Intuition in creative film editing practice: using phenomenology to explain editing as an embodied experience

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**Abstract**

*Intuition* has long been associated with creativity in editing but not easily explained when it comes to unravelling the editor’s creative process. An editor’s physiological and cognitive response to the film material they work with plays a significant role in developing a rhythmic storytelling technique and style that is ‘right’ for the film.

Creative film editing practice is a major focus of my research and the inspiration in developing the education resource, *The Art of Editing: Australian Screen Editors Discuss Creativity in Editing* (2015). As much as I draw on interviews from this resource, I will further investigate the *source* of the editor’s intuitive process in reference to phenomenological film theory, specifically the work of Vivian Sobchack and Jennifer Barker, who explore the embodiment of film. Both Sobchack and Barker argue the ‘body of the spectator’ and the ‘body of the film’ as reciprocal to the ‘existential act of viewing’. As such, a phenomenological film theory that moves beyond the confines of critical film studies to one that embraces the ‘act of viewing’ resonates with the editor’s intuitive process as the ‘first audience of the film’ which has a direct impact in shaping the audience’s *embodied* experience of a film.

**Key words:** film editing, intuition, phenomenology, Vivian Sobchack, Jennifer Barker

**Introduction**

While much of phenomenological film theory tends to focus on the ‘existential act of viewing’ it rarely acknowledges the *practice* of filmmaking, and specifically editing and its contribution in shaping the *embodied* experience of film. For the most part, film theorists and scholars do not have a first-hand experience as film practitioners or an understanding of the highly collaborative nature of filmmaking itself. It follows that the work of the editor and their contribution to the finished film is “vital but largely unknown to academics, critics and audiences” (Murray, 2014, p.9). Historically the role of the editor was subsumed by an auteur theory that gave “creative and authorial control to the director” (Murray, 2014, p.10). This
was in response to the fact that, at its best, the editors work is invisible, rendering their input as virtually non-existent. This sense of invisibility that surrounds the editor and their work has proved to be an ‘obstacle for the film scholar’: “[it is a] paradox that many effective cuts are effective precisely because they are not noticeable” (Orpen, 2003, p.4). What we have come to recognise from film theorists such as David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson is the tendency to define editing through a ‘shot-by-shot analysis’ (Kolstrop 1998, p. 31) with no mention of the practice of editing, which in and of itself creates a sense of ambiguity, even mystery: “editing has exercised such an enormous fascination for film aestheticians, for as a technique it’s very powerful” (Bordwell & Thompson 2010, p. 223).

In her book, Film Editing, The Art of the Expressive (2003) film editor/academic Valerie Orpen proposes that - “[t]here are two principle ways of considering editing: either as connective or as expressive” but concedes, “editing as an expressive technique is largely taken for granted” (2003, p.2, 3). By ‘connective’ she refers to ‘the joining of shots to form a whole’, but in doing so challenges Bordwell and Thompson’s analysis of editing as being “more concerned with the connective process of editing and creating ‘narrative coherence’ rather than exploring the expressive qualities of editing especially in terms of time and space” (Orpen, 2003, p.10). Historically, film editing took on various guises according to the place of origin and the context of function, but the terminology - decoupage, montage, to join, to cut - all point to the ‘connective’ in constructing and deconstructing the shot, but again do not allude to the creative process of editing itself: “We all know that it is expressive, but it is more difficult, uncomfortable even, to explain why and how. The expressiveness of lighting, camera movements, colour, sound and so forth have been explored to a large extent. Editing is far more elusive” (Orpen, 2003, p.3).

Orpen’s approach was to focus on the “expressive dimensions of the end result of editing” (2003, p.14) through examining ‘the rhetoric’ in terms of the language of editing and its effect on the audience. She argues that film does appear to function like language, each with its own set of conventions, and “the art of using language effectively, not simply to persuade but also to emphasise and influence” aligns the rhetoric as “relevant to the cinema and editing in particular” (2003, p.8). In the same way literature uses ‘the word’ to form sentences and paragraphs to create meaning and subtext, film uses ‘the shot’ to build scenes and sequences that move beyond the construct of the shot in building the narrative structure of the film. As such, it is the editors job to manipulate the filmic components of images, movement and sound to
create story and, most importantly, engage the audience in the emotional journey of the
film: “If one is to use the framework of the rhetoric, it should be on the emotional rather
than the moral or the aesthetic, even though all three tend to overlap to a certain extent”
(Orpen, 2003, p.10).

