FORUM

Editing in Leone's *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966) and Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969)

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In the first part of this paper I establish the centrality of editing to cinema as an art form, with specific reference to Rudolph Arnheim, Andre Bazin, Jean-Luc Godard, and Gilles Deleuze. I then examine the approaches to montage editing taken by Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah, in The Good, The Bad and The Ugly *(1966) and* The Wild Bunch *(1969). While both filmmakers use highly visible editing techniques there are also significant differences, particularly regarding the build-up to an action sequence and the sequence itself, their preferred shots and combinations of shots, and their use of music.*

Introduction/Overview

In the first part of this paper, I seek to establish the centrality of editing to cinema as an art form, with particular reference to four major film theorists: Rudolph Arnheim, André Bazin, Jean-Luc Godard, and Gilles Deleuze. In the second part, I examine the approaches to montage editing taken by Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah in the climactic sequences of *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969). I contend that while both filmmakers use highly visible editing techniques, there are significant differences in how they use montage, particularly regarding the build-up to an action sequence and the sequence itself, their preferred types and combinations of shots, the roles of planning and improvisation, and their use of music.

Prior to discussing editing and montage it is necessary to note some linguistic complications around the latter term. In some languages, including French and Russian, montage refers to all types of film editing. In others, including English, montage typically refers to a specific subset of editing practices, namely those developed by Soviet filmmaker-theorists in the USSR during the 1920s.

Arnheim: *A New Laocoön: Artistic Composites and the Talking Film*

As his titular allusion to eighteenth century aesthetic theorist Gotthold Lessing's *Laocoön* (1766) indicates, Arnheim (1983) is concerned with identifying the formal properties that distinguish film from earlier arts. This leads Arnheim to argue for silent cinema. His reason for this is that he believes the talking cinema to be an essentially inferior version of theatre. An appropriate balance between image and voice had not yet been found and Arnheim believed it could not be found. Arnheim's understanding of the cinema is thus fundamentally predicated on lack or absence. This is particularly apparent when he rhetorically asks, "Can image and word be combined in a manner different from that of the theatre?" (174), for, having identified properties of the film, Arnheim then goes on to indicate how they might be used in theatre:

> The modern theatre has also used actual film projections [...] as backdrops. Granted that in its present form the theatre cannot change the distance or the angle of view, nor can it leap from place to place as the film does by means of montage. (174-175)

This raises a contradiction: Arnheim has inadvertently identified montage as the distinctive formal property of cinema, one that theatre lacks, but does not seem to have any concerns over theatre losing its purity and distinctiveness by making use of what would appear to be purely cinematic devices. A good example of such a device can be seen in the opening of *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, in which an extreme long shot of an empty landscape is dramatically juxtaposed with an extreme close-up of a man's face.

Bazin: The Virtues and Limitations of Montage

For Bazin (1967), the fundamental division in cinema was not between silent and sound cinemas. Instead it was between filmmakers who put their faith in the image and filmmakers who put their faith in reality. With a preference for filmmakers who put their faith in reality, Bazin argued against montage and in favour of the long take. Two Robert Flaherty documentaries, *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Louisiana Story* (1948), exemplify his position:

> It is inconceivable that the famous seal-hunt scene in *Nanook* should not show us hunter, hole, and seal all in the same shot. It is simply a question of respect for the spatial unity of an event at the moment when to split it up would change it from something real to something imaginary [...] the scene of the struggle with the alligator on a fishing line in *Louisiana Story*, obviously montage, is weak. (50-51)

In the former scene we can clearly see the process of Nanook stalking and striking his prey while in the latter we see only the apparent product of the alligator-hunt; we cannot be sure, after all, that the alligator in the water and the alligator on the fishing line are the same animal or whether the caught alligator was actually prepared beforehand.

Godard: Montage My Fine Care

In his brief essay "Montage My Fine Care", Godard (1985) takes Bazin to task for having an overly limited notion of montage as applicable only to cutting. Godard contends that montage is inherent in staging more generally, with the filmmaker inevitably making decisions that affect the reality presented (39). For example, *Nanook*'s seal hunt could have been filmed in a single medium or long shot. The former is likely to feel more intimate, the latter more distanced.

