

THE ART OF THE EDIT

In advance of the first EditFest London, Jake Bickerton caught up with six editors at the top of their game to discuss the art of editing, the processes involved in cutting and the skills required to be a successful editor

The inaugural EditFest London event, organised by The American Cinema Editors (ACE), takes place in Soho at the end of June, with an impressive roster of some of the best editors in the world convening on London to talk through their craft in a series of Q&A sessions.

The editors taking part include Oscar winners such as the much-celebrated Anne V. Coates, whose editing credits include *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Elephant Man*, *Erin Brockovich* and *Becket*, and Chris Dickens, who won an Oscar for his edit of *Slumdog Millionaire*.

The lineup also includes Primetime Emmy winner and *Game of Thrones* editor Frances Parker, *Kick-Ass 1&2* editor Eddie Hamilton, *Downton Abbey* and *Billy Elliot* editor John Wilson and Tracy Granger, the editor of *Boys Don't Cry* & *Still Life*.

All are featured talking about their craft over the following pages.

The editors featured in this article will all be speaking at ACE's inaugural **EditFest London** on **June 29**, sponsored by **Televisual**. www.editfest.com



ANNE V. COATES

(*Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Elephant Man*, *Out of Sight*)

It was quite difficult to change over from film editing to computer-based editing in the mid-90s. I knew very little about computers, but when I did *Congo* [released in 1995], I had to go to computers; I had no choice. They fixed up lessons for me and my crew so we all learned together. It was really difficult at first. I was fairly old and thought I probably wouldn't need to change, but it came to the point where either you change or you move on and leave the industry.

So I took it as a challenge. I knew it was where the business was going, and while I resisted initially as it was difficult to learn and I kept wanting to kick the machine, I knew I had no choice. Originally I learned on a Lightworks, which I wanted to do as it was British and it was supposed to be easy. I cut four or five films on that, until *Out of Sight* [released in 1998], where I moved over to Avid on request of the sound editor. That was quite difficult as it was quite a complicated picture. There were lots of technical problems, and the director said I could go back to Lightworks if I wanted, but I was determined to master it.

In the end, I embraced the change. The editing software is only a tool – you're still making movies, telling stories, creating humour and excitement, the same as before. You're doing exactly the same thing but in a different way.

Another change has been that more directors come into the cutting room with you these days. Previously it was thought of as very unusual, now it's an everyday occurrence. There are still some directors who don't want to see anything you're doing at all during the shooting. Then you show the first cut to them and it's very nerve wracking. Handing over a film is like handing over a baby.

Now I've slowed right down and am in semi-retirement, with a bad back and leg. I used to always take time off between pictures anyway as I think you need space between films. It's only a film, you have a life to lead as well. I like to have the summer off each year and I'll look to get something around September. I quite like doing 'doctor jobs' where they need another pair of eyes on an edit that's already been worked up.

My favourite of the films I've edited is *Lawrence of Arabia* as there's nothing else like it. I loved *Becket* and *Out of Sight* too, and *The Elephant Man*. I've cut so many different films it's difficult to choose just one.

To be a good editor you need to have a certain authority, a storytelling quality and a lot of patience. Women make good editors – they generally have more patience as they deal with children all the time, which is much the same as dealing with directors.



EDDIE HAMILTON
(Kick-Ass 1 and 2, X-Men: First Class)

A good edit is something that produces the correct emotional response from the audience. People pay to have their emotions manipulated – they want to feel scared, to fall in love – if we deliver that, they get their money’s worth. It’s when you get the right timing for a joke, the right amount of shock value in a horror, the right amount of misdirection in the edit, the right amount of close-ups on a couple and so on.

Experience plays into it a lot – you can only break the rules once you know the rules. I try out new stuff to freshen things up a little and make sure I watch lots of movies and TV so I know the fashions and trends. It’s also key to have a good shorthand with the director.

