Editors on Editing

Robert Dalva and Vivian Hillgrove were the featured speakers at the record attendance setting March 1997 Image meeting. Both brought examples of the films they had edited.

Robert Dalva's credits include Academy Award nominee in editing for *The Black Stallion*, Editor for *Jumanji*, *Raising Cain* and additional for editing *The Joy Luck Club*, and numerous director credits including the feature film, *The Black Stallion Returns*. Vivian Hillgrove was editor for *Henry and June*, editor with Walter Murch for *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

Vivien Hillgrove

Vivien had 15 different majors in college, but ended up majoring in psychiatric nursing. As she put it, "Little did I know, but I had actually picked the best possible major for an editor, confronting problem directors!"

Vivien started her career with low budget industrial films, moved her way to low-budget features, and than to high-budget features. But in doing Henry and June, she realized that she missed the freedom of independent documentaries and gardening and decided to return to her true loves.

In commenting on a scene from **The Unbearable Lightness of Being**, in which the young woman in the pool views other women practicing their ballet, only to suddenly see them all nude; Vivien noted that this was a case where sliding film over a light table was an easier technique to figure out how to line up the lines in the pool to splice the shots, than a nonlinear video station.

Henry and June had a lot of cheesecake; it was a very sexy film. In showing a confrontation scene, she decided not to do the typical TV close-up, back and forth shots. Instead, she choose to use a wide shot, providing a chilly air, which while it doesn't always work, is particularly effective in this sequence. As an aside,

Vivien noted that the head turning in the initial shot pays homage to another classic film.

In contrast, *Hot Summer Winds*, shot for the American Playhouse, illustrated how an editor can save a film. Of the two scenes shoot, the voice of the actor was unusable. To salvage it, the dialog was thrown away, and the film transformed into a non-linear sequence, with the woman daydreaming as she bathes, of what will happen before it actually happens.

The Devil Never Sleeps was a Spanish, low budget documentary. The film breaks numerous rules, among them were not obtaining clearance for an illegal wiretap, but the sequence shown illustrated how well the unpredictable, experimental techniques used in the film can work. These included using a toy bull-dozer sinking in the water to illustrate a related point!

Currently Vivien is working on *Indigenous People Earth Summit*. To help herself decide how best to edit it, she has surrounded herself in it, printing off key photographs of each shot, to form a set of storyboards. "Video in this case makes it very easy to find scenes and figure out where to cut." A particular challenge on this film is to grok the culture, to really understand what their world is like, to understand the dichotomies between Western and native cultures.

Robert Dalva

Robert started out as an English major, and than attended the USC Film School from 1964 to 1967. He noted that English and architecture are the two most common college major for filmmakers.

Robert started by observing, "Editing is the most misunderstood profession in the film industry. Almost every studio executive simply doesn't understand what its all about." Fundamentally, films are about telling a story. While a film runs in time, we can screw around with it, compressing it, jumping back and forth, running in slow motion.

Editing a film is the final re-write. It's interesting to note that published scripts, taken from the screenplay, sometimes have gigantic differences between the actual film, due to changes made by the editor. A good example of this was the film Latino. Its a film about the Contras, where the protagonist meets their love interest and has an oil and water reaction.

As an aside, Robert went to film school with George Lucas. Now George had gotten into film because a guy by the name of Haskel Wexler had told George he should go into the film business, instead of being a mechanic. Haskel in turn had been the director of photography for *American Graffiti*. At any rate, George called up Robert and told him that Haskel needed help editing Latino, having already gone through two editors.

Upon examining the film, Robert decided that the film simply didn't work. Fortunately the film had good coverage, with a large box of lifts, discarded scenes that supposedly didn't work. The scenes needed to make the film work had been discarded. He used these scenes to recut the movie. He ended up rewriting a particular scene, where the end of a scene became the beginning, and vice versa.