In this context, phenomenology as an ‘eidetic science of experience’ is highly
relevant to a discussion on film editing practice and specifically intuition in editing
which draws directly on the phenomenological concept of the embodied experience. In
applying phenomenological theory to the reception of film, film theorist/ academic
Vivian Sobchack claims, “[w]e take in films somatically, with our whole body, and we are affected by images even before cognitive information processing or unconscious
identification addresses and envelopes us on another level” (1992, p.127). This
resonates with definitions of intuition in editing as ‘a kind of knowledge’ that acts as an
emotional beacon in driving the creative decision-making process. As much as the
editor relies on their technical and creative knowhow, it is their embodied response to
the footage that informs the ‘expressive’ in film: “An editor's intuition is critical to their
ability to derive a story. I do believe that editors require some level of emotional

Vivian Sobchack and Jennifer Barker take a distinctly existential phenomenological
approach as grounded in the “reversible and reciprocal correlation between film and viewer
in the notion that consciousness is materially embodied” (Barker, 2009, p.3-4). Sobchack
argues, “We do not experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend
and feel films with our entire bodily being …” (Sobchack, 2004, 127). Barker explores
further the sensory phenomena of ‘tactility’ and the reciprocal nature of the audience who can
‘feel’ or be ‘touched’ by a film - “[touch] need not be linked explicitly to a single organ such
as the skin but is enacted and felt throughout the body … and within the tactile world”
(Barker, 2009, p.2). The concept that we touch a film and it touches us back resonates with
intuition in editing in terms of the editor’s physiological and cognitive response to content
and story, as much as the inherent rhythm within the film material they are working with:
“The editor’s physical presence and physical engagement with the material becomes part of
the creative process. The rhythms of the editor’s body act on the material of the films rushes
in a very direct, physical way (Pearlman, 2009a, p.15).

A phenomenological film theory that embraces a conceptual, methodological
framework and the reciprocal relationship between the film and the audience is used here to
investigate the source of the editor’s intuitive process. In doing so, I will take the concepts of ‘tactility’ and ‘viscera’, one step further, or more precisely one step back, in examining the editor’s role as fundamental in shaping the audiences haptic, embodied experience of a film. Kevin Brownlow famously claimed editing to be “the hidden art” (1968, p. 286), but the power of editing in its ability to create story through the manipulation of pictures and sound can only truly be appreciated through the ‘existential act of viewing’: “The edits may be ‘invisible’, but the movement of story, the movement of emotion, the movement of images and sound are not, and what the editor does that no-one else can do as well is organise the flow of these three kinds of movement” (Pearlman, 2009b, p.28).

To fully understand the editor’s role in constructing story and shaping the emotional journey of a film, I will first review the concept ‘intuition in editing’ and how that impacts on the editor’s creative process.

**Defining Intuition in Editing Practice**

In my experience editors are able to talk about some aspects of their process but refer to other aspects (possibly the most important ones) as ‘intuitive’ and don't have much more to say (personal email, Karen Pearlman 2011).

Although editors cite intuition as fundamental to editing practice, most find it hard to explain given it comes from a deeply personal sensibility, more aligned with ‘a feeling’ than a cognitive thought process. By definition intuition is associated with ‘truth’, “both ‘higher’ and mysterious, something “beyond the bounds of scientific explanation” (Claxton, 2003, p.33). To a perceptible degree, Guy Claxton’s work on *The Anatomy of Intuition* (2003) helps unlock the editors intuitive process. Claxton challenged the more conventional or ‘unconventional’ notions of intuition by taking a practical approach in aligning creativity with professional practice and development. He discovered new meaning in reference to the more explicit behaviours including expertise, learning, judgment, sensitivity, creative problem solving and rumination, which converge as “ways of knowing” (Claxton, 2003, p.40). In his book, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1987), Donald Schon also investigates traits associated with creativity such as “wisdom”, “talent”, “intuition” and “artistry”, and in doing so acknowledges “we distance ourselves from the kinds of performance we most need to understand” (Schon, 1987, p.13). Both Claxton and Schon align artistry with competence, and emotional intelligence with knowledge,
and concur the acquisition of artistry as “an exercise of intelligence, a kind of knowing” (Schon, 1987, p.13) is not easily explained in terms of “being able to ‘do it’, and being able to articulate what you are doing” (Claxton, 2003, p.35).

