Is Hollywood Dying The Death of a Thousand Cuts?

Film editing has always been an essential part of the moviemaking process. But many contend that the new-style, in-your-face power cut is making confetti of the moviegoing experience.

JUST THIS SPRING, TWO EDITORS, STEVEN WEISBERG AND RICHARD Pearson, faced a pile of film images entrusted to them to turn into a funny movie. As the streams of film arrived at their Long Island editing bay, the men separated them into two batches and went to work stitching together their respective piles. This summer, those fragments will come together onscreen—with a beginning, middle, and end—as Men in Black II.

But don’t think of Weisberg and Pearson merely as drudges who glue together pieces of celluloid. Within the industry, editors are regarded as sorcerers; these are the people who can make a film. They can take leaden scenes and transform them into gold. Insiders know those filmmakers as the pathfinders who, by adjusting the images you see and the pace at which you see them, serve as the unseen, virtual directors of the movie.

For a long time, film editing itself was pretty much an invisible art form, something no more apparent to the audience’s eye than, say, the lighting on a star’s face. Now it has become an often celebrated, sometimes reviled part of the moviegoing experience. Indeed, to hear a lot of anguished film critics lately, you’d think American cinema is dying the death of a thousand cuts.

Why, it is asked, do so many movies come at us in a blizzard of images? Whether it’s a war movie like Pearl Harbor or a musical like Moulin Rouge, the modern editing style is overwhelming the industry. It’s too simple to just blame this state of affairs on “the MTV generation.” Many factors led us here. One watershed was the introduction of the Lightworks digital editing system in 1991. Video editors had been using various digital, or “nonlinear,” editing systems since the early 80s, but Lightworks revolutionized editing. The battle was joined by the now ubiquitous Avid system in 1992.

This digital equipment meant nimble-fingered cutters could rip up film and turn it into the equivalent of chopped cabbage with the strokes of a few keys.

The director of Men in Black II is Barry Sonnenfeld, the cheerful helmsman of the first movie. Having been a cameraman earlier in his career, Sonnenfeld puts a lot of baroque angles and striking visual flourishes in his films. One thing he doesn’t need on top.
of that, however, is hyperthyroidal editing—or to be "cutty," as it were. "Barry is very concerned that things not be overcut," Weisberg says. "It's born from a feeling that comedy can play better in two shots than with a lot of cuts and close-ups."

This sort of discipline has become increasingly rare. Revered editor Thelma Schoonmaker, longtime ally of Martin Scorsese and the person often credited for perfecting the so-called power cut in movies like Raging Bull (1980), created the bravura sequence at the climax of Goodfellas (1990) wherein a coke-addled mobster (Ray Liotta) goes on a penicky, paranoid spree. The images are all jagged, restless, and cut to a thundering soundtrack of manic '70s music. "It's designed by Marty for that cocaine rush," Schoonmaker says. "Now everyone wants our films to look like that. Whatever movie or scene we're working on, they say, 'Couldn't it look like the end of Goodfellas?'"

Movies didn't always have the visual dynamics of a drug rush. Though certain ancient classics like D.W. Griffith's Intolerance (1916) Sergei Eisenstein's The Battleship Potemkin (1925), and many silent-era slapstick comedies flirted with fast, swirling images, the average film from the '30s and '40s might be composed of no more than 150 cuts of film. (A film today might have the same number in the credit sequence alone and can run well over 3,000 cuts by the end.) When you watch the classics, it is astounding to see how long the camera lingers on one person talking.

But even Charlie Chaplin knew—and helped write the rules for—the principles of effective editing. They are, essentially, a matter of timing and point of view. When it comes to the film as a whole, the editor (under varied degrees of guidance from the director) figures out which order of scenes best tells the story. And then for the scenes themselves, the editor must decide, say, how long a moment should last after someone has spoken, as well as where to direct the viewers' attention. Chaplin knew that what might move the audience the most is not a close-up of the hero delivering his devastating speech but a shot of a minor character's reaction as he gets the news. And if the audience needs to be knocked off-balance for some reason, the editor has a host of tricks up his sleeve—speedups, slowdowns, jangled restlessness, or moments of enforced contemplation.