In a memorable quote, Robert noted, "There have been many good movies that were badly acted, photographed or even directed. But there has never been a good movie that was badly edited."

Next, a scene from **Jumanji** was shown in which a stampede erupts from the library wall. The scene starts with an argument between the two adults, while the two kids decide to go ahead and play the game. Having rolled the dice, the room begins to shake. At this point, the camera was locked down on the library wall. A mechanical rhinoceros is pushed through the wall by an air ram. Using an Avid editing system, Robert placed Robin Williams in the scene, crudely with the rhinoceros. The sequence was than given to ILM to do their magic, now that the editor had given the correct timing.

In the scene, the crashing props, walls exploding are moved by wires and air rams. Only the animals are computer generated. In some cases, literally the editing of one frame makes a huge difference in the effectiveness of a scene. One of the few places where a puppet is used is when the pelican lands to snatch the game.

Robert noted, "It was an interesting challenge to make cuts when the computer generated animation hadn't been done. While story-boards were very helpful, my approach was to visualize the animals and figure out how I would edit the scene to make everything join together." Needless to say, this technique drove the animators crazy. In one scene, an elephant crushes a car. "I had to teach a class in match editing, before the animators could understand why the elephant's leg needed to continue to drop in the close-up, from the wide shot that we had started with."

Another challenge for the editor is to consider when the audience will laugh, and for how long. "You have to keep track of how action, dialog and humor play off against each other."

Most Hollywood films are shot with 200,000 to 300,000 feet of work printed film that ends up in a 12,000 foot film. **The Black Stallion** was a very lyrical film, shot by a very demanding director. He shot 1,000,000 feet of film. There was so much film, that no one knew what was there! To make things worse, the film didn't have a script supervisor. To edit the film, required hiring a script supervisor for the post-production!

In a picture such as the *Black Stallion*, music plays an enormous part. Typically Robert first cuts the film, and than finds music that fits. He observed, "If I cut to the music, I might cut shorter. Instead I let the natural rhythm of the film speak." In watching MTV, if you turn off the sound, you'll notice how choppy everything appears, all the shots come out to being about the same length.

"Make it move," was an old Hollywood editing adage. Editing must constantly keep in mind the pacing and rhythm of the film and how it is flowing. But audiences today have become more educated viewers, able to retain more. Back in the 1960s, the typical movie would have 600 cuts. *The Black Stallion* has considered unusual in having 900 cuts. But in *Jumanji* there were 1477 cuts. In essence, movies teach you how to see.

Questions

Have never read Walter Murch's wonderful book on editing, but have talked with him on several occasions. His "blink" theory is that when an actor blinks, its a sign of something causing your concentration to waver. Personally, he think its rather funny.

Dramatic scenes have an internal rhythm to them. In the scene we showed from **Jumanji**, there were two rhythms. There was the false rhythm of the two adults arguing, and the true rhythm of looks and nods by the kids in deciding to play the game.

Its important to remember that there are cultural differences in how to shoot films. Japanese directors feel that the actors eyes have all the energy, but personally, I'd hold on the shot longer. Lighting is all important in Japanese films, you can't simply decide to edit like a Japanese editor, there are lots of other people involved in creating the necessary look. Editing is very much like a dance, with give and take.

In the Bay Area, the three major sites to do editing at Zoetrope Studios in San Francisco, at Saul Zaentz Company in Berkeley, and at Lucas's Ranch. (It is not all that expensive to rent time at the Ranch.)

When we shot *The Black Stallion*, we had 4 trained horses. One was a Polish Arabian, that was the closest thing I'd ever seen to an actor. He'd be standing still, the clapsticks would come down, and he'd perform. Another horse was a beautiful creature that we bought outright, since he had failed to perform as a stud. Very well trained, but unfortunately he suffered colic and died.