Intuition as ‘a kind of knowledge’ stands true for editing whereby expertise is the cumulative acquisition of skills and artistry as acquired through professional practice and reflective learning: “I do think editing is very intuitive and maybe later on you realise what it is that you’ve learnt. Your intuition comes to the fore when you’re cutting, and then you can sit back and write a book about it” (Dany Cooper, cited in The Art of Editing, Holt 2015).

Editor/academic Karen Pearlman adapts Guy Claxton’s thinking to an editorial context by interpreting ‘expertise’ as technical aptitude, and ‘implicit learning’ as “the acquisition of such expertise by non-conscious or non-conceptual means” (2009a, p.4). Like Claxton, Pearlman equates intuition with knowledge - “Intuition is not the same as instinct. People are born with instincts, but intuition is something we develop over time, through experience, in other words it is learnt” (2009a, p.1). This concept of ‘inarticulate implicit learning’ fits perfectly with what pertains to be ‘intuition in editing’, which is not to say an editor’s intuition is an inferior way of knowing, but it could be acknowledged as “the ‘glue’ that holds together our conscious intellect and our intelligent action” (Damasio 1994, cited in Claxton 2003, p.36).

In her book Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit (2009), Pearlman’s exploration of ‘bodily rhythms’ points to phenomenological film theory in “the ways that living bodies have kinaesthetic empathy with the movement they perceive” (2009a, xxiii). Through investigating the source of rhythm in editing Pearman developed the model of the ‘thinking body’ in terms of “a body that gathers, stores and retrieves information about rhythm and uses it strategically – in other words, a body that thinks, but does so primarily through a directly physical, experiential process” (2009a, p.xxiii-xxiv). What Pearlman interprets as ‘physical thinking’ directly informs the editors intuition:

In other words, deep knowledge is not just something you know, but something you are and you feel. My argument that the body thinks about and creates a film’s rhythms is
made in practical terms that are intended to enhance access to this embodied knowledge (Pearlman, 2009a, p.xxii).

In aligning intuition and rhythm in editing with phenomenological concepts of the ‘embodiment of film’, it stands to reason that the editor’s intuitive response as the ‘first audience of a film’ will have a direct impact on the audience’s embodied experience of a film. Of course, filmmaking is a highly collaborative practice and the key creatives, namely the director, the cinematographer, the production designer, the sound designer and composer, all contribute to the physical and emotional landscape of the film. However, in terms of the editor’s contribution, ‘[e]diting is central this reconsideration, as it has been to many accounts of the specificity of cinematic representation’ (Crogan 2013, p.97). Ultimately it is the editor who has all elements of this collaborative manifesto at their fingertips, and as such play a significant role in finding the story and shaping the intellectual and emotional journey, or arc of the film:

A film to me is a shape that you’re creating. And a shape has highs and lows, rises and falls, and that’s effected by performance and where you choose to put music, the level of anxiety in the characters … I mean basically our job is to harness light and sound and action and story and create a multi-layered thing called a film (Dany Cooper, cited in The Art of Editing, Holt 2015).

Like most artists and creative practitioners, editors are reluctant to theorise about their creative process and would prefer their intuition to ‘kick in’ when faced with the penultimate task of editing a film. This resistance to ‘think too much’ may be linked to editors reluctance to discuss intuition in editing in fear that consciously processing it will stem the creative flow: “It is true that analysing creativity and doing something creative are incompatible activities to perform simultaneously” (Pearlman 2009a, p.2). The challenging task of watching and retaining what can be hundreds of hours of footage, as much as finding the inherent rhythm and style of the film, can be daunting and requires the editor to be methodical in their approach. At the same time, the editor must allow the film to speak for itself: “Your mind is the film, an extended mind. The theory is that the thought doesn’t just belong to [the editor], the thought also belongs to the film” (Pearlman, cited in The Science of Editing, December 2016). This analogy is
shared by film editor Walter Murch who asserts that “[f]ilms are much smarter than the people who make them” (Murch, cited in *The Science of Editing*, December 2016).

As much as Sobchack and Barker have investigated cinematic experience through the reciprocal nature of the film and the ‘act of viewing’, I will further explore phenomenological film theory with a focus on the ‘film’s body’ and its capacity to touch an audience as fundamental to investigating the source of the editor’s intuitive process.

