

DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital
Humanists

Darren R. Reid and Brett Sanders





<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2021 Darren R. Reid and Brett Sanders



This work is licensed under a Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Darren R. Reid and Brett Sanders, *Documentary Making for Digital Humanists*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0255>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations.

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0255#copyright>. Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0255#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

Open Field Guides Series, vol. 2 | ISSN: 2514-2496 (Print); 2514 250X (Online)

ISBN Paperback: 9781800641945

ISBN Hardback: 9781800641952

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800641969

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800641976

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781800641983

ISBN Digital (XML): 9781800641990

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0255

Cover image: Photo by Nathan Dumlao on Unsplash at <https://unsplash.com/photos/McztPB7Uqx8>. Cover design by Anna Gatti.

22. Assembly

With a clear sense of how you intend to structure your film, the actual assembly may feel like a formality. But the construction phase is not merely a technical exercise; significant creative freedom exists, even if you now have a well-developed schema. The ways in which sounds are layered, the choice of music, the types of cuts of you utilise — all will help to shape the intellectual and emotional impact of your work.

To be sure, a degree of technical expertise is required for this phase of your project. If you have a collaborator who possesses the relevant editing skills, it may be appropriate to leave the technical side to them. If that is not the case, however, understand that, just as with the process of learning how to capture footage, the basics of editing can be learned quickly, whilst practice and dedication will deepen your skills over time. The assembly phase is less about technical skill than it is creativity and experimentation. There are three processes that will allow you to continue to add depth to your work: editing, colour-grading, and sound-tracking.

Editing

The most important part of the post-production process, editing, transforms raw footage into a cohesive whole, but it is much more than that in practice. The individual units of cinematic language — shots, sequences, music, soundscapes — need to be assembled into an accessible audio-visual dialogue, the on-screen equivalent of sentences, paragraphs, and chapters. Whilst much has been written about the editing process, from both a theoretical and practical perspective, the power of visual grammars comes from their versatility, their ability to reflect the ideologies and mental processes of the filmmaker (and of their audience). In other words, every film defines the contours of its own

visual syntax, setting parameters of understanding and interpretation which, within the film's own context, can be built upon or, as necessary, defied. These grammars, in turn, speak to a much larger body of filmic works, the overall language of film, within which you must define your own dialect and accent.¹



Fig. 58. The Odessa Steps sequence. *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Directed by Sergei Eisenstein (0:48:15–0:56:03).

According to the legendary Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, the true power of film is not to be found in any individual shot; rather, it comes from the juxtaposition of different images as they are presented sequentially. Eisenstein called this the 'montage' and, to him, it was one of the most powerful, fundamental devices available to filmmakers. To layer images in sequence was, Eisenstein posited, to layer them vertically in the audience's imagination and, in so doing, to engage in a profound act of creation. Alongside Vsevolod Pudovkin and Dziga Vertov, Eisenstein emphasised the raw power of the editing process, its ability to create tension and to stir emotions in one's audience. His epic *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), with its famous Odessa Steps sequence (which would form the basis of a similar scene in Brian De Palma's 1987 film, *The Untouchables*) is a demonstration of the power of effective editing.

1 Mackendrick, *On Filmmaking*, pp. 3–35.

No inter-titles, dialogue, or music are required to communicate the emotions and horror of the Odessa Steps. Happy spectators wave. We see images of smiling faces, the young, and the elderly. Suddenly, the people begin to run, charging down the steps as looks of adulation turn to horror. We see images of the military advancing. Bodies begin to collapse upon the steps. The military continues its advance. Shots are fired. We see close-ups of terrified faces; a wide shot of the fleeing masses; close-ups again, as looks of fear and confusion abound. The crowds continue their flight down the steps. A child falls, his mother, unaware, keeps running. We see a close-up of the child's bewildered face. The mother stops and slowly looks back. A close-up of her face; suddenly horror and realisation spread across it. The editor cuts back to the child, blood dripping down his forehead. He is screaming and reaching out towards the camera. He passes out. We cut to the mother, her face now a mask of existential dread. Cut to the boy, unconscious, with feet and legs surrounding him as those who are fleeing pass around and over him. We see an extreme close-up of the mother's eyes, wild terror engulfing them. The surge of the masses intensifies. There are close-ups of walking canes and feet landing upon the boy's prone body. The editor cycles through images: the mother's anguished face; her son being trampled; wide shots of the masses fleeing; the mother's anguished face; the boy's body; the mother's anguished face. The cuts, like the impacts to the boy, come quickly.