Flashy imaging, however, is the easy part, according to Sam O'Stein, the late, legendary editor of Chinatown and The Graduate. What's difficult is a quiet conversation. "It's the pauses and the waiting and the thinking that's hard," he once said. "It's knowing what the audience wants to see." O'Stein compared editing to telling a joke—a skilled practitioner knows what to leave out and what details to put in, and has the timing to make it work.

In the days when directors were making two or three movies a year, tough-minded legends like John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock shot film so economically that the picture could often be put together only one way. William Wellman once said that after the editing of his lean, tough gangster movie Public Enemy (1931), the unused film fit on a reel no bigger than his hand.

The emergence in the late '50s of such TV-trained directors as Arthur Penn and John Frankenheimer brought about a critical shift in shooting styles. Unlike the previous generation, who preferred to shoot one long master take of a scene and shave it up with a few close-ups, the TV vets had been trained shooting live dramas with a bunch of cameras rolling at once. Moving from video to film, they still preferred to get a lot of "coverage," so they shot lots of takes many different ways—over the shoulder, up close, wide shots—believing it could all be sorted out later. "That way the director protects himself," says Michael Kahn, who has cut almost all of Steven Spielberg's movies since Close Encounters of the Third Kind. "And also, with a lot of coverage, he can keep directing the movie even in the editing room. He can rewrite the picture, almost, as he edits."

In the 1960s, American filmmakers began responding to the experimental films from overseas, such as Alain Resnais's Hiroshima, Mon Amour (1959) and Jean-Luc Godard's rapturous Breath-
less (1959), by injecting similar fast-on-the-eye edits into their films. In The Wild Bunch (1969), director Sam Peckinpah and editor Louis Lombardo wove together a violent masterpiece of more than 3,600 cuts of film—some cuts were mere subliminal flashes. Other films with similarly subliminal cuts include Roman Polanski’s Rosemary’s Baby (1968) and Sidney Lumet’s The Pawnbroker (1965), in which a tired man in New York “sees” horrible memories (in flickering images) of his concentration-camp past. But the most influential filmmaker of the time in terms of editing was probably Richard Lester, who with the Beatles in A Hard Day’s Night (1964) established the new rules for rock: If you want it to look cool, make it jumpy.

Thus liberated, directors of the ’70s were intent on using the new editing tricks to heighten story moments. Though the action sequences devised by George Lucas and Steven Spielberg had a propulsive quality, they were usually highly designed—not simply a matter of helter-skelter images. Directors like Alan Pakula and Brian De Palma made regular studies of the classic works of Alfred Hitchcock and followed his example in such films as Klute and Carrie. They knew, for instance, the power of withholding: not to use a close-up or a wide shot unless it makes a point, and not to speed up the cuts until it’s time to show agitation. Pakula and the others advanced the form while still adhering to the old rule book.

Another shift occurred in 1985 when editor Larry Bridges was cutting a Steve Horn–directed TV commercial for Honda scooters. Bridges announced, “I’m going to make an underground film of this.” Set to Lou Reed’s “Walk on the Wild Side,” the ad was a shocking blend of flash frames and jagged cuts. “By subverting the unities, the traditions, and the rules of filmmaking,” Bridges says, “you reach an audience that is tired of those conventions, and you move the art form forward. You find a new attitude. And the viewer thinks, ‘If I identify with this attitude, I’ll be a user of that product.’” It was an initial splash in a wave of rough-cut, ultracool ads. The jumpiness became, as Bridges says now with a trace of guilt, “the new vocabulary.”

Consequently, a new generation of filmmakers has hung out a shingle proclaiming that Edginess is Truth. When editors and other film folk were polled last year by EditorsNet.com and asked to name “the best-edited film” of all time, the winners were not visual smoothies like a Casablanca or a Lawrence of Arabia; instead, the voters drifted toward such dreamlike efforts as Citizen Kane and Apocalypse Now. And Oliver Stone’s eye-popping JFK, which won the Oscar for film editing in 1992, was voted best of all.

