

© Loftin, Greg, 2017. The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in the Journal of Screenwriting, Volume 9, Number 1, pp. 85-102(18), 1 March 2018, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1386/josc.9.1.85_1

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Writing-for-the-cut: What can screenwriters learn from film editors about storytelling?

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Abstract

This article explores an approach to screenwriting using storytelling dynamics found in film editing. I call this ‘writing-for-the-cut’. This idea finds its roots in the lively theories and debates of early Soviet filmmakers such as Lev Kuleshov and Sergei Eisenstein in the 1910s and 1920s. They viewed editing as a juxtapositional dynamic, one that invites the audience to ‘discover’ the story for themselves. From their Hegelian notion of juxtaposition to its more nuanced application today, I discuss three kinds of cinematic juxtaposition: suggestion, puzzle, and kinesis. I then explore how these dynamics might be embedded in the screenplay.

Keywords

Screenwriting

Film editing

Juxtaposition

Storytelling

Writing-for-the-cut

Kuleshov

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the narrative synergies between screenwriting and film editing. The central question I address here is: what can screenwriter learn from film editors about storytelling? In answering this question, I identify a number of narrative properties that might be passed back to the screenwriter. Collectively, these ‘cutting patterns’ may form the basis of an approach to screenwriting that mimics the language of film. I call this “writing-for-the-cut”. Writing-for-the-cut is founded on the premise that film is made in the edit suite; that editing continues the writing project begun by the screenwriter. It suggests that by anticipating and embedding the dynamics of the cut in our writing, we may deliver scripts that are closer to the screen.

I am a screenwriter and I also run an undergraduate programme in Editing and Post Production in the UK. I think about storytelling a great deal, but it was not until I read the following line from a book review for *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film* that I began to consider the connection between the two crafts: “You will learn more about how to put stories together at the feet of a good film editor than almost anyone else”.¹ This comment struck me as both fresh and self-evident; had others examined this storytelling connection before? This was the starting point for my PhD by practice, which I completed at University of Exeter in 2016, and which I hope to capture in this article.

I knew from the start of my research that I wanted my findings to have practical application, particularly for new screenwriters and teachers of screenwriting. With this in mind, I adopted an interpretive methodology which values individual practice and experience over ‘scientific’ or generalising theories. I interviewed editing practitioners in the work place, undertook field observations of film processes, and experimented with writing-for-the-cut dynamics in my own screenwriting practice. I developed a feature film script called *Rush the Sky*; in this endeavour I wanted to apply editing dynamics not only to the writing of the story,

but also to the very tools used to write the story. I designed a writing interface that in some measure simulated that used by editors. Overall this has proved to be a productive model in which experiment modifies/generates theory, and theory modifies/generates creative writing.

The contribution of editors in particular was vital to this study. Theory plays little part for most editors; those I interviewed would most often say their craft is intuitive; that they are guided by ‘what works’. Nonetheless, their craft embodies ideas, experiments and experiences that are directed towards a rarely articulated but acutely understood notion of what constitutes cinema. In this sense the film product, in its construction, is a form of expert knowledge about cinema.ⁱⁱ

In all I interviewed ten editors who have between them over 200 feature film credits. If we were to give each a single credit, we might include: *Lawrence of Arabia* (ed: Anne Coates 1962), *Taxi Driver*, (ed: Tom Rolf 1976), *Apocalypse Now* (ed: Walter Murch 1979), *Dance with a Stranger*, (ed: Mick Audsley 1985), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, (ed: Juliette Welfling 2007), *Slumdog Millionaire*, (ed: Chris Dickens 2008), *Fish Tank*, (ed: Nicolas Chaudeurge 2009), *Nowhere Boy*, (ed: Lisa Gunning 2009), *Scott Pilgrim versus The World* (ed: Paul Machliss 2010) and *Kingsmen: The Secret Service*, (ed: Eddie Hamilton 2014). The work of these practitioners spans many of the genres of commercial filmmaking, with a similarly broad range of budgets and film cultures, from Hollywood to European independent filmmaking.ⁱⁱⁱ

The literature that guided my research engaged with two storytelling crafts, though my approach was different for each. For screenwriting I was looking for evidence of any existing practice or theory that referenced the dynamics of the cut. With editing I sought to identify those storytelling properties that might be passed back to the writer. It would be inappropriate to include a full review of such literature for this article, but I will refer here to some of the work that directly related to my research.

THE CUT IN CONTEXT

There are a number of thoroughgoing accounts of the plural histories of the screenplay's development.^{iv} In relation to the genesis of writing-for-the-cut, I was particularly interested in the continuity script, a format that emerged in the silent era at a time when screenwriters not only wrote the story but also prefigured the shoot and the edit.

Later the master scene format replaced the continuity script, and this spawned a parallel market for screenwriting manuals (Price 2013: 203). Manuals from the period commencing with Syd Field's 1979 *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* are important to this research as they represent the received understandings, the orthodoxies, of screenwriting discourse (Macdonald 2013: 4). As will be discussed later, most of these manual writers vigorously upheld the master scene injunction of 'no camera angles' (Field: 238).