Godard's point is also relevant to the opening images of *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* mentioned above. For rather than cutting from the landscape to the man's face, Leone actually has the man dramatically come into view by circling up from below the camera. As far as *The Wild Bunch* is concerned, Godard's remarks alert us to multiple realities and realisms. In *The Wild Bunch*'s opening shootout, for instance, the rapid cutting between images running at different speeds, might be argued to be a hyper-realistic presentation of a life-or-death limit situation.[i]

Deleuze: The Mobile Section

Arnheim's, Bazin's and Godard's ideas can be somewhat reconciled through Deleuze's (2005) concepts of the "image-in-movement" and the "movement-image". The image-in-movement refers to the earliest cinema, such as that of the Lumière brothers. In their films *The Arrival of a Train at Ciotat Station* and *The Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory in Lyon* (both 1895), the only movement present is that of the images within the frame – i.e. the titular train and workers. The static camera merely records whatever passes before it. The movement-image, as developed by D. W. Griffith and others, presents a "mobile section" via cutting, camera movement and changes in focus. The set of images presented within the frame is thus constantly changing.

Deleuze goes on to idiosyncratically conceptualise montage as referring to the breakdown of the film into the three main types of movement-images, namely the perception-image, affection-image, and action-image (71-72). This breakdown varies by genre, with the Western featuring relatively more perception-images and action-images and fewer affection-images (associated with the close-up, especially of the face). It also varies by nation, with distinct American, Russian, French and German "schools" identifiable in the silent era (30-57). Of these four national cinemas, the most important in terms of wider discussions of editing and montage are the USA and the USSR.

Hollywood Editing and Soviet Montage

Hollywood editing was developed in the 1910s and rapidly adopted as a standard by studios and filmmakers. Its key characteristic is being invisible to the spectator, with the sense of natural continuity from one shot to the next. For example, there were strict conventions about how a scene broke down into long, medium and close-up shots. In their sample of several hundred Hollywood films made between 1919 and 1960, David Bordwell *et al.* found that 90% of scenes began with an establishing shot whilst in the other 10% this shot was only temporarily delayed (66). Montage is associated with the type of cutting developed in the Soviet Union as a direct response to Hollywood. Its key characteristic is being visible to the spectator. This contrast can be understood in political terms. As Marxists, Soviet filmmaker-theorists such as Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov believed in a dialectical method. Hollywood had provided the thesis, invisible continuity editing, so they would present the antithesis, visible montage editing. Drawing the spectator's attention to the filmmakers' interventions was understood as presenting a world that could be changed, reflecting the Marxist belief that a class in itself, the proletariat, had to become a class *for* itself.

Both approaches had economic and authorial implications. Hollywood editing meant an efficient assembly-line approach could be taken. As personnel were mostly interchangeable, one director or editor could replace another without obviously affecting the end product.[ii] Soviet montage grew out of the impoverished material conditions of the revolution and civil war period. For example, Lev Kuleshov performed his famous experiment using photographs, not having access to raw film

stock. In this experiment Kuleshov presented his subjects with sets of stills, the first of which remained identical throughout. He found that subjects read the first image, objectively the same, as expressing different emotions based upon the content of the second image. Individual Soviet filmmakers developed their own particular montage theories. For instance, whereas Kuleshov's montage was based upon images combining, Sergei Eisenstein's was predicated upon images colliding. This made it difficult for one filmmaker to edit another's work and gave greater scope for the director to assert himself as the film's author.

Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah

Besides their use of highly visible editing, there are several reasons for comparing the work of Leone (1928-1989) and Peckinpah (1925-1984). They were of the same filmmaking generation, came into the film industry when the Hollywood Studio System was in decline, specialised in the Western genre, shared key reference points in the filmmakers John Ford and Akira Kurosawa, and made films considered excessively violent by the standards of the time (see especially Prince 1998, 1999, and 2003).