It is a devastatingly effective sequence, its potency undimmed by the passage of time. The power of these edits cuts across generational and cultural divides, speaking to audiences as clearly in the 2020s as it did in the 1920s. The power of the edit is supremely showcased by this sequence.²

The power of editing fascinated early Soviet filmmakers, partly because conditions in the USSR following the Bolshevik Revolution, where celluloid was available in only limited supply, necessitated short takes and their imaginative assembly.³ But this fascination only hinted at the editing process's versatility. Imaginative assembly can lead to stirring results, and inspiration need not be sought in theoretical texts

2 Dancyger, *The Technique of Film and Video Editing*, pp. 13–26; *Battleship Potemkin*. Digital Stream. Directed by Serge Eisenstein. Moscow: Goskino, 1925.

3 Rhode, *A History of Cinema from its Origins to 1970*, pp. 79–116.

alone. You should expose yourself to a variety of different cinematic dialects prior to editing and reflect deeply on the edits you see.

In *The 39 Steps* (1935), Alfred Hitchcock cuts from an image of a woman screaming to an image of a steam train rushing towards the camera. The shots are unified by a common sound, the screech of the train's whistle. The whistle abstractly replaces the sound of the woman's terror before, moments later, finding a more literal purpose alongside the image of the approaching steam train. This imaginative cut underlined a connection that the visuals had already helped to establish; it complemented and enhanced them, allowing the filmmaker to make his point in a more emphatic, and chilling, manner. Such asynchronous cuts can help to build tension or deepen the sense that events overlap, or are somehow connected, as sound from one part of a film bleeds through to another. It is a subversion of a reality, which can, if used appropriately, help to deepen the audience's immersion in your work.⁴

Just as striking, though for different reasons, is the match cut. In David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), Peter O'Toole's T. E. Lawrence spends a few moments staring at a lit match as it burns towards his fingers. He blows it out. Cut to a shot of the desert, the sky bleached red as the barest tip of the sun emerges from behind the horizon. As one light goes out another, very different form of light, utterly beyond the control of human beings, comes into being. An ending and a beginning, interior to exterior, the controlled and the uncontrollable. The shots mirror each other, symbolic opposites but physical parallels. The result is deeply effective.⁵

In both *The 39 Steps* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, a non-verbal connection between different events and locations is made through the power of the edit. The individual shots that make up each of these cuts are effective in their own right, but together they create a more powerful whole; a combination of symbolism and abstract depth, which helps to enlighten the audience without having to directly, or bluntly, tell them the desired information. In much the same way, you should aspire to make cuts that successfully deepen your audience's understanding of the issues at hand. Neither abstract symbolism nor Hitchcockian levels of innovation are strictly necessary, only a focus upon utilising each and every cut in

4 Dancyger, *The Technique of Film and Video Editing*, pp. 88–90.

5 Gary Crowds, 'The Editing of *Lawrence of Arabia*', *Cinéaste* 34 (2009), 48–53.

the most effective way possible. Careful review of precedent, with an eye trained upon the ways other filmmakers have handled cuts between and within sequences, will pay intellectual dividends.

If an interview is filmed using three cameras, each resultant angle should serve a different communicative purpose: a wide shot might show the subject in context; a mid-shot might serve to bring the audience within a relatable distance of the subject; whilst a close-up might reveal new levels of emotional truth by focusing the viewer's attention upon otherwise indiscernible changes in the interviewee's facial expressions. Cutting between these three angles should not, however, be an arbitrary exercise. Rather, each cut should be used to reflect or counterpoint some detail in the subject's testimony. Cutting from a mid-shot to a close-up could, for example, help to underline a change in the facial expression of your subject. Should the subject then withdraw into themselves, offering more limited access to their emotional world, it would make logical sense to cut back to the mid-shot. This cutting sequence (mid-close-mid) should help to draw the audience's attention to this change.⁶