Nevertheless, there are several outliers such as John Yorke's *Into the Woods* that discuss the significance for writers of the Kuleshov effect. And there are others, such as Jeffrey Michael Bays' *Between the Scenes*, and Craig Batty and Zara Waldeback's *Writing for the Screen*, that examine the juxtapositional property of the scene break.

A manual of particular relevance to writing-for-the-cut is Margaret Mehring's book *The Screenplay: A Blend of Film Form and Content* published in 1989. In it she discusses an approach to writing predicated on the dynamics of film processes, what she calls 'filmic elements'; her strategy is to submerge shot descriptors into the action lines so that shots and editing can be covertly signalled (81-82).

My second line of enquiry looked in the opposite direction: I examined the literature around film editing for any references to storytelling that might be of value to the screenwriter. Editor and author Don Fairservice closely examines the early years of film editing and its evolving narrative grammar. Of particular value to my research were his analyses of the chase film and parallel action (2001: 284). The theoretical writings of both

Rudolf Arnheim and Noel Carroll are particularly relevant in identifying the storytelling characteristics of editing as experienced by the audience (particularly in the way editing can engage the viewer's inductive capacities). In this article, Soviet montage is a founding concept in a strategy for writing-for-the-cut. The chief proponents were the filmmakers Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Sergei Eisenstein. Though each elaborated rather different theories of montage, all agreed on the dialectical potency of juxtaposition.

Later in the 1950s the film theorist Andre Bazin's essay *Montage Interdit* (1956: 32-44), and the New Wave filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard's rebuttal *Montage Mon Beau Souci* (1956: 30-32), are interesting in clarifying two quite distinct and enduring 'schools' of filmmaking/film editing. Crudely stated, there is the 'long-take' auteur camp favoured by Bazin (e.g. Murnau, Renoir, Rossellini, Tarkovsky, and more recently directors such as Haneke and Andersson). In the other camp, Bazin's disapproval was aimed at Hollywood directors such as Hitchcock, as well as compatriots such as Bresson and Goddard, all of whom consciously used editing as a storytelling device.^v Music composer and theoretician Michel Chion's concept of 'audio-vision' is an attempt to redress the almost entirely overlooked craft of sound design in film discourse (neither Bazin or Goddard mentions sound in their essays). Later when I discuss editorial juxtaposition, it is in Chion's sense of the 'audio-vision' event (1994: 17).

As highlighted earlier, praxis was the primary driver in my research: the exercise of a skill as a process of discovery. Of great value here are the reflections of practitioners whose everyday experiments and solutions are captured in reflective writings. Within this category there are two different kinds of writing: the director's reflections (e.g., Alexander MacKendrick, Alfred Hitchcock, Andrey Tarkovsky, Robert Bresson, Karel Reisz, and David Mamet), and the editor's reflections (e.g., Anne Bauchens, Ralph Rosenblum, Roger Crittenden). It would be difficult to summarise here the insights I gathered from these

writings, though perhaps most significant was David Mamet's discussion of editing and storytelling in his book *On Directing Film*:

Let the cut tell the story. Because otherwise you have not got dramatic action, you have narration (Mamet 1992: 2)

Editing manuals were another research source, though compared to screenwriting manuals, these are few and rather marginal. None makes a clear storytelling connection between the two crafts^{vi} though Roger Crittenden comes very close in his *Manual of Film Editing* when he declares:

The knowledge of how editing works is the absolute prerequisite of every attempt to make a film. If a film is to succeed, the writing and direction must already contain the pulse which signifies the way editing can breathe life into the material" (Crittenden 1981:7).

This is tantalising; how this pulse might breathe life into the writing is the chapter Crittenden did not in fact write. Instead he moves directly to 'Shooting with Cutting in Mind'. Perhaps not surprisingly, most sources tend in this direction; the shoot is editing's closest neighbour.

There are also a number of illuminating publications that feature interviews with prominent film editors; of particular value to this study are those edited by Justin Chang and Roger Crittenden. Walter Murch's reflections on editing are so singular he surely occupies a category of his own (rather as Michel Chion does for sound). This three-times Oscar winning editor and sound designer is also the author of a seminal book and numerous articles on editing. Murch is a polymath and a fertile thinker; he will often represent his craft by allusion to music, literature, science, or poetry. These works, along with his published interviews (particularly *The Conversations*, an extended dialogue between Walter Murch and Michael Ondaatje), form a kind of poetics of the craft.

ARE WE WRITING FOR CINEMA OR A NOTION OF CINEMA?

During Hollywood's silent era and well into the talkies, screenwriters most often worked at film studios and had an intimate knowledge of film production crafts (Boon 2009: 16). They used a screenplay format called the continuity script, which not only presented the film story, but also included the manufacturing instructions (details about camera angles, mise-en-scene and editing). At that time, one might say, the screenwriter was literally writing for the shoot, and the cut.