Leone's *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly* presents its three titular protagonists searching for a fortune in gold against the backdrop of the American Civil War. At the climax, the Good/Blondie reveals to the Bad/Angel Eyes Sentenza and the Ugly/Tuco that only he knows the name on the grave where the gold is buried, writes this name on a rock, and challenges the other two men to a three-way duel. Having earlier secretly removed the bullets from the Ugly's pistol, the Good has the advantage as he does not need to divide his attentions and can concentrate upon the Bad.[iii]

Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* begins with its titular gang robbing the bank in a border town, being ambushed by a posse led by former comrade Thornton, and escaping only to discover their loot is worthless. The five survivors – leader Pike, second-in-command Dutch, brothers Lyle and Tector Gorch, and newest member Angel – flee to Mexico. They encounter warlord Mapache, who hires them to steal a consignment of US army weapons. Angel gives up his share of payment for a crate of rifles to give to the revolutionaries fighting Mapache. Learning of this betrayal, Mapache takes Angel prisoner and tortures him. The others decide to go rescue their comrade. Rather than releasing Angel, Mapache unexpectedly slits his throat. In response, Pike shoots Mapache dead.

Build-Up and Action

The first obvious difference between the two films' climactic sequences is the balance of time given over to the build-up to action and to the action itself. In Leone's film it takes the three protagonists approximately[iv] two minutes 20 seconds to take their positions inside the arena. There is then a further two minutes 30 seconds of the men sizing one another up and looking for an opportunity. Finally, Sentenza makes his move, but is outdrawn by Blondie. Sentenza tries to return fire, but is shot a second time and killed, while Tuco realises his pistol is empty. This period of action takes around 10

seconds. The ratio of build-up to action here is thus approximately 29:1, quite an extraordinary figure. In total the sequence includes 75 individual cuts from one shot to another. The Average Shot Length (ASL), a metric developed by Bordwell (61) and calculated by dividing the duration by the number of shots, is thus about 3.7 seconds, a figure that is not appreciably longer or shorter than usual. What this does not indicate, however, is the variance in shot duration. For example, when the Bad slowly takes his position in the arena Leone holds a long shot for 40 seconds. Conversely, in the three seconds before the Bad draws his gun there are 15 individual shots, each an extreme close-up and each lasting only one-fifth of a second. In Peckinpah's film, meanwhile, there is an interlude of about 34 seconds after Pike shoots Mapache where it seems the Bunch might be able to escape. Then, as Pike shoots one of Mapache's German military advisers, a full-scale battle between the Bunch and hundreds of Mexican troops erupts. This battle runs just under four and a half minutes, ending with the deaths of Pike and Dutch. As such, the ratio of build-up to action is about 1:9, or 1:5 if we count the Bunch's walk into Mapache's camp and demanding that Angel be freed. The rapidity of the editing makes it nearly impossible to count the number of shots in the battle itself. There are at least 300 individual edits; this gives an average shot length of less than a second and means this sequence alone has about half the number of edits found in the typical Hollywood feature film of the era (Weddle 362). The variation in shot duration seen in Leone's film is far less apparent, with the majority of the shots being around a second long.

Shot Types and Camera Movements

Further differences between the two sequences lie in the type of shots used and the movements of the camera. In Leone's case there are several extreme long shots, such as the three men as mere stick figures within the circular arena, and several extreme close-ups, but few medium shots. With the exception of a zoom in on the rock as the Good places it down in the arena, Leone's compositions tend to be static, with the camera neither moving nor changing its focal depth. In Peckinpah's case there is a greater use of medium shots and a general avoidance of extreme long shots and close-ups. Peckinpah also edits with the frame more, by zooming in or out or whip panning to left or right. All this makes Peckinpah's sequence seem more intimately involved with its protagonists and Leone's more detached. The extreme close-ups Leone uses cannot logically be seen as subjective presentations of what the three men see of each other, given the actual space between them. The medium shots and movements Peckinpah uses could be seen as point of view shots from the positions of the Bunch and the Mexicans, as they quickly scan for targets and threats. Peckinpah also makes extensive use of slow motion, cutting between simultaneously occurring events playing back at different slow-motion speeds due to having been shot at higher than normal frame rates.

