

What an Editing Room Is

Workers paving a road with cobbles will throw a stone into the air and catch it; each stone is different, and they determine where it properly belongs in mid-flight.

Film script and shooting schedule are ideas and money; shooting a film is work and spending of money. The work at the editing table is something in-between.

Editing studios tend to be found in back rooms, basements, or in attics. Much of the work is done outside normal working hours. Editing is a recurring chore and gives rise to solid jobs, yet each cut is a particular effort and one which draws the editor under its spell, making it hard for him to keep work and life apart. Time passes quickly. The film on the editing table winds backwards and forwards, and one frame comments on another; to reach a particular frame ten minutes back you have to wait two and a half minutes again.

Through this winding back and forth you get to know a film very well. Children who have not yet learned to speak will still notice if a spoon is on the wrong hook in the kitchen. With this kind of familiarity, a film becomes a space you can inhabit and feel at home in. After three weeks, the cutter knows where the camera jerks, where there is a blip on the soundtrack, or where an actor uses an idiotic intonation. A director who does editing himself once told me that he could not understand how anyone could translate a text which they did not know by heart. That is the work performed at the editing table: getting to know the material so well that the decisions taken as to where to make a cut, which version of a shot to use, or which music to play follow of their own accord.

Gestic Thinking

At the editing table you learn how little plans and intentions have to do with producing pictures. Nothing you have planned seems to work. You remember a tree standing close to the house, its branches beating against the railings of a balcony in the wind – but on reaching the

balcony and about to jump, you find yourself looking into an abyss. That's the way things are when shooting. You prepare cuts and stage a movement so as to allow reediting, only to find at the editing table that the picture has a completely different movement, one which you have to follow. There is also the lesson of experience that one should only let actors begin speaking as long after the clapper as possible and have them continue acting long after their scene is over. It is simply a matter of producing images; an image can always be used. At the cutting table you discover that the shooting has established new subject matter. At the cutting table a second script is created, and it refers not to intentions, but to actual facts.

At the editing table, with the film winding back and forth, you can experience the autonomy of the image. In the same way as slow motion scenes from soccer matches have trained the eye to distinguish genuine fouls from faked ones, the editing table teaches how to tell which fouls in a film production are genuine and which fake.

Reediting

In the editing studio, work and ruling system meet, and it takes little imagination to predict the outcome of such a meeting. Editing studios are inhospitable places similar to the shacks inhabited by foremen in factories or on construction sites – the outposts of bureaucracy on the field of production.

Editing studios often have cement floors like those in workshops, and then a rug is placed on top like in an office.

The office or bureau can be used in a positive sense as in *Oval Office* and *Politburo* or negatively as in *bureaucracy* and *office mentality*. Literature and journalism inspired by literature like to use bureaucracy as a metaphor for meaninglessness. Franz Kafka opened our eyes to the fact that it has primarily a magical function. Bureaucracy busies itself with conjuring up a meaning for the world. Bureaucracy is a language; and able to reflect upon itself like a language, it brings about its own philosophy of language. The task dreamt of by this philosophy is the question whether the relationship between the language and reality is arbitrary or mimetic – a reality which can only be formulated and indeed only exists in these bureaucratic terms. Offices thus become a metaphor for production of meaning.



In this respect the editing table is an office for film; in other words, nothing could be so critical of television's conceptual and practical work than showing unedited images all day long.

The work at the editing table converts colloquial speech into written language. The pictures are put in a file marked cutting or montage.

At the editing table babble is turned into rhetoric. On the basis of this rhetorical expression, all discourse without articulation is seen as babble in the editing studio. On location you can place the camera here or there; the decision just takes a minute and is made with a ponderous expression. Later in the editing studio a whole week is spent appraising where to put this one-minute shot.

In order to provide an excuse for staying in the editing studio for so long, the question of images and sound recorded separately and their parallelism is sensationalized. The term used, for what is nothing more than the fact that a strip of film showing a mouth moving and an audiotape with sounds matching these mouthings should be played back in parallel and at the same speed, is synchronism. Nobody driving an automobile would think of getting excited by the fact that the left wheels move at the same speed as those on the right.

This synchronicity is blown out of proportion to provide a reason for spending weeks in the editing studio letting the images run back and forth. This ritual repetition establishes its own laws. After a few weeks, instead of pictures you come to see only the time, work, and life wasted on them. A bureaucratic process – a ridiculous, meaningless task is circulated on a fictional plane until at last a dossier is produced.

The editing studio is a dubious kind of place. The idea of punishing Eichmann by playing him tapes of the concentration camps for the rest of life must have been thought up by a cutter.

Directors on location apply the lessons learned in the editing studio. They become confident of not having to look closely; if a shot goes wrong, it can still be saved on the editing table. The director comes to lose his eye for film to such an extent that he takes all the material which has survived his work on location to the editing room, where he blurs it.