The editor can also play with time, drawing out moments or streamlining them to achieve noticeably different effects. By cutting from one part of a shot to another (without changing to another camera angle) in a single sequence, the editor will create a noticeable jump as a scene moves from one state to another without showing the intervening steps. By cutting from point A to point C, you can draw attention to the absence of B.⁷

Such jump cuts can be used to communicate anxiety or to help build tension. In *Roger Waters: The Wall* (2014), jump cuts were used extensively in the film's early sequences. The film documents the journey of former Pink Floyd front man, Roger Waters, as he explores the thematic roots of the band's 1979 opus, *The Wall* (1979), by interspersing an autobiographical, reflective journey about the nature of war with live concert footage. In the opening sequences, a multi-camera setup allows Evans to film Waters from numerous angles as he prepares to begin a deeply personal journey of discovery. Jump cuts add a sense of uneasiness to the sequence, as if much has been left unsaid. The sheer number of these cuts draws attention to the mundane nature of Waters'

6 Mackendrick, *On Filmmaking*, pp. 251–71.

7 Billinge, *Editing*, pp. 218–32.

preparation, whilst simultaneously giving it weight. Time becomes difficult to measure when jump cuts are employed. Have a few seconds been removed, or have entire hours been excised from the process? Perhaps, these cuts imply, time does not matter at all.⁸

Editing, then, is not a mechanical process, but a deeply creative one. Cuts within and between sequences can create meaningful depth, which enhances raw videography. Cutting from a person's face and upper body to a shot of their hands might provide the audience with additional insight into a person's inner emotional state. Drumming a distracted rhythm on one's thigh or the clenching of fists can communicate a lot of information that might otherwise go uncommunicated. The timing of these shots, the duration for which they linger on screen, their relationship to the next image in the sequence, all can create a powerful impression in the imagination of the audience.

As editor, you will have many tools at your disposal. Some of the most important are:

- **Hard cut:** cutting from one sequence to another without a transition. A very common edit.
- **Match cut:** just as the match going out cut to the rising sun in *Lawrence of Arabia*, match shots combine moments that mirror or invert one another. They are cuts between images that are symbolically related but physically distinct.
- **Asynchronous sound cut:** the sound from one shot bleeds into another.
- **Parallel editing:** explore parallel events by cutting between them in the space of a single sequence. Using parallel editing allows you to compare or contrast concurrent streams of imagery or contrasting phenomena.
- **Cutaway:** cut from the main focus of a sequence to a detail, such as a cut to the fidgeting hands of an interview subject or the object at which they appear to be staring before cutting back to your principal subject.

8 Roger Waters: *The Wall*. Directed by Sean Evans and Roger Waters. Universal City: Universal Pictures, 2014.

Colour-Grading

The colour-grading process can also be used to deepen a film's visual subtext. A more cinematic feel (unnoticed, but appreciated by audiences) can be achieved by using features in your chosen editing software that will allow you to control the shadow and highlight levels of your footage in order to emulate the effect of shooting on celluloid. By deepening the shadows and increasing the vibrancy of highlights, you will broaden the perceived colour range of your footage by creating a greater contrast between the light and dark areas in your frame. Software such as Da Vinci Resolve or Adobe After Effects can provide significant control over the colour palette of your film whilst apps such as iMovie on the iOS allow for basic colour-grading to be carried out on a tablet and mobile device (see video lesson ten, located in chapter twenty-three).⁹

Aside from emulating the look and feel of celluloid, colour-grading can be used to code meaning into your films more substantially. The saturation level of your sequences, for instance, can be increased, to give your footage a richer sense of colour, or decreased in order to give it a bleaker, washed-out tone. Greater levels of colour might reflect a sequence in which vibrancy is an important theme, whereas a washed-out, desaturated sequence might more effectively convey a less optimistic subtext.¹⁰ During the post-production process for *Aftermath*, we desaturated much of our footage in order to underline the pessimistic outlook most of our subjects envisioned under a Trump presidency.

