Editing
Text from multiple sources, including

“In the Blink of an Eye”

by Walter Murch

The Process

Simply put: Editing is the process of splicing together discontinuous pieces of film to form a cohesive story.
The Process

As we all know, movies are not shot in a continuous stream of film. A finished scene is typically composed from many different takes of many multiple camera angles.

These multiple takes and angles are not always the product of aesthetic. Often, technical issues require additional takes, such as sound system failures, camera operator mistakes, etc.
One of the primary responsibilities of the editor is to slog through the vast swamp of footage.

All movie productions shoot much more film than is shown in the final cut. The amount of film shot compared to the amount of film used is known as the **Shooting Ratio**.
An efficient film production shoots at a 10 to 1, or 20 to 1 ratio. Therefore, for every minute of on-screen film, 10 to 20 minutes of footage are shot.

On an average film, 40 hours of footage are edited down to 2 hours of final cut.
Apocalyptic Editing

Murch edited Francis Ford Coppola’s monolithic Apocalypse Now. More than 1,250,000 feet of film was shot on that production, totaling more than 230 hours.

The final shooting ratio was 95:1.

The editing process took more than a year, and given the total number of edits in the film the average number of cuts per day of editing was 1.47.
Who is Walter Murch?

Walter Murch is an Academy Award-winning editor who has edited or mixed the following films:

- The Conversation
- American Graffiti
- Julia
- Apocalypse Now
- The Godfather Part II
- The Godfather Part III
- The Unbearable Lightness of Being
- House of Cards
- Ghost
- Crumb
- The English Patient
- The Talented Mr. Ripley
The Cut

The most common type of transition in a film is the cut, a straight, sudden change between one visual image and another.

Why, when we view the world mostly as a continuous stream of visual images, do cuts work?

The explanation is theoretical.
The Cut

In reality, film is “cut” 24 times per second. The juxtaposition of each cut and the speed in which it occurs simulates true motion. But films are filled with cuts that are more discontinuous than simple 24fps film; a cut often indicates a movement or displacement of time or space.

We see cuts between actors, and cuts from wide shots to close ups. And somehow these “work” in the context of a film.
In my opinion, it’s all about context.

Because our brain has the ability to fill in the missing parts of any given setting, we can construct a change of direction or space without an interruption of thought. For instance, without moving we can imagine what a room looks like when we turn around – especially if we are given an establishing shot at the beginning of a scene that defines the boundaries of the space.
Similarly, we can understand that the person to whom we are speaking “sees” the setting differently than we see it. This helps us to resolve cuts back and forth between actors in a conversation.
Bad Cut

But all cuts do not work.

A general rule of thumb I learned at NYU is to cut between stationary shots or between moving shots, but from a moving to a still shot.

Murch tells us that shots that differ slightly, such as a full-figure master shot doesn’t cut well to a slightly higher ankles and above shot.
Bad Cut

According to Murch:

The new shot is different enough to signal that something has changed, but not different enough to make us re-evaluate its context. The displacement of the image is neither motion or change of context, and the collision of the two ideas produces a mental jarring – a jump – that is comparatively disturbing.
A Continuous Movie

Alfred Hitchcock, a great film experimenter, shot an entire movie as one continuous take. *Rope* was shot on a specially constructed circular set, and the action continued from the beginning of the movie to the end in a continuous take.

Modern movie cameras use 1,000-foot film rolls, each providing 11 minutes of footage.

The film was a critical and commercial failure.
Editing is about Rhythm, not Just Trimming

Editing a film isn’t just removing the bad parts. It’s about establishing pace and rhythm, and creating a sustainable emotional experience — in other words, making the film, in its entirety, feel like one singular experience.
The Rule of Six

How do you decide which cut to make? In film school there is a theory or practice that Murch uses on his films: The Rule of Six.

Essentially, it is a criteria list for each cut.
The Rule of Six

1. Emotion
2. Story
3. Rhythm
4. Eye-Trace
5. Two-dimensional plane of screen
6. Three-dimensional space of action
The Rule of Six

1. Emotion

The cut is true to the emotion of the moment.

2. Story

It advances the story.
The Rule of Six

3. Rhythm

The cut occurs at a moment that is rhythmically interesting and “right”

4. Eye-trace

The cut acknowledges the location and movement of the audience’s focus of interest within the frame.
5. Two-dimensional plane of screen

The cut respects “planarity” — the grammar of 3 dimensions transposed by photography to 2

6. Three-dimensional space of action

The cut respects the 3-dimensional continuity of the actual space (where people are in relation to each other)