The editor is solely focused on the storytelling and I’m always brutally honest with script feedback, as audiences are always brutally honest. Aded to this, if there are any problems with the script they will still be there when you get to the edit. When reading a script, I look for things like pace, a confused storyline, characters dropping out of the script and so on. If you minimise the issues in advance you’re in a good position for the edit.

The edit usually starts on day two of the shoot. My approach is to dig in and throw a cut together before I’ve watched all the footage. I’ll then swap out line readings if and when I find something that works better. I’ll also go through and mix in sound effects and temp music and really build up theatrical level sound in Avid to show the full potential of a scene.

My job is to make the film the director wants to make, and the norm is for the director to drop in every few days to see what is and isn’t working. The first assembly is really just for the director. Then a couple of producers might see the next version, and you slowly widen the circle each time. You often have a dinner party screening to garner opinion, then a bigger screening, then eventually you go up to 200 or so people to get a much broader sample base for feedback.

Millions of dollars are spent between the words ‘action’ and ‘cut’ with hundreds of people worrying about it all. Then it literally just comes to me and I build the film. I’m the first person to set eyes on the film – it’s incredibly exciting, and a very privileged position to be in. I love going to work every day. I take a step back when I’m having a bad day just to be grateful for the position I’m in.

Having a passion to edit is the most important factor in being an editor – it can be quite a solitary job and you’re always focussing on the minutest of details. You need to be an expert storyteller and a technical expert – f*ck ups cost a fortune so have to be avoided. And politically there’s a lot of stress with all the money at stake so you have to be very diplomatic and keep calm, especially when things aren’t going that well.

The process of refining a film or TV programme is largely the same – though with TV work there are fewer rushes, and generally you have to fix fewer problems. There’s also not so much money at stake. One mediocre episode can be skipped through whereas film has no room for failure. Film is more complex and takes more time to get right, although a lower budget film may have the same timescale and a similar amount of money spent on it as a TV production.

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CHRIS DICKENS
(*Slumdog Millionaire, Les Misérables*)

There are many different schools of thought – some think editing should be invisible, some think the opposite, but it's all about serving the story. If a film works, it's been well edited – it's not just a series of shots cut together well, it's to do with the whole. The edit is the essence of filmmaking.

Every morning you get whatever they've shot from the day before. You cut that and feed back to the director. You try to keep up with the shoot – both to have something to show the director and for your own sake. It depends how much time you have but I aim to watch all the rushes. If you don't, you don't know the progression and why the camera changed or whatever. Watching everything also helps formulate a plan for how to edit. You can't get the edit right first time. Later you might find you need to re-cut something and if you don't know what's there, you won't know how to do it.

50% of the way something functions is down to the sound so I do as much as I can of the sound editing during the cut.

You're always located close to the shoot, though you don't want to be too close as you need to be independent and have your opinions uncoloured by what's going on.

The aim is to have the first assembly ready a few days after the shoot, to show the director and producer. Some directors like to open the process up quickly by doing screenings of fairly early cuts, whereas others are very protective of it and don't want anyone to see it until it's 100% ready. You can miss things if you work in isolation, if you protect a film for too long.

We test screened *Slumdog Millionaire* twice. The audience didn't like the original ending very much, which is quite a commonplace occurrence. Following a screening, you can schedule in a bit more shooting to adapt it if you feel the feedback merits it. Then you re-screen to test the reaction.

How long it takes to edit depends on what kind of thing you're shooting. Four minutes is probably the average amount of screen time you'll edit in a day. Generally, if it's a 9-10 week shoot, it's 9-10 weeks after this you'll be expected to have the director's cut ready.

An editor has to have patience, diplomacy, and a willingness to start again. You need to be able to listen to people's opinions and not be too precious. Editing is more related to art, sculpture and painting and is more about your feelings and trusting them; you need to be able to control and channel that.



