

**Anti-Cut  
Or  
How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to love the Long Take**

By Gordon A. Burkell

When I interviewed Michael Tronick about his work as an editor he made a statement that has stuck with me ever since: “I became an editor when I learned when not to make a cut”.<sup>1</sup> Those words have played over and over in my head and I constantly try to explore this concept. When a director recently brought in footage that consisted of long takes with minimal coverage I went back to this idea and started to examine how a long take can be used to achieve the greatest impact. A lot of the work with long takes is out of the control of the editor. However, there are ideas and concepts that can be beneficial when working with long takes that should be beneficial to a director while shooting and to an editor who is working with long take footage and will need to identify problematic footage.

There are long takes that work and long takes that do not. The most famous and arguably most successful long take is Orson Welles opening scene from *A Touch of Evil*<sup>2</sup>. I will use this scene to help me explain my ideas. This scene is a great example of the need to pull the audience into the take and engage them. It is a valuable reference because the original release was not to the specifications of Orson Welles and is viewed in his eyes as a bastardization of his work. The original edit worked quite well, however, it was Walter Murch’s 1998 re-cut of *A Touch of Evil*<sup>3</sup> that makes evident the genius behind Welles’ work and why his original vision worked better than the studio’s cut.

For clarity, I’ll refer to the released version based on the studio’s choices as the “Original Cut” and the work that Walter Murch executed to meet Welles’ vision as the “Re-Cut”. The original cut had music laid throughout the scene with very little ambient sounds. Superimposed on the scene, the studio laid credits for the film mostly on the left-hand side of the screen, however, in many instances the credits may appear on the right-side or close to centre. Although, this scene was still recognized by people for it’s uncut story telling it was not what Orson Welles wanted. In his memo to the studio he stated, “I assume that the music now backing the opening sequence of the picture is temporary...” [sic]<sup>4</sup> “...it's not clear where you have

---

<sup>1</sup> Tronick, Michael. Interview by Gordon Burkell. *www.artoftheguillotine.com* The Cutting Room Podcast, Episode 001, 2009. Web. 30 Sept. 2008. <[http://www.artoftheguillotine.com/sections/news.php?searchfor=Tronick?page=list\\_full\\_media&article\\_id=1704](http://www.artoftheguillotine.com/sections/news.php?searchfor=Tronick?page=list_full_media&article_id=1704)>

<sup>2</sup> *A Touch of Evil*. Dir. Orson Welles., Editors. Arron Stell and Virgil W. Vogel. Universal International Pictures, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Murch, Walter, Editor. *A Touch of Evil: Re-Cut*. Dir. Orson Welles. Universal International Pictures, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Welles, Orson. *Memo From Orson Welles*. Wellesnet. 5, Dec. 1957. Web. 1998. <[http://wellesnet.com/touch\\_memo1.htm](http://wellesnet.com/touch_memo1.htm)>

decided to place the credits. A brief report on this will determine whether or not my old ideas for sound and music patterns in this opening reel are still of some potential value.”<sup>5</sup> The way the studio had used these two elements would disengage the audience from the story rather than pull them into the story.



Welles' idea was to make the scene more engaging by removing the non-diegetic music and putting in ambient sound and street music that changed as the characters moved through the scene, each small restaurant or store containing its own unique musical selection and sound. Upon first thought this might seem distracting and something that might alienate the audience but these elements are Welles' way to mimic reality more accurately than the audience had previously experienced. Welles, was trying to place the audience in the real location, he wanted us to feel and hear what the world was like for these characters. His idea was to pull us into the story through sound. Universal Studio's choice to place music as the primary sound comforts the audience making them passive observers outside the film's world.