**Phenomenological film theory and the embodied experience**

The early 1990’s signified a dramatic change of perspective in film theory and criticism led by phenomenological film theorists who subscribe to “a new appreciation for the sensual dimension of cinematic experience” (Barker, 2009, p.3). Until that time film criticism ‘focused almost exclusively on the visible and intelligible qualities of cinema’ (Stephens, 2012, p.529). The shift in perspective from a “neo-formalistic, cognitivist, ideological and psychoanalytic interpretations of film narrative, spectatorship and screen aesthetics” (Stadler, 2011, p.87) to one that engages in cinematic tactility and how cinema makes us feel, had a resounding impact on film theorists and scholars. Disenchanted with the “negativity of theoretical paradigms that insisted cinephilia of any kind was both intellectually and politically disingenuous” (Sobchack 2016, p.65), Sobchack embraced phenomenological film theory and responded with her book *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenological Film Experience* (1992). In posing the question, “what else is film if not ‘an expression of experience by experience”? (1992, p.3), Sobchack moves beyond a theoretical discourse to a more methodological approach that interrogates the ‘act of viewing’, thereby setting up a framework that takes a “distinctly existential phenomenological approach to cinema, one that grounds its description of the reversible and reciprocal correlation between film and viewer in the notion that the consciousness is materially embodied” (Sobchack, cited in Barker, 2009, p.4). Two phenomenological formulations central to her writing are what she describes as the “viewing view/ viewed view”, which signifies a shift in perspective from “what was to see appearing onscreen in a materially-grounded and finite way that was neither ‘transcendental’ nor conflated with the spectator’s vision”, and secondly the concept of the “films body” – the other side of the ‘viewing view/ viewed view’ – in
terms of the “off-screen and unseen” relating to the “logical, psychological and literal ‘coherence’ of the unfolding perceptual field visible on screen” (Sobchack 2016, p.65).

Most notably, Sobchack identified with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception as instrumental in developing her theory on film as both the ‘subject of experience’ and an ‘object for experience’. In his essay, *The Film and the New Psychology* (2000, p.332-345),¹ Merleau-Ponty asserts a strong affinity between phenomenology and the cinema, even claiming cinema to be the phenomenological art *par excellence* (Sobchack, 2016, p.63). This ‘new psychology’ advocates our senses are not disparate but omnipresent in our perception of the world around us: “My perception is therefore not a sum of visual, tactile and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being, which speaks to all my senses at once” (Merleau-Ponty, 2000 p.335). Merleau-Ponty’s mode of perception extends to ‘a new concept of the perception of others’ in breaking down the distinction of what is perceived as personal or ‘inner observation’ to what is perceived as ‘outer observation’:

“Since emotion is not a psychic, internal fact but rather a variation in our relations with others and the world which is expressed in our bodily attitude” (2000, pgs. 337-338). Merleau-Ponty applies his theories of perception in general to film as a ‘perceptual object’, which he deems “illuminates the nature and significance of the movies and that the new psychology leads us straight to the best observations of the aestheticians of the cinema” (2000, p.339). Sobchack takes Merleau-Ponty’s concept of *cinema as object* further in acknowledging cinema as a ‘lived-body experience’, and through the existential act of viewing, “the film shares with us certain modes of visual perception” (Sobchack, 1992, p.203).

Jennifer Barker expands on Sobchack’s theory of the ‘films body’ through exploring the concept of ‘tactility’ and the reciprocal nature of the emotional texture of film, “specifically tactile structure of embodied cinematic perception and expression that are taken up by on-screen bodies (human or otherwise), filmgoers, and the films themselves” (2009, p.4). In her book, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and Cinematic Experience* (2009), Barker proports an audience is touched by a film: “[p]articular structures of human touch correspond to particular structures of the cinematic experience” (Barker, cited in Stadler, 2011, p.91). Barker borrows from Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of perception as something that happens ‘between the subject and the object’ which she defines as a ‘haptic experience’: “touch is not

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just skin-deep but is experienced at the body’s surface, in its depths, and everywhere in-between” (Barker, 2009 p.2). In terms of cinematic experience, this sense of ‘touch’ comes to mean “not simply contact, but rather a profound way of being, a mode through which the body – human or cinematic – presents and expresses itself to the world” (Barker, 2009, p.2), which again would imply the concept of film as ‘object’.