FRANCES PARKER
(*Game of Thrones, Band of Brothers*)

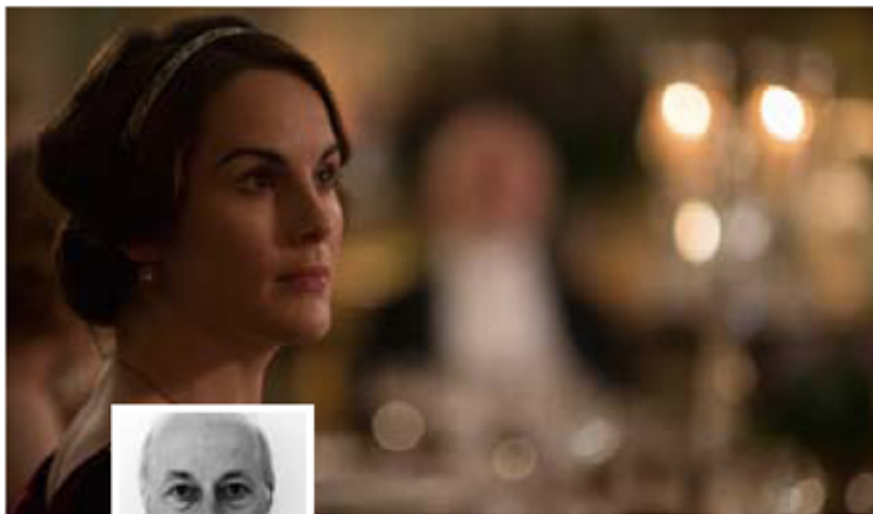
Editing is such a subjective discipline – pretty much everyone can agree as to what makes great photography, great design, great costumes, make-up and music but most people would be hard pushed to comment on how the editing has enhanced the film or TV show. The overall aim is to be on the right shot at the right time, which is sort of obvious, but I can give you an example of when no editing was the most effective way to go. It was in a dialogue scene – as one of the actors delivered the big speech, the pivotal point of the scene, the editor chose to play the whole speech on the face of the listener – not because the speaking actor was no good but because the sense of the dialogue was more effectively conveyed on the reaction rather than the delivery. So it's not always obvious.

I suppose the closest analogy to editing is music – it can be melodic or discordant, it can change pace abruptly or you can hang on a sustained note – but it must always have a logic of its own that draws the audience in.

It's becoming increasingly difficult with the rise of digital photography but I try to watch all the footage that comes into the cutting room. I know this is not everyone's practice but I can't bear the idea of overlooking a shot or a performance. I make notes against the script as I go – nice section of wide shot here; great performance for that line there; perfect reaction to this piece of dialogue etc, etc. As I watch the same sections of the scene over and over in various setups it becomes clear what the director's intention is. Then I roughly construct the scene trying to include those moments I've noted. It's then a good idea to put the scene to one side before it gets over-thought and sneak up on it later.

I've always enjoyed working collaboratively but it's always been the case that we've worked on individual episodes so there's never been a clash of styles within an episode. Just mulling things over with other editors is an interesting thing to do, as we share the same preoccupations. If it's a multi-strand series like *Game of Thrones* it's a good idea to discuss the various strands with the others to see where the emphasis lies in their episodes and to make sure we're not inadvertently repeating something.

It used to be the gold standard that editing should be unobtrusive and seamless. Some of the best editing still is but there is far more scope now to be less conservative. The average audience is not going to be thrown off by jump cuts, discontinuity and crossing the line.



JOHN WILSON
(*Downton Abbey*, *Billy Elliot*)

With TV, there's a definitive maximum running time. I was having a real struggle to contain all story strands in series two of *Downton Abbey* within the 47 minutes or so permitted running length. On telling the producers this episode could only fit the permitted time slot if one of the storylines was dropped, it was sensibly decided to permit the episode a 10-minute overrun, which was then applied to all the subsequent series two episodes.

There was always plenty of good material to find its way into the episodes and, owing to the huge appeal of the programme, the audience certainly wasn't complaining about slightly longer doses of their favourite Sunday night fix.

