

# 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

**T**he 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 on *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](http://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.

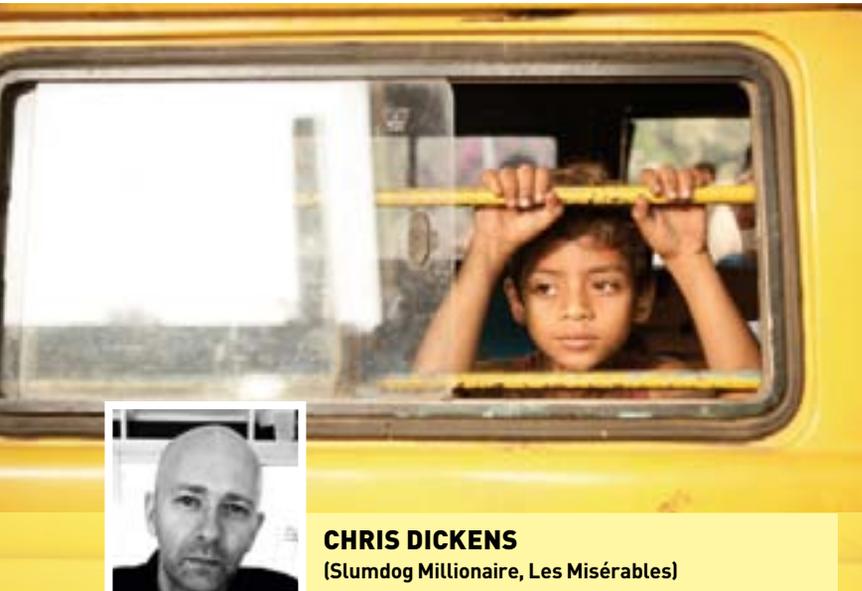
In the end, I embraced the change. The editing software is only a tool – you're still making movies, telling stories, creating humour and excitement, the same as before. You're doing exactly the same thing but in a different way.

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.



**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.



**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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**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)

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.

AMERICAN CINEMA EDITORS



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\*Speakers subject to change due to work schedules.