A Bad Idea: Edit to the Beat...

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Introduction

Who doesn't have a camera these days? Now, even I have a camera, and I'm not a camera operator but a creative director. I mean, how farfetched is that?

So, yeah, I make my own little movies. I edit them together... And I watch the news and television, occasionally. One thing that surprises me is how in the Netherlands, subpar seems to be the norm, even in terms of editing.

When most people think about editing, they mostly consider that this has to happen after that, and then that... Lo and behold, not *than* that, because that would be too soon.

Please note! Screenwriters often still make use of the word *than*, that's considered archaic, rather than *then* to indicate something happens right after something else. That's because rhythm is important. When you don't use *than* but *then*, it's perfectly okay that some time passes before the next thing happens.

Most Dutch television focuses on something happening, a beat, cut to the next scene, something happening, a beat, cut to the next scene, and so forth. Where's the tension? Where's the suspense? When is it time to be laid back? How do you strike people in the face? When do you allow people to feel and how?

These are all basic considerations that should come into play, not only when exiting a scene or a shot, but also when entering.

Entering and Exiting a Scene or Shot

My fencing master André Ligthart used to stab the crap out of me and I didn't know what to do. One of his responses was that I always started with the same step: the rhythm of something as simple as a single step was sufficient for him to catch me on my advance and basically kill me. I like to learn and understand the necessity of being taken down, so I wasn't frustrated, but I can't say I figured out myself what to do without him pointing me to it. (I do have to admit to feeling a little sad.)

He made me think about things like rhythm, also called cadence, which is also key to screenwriting, editing, acting, pretty much anything creative, even painting.

When I bought my copy of Casablanca, written by the Epstein brothers: screenwriters and at least one of them was a local boxing champion; it also contained the first (and ever so horrid) TV-adaptation of Casablanca.

When you wanted to be an actor during the golden age, there were a couple of key disciplines you needed to understand: acting (naturally), diction, fencing, and horseback riding. The "screenwriter" for the TV-adaptation may have heard that fencing was important, because he wrote the most awful dialogue, also including the words "parry - riposte", which he probably thought was a quick repartee. But he didn't have a sense of anything: not character, not conflict, not rhythm.

In general, how can you enter a scene? A number of options present themselves: early, before the action starts; on the beat, when the action starts; late, after the action has already started.

It's difficult enough to film a punch, but it's even more difficult to make it feel fast. Modern day editing often also relies on speeding up from a slow action to something that appears fast. That's possible, but even then there's something you need to consider.

In order for a punch to be delivered in the best possible way, people aren't allowed to see it coming. The way to do this in movie editing, is by cutting into the action when it has already started: you need to omit the first frame of the punch, starting the punch off with the second frame of the punch. This will kickstart it. Otherwise, people will sense a delay.

When you enter a scene or shot and you don't cut into the action, right after it has started, you can basically cut into it on the beat or before the beat. In the same way when you exit a scene or shot, you can do so immediately or with delay.

The Nature of Immediacy and Delay

Naturally when you enter or exit a scene or shot, there are multiple approaches, using different amounts of delay. I typically discern four time measures to indicate the amount of delay: direct cut - ø seconds, medium cut - 1 second, long cut - 3 seconds, and extremely long cut - 4 seconds. This delay can be at the end of the shot or at the beginning, and they can also be combined.

When the delay is at the end of the shot, I would call it a "cut out". When it's at the beginning of the shot, I would call it a "cut in". When do you use these different types of delay?

Direct maintains the pressure. There's no delay, no waiting, it's very pressing. Medium maintains a steady beat, it gives people a sense of continuity, adequacy, and possibly ease. Long allows people to feel, it allows them to get into the characters more and form their own perception of the character's mind and emotions. Extremely long builds suspense: it offers the one second more that you need to crave for something to happen.

As said you can cut out and cut in.

So you could have two characters arguing, the one character makes a point: "You don't get that I saw you go in? I saw you climb in through her window!" Medium cut out - that builds a regular rhythm emphasizing truth - combined with an extremely long cut in - to build suspense. Response: "I know a thousand ways to kill you, but if you tell anyone, there's only one way that will suffice: the slowest, most painful, most agonizing death imaginable."

It depends on the context what you do. When what went before was a really tense argument, it might be better to use a direct cut all the way: no delay, just the quick exchange

of dialogue. If you do that, you shouldn't forget to vary the rhythm after that and allow the audience to relax for a second.

What you need to consider is the nature of the scene: what's the intent of the screenwriter, actors, people working on make-up, lighting, etc. and the director combined? What do they mean to communicate? It's easy to see that the two approaches to editing the same dialogue deliver an entirely different kind of feel.

Building Expectation and Countering It

The two first attacks in fencing a fencer typically learns are the *passo patinato affondo*, an attack by covered pushing fencing step lunge, and the *balestra*, the attack by jump (jumped step) lunge.

Please note! Most of the world in fencing uses the incorrect term *patinando*. Although it is proper Italian, it's not in use in Italian fencing terminology. I contacted the Italian Academy of Arms, in charge of educating fencers to be fencing masters in Italy, and they were very kind in that I got a relatively elaborate response with proper literature references to illustrate that they don't use the word *patinando*, but the proper term is *passo patinato affondo*. It's also interesting to note that *patinato* means patinated, meaning that you allow metal to form a protective fully covering layer of rust, and *balestra* means crossbow. *Affondo* means lunge. (But if you want to learn to fence, you should really describe it in your own language, otherwise you don't know what you're doing.)