When I started out in the 70s it used to be said that an editor's role was 90% diplomacy and 10% ability. There is still some truth in that. I believe an editor's prime roll is storytelling with as much clarity as his material will permit. Often in the shortening process, a story strand can be removed and it's the editor's duty to make sure the audience is kept in touch with the narrative flow. It's also vital to keep one step ahead of the audience – if they know what's going to happen before they should, you lose their attention as well as their overall interest.

Directors are sometimes surprised by how an editor may put a scene together completely differently to how they envisaged it – perhaps because the editor hasn't been on set, so there is more freedom in how to construct a scene.



TRACY GRANGER
(*Still Life*, *Boys Don't Cry*)

A good edit is when you sit down to watch a film in a theatre and you are sucked into the story and characters, completely engrossed and never think of anything else until it's finished. It's about the images, sound and music all transporting you to this other place. If you find yourself thinking, 'Did I leave that parking thing on the dashboard?' you've got a problem.

For a feature film, first I do a rough cut or assembly with everything that was shot. I leave in all the best moments for each character, milking everything as much as possible. I immerse myself in this cut. This is how I get the movie into my head. Then it's just a slow process of elimination really. The director and I deciding, 'Do we need this? Do we need that?', slowly reducing it, tightening it, making many, many passes through the film, sort of moulding it like clay as we go. We're constantly tweaking and shaping it, building an emotional narrative until we don't feel the beginnings and endings of scenes any more.

Then once we've finished a cut, we screen it for an audience because that's where you really feel where the energy drops or when you've cut something too short and a moment feels too clipped.

When it's working, it just flows. But it takes a good while to get a cut to that place. Sometimes the director and I will look at a sequence we've spent all day working on and think, 'Yes that works'. The next morning, we watch it fresh and think, 'God, we have to rethink it yet again.' Editing really is the final rewrite.

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Eddie Hamilton, A.C.E.	John Wilson, A.C.E.

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*Speakers subject to change due to work schedules.

EditFest London



BY JONNY ELWYN

JULY 03, 2013

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If you couldn't make it to Edit Fest London, here are 10 insights I learned from top television and film editors at this year's Fest!

EditFest is a day long series of panel discussions featuring top professional film and television editors, held in New York, Los Angeles and now London. But it is far more than just a day of talk, its **a rare opportunity to meet, question and learn from world-class editors** who are working on major Hollywood blockbusters and HBO multi-series hits.

For a full run down of the panelists [check out the Edit Fest site](#) but know that if you'd been there, you too could have chatted over a glass of wine with [the editor who cut the famous scene](#) in *Heat* where Pacino and De Niro talk it out over coffee!

Lesson No. 1 – You've Got To Get Out There

In this Internet age, **its very easy to assume that event info will make its way online**; that you just can download the podcast, read the blog posts or follow the live tweets and basically have gotten much of the same content as those who attended but for free and from the comfort of your own home. **Well you would be wrong.** Totally and utterly wrong!

The beauty of events like [Edit Fest](#) or [The Supermeet](#), or any event where you physically meet people, is all the stuff that happens before and after the panels. It is the chats in the corridor or over coffee or at lunch. The first lesson I learned from EditFest is that you've absolutely got to go to events like these. Make the trip, pay the money because days like these **are a rare opportunity to get inspired, informed and integrated with other post production professionals in a way that's not feasible online.**

Lesson No. 2 – Group Therapy

Chatting to fellow editors at the [AOTG.com](#) pub night after the free Edit Fest cocktail mixer (those Dutch editors can drink!), it seemed like **the main encouragement that most editors took away from the day** was that we all face the same problems, regardless of budget, genre or product market. Problems like the first version being embarrassingly bad, that its really hard to stay fresh, or that you can't bear to watch your own work for a good few years afterwards. As John Wilson A.C.E. editor of *Billy Elliot* said on the day *"It takes me five years to watch a movie I've cut, to really see what I've done."*

Spending a day discussing the craft with other editors at all stages in their careers was both highly educational and extremely encouraging.