Around the 1950s, responding to shifts in film production models and the gradual demise of the major studios' writing departments, screenwriters began writing away from the 'factory floor', and a new screenplay format, the master scene, became the industry standard (Norman 2009: 42). This format removed the burden on screenwriters to include production details so they could focus solely on the film story. Soon a new generation of non-filmmakers (many of whom might not be familiar with camera angles or editing processes) were busy writing spec screenplays (Price 2013: 202-3). In lieu of a traditional studio apprenticeship or film school, these screenwriters could reach for expert advice from a growing library of screenwriting manuals. Though most of these manuals advocated quite diverse and sometimes truly original approaches to the craft, all upheld the universal injunction: 'no camera angles'.

Was anything lost when camera angles and technical directions disappeared from the script? One can more readily see gains. For the reader, the scripts were more lucid, immersive and succinct; for directors and editors, they gained a fuller measure of creative freedom; and for screenwriters, they could finally tell stories without having to prefigure the shoot.

You don't have to tell the director and cinematographer and film editor how to do their jobs. Your job is to write the screenplay, to give them enough visual information so

they can bring those words on the page into life, in full sound and fury. (Field 2005: 217)

This would seem a sensible approach. However, this ‘no camera angles’ injunction has tended to foster a much broader silence around film technology and the follow-on crafts, particularly editing. This is quite strange; imagine a music primer for composers in which consideration of how musical instruments translate the score into sounds was off-limits. Today, those learning their craft solely from screenwriting manuals can have little concept of that ‘pulse which signifies the way editing can breathe life into the material’.

There is no suggestion here of a return to the continuity script, but might there be other ways of capturing this pulse in the screenplay? Instead of overt references to camera angles and juxtapositions, could this information be submerged in the poetry of action descriptors, line breaks, and dialogue? The answer is surely yes; in fact what I am describing here is the practice of most professional screenwriters, particularly director-screenwriters and editor-screenwriters. In the documentary *The Cutting Edge: The Magic of Movie Editing*, Quentin Tarantino captures this approach very succinctly: “The first draft of the script is the first cut of the movie and the final cut of the movie is the last draft of the script” (Tarantino 2004)

JUXTAPOSITION

In answering the question, ‘what can screenwriters learn from film editors about storytelling?’, much of my attention was focused on what one might describe as the essence of film editing: juxtaposition. Through juxtaposition a film does not ‘tell us the truth’, but rather it invites us to discover the truth for ourselves. This idea finds its roots in the lively theories and debates advanced by the early Soviet filmmakers such as Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Sergei Eisenstein in the 1910s and 1920s.

Lev Kuleshov gave his names to an experiment that explored the expressive potential of the cut. To recap, he created three different film sequences. Using a Medium Close Up of a man looking straight ahead, he cut this shot with three different Point of View shots: a bowl of soup, a coffin, and a child. Each juxtaposition evoked in the viewer distinctly different interpretations (Kuleshov 1974: 106). As we know, his experiment proved that no single image had an absolute meaning; shots change their meaning through juxtaposition with the next shot. For the Soviet filmmakers, this was a striking demonstration of Hegelian dialectics: image A (thesis) is juxtaposed with image B (antithesis), resulting in image C (synthesis), which is ignited in the mind of the viewer.

It is important to acknowledge at this point that some academics have disputed this experiment. For example in his book *Film as Film*, British film academic V F Perkins questions accounts of the Kuleshov Effect on the grounds that:

in the absence of the original footage the effect cannot be proved
the scientific basis of the experiment is 'specious'
the emotional responses (grief, happiness, hunger) could just as easily have been produced in a single shot
the effect ignores the contribution of lighting, make-up, camera angle etc.
the inadequacy of the terms 'close-up' and 'face' to properly describe performance.
(1972: 106)

Against this one could confidently state that no practicing film editor would seriously dispute the validity of the Kuleshov Effect. In the course of their practice, editors are constantly reminded of this juxtapositional phenomenon as they experiment with different combinations of reaction shots and Point-Of-View shots. Hitchcock, whom Perkins clearly admires, is himself a declared enthusiast of the Kuleshov Effect and describes how he consciously

applied it in his 1954 film *Rear Window* (Hitchcock: 215). He also famously filmed himself demonstrating the Effect: in the first edited version he is shown smiling at a toddler in an avuncular manner, and in the second version that same smile becomes a lascivious leer as the POV shows a woman in a bikini.^{vii}

Sergei Eisenstein gives us further examples of editorial juxtaposition in haiku poetry, which he compares to montage (1969: 32), and Chinese characters where one pictogram is combined with another to form a meaning:

a dog + a mouth = “to bark”; a mouth + a child = “to scream”, a mouth + a bird = “to sing”; a knife + a heart = “sorrow,” and so on. But this is—montage! Yes. It is exactly what we do in the cinema, combining shots that are *depictive*, single in meaning, neutral in content - into *intellectual* contexts and series. (Eisenstein: 1969: 30)

The Soviet filmmakers were conducting their experiments during the silent era and so the cut had to shoulder far more of the expressive/narrative freight than one is likely to find in contemporary films. With the advent of the ‘talkies’, storytelling travelled in the opposite direction and was increasingly carried by dialogue and sound design. However, juxtaposition – the collision of images/sounds – still remains one of cinema’s most potent storytelling devices.

