

This relates to the manipulation of story time. Editing offers ways for the filmmaker to alter the 'natural' duration of a story's events as presented in the film's plot. Natural duration can be abbreviated (elliptical editing) or can be extended.

BUILDING BLOCKS

Editing is about making creative choices in using smaller units to construct a bigger whole. An editor begins to make these creative choices by looking at what...

shots

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the director has filmed. The action might have been filmed from different angles or positions or with multiple cameras, for example. The editor needs to make creative choices with this material – which shot is the most appropriate? Using the script as a reference, the editor decides how best to use these shots to construct a...

scene

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a self-contained, continuous series of shots that show a particular dramatic and/or narrative moment. Again, the editor must make a creative choice about how to cut from one shot to another in the most effective way that suits the mood of the scene. This might be a straight cut, a dissolve or perhaps no cut at all if a single shot is the most appropriate for that scene– the opening of *A Touch of Evil* (Welles, 1958) for example.

The editor then joins one scene to another to construct a...

sequence

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a self-contained group of sequential scenes grouped around a specific set of sections of the narrative. Adding all of the sequences together forms a finished film or...

cut

WAITING

Having considered some of the creative choices embodied in the editing process from a theoretical perspective, delegates moved onto the practical part of the process to firstly edit a short scene together using from given material. They had to tell a simple narrative – a woman is waiting in a room, but they had to decide – what is she waiting for; what is her state of mind? Answers to these questions would dictate the mood of the scene and therefore the choice of shot and style of editing in order to build up different emotions in the audience.

Delegates had a small number of shots or rushes to choose from – establishing shots, mid and close-up shots and were encouraged to think about which kinds of shots might be most appropriate to the particular scenario that they had imagined the woman to be in. Although the workshop did not have the time to consider the impact of sound on the editing process in any detail, delegates did have the opportunity to include a number of pieces of music and sound effects if they thought it added to the effectiveness of their narrative – or perhaps to use no audio track at all.

Although this exercise works on only the simplest of narratives and very few shots to choose from, delegates found that this confinement and the narrow focus of the task enabled them to concentrate on the nuances possible through their editing decisions. They were surprised and impressed with the range of scenes that each other constructed in a short space of time. A number of delegates were keen to spend longer on the task to explore the possibilities further.

Having looked at each other's work, delegates were encouraged to consider a number of questions: had all the shots that they had wanted in order to construct their scene? If not, what else did they require? In other words, what additional creative choices should the director have given to the editor – a valuable point to remember and take on into the next exercise.

PHONE CALL

Again, for this activity, delegates had to construct a short scene to convey a simple narrative, although they now had to shoot their own rushes as part of the activity. They were encouraged to consider how previously as editors, their creativity had perhaps been frustrated by a lack of choice. Therefore, in taking on the role of director, they needed to shoot a range of material using various shot types, angles, points of view etc. and to think about establishing the cinematic space, creating dramatic tension, evoking a mood, involving the audience and telling a story to ensure that as editors, they would have a sufficient variety of shots to create an interesting sequence.

The brief was to fill and construct a narrative called Phone Call using twenty shots. This was again a confined brief to enable delegates to concentrate on the fine detail of the effect that individual shot choices and the placement in a sequence can have. The scenario and therefore mood and its accompanying considerations about creative shot choices and editing style were up to the delegates. As a model for good practice in practical work, delegates were required to plan their scenario and shots first, before picking up a camera.

Again, delegates were impressed with the range and quality of films that the group had produced in a short space of time and were able to suggest how different creative choices at both shooting and editing stages would have affected the meaning in the narrative.

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