Lesson No. 3 – Diplomacy Is Essential

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"The most important talent to develop in the cutting room is diplomacy. Never hold anyone's idea up to ridicule. Try anything and be ready to fight for what you think is right." -Tom Rolf A.C.E.

If there is one lesson which is absolutely vital for any editor to learn it is that being diplomatic is crucial to developing a healthy career. The edit suite is not only just the place where films are made, but also the arena of a great deal of personal politics, passions and opinions. All of which needs to be handled with a deftness and a strength that is often a real challenge to get right.

As Tom Rolf sums up, being open to any idea is important not just on a personal level but for the benefit of the project. It's all to easy to defend your edit decisions by saying "I tried that and it didn't work" than to cheerfully give it another go anyway. **Equally it is important to be able to engage in a respectful level of argument when you really believe in a creative call. As Tom later said "It's alright to get a little blood on the cutting room floor."**

Lesson No. 4 – Fighting Film Blindness

When you are working on a project for a long time one of the most difficult hurdles to over come is that of 'film blindness' – being so close to your work that you can't see it as it really is. **The feature film editor's panel shared some of their secrets on how to stay fresh to the material.**

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"I try to watch it in a different context from the work environment, taking it home or into a screening room. I try not to dismiss any notes. Your negative reaction might be because you're too close to the scene. So be open to all ideas." -Chris Dickens A.C.E. (*Slumdog Millionaire*)

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"I try not to watch it alone with the director because its too easy to talk through it. It's much better to bring in another person, to help see it through their eyes." -Tracy Granger A.C.E. (*Boys Don't Cry*)

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"I like to make viewing the film in the edit suite a bit more of an event by turning off the monitors, turning all the chairs around and setting up a video projector. It helps keep everyone focused on the film." -Eddie Hamilton A.C.E. (*Kick Ass 1 & 2*)

Lesson No. 5 – Film Vs Digital

With the advent of digital media and the demise of film, many of the editors felt a few **vital things had gotten lost along the way** and that the expected pace for editors had quickened a bit too much.

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"Rewinding a Steenbeck gave you plenty of thinking time and thinking time is vital." -John Wilson A.C.E.

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"Rewinding through rushes also gave you a chance to see every frame at high speed and you could spot things you'd forgotten." -Tracy Granger A.C.E.

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"On film you had to construct it first in your head and then do it physically. Now that the polish comes with it (in digital) you don't pay as much attention to the basics, structure etc. Because everything is so fast you feel like you have to get it right the first time. But you need the opportunity to get it wrong." -Chris Dickens A.C.E.

Lesson No. 6. – Watching Rushes

The TV editors panel, moderated masterfully by Gordon Burkell from [Art of the Guillotine](#) provided lots of **insights into each editors technique when it comes to digesting rushes and tackling a scene for the first time.**

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"Each job is different and you just have to respond to the rushes each time. For me the performance comes through the eyes and I'm just responding to instinct and feel. And I'll look at the script to see where is the drama in this scene and then shape it around that." -Kristina Hetherington A.C.E. (*Birdsong*)

"It all starts with the story. My edit suite needs a sofa in it because once I look at the rushes I need to have a lie down (to think). You've got to find the best nugget and shaping the story around that. It's all about story, story, story. But each editor has their own pattern, there's no set rules." -Oral Norrie Ottey A.C.E. (*Game of Thrones*)

"Dialogue scenes are often difficult to cut as there are so many nuances you want to pull through. I make extensive notes on the script – Great reaction to this line etc – and start as faithfully to the script as I can. I often assemble quickly and then leave it because you can often over work it. When I re-watch it later I'm looked for the real focus of the scene, which might not be what you thought it was when you assembled it. Its a very fluid process." -Frances Parker A.C.E.

Lesson No. 7 – Wile editor tricks

During the day **a few cunning editors tricks** were mentioned which might come in handy one day.