Planning and Improvisation

Another important point of distinction between the two filmmakers is in how they approached the sequences. Whereas Leone knew the specific shots that he wanted in his mind's eye, Peckinpah only

knew the general effect that he wanted. As such, the two filmmakers' casts and crews had very different experiences. As actor Lee Van Cleef recalled:

> "So there we were in the middle of this cemetery and Sergio was taking one close-up after the next of each of us, and taking close-ups of our hands wavering near our guns, and all sorts of unusual angles. [...] He made that scene last, what, five minutes? And all we do is stand there and look at each other across this great circle, with the music blaring on the soundtrack." (Frayling 238)

Peckinpah's wardrobe master Gordon Dawson remembered a more challenging situation:

> "[Peckinpah] didn't have a fucking clue of what he was going to do. It was not happening. He cleared the set and he sat there for about three or four hours, and then he brought in the cameraman." (Weddle 342-343)

Peckinpah's improvisational approach meant that Dawson had to work around a shortage of costumes for extras playing Mapache's troops. After a blood squib had been fired and an extra "killed," Dawson's crew would tape over the hole left by the exploding squib, paint this tape khaki, quickly dry and age it, and then send out one of the next tranche of extras wearing it (344). For his part Peckinpah indicated that he had a method, one based on obtaining plenty of raw footage to be pored over and worked over in the editing: "We're just down here mining the ore. I don't start making the jewellery till we hit the cutting room" (345). To ensure he had what was needed, Peckinpah covered some shots with as many as six cameras, sometimes running at a range of speeds, from the normal 24 frames a second up to 125 frames per second. In this, Peckinpah's approach is comparable to that of Kurosawa when filming some of *The Seven Samurai*'s (1954) battle scenes (106). In contrast, Leone's approach was more like that of John Ford (1894-1973). Ford believed that there was a single best camera set-up for any given shot and that his job was to find it. One way he found of maintaining editorial control was to edit "in camera" as much as possible. By so doing, it became essentially impossible to edit footage any other way but his, as there simply was not other material that could be used:

> When I take a scene, I figure that's the only shot there is. Otherwise, if you give them a lot of film, when you leave the lot the committee takes over. [...] They can't do it with my pictures. I cut in the camera and that's it. There's not a lot of film left on the floor when I've finished. (Peary 123)

Composed film and the musical moment

Leone's pre-planning of the three-way duel was also strongly influenced by his and composer Ennio Morricone's use of composed film techniques. While understandings of composed film vary, the essential point is that the music exists before the film or film sequence. This is the opposite of conventional film scoring practice, where the music will be written in post-production. The music can thereby be used as a structuring principle for the duration of shots, the rhythm of the editing and suchlike. Or, as Leone indicated, "I had some of the music played on set. It created the atmosphere of the scene. The performances were definitely influenced by it" (Frayling 235). In sharp contrast to this,

Jerry Fielding's music accompanying the Bunch's walk into Mapache's lair in Peckinpah's film was added in post-production, the scene itself having been improvised.

In *Dreams of Difference, Songs of the Same* (2008) Amy Herzog introduces the notion of the "musical moment." Herzog characterises the musical moment as the point in a film where the normal subordinate relationship of the music to the visuals is temporarily inverted (5-7). The music becomes the dominant element, in that it may determine, amongst other things, the duration of the scene, the rhythm of its editing, and even its ontological status (e.g. from the present to the past, from reality to dream). Crucially, while such moments are most commonly found in the musical genre, they are not unique to it and may potentially be found in any genre.

