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Emphasizing Intentions: The Power of Film/Video Editing

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Emphasizing
The Power of

By Sharaf N. Rehman

If students want to learn filmmaking today, they need to turn to video technology. Gone are the days when every mass communication, journalism or radio-TV film program offered at least one, if not a sequence, of courses in filmmaking. Except for the schools offering a major in cinema or film studies, most have done away with their film equipment. Now, all training is offered on video equipment—a technology that has almost approached the sophistication and quality of film recording and reproduction.

This doesn't change the learning of all of the traditional steps. That is, learning to use the video medium doesn't alter mastery of production planning, script writing, lighting, audio recording, visual composition, and editing. One difference, however, lies in the textbooks. Where nearly every text on film production or aesthetics devotes some space to the art of editing, television texts stop at a technical description of the equipment and its operation. Hardly any texts pay attention to issues such as, why do a certain combination of sounds and images arouse a particular emotion? When is a certain combination of these factors effective? Useful? Misleading?

Television texts tell us that cuts are customarily made on dialogue, action, sound, and music. They tell us that we shouldn't go from an Extreme Long Shot (ELS) to an Extreme Close-up and that we shouldn't disrupt the continuity of action. (It is wrong to show an object moving from left to right in one shot and from right to left in the next.) However, the standard texts fail to explain why a certain cut works to help emphasize a point, and when it works against intentions.

How to Edit for Impact

The power of editing is best demonstrated by an experiment conducted by two Russians in 1928. They took a close-up shot of an actor with a neutral expression and edited three sequences using this shot. In the first sequence, a plate of food was followed by the actor's expressionless face; in the second sequence, a shot of a dead woman in a coffin was shown followed by the actor's face; in the third sequence, a shot of a young girl playing with a toy was used as the first shot and the actor's close-up as the second. When these sequences were shown to three different audiences, the responses were astonishing. The viewers of the first sequence saw a famished man, the second group saw the same man in mourning over his dead mother, and the third group saw a joyous father watching his daughter at play. This experiment established that it was possible to create any emotion in an audience as long as a director had the appropriate combination of images.

In order to encourage the student to think about the creative process of editing, I have, for a number of years, used an "Outcome Model."

This model suggests that a combination of shots "a" and "b" can render at least seven emotional outcomes:

1. $a + b = a$
   - The two shots are put together and the end result/effect is still the first shot. The second shot seems to contribute nothing to the scene or sequence. Thus, one may delete shot "b". However, this arrangement or outcome is perfectly acceptable if shot "b" is being inserted for foreshadowing. It may not seem to add anything to the story immediately, but if it explains something later on, then its inclusion is justified. Alfred Hitchcock used this type of seemingly innocent foreshadowing time and again.

Here's an example from *North by Northwest* (1959): It is early morning and Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint are walking away from a train. For no apparent reason Cary Grant asks Eva Marie Saint, "Nine-thirty," she tells him. She then proceeds to place a phone call to a hotel and talks to a mysterious person, arranging a meeting for Cary Grant. About 15 minutes later, after an attempt on Cary Grant's life, we discover that the mysterious person had already checked out of his hotel at 7:30 a.m. It suddenly becomes clear to us that Eva Marie Saint's phone call at 9:30 a.m. was a sham and that she had been a party to setting up Mr. Grant for murder.

This outcome ($a + b = a$), in terms of creating a temporary confusion, is certainly a useful device in dramatic shows. However, its application is...
Intentions...

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not recommended in educational or instructional programs.

2. \( a + b = b \)
   In this situation, where the second shot alone is sufficient to convey the necessary information, the "a" has no function. One doesn't find many examples of such wastefulness in professional TV and film work... but, many students, in their projects in introductory TV/film production courses, fall into this trap. There are two common reasons for such edits in the students' projects.

1. Many students feel that since they have invested the time in shooting/recording a scene, it has to be used. It's human nature: we don't like to see our work go to waste.