How then might this editing dynamic be passed back to the writer: how can the cut be signalled in words? For reasons that will become clear, it seemed some properties of poetry could hold the key. Below is an extract from *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* by Wallace Stevens; it is a stanza from a poem but it might easily be action lines from a screenplay.

Across twenty snowy mountains

The only moving thing

Was the eye of a blackbird

With great economy, a film sequence is immediately conjured in the mind of the reader, including shot sizes, moment of cut, and even a sense of duration. These ‘shots’ also possess a poetic charge through juxtapositions: macro/micro, stillness/movement, white/black, cold/warm. Indeed, through my research I have come to believe it is poetry that opens the way from the word to the moving image: alliteration, pattern, contrast, metaphor, paradox and rhyme are characteristic of both poetry and film editing. I find further confirmation of this in an interview with film editor Walter Murch for the poetry magazine *Parnassus*. Murch discusses the ‘secretly architectural’ nature of the poem/cut, and also the relationship between the length of a line of poetry and the duration of a film shot. He then goes on to discuss the juxtapositional qualities of both:

Why does a poet choose to end one line where he does, on a particular word, even though it may make no grammatical sense to do so? Perhaps because ... he wants to draw subtle attention to the last word in the line and the first word in the next.

Similarly, I will keep a shot on screen until it feels rhythmically and contextually "ripe" ... I want to draw subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) attention to the final image of the outgoing shot and compare it with the first image of the next ... (Murch/Katz: 1997)

To be clear, Walter Murch was not addressing screenwriters here, but if we view screenwriting as a kind of poetry, then Murch’s analogy is extraordinarily apt. The truth of this becomes clearer when we examine virtually any good screenplay; we soon discover a free-verse quality that seems to embed editing shapes in the writing.

In this extract from screenwriters Lucy Alibar and Benh Zeitlin’s *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2010), one can readily discern a poetic juxtapositional dynamic at play: the

collision of action and stillness, life and death, the seething catch and the heartbeat of a single crab, the din of the crowd and the thoughts of a child, the premonition of a deluge and the fiery celebration of life:

EXT. MARINA PAUPIER NET - NIGHT

Wink opens his trawl net and dumps a massive catch into a picking pan. There's food to feed a hundred in the haul. No one is a bit fazed though, this is just your average night fishing in the Bathtub.

Shrimp, crabs, and small leaping fish struggle over one another for dear life...

Hushpuppy focuses in on a tiny fish, wriggling and sucking its last breaths of air.

HUSHPUPPY (V.O.)

One day, the storm's gonna blow, the ground's gonna sink, and the water's gonna rise up so high, there ain't gonna be no Bathtub, just a whole bunch of water.

She picks up a crab, pets its belly. The DIN of the party fades down around her as she listens to its HEARTBEAT.

EXT. LADY JO'S CYPRESS FOREST - NIGHT

Explosions everywhere as Bathtubers rampage blasting fireworks down the street instead of into the air. Men

dressed as women, women dressed as men, in some kind of reckless esoteric ritual.

Perhaps the most obvious cut signalled here is the scene break which delivers a collision of opposites: a child listening to the heartbeat of a crab / cut / explosions, fireworks, a community in full fiesta.^{viii} But when one examines the text more closely one can detect cuts in the spacing between the blocks of action lines, and within the action lines themselves:

‘Hushpuppy focuses in on a tiny fish...’

This points to the Kuleshov effect:

shot 1, an ‘uninflected’ CU of a small girl looking at something

shot 2, POV a fish is ‘sucking its last breath of air’,

shot 3, an ‘inflected’ CU of a small girl pondering life and death (the viewer would normally add a subtext here, but in this case the subtext is spoken as a kind of thought-poem).

THE CUT: THREE AXES

How exactly does juxtaposition work? Clearly Kuleshov’s man-staring/bowl-of-soup juxtaposition is quite different from say Pudovkin’s comrades-dying-in-battle/capitalists-rushing-to-the-stock-exchange (*The End of St Petersburg 1927*). In each of these cases the viewer’s contribution is quite different; in the first the thought ‘hunger’ might be ignited in the minds of the audience by ‘joining-the-dots’ (proximity and familiar association), whereas in the second there is no easy association, and the audience is prompted to supply a more poetic solution.