Herzog's concept provides a further point of distinction between Leone and Peckinpah's use of montage in the climactic scenes of their films. In *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*, Morricone's cue *il triello* (i.e. a portmanteau term combining *trio* and *duel*, indicative of the three-way nature of the duel) begins as the three combatants make their entrance into the circular ring. Though non-diegetic, *il triello* functions as a musical moment in that it plays throughout the scene, as the three men take up their positions, continues as they size another up and look for the moment to act, building to a climax, and then ends at the precise instant the Bad goes for his gun. In *The Wild Bunch*, Fielding's cue begins after the terse exchange between Pike and Lyle Gorch ("Let's go" / "Why not?") as the four men march into Mapache's camp to demand Angel's release. Though the martial drums that begin the cue are non-diegetic, the guitars and voices that soon join them are somewhat ambiguously positioned in that they could be produced by some of the Mexicans that the Bunch pass as they continue on their way. This cue then ends as the Bunch confronts Mapache. The shock as Mapache slits Angel's throat rather than releasing him is amplified by a brief musical sting at this precise instant, which ends as soon as Pike instinctively shoots Mapache in response. As the members of the Bunch and the Mexicans nervously look to see who will make the next move, further musical stabs ramp up the tension still further. Then, as Pike shoots one of Mapache's German military advisers, a full-scale battle erupts and the sounds of gunfire, explosions and screams replace the instrumental score.

The *triello* functions as a musical moment, in Herzog's terms, in that the duration of the scene and the individual shots within it, along with the patterns and rhythms of the editing (alternating extreme close-ups and extreme long shots, repetitions of two or three shots, the duplets being of the Bad and the Ugly, the triplets also including the Good) are choreographed to the music. While accounts differ as to whether Morricone's music was ever played on set during filming, it is clear that it had been written beforehand and was used by Leone to structure the mise-en-scene and editing.

The musical sequence that immediately precedes the *triello*, in which the Ugly circles the vast cemetery looking for Arch Stanton's grave, also appears to be a musical moment. For one thing, discussions of it frequently refer to it in terms of Morricone's musical cue, *The Ecstasy of Gold*. For another, the music appears to determine the duration of the sequence, beginning as the Ugly enters the cemetery and reaching its climax as he finally sights Stanton's grave, and certainly conveys his

elation. Surprisingly, however, Morricone scored the sequence only after it had been shot and edited it such that his cue was actually structured around Leone's images. The rapport between the images and the music and the director and the composer is all the more remarkable when we consider that Leone's staging and editing of the sequence is unusual. He cuts between long shots observing the Ugly's circling round the arena and point-of-view shots, taken as if from the Ugly's perspective, which are blurred to the point of abstraction.

Conclusion

Editing and montage are fundamental to cinema as an art form. They must, however, be understood in broader terms than merely cutting from one shot to another to also encompass movements of the camera and changes in its focus. The most important distinction in approaches is between invisible Hollywood editing and visible Soviet montage. While both Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah favoured drawing attention to their editing, their uses of montage differed in various ways. Leone used montage in the long build-up to a brief moment of action, whereas Peckinpah used montage for a more sustained period of action following a briefer build-up. Leone favoured extreme long and close-up shots, Peckinpah medium shots. Leone's shots were generally static, whereas Peckinpah's usually incorporated movement. Leone's montage was based upon having an awareness of the shots he wanted beforehand, Peckinpah's upon shooting considerable amounts of footage and then distilling it down in the editing room. And finally, Leone used music as a structuring device in the manner of a musical moment, whereas Peckinpah used music in a conventional, supporting role.

Notes

[i] Peckinpah was influenced by his own experience, while serving in the US Marines, of experiencing time seeming to stretch when under gunfire (Weddle 55).

[ii] With some exceptions, such as Ernst Lubitsch and promotional materials emphasising his "Lubitsch touch".

[iii] One of the film's strengths is the way it stands up to repeat viewings, as we then fully understand why the Good is so calm and impassive compared to the other two men.

[iv] Differences in running time between cinema and home video formats, the latter running at an equivalent of 25 frames a second rather than 24, mean that all timings here should be taken as approximate, accurate to plus or minus four per cent.

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