Instinct
by
Linton Davies

Here's what I think. You might not like it but try and stay with me:

- **film is the most important art form in modern culture.**

- **editing is the most important part of filmmaking.**

- **no one gives a shit about editing.**

There are lots of caveats to this, of course. Caveats are the sauce of life. By film I really mean Movies/TV/ assorted cat videos. Writing is probably more important than editing if no-one fucks things up (spoiler alert: they usually do), and some people do give a shit about editing. All this is not the point though, at least not right now. Today let's think about why no-one gives a shit about editing and to do that, let's think about thinking. When editors talk about what they do, on the rare occasions that they're not talking about software or trying to 'stump the gurus', we tend to talk about instinct. I find that embarrassing.

"You just know," - Sidney Levin (ed. Mean Streets)

"We go by intuition, every time," - Alan Heim (ed. Network)

"You rely on instinct. Some editors have it and others don't," - Nino Baragli (ed. The Good, The Bad and the Ugly)

When I decide what take to use, whether to heighten or lower the pace, which way to switch those two awkward scenes around, or how to get around the airplane noise covering every damn take, I think about a lot of things. I think about that particular moment within the context of the scene, the scene within the context of the act, the act within the context of the film. I think about the actors' performances. I think about what the audience is thinking about, about what's just happened and what's going to happen next, about what the film needs to convey both narratively and emotionally. I think about whether I'm bored or confused, about the sound, music and colour that don't exist yet. I weigh up the pros and cons of all these things, and then I make a choice and call it instinct.

I do this because I'm making thousands of these decisions a day, every day for months on end. If I had time to think about what I was thinking about, every film would take as long as Apocalypse Now, and Apocalypse Now still wouldn't have a rough cut. Most of the time when people say 'instinct' this is what they mean. They're thinking without thinking.

In fact, I only really have to externalise this creative process when something isn't working. 'Why did you choose this shot?' 'This sucks, what's the problem?' 'What do we need to achieve here?' 'How do we make it look like the duck's falling in love with the monkey?' Most of the others will on the whole escape such externalised scrutiny, because they 'just work', but the process is exactly the same.

"What's in the box?"

"Instinct…"

Instinct sounds too much like inspiration, unknowable and unapproachable. Packed away in a box we probably shouldn't look too closely at. The process is fine-tuned and refined in the editor's brain with each passing year, each long day with its accompanying long night. 'Instinct' is demeaning. It sounds like a baby reaching for their mother, or a mother reaching for their Facebook account. It implies an absence of skill, of sweat, of artistry. Most damningly, it implies that everyone can do it. My mum has instincts too, but I bet her rough cut would be rubbish.

More importantly this notion, the most pervasive in our profession, holds everyone back. How we tell stories, how we make movies - this is the real work of editing (you know, the editing part), but it is only rarely discussed. Instinct can't be talked about, can't be taught, can't be learned. It's the ultimate shut-down. It was all just instinct folks, let's just have a raffle and go home.

How can we learn to cut better movies, if we can't talk together about how we made the cuts? If we can't learn from each other we can't move things forward; this is how art evolves, standing on the shoulders of the past. I once heard a respected editor saying he refused to read In The Blink of an Eye, for fear that someone else's ideas about editing would damage his own thought process. Oh my, we really are in trouble.

At a recent EditFest event, I asked Alan Heim, one of the most revered and well-known editors in the world, whether he felt he was a better editor today than he was when he began his career. His response was not the resounding ''yes, obviously'' that I had been expecting. Instead he replied that he could now decide things a little bit faster, and that he paced things a little bit quicker, in keeping with the changing style of cinema over the past few decades. 40 years you devoted to this and all you got was a little bit faster?

Of course he's a better editor! How could someone possibly devote their life to the practice of a skill, and not have improved at all over such a long time? He'd have to be an idiot, and he most certainly is not. But to him, it was exactly the same. He's still doing what his gut tells him to. Maybe I should have asked his gut.