This is clearly a subtle and complex field, nevertheless after examining the construction of numerous feature films, it seems that most cuts fall into three categories.^{ix}

1. Suggestion: here the cut ignites aesthetic and lyrical possibilities. The spectator adds *imagination* and *subtext*.
2. Puzzle: the cut creates mystery and piques curiosity. The spectator adds a *solution*.
3. Kinesis: here the cut creates a sense of motion, time, pattern and rhythm. The spectator adds *emotion*.

Kinesis is the property of editing closest to music and determines the intensity, tempo, and pitch of Suggestion and Puzzle. It is in fact everywhere present in the film from the rhythm of shot-reverse-shot dialogue, to the pacing of suspense and action thriller sequences.

To expand this model further one might usefully see these terms on a sliding scale:

Suggestion > Statement

Puzzle > Exposition

Kinesis > Stasis

These terms form a kind of matrix in which a cut may register on any or all of these axes at once, with varying degrees of intensity.

At the far end of the scale (statement, exposition, stasis), one might expect the juxtapositions to be least involving for the audience, and the editing is serving primarily to maintain continuity. This might be a shot-reverse-shot of two or more people having a conversation at a restaurant table in which they are effectively telling the audience, in plot terms, that $2 + 2 = 4$.

At the other end of the scale (suggestion, puzzle, kinesis), one might expect the storytelling to be most involving. This might be exactly the same restaurant set up as above; but now we are watching *The Godfather* (1972), the conversation is in Italian, and there are no subtitles. And we know that Michael Corleone has a gun in his pocket. The camera slowly

zooms to a close-up; Corleone is in the grip of an emotional struggle that is amplified by the metal-on-metal screech of a train passing close-by. He stands and shoots Sollozzo and McCluskey dead.

In this example, juxtapositions invites the audience to discover the story (what are they saying, what is Michael thinking?), to feel the mounting suspense (will he go through with it?), the terror and shock (brutal and bloody murder).

From these observations about editorial juxtaposition, we may now begin to consider their value for writers. In the following sections I explore various juxtapositional ‘cutting patterns’, and how they might be imported into the screenplay.

SUGGESTION

‘Non-linear shuffle’ was the term film editor Lisa Gunning used to describe one such cutting pattern. At a macro level, it means the shuffling of entire scenes to form new ‘wrongly’ ordered configurations. She gives an example from the film *Nowhere Boy* (Taylor-Johnson, 2009):

There is a scene of the mother and John listening to Screamin’ Jay Hawkins’ *I’ll Put A Spell On You* and they’re listening together and the mother’s painted nails brush against John’s thigh. I made another montage there... I intercut this moment with a sex scene in the forest with this young girl who also happens to have the same red nail varnish... (Gunning, interview, 2014)

The audience now adds an Oedipal subtext that was not there before, and where there was only a single break between two scenes with a non-linear shuffle, there are several. This increases the number of juxtapositions, creates new rhythms and patterns, and has the potential to ramp-up the poetic/subtextual import of a scene. This device is akin to parallel

action (described in the Kinesis section); but whereas parallel action intercuts scenes occurring at the same time, shuffling intercuts scene fragments backwards and forwards in time in a way that may be uncanny, illogical, and entirely chimes with the dream dimension of cinema.

Soon after my conversation with Gunning I adopted this non-linear shuffle technique in my own screenplay. One of the chief benefits of a PhD by practice is the opportunity it affords to apply and, in some measure, test findings in your own writing. *Rush the Sky* is a thriller that tells the story of two adrenaline-addicted lovers, Luke and Ella. One of the opening scenes shows Luke taking a shower in a highly distressed state; only later in the story does the audience come to understand that Luke has just witnessed the gangland murder of a young boy. Below is an early draft of the scene:

INT. VALERIE'S FLAT, BATHROOM - NIGHT

Luke is out of breath; he stares at his own frightened face in the mirror. There's blood on his cheek. He snaps off the light.

Faint moonlight. In the shower, Luke is vigorously scrubbing his body.

He's seized by a violent fit of shaking; he can't stand up.

After my conversation with Lisa Gunning, I shuffled a section of dialogue from a scene that plays much later in the script and produced a new draft:

INT. VALERIE'S FLAT, BATHROOM - NIGHT

Luke is out of breath; he stares at his own frightened face in the mirror. There's blood on his cheek. He snaps off the light.

VALERIE (V.O.)

Here comes the storm. And the sky is like an ocean.

It covers the sun. "Help help, where's the ark?"

Faint moonlight. In the shower, Luke is vigorously scrubbing his body.

VALERIE (V.O.)

But there is no ark, not this time.

And it rains like the ocean is falling.

He's seized by a violent fit of shaking; he can't stand up.

The audience cannot know at this point that these lines are taken from a flashback scene when Luke was a child and his mother is telling him a bible story. The scene now invites the viewer to make a puzzle/suggestion connection between Luke cleansing himself of 'sin', and the coming of a great storm of retribution.