In *Looking for Charlie*, we removed all colour and instead graded for a celluloid-like black-and-white look. As a film about silent cinema, it made perfect sense for us to develop such an aesthetic, but it was practical necessity that encouraged us to embrace this fully. Because we were using a mixture of cameras, some of which captured a broad dynamic range (a wide colour spectrum) and some which did not, creating a cohesive look between different shots proved difficult. By removing all colour from

9 Dion Scoppettuolo and Paul Saccone, *The Definitive Guide to Da Vinci Resolve* (Blackmagic Design: Port Melbourne, 2018), pp. 287–366; Mark Christiansen, *Adobe After Effects CC: Visual Effects and Compositing Studio Techniques* (Adobe: New York, 2014), pp. 197–202; Tom Wolsky, *From iMovie to Final Cut Pro X: Making the Creative Leap* (Focal Press, New York, 2017), pp. 285–314.

10 Alexis Van Hurkman, *Color Correction Handbook* (New York: Peachpit Press, 2014), pp. 83–113.

our footage, and grading for a consistent black-and-white contrast ratio, we were able successfully to match footage produced by very different cameras. The theming of the documentary complemented this aesthetic choice, as did our decision to release it as an exhibition film, screening it in venues related to silent-era film and cinema history. A prestige-style black-and-white aesthetic perfectly reflected the subject and era covered by the film, and the spaces in which it was shown.



Fig. 59. A still from one of the earliest films. The difference between the highlights (light areas) and shadows (dark areas) captured by celluloid are stark and evident here. This effect can be emulated by deepening shadows and blowing out highlights in post-production software. *Train Pulling into a Station* (1895), directed by Auguste and Louis Lumière.

Colour levels should be consistent in any given scene — sudden changes can distract audiences and break their immersion in your work. Beyond the individual scene, however, you should feel comfortable in altering colour palettes to suit the needs of a given sequence. Some sections of a film may, for instance, employ a desaturated palette whilst, in others, the saturation level may be increased. Such variances in colour profiles should not be arbitrary, however. They should reflect tonal, thematic, or chronological shifts in your narrative. Just as altering aspect ratios can recall ideas about classic or modern cinema, so too can different colour profiles be used to differentiate one part of your work from another. For example, you might stylise re-enactment to give it a vintage feel, whilst leaving modern interview scenes largely untouched. Such variable

colour palettes can be used subtly to colour-code your film, to help the audience keep track of their temporal location within the narrative.¹¹

Colour-correction software can also be used to fix issues that were baked into the footage as it was captured. Basic settings in your chosen software, such as exposure, brightness, and contrast, can be used to modify footage that is, in some way, in need of correction. If you over-exposed your footage, for instance, using a combination of the exposure and brightness functions in your chosen software package should help you to reduce the impact of this error. Be aware, however, that only so much can be accomplished in post-production; minor errors can be corrected, but more significant issues will require that you reshoot the scene entirely.

As with editing, successful colour-grading is a process that requires practice. The basics are comparatively easy to grasp, but mastery will only come with experience. Colour-grading should occur in the following three phases:

- Correct any necessary errors in your material, such as over-exposure, using basic software features such as exposure, brightness, and contrast controls.
- If desired, grade your footage to emulate the feel of celluloid (deepen shadows and blow out highlights to increase perceived colour depth).
- Stylise your footage using the more advanced tools in your software package or app.

To introduce you to the colour-grading process, we have prepared a video lesson that will teach you core techniques in Adobe After Effects (see chapter twenty-three)

Sound-Tracking

Whilst effective editing (and colour-grading) can do much to create an immersive filmic experience, the music that you employ can add additional depth to the audio-visual experience. Whether used sincerely

11 Alexis Van Hurkman, *Color Correction Look Book: Creative Grading Techniques for Film and Video* (New York: Peachpit Press, 2014).

or ironically, music can serve as a reflection or counterpoint to the visual aspect of your film, allowing you to add another layer to engage and entertain your audience.¹²