This theoretical shift to the reciprocity of filmic images and off-screen bodies injects new energy into film studies, and as a result “the discourse on the cinema had moved beyond theory” and has no doubt led to “approaching theory and methodology of phenomenology as a legitimate focus for any future metaphysics of the cinema” (Puckett, 2000, p.312). Again, phenomenology lends itself not only to the objectification and reciprocation of the film experience but opens up new insights into the embodiment of film practice as fundamental in constructing the film experience.

**The praxis of phenomenological film theory and film practice**

Although phenomenological film theory succeeds in shifting the focus to the ‘existential act of viewing’, it rarely acknowledges what Sobchack refers to as the ‘technical methods’ associated with screen production. Sobchack took this to task in her article, *The Active Eye (Revisited): Toward a Phenomenology of Cinematic Movement* (2016), by examining camera movement both within the frame and the off-screen movement of camera as an ‘embodied quasi-subject’ whereby the “visually perceptive motility responds to its world in visibly expressive mobility” (2016, p.63). Sobchack draws on Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the ‘gestalt structure of existential perception’ - “I perceive in a total way with my whole being” (2000, p.335) - and specifically the ‘bond’ between consciousness, embodied movement and space. However, in looking to the source embodied cinematic movement Sobchack asserts Merleau-Ponty “does not explicitly recognise that the moving image is the bond’s most fundamental expression” (2016, p.66). In response, she attempts to break down camera movement to its essential forms as complicit to cinematic expression: “Without this fundamental bonding of movement and space both off-screen and on, there would be no cinema - and, secondarily, no montage” (Sobchack, 2016, p.66).

Sobchack’s interest in camera movement as formative in creating cinematic expression, reinforces the concept of editing and its place in constructing cinematic expression, a notion that inspired the title of Valerie Orpen’s book, *Film Editing - The Art of the Expressive* (2003). In the same way Sobchack explores the union of ‘mind,
body and world’ in the cinema through the “fundamental relationship between the off-screen ‘technical methods’ of camera movement and their phenomenological effects as the moving image projected and perceived onscreen” (2016, p.64), the same principles can be applied to editing in terms of the editors skill in choreographing movement and rhythm perceived both within the footage and in the context of cutting from one shot to the next – “[t]he word “rhythm” is commonly linked to ideas about music, the actual materials that editors shape in time are movement and energy” (Pearlman, 2009a, p.23). Furthermore, in constructing the expressive editors also identify with the movement between the cuts: “It’s not the actual joins that are important, its what’s between the joins. And the selection of what’s between the joins comes from all that life experience that you’ve had as to why would you choose that piece to put into that film” (Dany Cooper, cited in The Art of Editing, Holt 2015). This would infer a new level of meaning is created through the editors highly developed sensibility which again informs their intuitive response, as much as the skillful manipulation of light, movement and sound which defines the creative editing process: “[c]utting is more than just the convenient means by which discontinuity is rendered continuous. It is in and for itself–by the very force of its paradoxical suddenness – a positive influence on the creation of a film” (Murch, 2001, p.9).

Although Merleau-Ponty is aware of the power of cinematic rhythm - “[t]he meaning of film is incorporated into its rhythm just as the meaning of a gesture may immediately be read in that gesture” (2000, p.343) - he took editing to be more formulaic in terms of the of the order and duration of shots – “a cinematic system of measurements with very precise and imperious requirements” (2000, p.340). It follows that Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of ‘montage’ and ‘cutting’ is limited to a calculated appraisal of function over practice - “it seems to be an extremely complex form inside of which a very great number of actions and reactions are taking place at every moment” (2000, p.340) – which does not allude to creativity or what Orpen refers to as the ‘expressive dimensions of the end result of editing’.

Jennifer Barker’s theories on cinematic tactility would suggest a stronger connection with the editor’s creative process in reference to their embodied response to the film material they are working with. In her book, The Tactile Eye... (2009) Barker takes a sensory approach to the cinematic experience - “from the surface to the depth, from haptic touch to total immersion” (Barker, 2009, p.2). In doing so she focuses on three levels of immersion: the ‘Skin’ at the surface of the body which responds to the
textural qualities of cinema associated with ‘touch’ and feel’; the ‘Muscular’ relating to
the middle dimension of the body which incite mimicking and gestural responses, and
‘Viscera’ relating to the deeper organs, ‘heart, lungs and pulsing fluids’, what we
associate with as a gut response. As the ‘first audience of the film’, all of these elements
act as an emotional beacon for the editor:

Your first response to something is very important. Seeing dailies for the first time,
trying to retain that feeling you had, trying to retain that feeling when you put
something together and you cried when you were cutting it … You’ve got to remember
what it felt like the first time” (Dany Cooper, cited in The Art of Editing, Holt 2015).