I used a different variety of this technique later in a scene where the lovers have a tryst on the roof of a skyscraper. As they stare at the sky, Luke tells Ella the names of the clouds and reveals his fantasy about taking a ride in thunderhead. I rewrote the scene and 'intercut' fragments from an earlier montage scene that featured Ella enduring a tough-love fitness regime, playing hide-and-seek under a parachute, and a scene showing her terror as she climbs the span of a bridge. Through these juxtapositions the scene acquired a new subtext: Ella is falling in love and growing in strength, but she is also being initiated into Luke's world of clouds and mortal dare.

This shuffle principle can be taken to the next level where moving whole scenes to new locations creates surprising neighbours, and increases the possibility of serendipitous ‘ignitions’ (on all three axes). Many screenwriters are familiar with this strategy, for example Christopher Nolan’s screenplay *Memento* (2000), Guillermo Arriaga’s *21 Grams* (2003), and more recently Noah Oppenheim’s *Jackie* (2016). This shuffling is far from random; in all cases the structure reveals a complex narrative logic. Arriaga describes how he began experimenting with this approach:

I started putting different scenes together with no time connection between one and the other. I jumped from one scene in the present to one in the past to one in the future to one in the past, and so on... We all know that one scene has a meaning by itself and a completely different one when it is linked to a scene before and a scene after... I was looking for a way to make the audience be much more participative—to have a constant dialogue with the film, to create and recreate the story (Arriaga 2015).

Puzzle

Fragments, gaps, jerks of time and location, these have always been characteristic of the puzzle dimension of film editing (Arnheim 2006: 20-21). As highlighted earlier, during the silent era juxtaposition had to work hard to create meaning, but the advent of the talkies ushered in a brand of naturalism that shifted the weight of storytelling and exposition towards dialogue. Editing developed its own prosaic conventions. For example, changes of location were signalled by cross-fades, and dreams or flashbacks were signalled by ripple dissolves (or calendar leaves blown in the wind).

The French New Wave gave the grammar of editing a big shake-up. Pioneering films such as *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Resnais, 1959) and *Breathless* (Godard, 1960) often stripped out conventional transitions, which then obliged the audience to work out if the incoming

image was sequential, later that day, in the past, or a dream. These innovations represented a significant shift from exposition to puzzle (Reisz 330).

The storytelling techniques of film have developed over time in tandem with the spectator's increasingly sophisticated visual/aural literacy. Audiences in the 1930s would no doubt have struggled to make sense of a film like *21 Grams* (Iñárritu 2003). Nevertheless, it seems we are predisposed to look for a pattern and fill in any gaps we find (Carroll 80).

Editor Lisa Gunning puts it this way:

Gaps in the story can be strangely effective. If the audience engage emotionally with the character then the gaps are easy to fill. Filling in the gaps in a story is fun.

Encouraging an audience to do this creates a sense of additionality. Their imagination is far better than anything that you can put on a screen. (Gunning 2014)

For editor/writer, the ellipsis strategy is likely to carry risks; if the gap between two images is well judged, the viewer will generate the narrative electricity to arc the gap. If the gap is too wide, then there may be no spark, and the viewer is likely to become confused or frustrated.

Beyond ellipsis, we can identify two further puzzle figures: *in medias res*, and script-planned montage.

In post-production, a question that arises in the minds of editors as they begin work on a new film is: 'where does the story begin?' Screenwriters may find this surprising; they have laboured long and hard on their opening scenes, why would it change? But in the edit suite, kinetic and narrative imperatives bear down on the cut nowhere more keenly than the opening sequence.

Lisa Gunning edited Anthony Minghella's film *Breaking and Entering* (Minghella, 2006). When she read the script and viewed the rushes,

it occurred to me the first 35 scenes were all about setting the characters up ... But for me the film started the moment there was a break-in ... You don't want to start off with an explanation, you want to start with something that's intriguing, something that makes you think 'what is this?' You want the audience to feel curious ... I enjoy films that start *in medias res*; you feel like you're in the middle of something and you have to find your way out of that. So I said to Anthony "could we just try taking the first 35 scenes and cutting them out? (Gunning 2014).

The script Minghella wrote had a long set-up, so the editor reconfigured the story in a way that was for the cut, and began the story at the moment of significant action: the break-in. With no narrative set-up, the film now opens in *medias res*.