Whatever one thinks of his political stance, Michael Moore's use of music in his films is frequently effective. Often ironic and unexpected, Moore's use of music, like that of Quentin Tarantino, adds layers of sincerity, irony, and style to his work. At times, Moore uses music sincerely, to help evoke a specific emotion in his audience, as he did in *Capitalism: A Love Story* with the Irish folksong, 'The Last Rose of Summer' (1805). In a scene near the end of the film (1:57:20–2:00:21), Moore speaks in solemn tones about the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the country's subsequent move away from economic progressivism. As he does so, the opening chords of the song play. When he finishes his speaking, the music swells over footage of Roosevelt's funeral. After a short break, Moore's commentary resumes and he lists all of the rights that Roosevelt had envisaged but were not enacted. In the last part of the sequence, the song continuing to play, Moore shows footage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the natural disaster that devastated communities across southern parts of the US and, specifically (and most famously), in New Orleans.¹³ The last rose (Roosevelt) was dead, and the summer (political support for workers) was at an end. It was not a particularly subtle moment, but it was effective.¹⁴

In contrast, Moore's use of The Go-Go's 'Vacation' (1982), an upbeat pop song, in *Fahrenheit 9/11* over footage of George W. Bush golfing as American troops were being deployed in the Middle East, was deeply ironic. In that section of the film, 'Vacation' underlines the apparent frivolity of the president's life compared with the vast responsibilities he was, according to Moore, actively avoiding.¹⁵ The use of Richard Hawley's 'Tonight the Streets are Ours' (2007) in Banksy's *Exit through the Gift Shop*, an upbeat, retro-style track, similarly helped that filmmaker

12 Andy Hill, *Scoring the Screen: The Secret Language of Film Music* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Books, 2017).

13 For a discussion on the social and cultural impact of Katrina see Jean Ait Belkhir and Christiane Charlemaine 'Race, Gender, and Class Lessons from Hurricane Katrina' *Race, Class and Gender*, 14: 1/2 (2007), 120–52.

14 *Capitalism: A Love Story*. Directed by Michael Moore. Los Angeles: The Weinstein Company, 2009.

15 *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Directed by Michael Moore. Santa Monica: Lionsgate, 2004.

to set a suitably irreverent tone for his work.¹⁶ Footage of street artists being chased by the police stands in contrast to the upbeat melodies of Hawley's music, hinting at some of the deeper themes Banksy hoped to explore. It was an absurd, entertaining piece of foreshadowing and irony that worked extremely well in context.

Of course, it is difficult, if not impossible, for independent filmmakers to secure the necessary rights to include popular music in their work. The costs are outrageously prohibitive. Rather than thinking in terms of pop music, think instead in terms of mood and tone. Popular artists may be out of reach, but viable alternatives are available. A plethora of royalty-free recordings, covering a vast array of genres, are released every year by relatively unknown artists, some of which are of an extremely high quality. Royalty-free music tends to require the purchase of a license, resulting in an up-front cost but, particularly for budget-minded filmmakers, there are some royalty-free collections that do not require an upfront payment of this nature. Examples include Musopen.org (an excellent source of public domain recordings of classical music), The Free Music Archive (a mix of free and paid-for music and songs) and Premium Beat (paid-for music). Significant time and effort will be needed, however, to find material suitable for your project. Royalty-free music varies in quality and suitability and you may need to listen to hundreds of tracks before finding a suitable addition to your sound-track. When that discovery is made, however, the effect can be tremendous. Whatever music you select, use it imaginatively and with care. Even high-quality music can be used ineffectively.

The use of music should be varied and considered. It can add to background ambience, help to sincerely appeal to the audience's emotional state, or make bold ironic statements. The creative potential it offers you is substantial.

Beyond royalty-free collections, bespoke music can be commissioned. Whilst not always cheap — and certainly not a guarantee of quality — websites and online spaces that specialise in the hiring of people with creative skillsets will allow you to engage with musicians and composers of varying skill levels. In *Looking for Charlie*, we utilised this option extensively, commissioning two pianists to produce a range

16 *Exit Through the Gift Shop*. Directed by Banksy. London: Revolver Entertainment, 2010.

of instrumental tracks. Some of these were original compositions, whilst others were new versions of copyright-free music from the nineteenth century. Our most audacious commission for the film was a three-track jazz drum sound-track recorded by a Parisian musician. Combined with other, royalty-free sources of music, this provided us with a varied and effective soundscape, which we employed extensively through the film.

As with every other aspect of the assembly process, we encourage you to embrace the opportunities offered when you are constructing your sound-track. It is one of the final opportunities you will have to craft and shape your audience's journey.