Basically directors want the best possible film they can get and are willing to let editors deliver that. The major exception is when they've invested a lot of money in a particular scene and it simply doesn't work. Directors vary widely in their behavior. Some will go away for a month, others will sit over your shoulder, cut by cut. Directors are the most exposed person on a film. In many ways, its like you're married to them during the cutting of the film.

Vivien commented, "I don't like to go to a set when its being shot. I don't want to be constrained by the limits and perceptions I would form being on the set. I'm hired to be a critical eye." She also noted that editors are not for the meek of heart, that you need to have a strong personality that is willing to do battle with a director.

Do studios ever do additional editing? Robert related his experience on *The Black Stallion*. They had spent 21 months in post-production, and United Artists had never seen any footage of the film. At the same time, Francis Ford Coppola was shooting *Apocalypse Now*. Now at some time, you have to take a movie out and show it to an audience that doesn't have an agenda. We did a preview in Seattle and than met at a restaurant with 6 studio executives, the director, Carroll Ballard, myself and Francis who was the head of Zoetrope. David Field from United Artists said, "Carroll, we have a few notes."

Now Carroll knew it was going to be bad and had started drinking as soon as we got to the restaurant. But Francis immediately stated, "If this is the way Carroll wants the movie to go out, this is the way its going to go out." It was a good thing that we didn't get into their list of "changes" they wanted. When we looked at them the next day, most were garbage. But there was one idea that we incorporated into the film. In truth, while very few directors have the clout to have final cut like Francis, most usually make out all right by the studio.

What do you do when people freeze up on the camera? *On Mosquito Coast* with Harrision Ford, got him a whirligig, since he's a wood-

worker. But in your industrial film, you could put a funny face over the camera, cutting a hole for the lens. Tell them you're doing a rehearsal shot, but actually film it. Cover the red light on the camera so they can't see its running. Get them to have a beer. It's very hard to talk to a camera, it has no warmth or personality. Stand next to the camera and have a conversation with them. Run an audio tape continually, than record some wild video, shoot their hands, feet, back of head, where lip sync doesn't matter. Keep in mind that even when you have noisy dialog, sometimes it will wok better than you think.

The best directors permit their editors the most freedom. Robert is not a rough cut guy, he goes for a final cut the first time.

The real battle, when editing, is to maintain perspective about the film. This is an important role for the director, he needs to see the film as a whole since the editor develops a myopic view over the weeks and months of editing.

With respect to non-linear editing, Robert first used an Avid on *Jumanji*. While you lose the tactile feel of the film, you gain a lot more because the Avid allows sketching and popping things in. In this sense, its a return to the old Moviola that allow more intuitive, random access in editing film. With the Avid, its important to make a conscious effort to go through the bins and refresh your memory of the dailies. This was an advantage of the old flat bed system where you could thread a 1000 feet of film through a rotating prism and see the dailies going by very fast, to find things that you would otherwise might have forgotten.

To get a better idea of how the film would appear, mounted a 30 inch monitor with a black matte cutting off the burned in numbers at a height similar to where the screen would be in a movie theater. But Robert advised, "If you only have 3 weeks of money to do editing, it is a big restraint. To do good editing on the Avid or any system, you need to have the time to edit properly."

Overall, Robert was very impressed with the Avid system. He only faulted them in terms of being able to get through to technical support on the phone without waiting for 45 minutes at a time. But he noted that if they get two calls on the same software bug, they'll fix it! The only real problem that Robert sees with an Avid system is that studios believe that editing can be done faster using an Avid. Typically on a Hollywood production, editing is working a week behind production, leaving a week or two after the wrap to finish up the director,s cut. Editing a non-special effects film takes about eight months..

What happens when editing is rushed on a movie? *Days of Thunder* had a grand total of three weeks of editing after completion of final principal photography. This was accomplished by using multiple editors at the same time. The movie suffered from this shortened schedule. Heat was another example of a movie that didn't allow the editors time enough to percolate over the structure and movement of the film, and it shows in the final product.