If, then, the editor is attuned to the haptic, visceral rhythms of a film and their
embodied response is imbued with the experience they bring to their practice, how
much can be attributed to intuition? Investigating intuition in editing through the lens of
phenomenological film studies and specifically, “a postmodern theory of film that
would pull into sharp focus the active process of viewing” (Stadler, 1990, p.37), gives
the editor agency to invest their own ‘lived-in’ body experience of film as a legitimate
form of knowledge: “[t]he effort to account for the whole human perception of the
unique experience of film requires meticulous care and attention to the details of one’s
own intuition” (Puckett, 2000, p.318). As such, a phenomenological perspective
supports my proposal that the editor’s intuition, as grounded in their embodiment of the
film, is fundamental in making creative choices and constructing cinematic expression:

I think intuition and editing is terribly important. If you can’t pick a performance or feel
it, if a performance is meant to be emotional and it’s not getting through to you there’s a
problem … and I just think intuition and life experience helps you with that emotionally

This theory of ‘embodiment’ resonates with what editors themselves identify as intuition and
rhythm in editing, and in response many have devised their own theories to explain the editing
process as a mind and body experience.

Bringing the body back to editing
In his book, *In the Blink of an Eye* (2001), film editor Walter Murch adapts the concept of the ‘blink’ as a physiological device that signals when to cut from one shot to the next: “that our rates and rhythms of blinking refer directly to the rhythm and sequence of our inner emotions and thoughts” (Murch, 2001, p.64). Film practitioner/academic Ross Gibson explores a similar concept in his writing on *Acting and Breathing* (1999) by focusing on the reciprocal relationship between the rhythmic performance of the actor and the embodied experience of the audience: “we feel ourselves occupied and altered by the bodily rhythms of another… by blinking and breathing in sync with the performer, you can feel the actor representing you in the world of the drama” (1999, p.41-42).

Observations such as these align with phenomenological film theory in that the editor sits between the screen and the audience whereby, “the actor’s breath and rhythms have passed through the hands, or perhaps the lungs of the editor” (Pearlman 2009a, p.17). As such, the editor is the conduit in communicating these internal rhythms, as embodied through the editing process, to their intended audience:

The method editors use for constructing a rhythm is this: they breath and blink with the actors, feeling their way through a shot, performance, a scene, and the whole film. They tune their awareness of the movements in the film to the rhythms of their own bodies…the editor is conducting rhythms of the whole world of the rushes … to make decisions about when and where to cut the performance, to shape its rhythms (Pearlman 2009a, p.20).

In his book, *The Lean Forward Moment* (2008), film editor/academic Norman Hollyn establishes the concept of manipulation as fundamental to the job of the editor: “we are telling stories to affect an audience. And in order to do that we are manipulating them” (2008, p.5). Hollyn defines the key moments of change in a story as ‘lean forward moments’ because “the purpose of them is to get the audience to lean forward (in their guts, not literally) and pay a bit more attention” (2008, p.14). Again, to recognise those ‘lean forward’ moments or *emotional beats* in a story, comes down to the editor’s ability to trust in their intuitive response in shaping the emotional journey or *flux* of a film:

The real trick as a filmmaker, however, is to consciously know how to create these subconscious feelings in an audience. It is not easy to do this but essential for audience involvement. Audiences react from the gut, but most good filmmakers don’t create that
Hollyn’s ‘lean forward moments’ resonate with what Barker ascribes to as “muscular” or mimetic gestures whereby the audience responds kinaesthetically through shared modes of movement, comportment and gesture - such as leaning, reaching, swaying, and flinching. In the same way, Pearlman’s investigation into filmic rhythm resonates with Barker’s theories of tactility and visceral as both ‘internal’ and ‘intuitive’, which impacts directly on the audiences deeply felt gut response to a film. Again, if the editor is attuned to the muscular and visceral and their embodied response is imbued with the experience they bring to the film, then much can be explained as to the editor’s intuitive process: “You’re really drawing on your intuitive self, depending of course on how refined an instrument your intuitive self is. In my opinion, that’s what creates the difference between good work and brilliant work” (Worth, cited in Oldham 1992, p. 313).