Can the film work without those first thirty-five scenes? In fact they were not entirely lost. Lisa Gunning created a short title/opening sequence that condensed the set-up information into a terse visual/musical montage. Like much else that goes on in the cutting room, this practice is fairly common, but for reasons of professional confidentiality is rarely discussed. In the same *Parnassus* interview previously referenced, Walter Murch discusses how he concocted the opening sequence of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and how it functioned as a kind of overture. Likewise, film editor Chris Dickens talking at the London Screenwriters Forum in 2013 describes how he edited the opening sequence of *Slumdog Millionaire*:

Those scenes - overlapping dialogue, making it non-linear, out of real time - was actually like what the film was like. Essentially it was preparing you for this experience (Dickens 2013)

Can screenwriters use this kind of cinematic language, or is it something best left to editors? Screenwriters are often wary of writing montage sequences of this kind perhaps because they feel a sense of professional trespass; montage is a 'production' word. Montage in a

screenplay has also come to be associated with fixing a story problem (perhaps a cluster of expositional scenes that are slowing the story down). At its best, montage can ‘show’ story by using a cinematic shorthand; once translated into film, this will inevitably be accompanied by a powerful musical track. At its worst, montage reduces dramatic content into a sequence of musical postcards (McKee 1997: 343-344). However, in his book *Technique of Film Editing*, director Karel Reisz discusses a phenomenon that he calls the ‘script-planned montage’. He examines in detail a sequence from *Citizen Kane* (1941) in which the writers, Herman Mankiewicz and Orson Wells, convey the gradual break-up of Charles and Mary Kane over time.

This conciseness of presentation is obviously the result of thorough script preparation... There is nothing fortuitous about the order and relation of the separate impressions — and the passage has been conceived as a complete entity already in the script. (Reisz 2009: 121)

This variety of montage again deploys music, but uses an elliptical, patterned, and juxtapositional style of construction. Presented in this fragmented way, exposition again becomes a puzzle to solve.

Kinesis

Screenwriting manuals rarely hint at the time imperative of film beyond the familiar metric of one-page-equals-one-minute-of-screen-time. On the other hand, every decision a film editor makes is motion/time-based. The telling of film stories is by definition kinetic. Editors ‘make’ kinesis in the slicing and dicing of time, the forward momentum of the story, the rhythmic patterning of sequences. It is both motion and emotion.

On a primary level, we make motion pictures, so there has to be motion of some kind, kinetic or dramatic. Secondly, we are making e-motion pictures. You need motion or emotion, and preferably both. A film composed of static images can work if it somehow arouses emotion in the audience (Murch/Katz 1997)

The invention of film allowed us to capture an impression of time. Soon after, the invention of editing allowed us to tell stories kinetically; with a cut we expand or contract time, we jump to a new location. Through editing, time can approximate real-time, or it can represent memory time, and dream-time (Arnheim 2006: 20-21).

This propulsive, atomising, rhythmic force invests all genres of films; but it is most prominent in suspense and action-thrillers. These films are all kinesis (Fairservice 2001: 35): here the writer, director and editor are essentially building a ride. One of the key kinetic devices of this sort of film is parallel action (cross-cutting). Parallel action will be familiar to most writers, and has certainly been discussed in screenwriting manuals since the early years of cinema (Palmer 1922: 113). When writing parallel action, the screenwriter understands that the timing and sequencing of these scenes will ultimately be determined by the editor. Parallel action is an oscillating pattern that affords the editor maximum scope to increase/reduce both the number of cross-cuts, and the duration of the shot. However, when writing thriller/suspense scenes that play out in a single location, it is the screenwriter who bears much of the responsibility for 'editing' the sequence; with no opportunity for cross-cutting, the writer's sense of the timing and duration of events must be inscribed in the action lines and dialogue.

The filmmaking brothers Ethan and Joel Coen are rare in that they direct and edit most of their films. Indeed, I would suggest they write-for-the-cut. In the suspense example below the Coens clearly signal the length of the shot, the moment of the cut, and the pattern of the

sequence in the writing. This short extract is taken from *No Country for Old Men* (2010). At this point in the story, the protagonist Moss has checked into an out-of-season hotel, and he has just discovered the tracking device that ‘killing machine’ Anton Chigurh has used to hunt him across the country. It is night, and he can hear small sounds beyond his bedroom door.

... Moss clasps the document case, picks up his shotgun and eases himself to a sitting position on the bed, facing the door.

He looks at the line of light under it.

The beeps approach, though still not loud. A long wait.

At length a soft shadow appears in the line of light below the door. It lingers there. The beeping-stops.

A beat. Now the soft shadow becomes more focused. It resolves into two columns of dark: feet planted before the door.

Moss raises his shotgun toward the door.

A long beat.

Moss adjusts his grip on the shotgun and his finger tightens on the trigger.

The shadow moves, unhurriedly, rightward. The band of light beneath the door is once again unshadowed.

Quiet. Moss stares.

The band of light under the door.

Moss stares.

Silently, the light goes out.

Something for Moss to think about. He stares...

The Coens are designing the cutting pattern to make a suspense sequence. The rhythmic shot-reverse-shot editing is indicated in the line breaks; shot durations are signalled in the numerous time expansion cues (beat, long wait, quiet, Something for Moss to think about, etc.). When one compares the written scene with the edited version, one finds an extraordinarily close word/cut correlation between the two. Here we can also see how a suspense scene inverts many of the defining characteristics of an action scene: time is stretched, movement is minimal, and sound cues are just audible. Kinesis is a force that is slowly coiled.

