23 GOOD SUGGESTIONS FOR BETTER EDITING

by FRANK M. McGEARY

(1) Familiarize yourself with the script and the story. This includes finding out (a) the purpose of the film, (b) the intended audience, and (c) the mood that the director has attempted to create. If you know the job that the film is intended to do, you can make your cutting blend in with its purpose, emphasize its meaning, and harmonize with the mood of the story.

(2) View *all* the work print on the production. In order to know what footage he has, an editor must see all the scenes, and he can best tell what he has by looking at them first on the large screen. This may seem a slow process when compared to checking the footage through the viewer, but you can see many things on a big screen that would escape notice on the viewer or Moviola.

(3) When viewing the film, make notes of outstanding scenes, problems or defects, and begin your selection of takes. For example, the notes might read this way: "Scene 4: Take 3 is best; Take 2 is out of frame. Scene 17: no good takes; check for a substitute."

(4) When you have screened all the footage on the big screen, pull out the takes which you do not plan to use, break down each one separately, identify it clearly (Scene 4, Take 2; or, Long Shot boat pulling away from pier, Take 1). These outs should be carefully saved until all work on the film is done and you know that you will not need them. If there are still scenes for which you have not selected good takes, view them and decide.

(5) Break the good takes down by scene, labeling them carefully. Some editors prefer to put these good takes on separate reels, others use cores and still others prefer to hang them in editing bins in numerical order. Keep a well-organized, clean editing room and table. Label everything as you go. If there are quite a few takes, separate spooling is indicated, but hanging scenes in a bin is a good way to begin the assembly of the film, sequence by sequence. If the bin is tall enough, you can hang up all the scenes in the sequence so that you can see them all at eye level.

(6) With the scenes hanging in the bin, arrange and rearrange them in order that seems most reasonable or interesting. The shot arrangement will depend on the mood or pace of the sequence. The normal sequence would be LS (long shot), MS, CU, LS. For a dramatic, Jack Webb-type sequence you might want to start with closeups and go from there to long shots for faster pacing to build suspense or create surprise or shock.

(7) When you are cutting, try to avoid interruptions that break your chain of thought. You are trying to establish a mood, an interruption might cause you to fail to convey the proper mood or to break the flow of action at a bad point. Interruptions and reorienting take up valuable time.

(8) Learn to make decisions as rapidly as possible without allowing your cutting to become sloppy. Editing is made up of one decision after another; he who hesitates unduly will accomplish little, and his hesitations will be apparent in the finished cut. This doesn't mean that an editor should never change his mind. There are times, for example, when the selected scene will not fit in right, and a good editor will take the time to change it for a better shot. But an editor must have confidence in

his own ability and must learn to tell the good from the inferior.

(9) In selecting scenes, keep the audience in mind and give them pictures of things they haven't seen before or show the familiar from a new and different angle. If the director has not provided you with interesting shots and angles, it makes your job harder, but, by using your imagination, you can often turn a humdrum sequence into a good one by an unusual arrangement of shots or by the way that you pace them.

(10) When you make the first cut on a sequence, make it longer than you think it should be. It is much easier to shorten a sequence than it is to lengthen one. The same goes for cuts. If you are in doubt as to the exact frame on which to cut, cut a bit longer and fine-cut only after viewing the cut.

(11) It's basic but it's worth repeating—cut from scene to scene on movements, not before or after a person or object has moved. There are times when static cuts are very effective but not when the action should flow from scene to scene. When cuts are made in static shots, each cut is like a period in the middle of a sentence.

(12) The editor who learns to cut on the bench with a glass will usually be the fastest editor. Many people have never learned to cut without a viewer or a Moviola, but much cutting and frame selection can be done with only a magnifying glass or jeweler's loup. After the cut is made, it should checked on the viewer or Moviola, but such checking could be done for a whole sequence and not cut by cut.

(13) All rules have exceptions, but one good rule for cutting people on camera is never to cut when the eyes are closed and the mouth is open.

(14) When cutting, keep the action flowing in the same direction. The failure to do this is called a reversal and is more apt to occur in direction than in editing, but a good editor can spot such errors and avoid them (e.g., long shot shows horse and rider going to screen left; closeups have them headed right).

(15) When cutting dialog, the pace is the thing. The length of the pause between words and sentences is important here. When cutting from the same person (i.e., from one shot to another), a good check point for the proper pause length would be to measure the distance between his words or his sentences within any given scene. Then, if you have the feel for pacing, you could run the sound through the reader at a steady pace until the beat of the actor's timing and voice become apparent to you. This will give you a clue to the actor's normal pace, but you must cut faster for interruptions, for heated discussions, or for dramatic action.

(16) When cutting voice-over or narration, the picture should always lead the track except for special effects; otherwise, the track will appear to be ahead of the picture. This should also be done because the viewer cannot usually absorb both picture and sound simultaneously and usually needs from 6 to 8 frames (1/3 second) to orient himself. If your pace is to be relaxed and easy going, let the picture lead the sound by a second or so (20 to 30 frames). If the pace should be faster, cut this time in half or even by two-thirds.

(17) Handling dissolves: When you dissolve into an on-camera actor, the actor should start speaking about a half-second (12 frames) before the dissolve is in the clear. For out-going dissolves, the actor should finish speaking just after the dissolve begins.

(18) Handling fades: The scene should be well established before sound or dialog begins, but this rule should not be followed if the picture has no interest to sustain the silent period following the fade, e.g., actor with dead-pan expression, obviously waiting for the director to say "action." For fade-outs, let the fade begin just before you hear the last two words or so.

(19) In cutting, prepare the viewer for what will happen on the screen. For example, if danger looms ahead, cut to danger area, before something happens, to prepare the viewer for something to come from that area.

(20) If you will be editing lip sync consider edge-numbering the sound tracks for sync cues. Here's how: When you have all the work-print and the 16mm magnetic sound, make up sync rolls in sequence, splice, check on the Moviola for any variation from the clap-stick pops, and then code the workprint, 16 mm magnetic track(s) and original in sync. This allows you to cut freely without having to stop to add crayon sync marks before and after each cut.

(21) Many editors like to break down their coded sync rolls in this manner: Wind the workprint and its corresponding sound track up together on one core, head out and emulsion out. Break down all shots in this way and stack by sequence. Then, when it comes times to edit, feed each scene off the core into the Moviola to check action and for cut point. Cut by the sequence, check carefully, then go on to the next sequence.

(22) Whether you are cutting lip sync or picture only, you should take time to look at the completed or rough cuts on a large screen. If the material is lip sync, you should arrange to see it in interlock with the sound. Seeing the film on the large screen may point up problems that were not apparent in the viewer or Moviola.

(23) There are many rules and most of them have value, but another rule might be "don't be afraid to throw out the rules and use your own creative imagination." If you always cut by the rule, your work will become monotonous and uninteresting. Vary the pace, the cut, and the point of view, and remember that even though the film may be about widgets, movie making is a kind of show business, and part of the purpose is still to entertain and to hold the interest of the audience.