As Barker concedes, “Cinema gives us an uncanny feel for our own deep rhythms, reminding us what we are made of” (2009 p.129). The concept that we can ‘touch a film’ and it ‘touches us back’ has a direct correlation with all that pertains to intuition and the expressive in editing. It is the editor’s skill in shaping the rhythm as perceived and felt in the images, light, movement and sound in a way that will emotionally engage an audience and allow them to re-live their own life experiences though their embodiment of the film. As Murch explains: “The paradox of cinema is that it is most effective when it seems to fuse two contradictory elements – the general and the personal – into a of mass intimacy…when it works, a film seems to speak to each member of the audience in a powerfully personal way” (2001, p.143).

In returning to Sobchack’s question, “what else is film if not ‘an expression of experience by experience’” (1992, p.3), be it the director, the cinematographer or the editor, the filmmaker’s creative experience in making a film, and their physiological and emotional investment in bringing that experience to the screen directly informs cinematic expression. In terms of editing, to choreograph the highs and lows, to engage an audience in the mind of the film without conscious thought as a ‘lived-body experience’ is in the hands and at the heart of what an editor does:

I see editing as art definitely when it’s done well. And its choices, good choices are made that visually create a tapestry of imagery and sound. I think it’s extraordinary if you can get content with all those things working beautifully, with a rhythm that’s

In essence, it is the editor’s job to bring together “the ‘stuff’, the substance of its language” (Sobchack cited Barker 2009, p.8) into a glorious cacophony which informs the body of the film. As Merleau-Ponty says, “movies are particularly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and the world and the expression of one in the other” (Merleau-Ponty 2000, p.344). As such, phenomenological film theory is highly relevant in unlocking the phenomena of intuition in editing and how that informs the editors creative process: “Watching a film, we are certainly not in the film, but we are not entirely outside it, either. We exist and move and feel in that space of contact where our surfaces mingle and our musculatures entangle” (Barker, 2009 p.12).

Conclusion

A phenomenological film theory which looks to the reciprocal nature of the ‘essential act of viewing’ expands our understanding of cinema and the collaborative nature of the practice of filmmaking itself. Merleau-Ponty’s observations of film as a perceptible object in playing on ‘all the senses at once’, Sobchack’s concept of film as both ‘the subject of experience, and the object of experience’, and Barker’s sensory approach that looks to the haptic experience of film as ‘reversible and reciprocal correlation between film and viewer’, all pay tribute to the film practitioners’ task of re-creating the world of the film as a ‘lived-in body experience’: “[o]ur capacity not only to hear, but also to touch, to smell, to taste and always to proprioceptively feel our dimension and movement in the world. In sum, the film experience is meaningful not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies (Sobchack, 2004, p.60).

As the ‘first audience of the film’, the editor sits between the screen and their intended audience in orchestrating the emotional journey or flux of the film. In looking to the technical phenomena of camera movement which occurs not only ‘in the image, but from the first, as the image’, Sobchack reveals much about creating the ‘expressive’ in cinema as an “transitive and reversible structure in which we see and understand in the visible eyes and gestures of others the intentionality motility of our own vision” (2016, p.88). In the same way, my interest in creative editing practice and specifically intuition in editing as formative in constructing the ‘expressive’ in film, resonates with all that is associated with phenomenological concepts of embodiment. The editor’s ability to manipulate movement and rhythm as perceived not only
within the footage and the juxtaposition of images in cutting from one shot to the next, but in the movement between the cuts, reinforces editing as art and its place in shaping cinematic expression: “I mean editing is about rhythm. It’s about creating many rhythms in a film. If it was all the same rhythm it would be pretty dull” (Dany Cooper, cited in The Art of Editing, Holt 2015).

In summary, the editor’s embodied response to the film material directly informs their intuitive process in shaping the physiological and emotional structure or shape of the film, which in turn informs the audience’s embodiment of the film and its ability to affect them in a deeply personal way. As Walter Murch concedes, “emotion, story, rhythm are extremely tightly connected”, but of the key criteria that defines ‘good editing’ he puts emotion at the top of the list: “[h]ow do you want the audience to feel? … What they finally remember is not the editing, not the camerawork, not the performances, not even the story – it’s how they felt” (Murch, 2001, p.18).

References