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“I’ll leave a bad scene in to misdirect attention, to give me more time to do the real work.” -Mick Audsley A.C.E (Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire)

“It’s always good to have a couple of really polished sequences to roll out when people come to look at things.” -Chris Dickens A.C.E.

“We kept the process private by being portable. I was editing Kick Ass 2 on a laptop in the directors flat in Kensington.” -Eddie Hamilton A.C.E.

“I prefer working alone. Staying late to strip the film down to the spine, taking out things the director would never want to lose, just to see what you have. There’s a very small difference between a bad idea and a brilliant idea which you wouldn’t try with other people in the room.” -Tracy Granger A.C.E.

Lesson No. 8 – Working with Sound

It was interesting to hear a variety of opinions on working with sound, with some editors leaving it all to the sound editors while others feeling like they needed to **provide a highly polished and full sounding mix, right out of the Avid.**

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“I often watch it on mute to see the issues buried in it. I try to make it as hard as possible for something to carry the scene if its not working.” -Mick Audsley A.C.E

“I will cut it mute for a long time, imagining it with the sound effects at first and then adding in sound effects, music etc as a full mix to make the most of sound’s storytelling power.” -Eddie Hamilton A.C.E.

“It’s all too easy to fall in love with the temp music. But if it works without sound effects and music, you know it will be fantastic with it.” -Kristina Hetherington A.C.E.

“I simply cannot edit picture without editing it’s sound at the same time. Temp music is something different entirely and can lull you into thinking something works when it actually doesn’t. But to me sound and picture go together.

In life we don’t experience one without the other so how can you know how long to leave a shot unless there is sound design under that shot? As soon as I add sound to an image, I find the shot is usually too short.

And I believe this to be true: a film will work emotionally if the sound design is all there and the picture is slightly out of focus, but it will not work emotionally the other way around.” -Tracy Granger A.C.E.

Lesson No. 9 – Cutting for drama

The most important thing you can do as an editor is to focus on the drama and the story. **It’s more important for the drama and the story to be perfect than for the cosmetic things like continuity or stylistic touches to be 100 percent accurate.** Chatting to commercial’s editor James Rosen at the AOTG pub night, he shared how he had learned to focus on the choices he was making in his editing as they relate to the drama of the scene: cutting to a close up not for the best line but because the drama of the scene dictates that we need to be in a close up. It’s a great lesson to ponder when watching back what you’ve cut.

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“I like to focus on the eyes, if they’re feeling it, we will feel it. It’s about balancing the emotional output. Not having too much either. Sometimes you need to throw away what may be the most amazing part because its too much.” -Kristina Hetherington A.C.E.

“For me it’s about holding on a shot of someone just long enough to feel that actor’s emotions about what she/he is looking at or the situation they find themselves in. And holding on a shot for a bit longer than you normally would, makes the viewer uncomfortable because you know something is going to happen because you are waiting for it, as they are. I always think of the tiger scene in ‘Apocalypse Now’. And if the audience knows something is coming, how long do you hold on the shot before the audience wants to stand on their seats and scream RUN! An editor always strives to get that right and find that sweet spot. Test audience screenings are essential to have as you just can’t tell when it’s just you and the director in the room. The dynamics between shots, sound levels/mix and subtle camera movements are just a few things that are key in creating good drama.” -Tracy Granger A.C.E.

Lesson No 10. – Work Hard

One of the things that struck me most was **Eddie Hamilton’s absolute drive to be the very best editor he can be**, which seems to have been a major factor in his whole career progression. If you want more advice from Eddie on getting into the film industry, check out [this great article on his site](#).

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“I remember as a kid begging a friend’s dad to take me to see Return of the Jedi, because I never got taken to the cinema.” “I failed to get into film school and so I got a job as a runner and taught myself Media Composer, staying behind every single evening and weekend.” “I often think if I stay an couple of extra hours, then I can make sure this is world class, in case anyone comes in to see it tomorrow.”

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