2. Young video and film directors tend to develop an emotional attachment to their footage. During editing, they recall, "Oh, it was a beautiful sunset!" Result? They hold the shot for a much longer time than necessary, or they use it again and again. We all have our favorite buildings, flowers, cars, girls, boys, and a thousand other things. The secret is to scrutinize our pet shots objectively and avoid the overkill.

Students can iron out this flaw of overuse during the editing stage, but it is best to detect it while writing the script. If a shot seems to add nothing to the story, they can omit it during the editing stage. This saves valuable production time and simplifies the editing process.

3. \( a + b = a + b \)
   This arrangement suggests that the result is the same as the sum of its parts. Imagine a Long Shot (LS) of a car on a country road ("a"). Next, a Medium Long Shot (MLS) of the same car moving in the same direction on the same road ("b"). The location and direction of the car are already established in the first shot; the second shot serves little purpose but sometimes it is used. Its function: to gain time. Television shows have to run specific time lengths. If a show or segment is running short, extra shots are thrown in to meet the...
time requirement. In the case of our example, we could have remained on the LS for the entire time, but cutting to an MLS adds variety and brings us closer to the subject, making it more interesting. In educational/instructional programs, we may rely on this editing strategy to repeat a piece of information to facilitate retention.

4. \( a + b = A \)

This is a very creative and exciting arrangement of shots. Here, the second shot adds to the information in the first shot. Let’s say we have an MLS of a car swerving dangerously as it moves down a highway (“a”). To this, we add an MS of the driver and the passenger struggling over a handgun (“b”). The second shot explains why the car is heading for an accident. We find numerous examples of this type of editing in dramatic and instructional programs.

5. \( a + b = B \)

This is the opposite of arrangement 4. Here, the first shot complements the second shot. For instance, a CU of a handgun (“a”) is followed by a CU of a frightened face (“b”). It is only after seeing shot “b” that we understand the purpose of shot “a.” In this example, the gun alone explains little, but when followed by the scared face, the combination explains the reason for “b.” Since the purpose and intent of the first shot is unclear until the viewer has seen the second shot, this sophisticated arrangement, even though it works miracles in dramatic shows, should be avoided in instructional programs.

6. \( a + b = A + B \)

This is an arrangement where the two edited shots complement each other. For instance, take a shot of a very poor family at their dinner table with very little food; add to it a shot of a rich family at their dinner table with fine food, expensive china and silver. When the two shots are viewed in succession, the contrast makes the poor seem poorer and the rich, richer. This montage strategy is referred to as “contrast editing.” Other obvious examples would include the strong and the weak, the big and the small, and the pretty and the ugly. I would hasten to add that although this is a powerful technique in dramatic shows and documentaries, it is not a very desirable one for educational or instructional programs.

7. \( a + b = c \)

This arrangement allows an editor to exploit the power of editing to its fullest. This arrangement implies two important phenomena that are operative in film/video editing. First, the outcome of two shots can be distinctly “different” from their sum. This is not unlike bringing together two chemical elements to form a compound—a merger where the two elements lose their initial properties to become a new compound with properties of its own. Second, a filmmaker need not spell out everything for the viewer; given the right images, the viewer will arrive at the intended meanings. The Russian experiment demonstrated well that the audiences were able to “see” hunger, grief, and fatherly love in the same CU. However, despite its exciting dramatic potential, this too is an arrangement that should be reserved strictly for dramatic programs.

Application of the Model

This teaching model of shot sequences in editing can be used in two ways:

1. In TV/film production courses, students can apply it to analyze existing TV programs, films, and commercials to study the process of editing.

2. While writing scripts and preparing story-boards, or during post-production, students can incorporate elements from the model into their class projects.

This editing model also has obvious applications within the study of other existing visual media, such as TV, film, and slide presentations. In addition, the Outcome Model can be applied in developing dialogue for plays, scripts, and fiction. Such a model can be used in writing radio and television commercials. Most surprisingly, it works in learning to write poetry. Its teaching effectiveness, however, depends on the teacher’s use of the structure to challenge students to think; to invite them into the exciting possibilities that lie waiting in the processes of video/filmmaking and creative writing.