Stone, with editors Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia (who won the editing Oscar for Black Hawk Down this year), created a film that is fraught with breathtaking imagery. A tense political discussion might be interwoven with the sight of a young girl chasing a ball. Why? Don’t ask! You responded, didn’t you?

“That,” Stone says, “is just free association.

Stone feels that his true liberation actually came on the film preceding JFK: the hallucinatory opus The Doors, which was his first experience with a digital editing machine. “For us, it was like walking into a new universe,” Stone recalls. “We were moving at the speed of thought.”

On the new machinery, all the footage shot for a movie was transferred to video and then digitized. Instead of sifting through hundreds of reels of celluloid, the editor only had to push a few buttons to review anything he wanted.

By the late ’90s, the old method of threading up reels on an editing flatbed or the older upright single-track viewing machine, with which fragments of film had to be manually spliced together, was virtually gone. Now the digital streams of film could be watched on a TV—perhaps with people sitting there with you and kid-

The Moviola, an upright, portable editing machine invented in 1924, generally ran one reel of film. It could work at various speeds, but the image wasn’t very clear. Here, Walt Disney (right) oversees the making of 1940’s Pinocchio.

Flatbed editing machines (such as this one, in director Spike Lee’s home) began replacing the Moviola in the 1960s because of superior sound quality, ability to handle multiple reels, and more gentle treatment of film negatives.

Digital editing machines such as George Lucas’s Editdroid (above) were introduced in the 1980s. By 2000, most studio movies were being edited on digital machines built by Avid.

Recently, digital software has dramatically lowered the cost of editing a film. Apple’s Final Cut Pro (above) allows an indie filmmaker to own an editing system for less than $10,000.

"In the old days, directors would have time to walk around and think about the change," Schoonmaker laughs. "Now the change can be made in a second. Now it might go too fast." Today, digital editing dominates the trade. Only a few holdouts, like Steven Spielberg and the Coen brothers, still edit the old-fashioned way.

These days, the edgy energy that director David Fincher and editor James Haygood brought to music videos like Madonna’s "Vogue," pulses through Fincher’s movies like Fight Club and Panic Room. And the speed-freak style is being incorporated into movies before the shooting even begins. Take last year’s most interesting example of wondrous editing, Memento, with its amnesiac-failing-for-
ward-through-the-past story line. The fiendish result of an overcaffeinated cutter? Nope. Editor Dody Dorn says she was only religiously following writer-director Christopher Nolan’s script, which was warp speed from the get-go.

But digital editing has its dangers. Any busybody executive or star can take home a videotape of the dailies and return with free advice. And since the imagery is now so malleable, directors and editors sometimes live in fear that another editing team may be given duplicate copies of the film and told to cut another version—in secret. The top editors, Kahn says, are often called by desperate studios hoping to “save” a troubled movie. If 11 kids at a Pacoima test screening write “Bor-ning!” on their preview cards, some lovingly sculpted movie scene might get fed through an editorial Osterizer set to puree.

“Fast cutting is now in every single commercial, every single music video, and it’s boring,” Stone warns. “It’s reached the point of jadedness. If it doesn’t have content anymore, it doesn’t interest me. After Natural Born Killers, I felt like pulling away from it.”

Many filmmakers agree. “Moulin Rouge may have 4,000 cuts,” Kahn says of the Jill Bilcock–edited film, “but the number isn’t as important as the story.”

But for some, the number of cuts is the story. When critic Julie Talen praised Moulin Rouge on Salon.com, she decreed that the film’s riotous editing is just what’s needed to hold today’s ravaged attention spans; she called the furious visual field of our lives “glimpse culture.” You don’t need a full song or a full scene anymore; a glimpse will do.

In the editing community, the whirling-dervish effects of Moulin Rouge have created a seismic impact. “What a balls-out rush,” says an admiring Weisberg. Still, as he cuts Men in Black, he knows he is serving the job of comedy. A fast editing style might be fun, but, as your Aunt Bessie would say, it won’t necessarily build character.

Chris Hodenfield was the editor of American Film Magazine.

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- **Texas Film Hall of Fame Awards**

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