

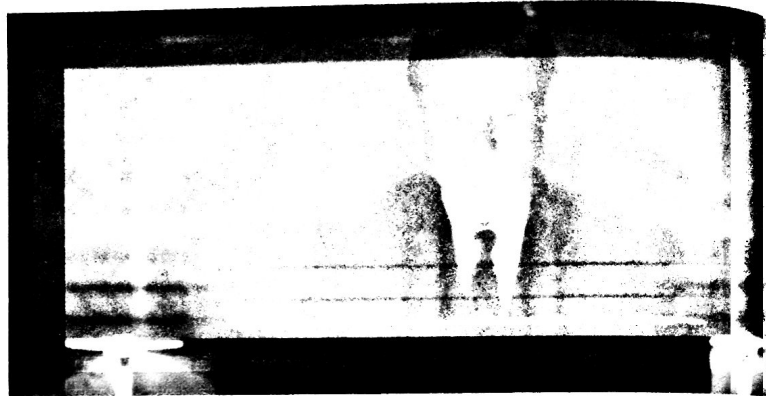
# FLASHBACK

## FILM EDITORS: A HISTORY BEHIND THE SCENES

In the 2004 film *The Final Cut*, Robin Williams plays a very serious character. Alan Hakman (the name is a pun, surely), a special kind of filmmaker who edits real people's lives. In the futuristic world of the movie, one out of every twenty humans has been given, at birth, a "Zoe implant," which records every moment of existence through his or her eyes. At a crucial point in the drama, Hakman explains that "cutters" like him are sometimes called "sin eaters," because they erase weaknesses and errors in lives before family and friends can hold a viewing of the deceased's memories. Thus, they "edit" lives that have been fragmented, feeble, and wrong so that the lives appear to have been whole, strong, and worthy.

Although this clever concept is hardly given its due in the film's melodramatic plot, it might nevertheless serve as an apt metaphor for the magic that real film editors have created throughout a century of cinema history. "What makes a movie a movie is the editing,"<sup>A</sup> says Zach Staenberg, the Oscar-winning editor of the *Matrix* trilogy. Without skillful editors to obscure the professional foibles of writers and directors, modern movies would hardly exist, and wise actors have long known that editors can make or break their performances on film.

Late in the nineteenth century, cinematic pioneers such as Thomas Edison and brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière did not truly envision the narrative possibilities that editing could bring to their new medium. Only with Edwin S. Porter's creation of *The Life of an American Fireman* (1902) and, especially, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) did editors first manipulate technology for skillful, extended story-telling. Later, director D. W. Griffith, in his films *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), began to establish the strict "rules" of so-called classical editing, a "masked" manipulation of film clips that endeavored to make



Source: *The Final Cut*/Lionsgate

the film seem fluid in its movement. Wide (or "master") shots usually came first, followed most often by "two shots," and finally, "single shots," establishing a smooth and predictable progression of images for the viewer. Even the first uses of close-up and flashback shots were incorporated seamlessly into his films. As film editor Sally Menke (*Pulp Fiction*) observed, cutting was "the Invisible Art."

Unfortunately, the editors who did the work also remained invisible to the movie-going public, who were unaware of these artisans' essential power over the films they watched. Editors' invisibility, a natural result of classical editing techniques, became even more profound during the "movie factory" atmosphere of 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s America, when large and powerful Hollywood studios marginalized the roles of such technicians. In contrast, with the advent of the French New Wave in 1959, films such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* had begun a frontal assault upon the traditional editing style, using

### 1890s

Early movies incorporate little editing.

### 1915

In *The Birth of a Nation* D. W. Griffith establishes formal editing conventions and techniques, resulting in increasingly fluid films.

### 1902, 1903

*The Life of an American Fireman* and *The Great Train Robbery* feature innovative editing and effects, including long shots and close-ups.

### 1930s–1950s

Editors' work is de-emphasized during "movie factory" era of big production studios.

such techniques as frequent jump cuts (defined on p. 176) to create deliberately erratic rhythms.