Although the rhythm isn't necessarily as straight forward as it seems, in case of the *passo patinato affondo*, it's typically measured as a three-beat action: casual front foot advance, an at first casual back foot advance, the foot thrust into the ground on placement, resulting in an immediate sped up lunge.

You can also make a straight forward three beat step lunge: ta-da-da; that you let fall short and retreat. What does this do?

This makes sure that your opponent expects the hit to land on the three. If you then make a *balestra*, a jump lunge attack, since both feet in the jump forward land in the same moment, the jump feels like a single beat loading up your muscles like springs, shooting your lunge forward during the second beat, thrusting your weapon through your opponent.

The intended result: your opponent expects a one-two-three rhythm and waits to parry on the three, is found off-guard by the one-two rhythm of the attack that already lands on the two, and doesn't parry.

You can do the same, editing. Medium cut out, medium cut out, medium cut out... Long cut out. Medium cut out, medium cut out (delivering the knock out punch)! This kind of rhythm variation is the most basic form of using rhythm to surprise the audience.

As said, if every movie you make, or in a particular genre, always maintains the same rhythm, movies become predictable and stereotypical. That's the one thing you want to avoid: formulaic writing, execution, and editing. Every shot, every scene, every sequence, every movie should be its own. Vary!

What can you do to vary? Word has it that European and American filmmaking are two distinct entities: stereotypically European movies show clouds, clouds, and more clouds and American movies show clouds, than an airplane breaking through the clouds. Practically, this is bullshit, although Americans *sometimes* are a bit more straightforward in that they for instance *sometimes* call porn porn, not art, but I need to focus on the rhythm. So, how can you vary this?

You could for instance have a camera trace the animated clouds, panning, and as it hits a new angle: "Splat!" - a bird smashes into the lens, its face with its body around it now pressed against it, its tongue sticking out, eyes wide open. It slides off the lens, clearing the view. An airplane breaks through the clouds!

Please note! Forget words like "suddenly" as in, "Suddenly, an airplane breaks through the clouds!" If you need that to emphasize rhythm, you probably didn't get it right. Readers will complain, but who gives a shit, you're going to have to make your own movie anyway to break in and once you're in, you're in. Other than that, if you can cut words from a screenplay, you always should.

What this does is precede the expected beat by an unexpected beat: you cut the audience's expectations short and strike them on the preparation.

In fencing, some people call this fencing 2.0, 2.1, 2.x etc. That's a little bit like, "Okay, let's reinvent the wheel!"

In reality you need to vary it. Sometimes you cut intentions short, sometimes you let them happen on the beat, sometimes you follow up on your opponent's intentions with multiple feints preceding the finale, the last disengagement adding one action and no more than one action to the intentions of your opponent.

I should also mention the option of a threat of an attack that doesn't follow through, allowing your opponent to relax for a second or two, then you follow through anyway. Remember, dialogue is the act of speaking, so anything that applies to action applies to dialogue, and anything that applies to dialogue applies to any other kind of action as well.

As an example in dialogue, a character could use something as simple as, "You know I hate those shoes...! But I understand you need them for work..." A beat, a stare but no response, then a followup, "I'm going to call your boss and tell him you quit! Damn those shoes!"

As a final throw out, you can also make use of a garbled attack. For instance in fencing you have the running attack with a stretched arm and continuous varying lines with the point. Although while maintaining distance, when there's no rhythm variation to the footwork of the attack, it's perfectly possible to parry it, it can be used well against beginners to garble their senses.

In moviemaking and editing this translates to what I would call "shaky-cam editing". This is a technique often abused, rather than used, to emphasize action. You need to consider the intention.

For instance when you have a car chase, you don't want to use quick cuts back and forth between cars to illustrate the intensity of the chase - it simply doesn't work. Instead, when it comes to longer action sequences where different actions are continuously related to one

another, if you can shoot it in a long continuous shot, this matches the intention of the continuity of action in the sequence and is the optimal solution.

You may also imagine someone being sedated, dragged into a shed far away from the outside world where anyone may hear this person, and thrust onto a chair. They tie him up. The abductee's senses are already garbled, so haphazard cuts will illustrate the lack of cohesion in terms of the abductee's perceptions in the scene. When they continue to beat the abductee up, when the abductee can't make any sense of what's happening, quick cuts between actions with a shaky-cam kind of feel do apply.

The camera is an actor and the intentions of the shot should always impressionistically link to the types of shots used and the editing, recombining reality and the senses into a single experience.

Conclusion

Editing isn't straightforward, it can actually be quite daunting. Even a single shot can cause a great variety of considerations in terms of what impression you want to make. To make things easier on yourself, it's a good idea to sit down up front, even before shooting starts, and discuss the intended rhythm beforehand.

In reality changes will be made. Different circumstances will arise, people will have different ideas on how to interpret their parts and the movie, and all of these considerations are correct, in that even when they are wrong, they'll provide proper contrast to prove what's right and what will work.

I hope it's clear that editing to the beat, using only the medium cut out of 1 second, leads to predictable and numbing senseless editing. It's lazy and lacks consideration. Always question what you mean to communicate. Always question whether there are different ways to communicate what you have to say. Find the optimal form to do so.

Good luck and have fun!