Instead of trying to break apart how we make films, how our brains work, we mostly talk about codecs. There couldn't be a starker contrast. From artists, we turn into engineers. Creativity is replaced by keyboard shortcuts, feelings and emotions become workflows and plugins. How boring. I didn't go into filmmaking because I saw a slick motion-track or a streamlined XML export. I did it because I saw Darth Vader strangle an Imperial Officer, Indiana Jones escape a cascading boulder and John Cusack lift a stereo above his head. I did it because these things made me feel something powerful and exciting. Then I became an editor because of how cutting helped create those moments. Not because I was pumped about Dynamic Link.

"I find your lack of star wipes disturbing..."

I believe that the issue is more important though, than creating some more interesting post-production podcasts. What we talk about shapes how we view ourselves, and so how we're viewed by everyone else. Our technical obsession devalues us, and far more importantly, what we do. When I think of a musician, I think of an artist, not of an expert in Logic or Cubase. But when people think of editing they think of a middle-aged dude with a load of firewire cables sitting at a big-ass computer, using an application that looks like it might hold the keys to the nuclear codes. Subconsciously, we form a picture of an engineer doing the bidding of the genius director, and when we open our mouths and start arguing about FCP X, well, we're not doing ourselves any favours.

And what happens when the tech disappears? 20 years ago a professional editing system probably meant a £50k investment. 10 years ago maybe £5k, today £1000. So what happens in 10 years time? It's getting 'easier' too; think back to your first editing project and consider how much harder it was/would have been doing it on a 2004 era Avid compared to starting out in FCPX today (star-wipes were a lot trickier in those days); then multiply that out over the next 10 or 20 years.

Soon enough, people will consider the idea of hiring an editor just because they can use an NLE the same as hiring a writer because they can use Word.

So maybe we should start talking about what it is we actually do rather than the technology we use to do it, because that differentiator is going away fast. My mum's rough cut would be terrible, but she could probably get it done. She could record a song in GarageBand too, but I don't think Bono's really sweating it too hard. Many people still advise that to get into editing you should become an assistant, that this should be your way into the industry. That to me is simply madness. If you want to become a painter, don't go sit in a room sorting out paint brushes while someone else does the work next door, go hurl some paint at a canvas until you've got a Technicolor banana (or whatever... sorry, I don't really know how to talk about painting, I'm not a painter).

But this is the world we live in, because how can you hire the editor who is best at what they do when you don't really know what that even is? If the extent of your understanding of cutting is that you put someone in front of an expensive desk, fill them up with Diet Coke and wait for the montages to spew out, it's not surprising that next time you end up hiring the guy sat next door who seems friendly enough and says he knows how to edit, even though the last thing he cut was a music video for his band in '07 and it was... interesting. We need to start talking about this stuff so that we can learn how to understand it, at least a little bit better. Only editors can teach the world about editing, and our increased understanding of what we do and how we do it will be reflected back onto the industry in many positive ways, not least in the size of our pay-cheque. Bluntly put, artists get paid more than tech-support.

The thing is though, I get it. I talk about tech all the time. I hang out on Video Copilot and I listen to FCPX Grill. And I don't have many conversations about character development outside of the editor-director relationship. (Ever notice by the way, that the only people who really respect editing are directors? They're the only ones who actually get to see it.) So I understand that it's not easy, for various reasons. Another discussion perhaps, for another day. But my point is that we need to try much, much harder to realise that this is actually important, and start working out better ways to talk and think about how we do this thing.

Let's not forget, picture editing is only around 100 years old. That's nothing. Look at other art forms and how they've evolved over hundreds, even thousands of years. It becomes abundantly clear: we're just getting started here, and we probably totally suck at it right now. We're going to get so much better, and start getting it so much more. I truly believe at some point editing will start to be seen by the wider world as the art form that it is; as the foundation, the core of filmmaking. And when that happens editing and movies will become immeasurably better and more interesting really, really fast - but it'll probably be up to us to take the first step.

Linton Davies is a Film and TV Editor based in London. He's best known for doing the international cut of The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon and as editor of the cult film Ashens and the Quest for the GameChild. He will talk to you about editing until it gets awkward and you have to make up an excuse to get away. You can email him at lintondavies@gmail.com or find him on twitter: @lintondavies.

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