Such rule-breaking in the art of editing began gradually in America but became particularly evident in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), with wonderfully kinetic cutting by the estimable Dede Allen (*Dog Day Afternoon*, *Reds*, *The Breakfast Club*, *The Wonder Boys*, and *The Final Cut*). The ultimate result of this movement was “free-form” editing, which probably reached a commercial peak in Joe Hutshing’s work on the Oliver Stone film *JFK* (1991)—a film that involved much “fragmenting of time and space.” However, even within popular movies of the 1980s, cuts happened faster and faster. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, many action directors had come to feature films from the frenetic world of MTV music videos and television commercials. Consider the quick-cutting styles, for example, of Michael Bay (*The Rock*) or Rob Cohen (*XXX*). Interestingly, director Martin Scorsese (*Raging Bull*, *The Aviator*), who began his film career as an editor (*Woodstock*), has expressed concern about what effect this practice may have on our culture’s sense of real time, not merely movie time.

Not all contemporary directors demand speed from their editors. For example, *New Yorker* critic Anthony Lane notes that Gus Van Sant (*Drugstore Cowboy*, *My Own Private Idaho*, *Good Will Hunting*), in such films as *Milk*, *Elephant*, and *Last Days*, “refuses to go in fear of the long take. This sets him apart from many of his contemporaries, for whom every movie is a kind of slasher flick, sliced and diced within an inch of its life. By contrast, Van Sant is prepared to hang around and see how a scene unfolds.”<sup>B</sup> Likewise, writer/director Rodrigo Garcia takes his time in the drama *Nine Lives*, which consists exclusively of nine singular, unbroken takes. Surely the champion of this “slower” technique remains Alexander Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* (2002), whose ninety-five-minute running time is a single take, with all the film’s “editing” done inside the camera’s frame (that is, by manipulating the elements of *mise-en-scène* rather than by montage [see page 188]).

The Oscar-winning *Birdman* (2014) appeared to create a complex, two-hour version of this “one-shot” feat—although

its amazing editing in post-production cleverly disguised the seams between scenes. Its director, Alejandro G. Iñárritu, mimicked a similar but much simpler technique Alfred Hitchcock had created for his 1948 drama *Rope*.

Currently, more and more financially strapped independent directors are choosing to shoot in a high-definition digital video format, and some commercially successful directors, such as George Lucas, Robert Rodriguez, David Lynch, and Steven Soderbergh, are famously embracing and promoting the technology. *Time* reviewer Richard Corliss even notes, “If moviemakers won’t shoot digitally, they’ll edit digitally, citing ease and efficiency.” However, there are still major holdouts: Corliss spotlights the accomplished editor Michael Kahn and Kahn’s creative collaborator, director Steven Spielberg, who says, “I still love cutting on film. I just love going into an editing room and smelling the photochemistry and seeing my editor with mini-strands of film around his neck. The greatest films ever made were cut on film, and I’m tenaciously hanging on to the process.”<sup>C</sup> But most theaters currently project their films by using portable, economical, and digital hard drives, rather than heavy, unwieldy, and expensive film reels.

Although directors’ and actors’ careers may often hang in the balance of the film editor’s art, no one is more dependent on good editing than the screenwriter. For, as writer/director Quentin Tarantino proclaims, “The last draft of the screenplay is the first cut of the movie, and the final cut of the movie is the last draft of the script.”<sup>D</sup> Ultimately, then, all filmmakers are “saved” by the art of these invisible editors.

Sources: *The Cutting Edge: The Magic of Movie Editing* (Warner Bros., 2004), directed by Wendy Apple, written by Mark Jonathan Harris; Anthony Lane, “Opting Out,” *The New Yorker*, 1 August 2005, 90–91; Richard Corliss, “Can This Man Save the Movies? (Again?),” *Time*, 12 March 2006, 66–72. For an excellent feature-length examination of the film-versus-digital debate, see the DVD of *Side by Side* (Tribeca Film, 2012), directed by Kris Kenneally and hosted by Keanu Reeves.

#### 1959

French New Wave emerges in films such as *Breathless*, featuring frenetic jump cuts and a faster film-editing style.

#### 2000s

Quick-cutting style reaches its pinnacle; feature films employ fast cuts similar to those in music videos and commercials.

#### 1967

American film *Bonnie and Clyde* features the fast cutting embraced by the French nearly a decade earlier.

#### 2002

*Russian Ark* is shot in single long take with no editing in postproduction.