WAY STATION

The central question of this article was: what can screenwriters learn from film editors about storytelling? In answering this question, my intention has been to identify key editing properties that might be useful to writers, and to begin to formulate a for-the-cut strategy based on the poetry dynamics of juxtaposition. Juxtapositional editing, and by extension juxtapositional writing, obliges the viewer to ‘make sense’ of the cut, and in so doing

contribute to the unfolding of the story. In this way the film does not tell us the story, but rather we discover it for ourselves.

When I first began my research, I had imagined that tighter, more focused scripts would be one of the chief prizes of writing-for-the-cut. We know that from the initial ‘editor’s cut’ to the final cut, the film will typically lose up to thirty per cent of its body mass. This means whole scenes, sometimes entire sub-plots, and a great deal of action and dialogue will end up on the ‘cutting room floor’ (true of virtually every genre of film excepting animation). I still believe writing-for-cut will reduce story wastage, but I have come to understand that this is a complex field; all editors I interviewed expected a healthy narrative surplus from which to sculpt the story and to fix problems. In considering this surplus in relation to *The English Patient*, the editor Walter Murch says: ‘The screenplay generated the material that allowed you as the tailor to turn this pair of trousers into a dress’ (Murch 2015). But what is a healthy margin? And would an editor need less if the script were better designed ‘for-the-cut’?

One of the biggest casualties in the edit suite is dialogue. However, I now appreciate this is often a necessary casualty: the lines are there to give the actor emotional clues. The actor can say the lines, and because she understands the intention, she can also deliver the ‘I love you’ look that, in the edit suite, makes not only the lines redundant, but perhaps the next two scenes beyond.

This enquiry is by no-means scientific or exhaustive, and there is much yet to investigate. What other properties of the cut can we discover? How does writing-for-the-cut work in practice? In a world of digital plenty, where editing software comes as standard on most computers, will screenwriters feel quite at home writing ‘in the cutting room’? Can the idea of writing-for-the-cut be usefully invoked in answering the question ‘is this script cinematic, is it ready for production’? For me, the most fertile lines of enquiry lie in the potential of digital tools to tell and to ‘prove’ stories.^x

I am currently designing a hybrid writing-editing interface that allows the writer to ‘mount’ and sequence the beats of their treatment. This is a kinetic environment where the beats are displayed as text, proxy images and film clips. In this way the familiar write/read/revise process of screenwriting moves closer to the play/watch/edit process of the cutting room.

Digital tools of this sort hold the promise of a writer being able to simulate the editing interface for the dual purpose of developing a treatment, and rehearsing the screenplay before filming commences. Here, in a very tangible sense, the head and tail of the film process have become joined:

The processes of screenwriting and filmmaking have been separated since the early years of cinema when Thomas Harper Ince, Hollywood’s answer to Henry Ford, devised his industrial system of the continuity script as a basis for pre-planned productions. Over 90 years later, the digital era offers the possibility of reuniting screenplay and film production in an expanded notion of the screenplay (Millard 2014: 41).

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ⁱ The review originally appeared on the now defunct The Script Factory website.

ⁱⁱ It should be understood throughout this article when I discuss storytelling and the cut, I am referring to a process formed of a special creative partnership between director and editor.

ⁱⁱⁱ Due to the commercial sensitivity of this craft, I was obliged to conduct all interviews ‘in confidence’ and contributors were told their comments would not be published without permission. Understandably, most nevertheless remained quite cautious.

^{iv} See for example the writings of Steven Price, Steven Maras, Mark Norman and Kevin Boon.

^v “... A sizeable portion of the public, if you asked them to concentrate a little, would be able to distinguish between real scenes and those created by montage” (Bazin 45). Real scenes are scenes that are somehow complete in themselves; for Bazin *mise-en-scene* was everything but the cut. Whereas for Goddard “Montage is above all an integral part of *mise-en-scene*... If direction is a look, montage is a heartbeat” (Goddard 31).

^{vi} Gael Chandler, who is also the author of an editing manual, published an article online called ‘Writing your Script with Editing in Mind’. In it she discusses ways to make a script ‘edit-ready’ by, for example, thinking of the scene-break in images, and considering the rhythms of the story

^{vii} This clip can be found on *YouTube*, *Hitchcock's Pure Cinema: The Kuleshov Effect*.

^{viii} In the master scene format the scene break appears capsuled and detached, rather as if we were starting a new chapter. There is nothing to remind us that the outgoing and incoming scenes are actually images/sounds that snap together in one twenty-fifth of a second. At the join is the potential for poetry.

^{ix} This model of poetic juxtapositions, and the 'cutting patterns' that follow, are by no means exhaustive but rather intended to provide a useful starting point for future investigations.

^x See for example 'Cutting Rhythms, Intuitive Film Editing' (Pearlman, 2015) chapter 12 – Onscreen Drafting and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02JF19IJ29M&t=3s>