After viewing these two scenes I conducted my own small experiment to see how the audience would react to their differences. During two lectures at Ryerson University, in Toronto, Canada, I showed the original cut to my editing class. Once the screening was finished we discussed what the students saw. Everyone could easily recall the story and a few basic elements of the shot. It is when I showed them the re-cut that things became interesting. There is a moment in the shot that a small herd of goats appears camera left. Walter Murch added the sound of goats moving and making noise. In the original presentation, no one in the class mentioned the goats, nor did they even see them. When the class viewed the re-cut everyone noticed the goats. Although this is a very

---

<sup>5</sup> Welles, Orson. *Memo From Orson Welles*. Wellesnet. 5, Dec. 1957. Web. 1998.  
<[http://wellesnet.com/touch\\_memo1.htm](http://wellesnet.com/touch_memo1.htm)>

unscientific experiment it does point to something important Welles realized and Murch helped illustrate. The sound played a vital role in building the world of the shot. It helped flush out the environment making it more real and it helped guide the audience through this experience, I would liken it to adding colour to the shot. Without a flushed out sound design we are merely grasping a few important details.

Welles also disagreed with the titles placement and this is an important factor for editors to recognize. The titles appeared on the screen without a fade, so they created a pop sensation and would then pop off the screen mostly in the lower left-hand side of the frame with the occasional credit appearing on the right-hand side. Having the titles appear over this long take creates the feeling in the audience that this is merely a title sequence, something that gives us visual appeal while the credits roll, it lessens our appreciation for the shot and our interest. More importantly it also causes a visual distraction. The popping on of the title pulls the viewers eyes over to the lower left corner and away from what is important, the action and story. Also as the viewer gets use to the text on one side it pops up on the opposite side and sometimes even in the middle of the screen. Murch's work removed the credits from the opening shot.

Why did this scene work so well when Murch got his hands on the film? It wasn't simply those two factors, the audio and titles. It was much more. Murch removed the distracting elements to reveal Welles' original intention. The story is 'king'. Welles' strength in storytelling is obvious and his use of suspense in this scene can be placed in the canon alongside Alfred Hitchcock's work. The story drives the long take. We are engaged with the story that's why it's okay that there aren't any cuts. Most failures in long takes come from simply lingering on a subject and expecting the audience to understand what the character is feeling. This leaves the audience sitting in a dark theatre staring at motionless images that evoke very little, and loses their engagement in the story and characters.

To show you Welles' strength in storytelling I need to reference Alfred Hitchcock's example of suspense and surprise.

There is a distinct difference between "suspense" and "surprise," and yet many pictures continually confuse the two. I'll explain what I mean.

We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let us suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, "Boom!" There is an explosion. The public is *surprised*, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a *suspense* situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public *knows* it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is *aware* that the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock and there is a clock in the décor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions this same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the

characters on the screen: “You shouldn’t be talking about such trivial matters. There’s a bomb beneath you and it’s about to explode!”<sup>6</sup>

In *Touch of Evil*, we are given an immense amount of information and told a story with suspense. The audience first sees the bad guy holding a bomb in an extreme close up of the bomb being set to a particular time. As the camera pulls back we see the terrorist place the bomb in the car’s trunk and run away. This sets up the suspense. We know that this bomb will go off soon and we want them to get out of the car and escape.



While we watch the scene unfold we are introduced to Charlton Heston and Janet Leigh’s characters. As we see the car appear and disappear behind buildings we get a moment of suspense, will the bomb blow up? Later, the woman, in the car, mentions a ticking sound and is ignored. As they cross the U.S./Mexico border the bomb explodes. Murch referenced this suspense in an interview with Michael Ondaatje.

I was giving a presentation of the re-cut version in Denmark, and somebody perceptively mentioned that a hidden advantage of this new approach to the beginning is that as long as there were titles running, and as long as there was title music, you knew, subconsciously, that the bomb wasn’t going to explode. Whereas without titles and with a fragmentary soundtrack there’s no knowing exactly when three minutes and twenty seconds is up. The bomb could explode at any time.<sup>7</sup>

Murch points out that the titles and music cue the audience as to when the bomb will explode dulling the edge of suspense. However, with the re-cut, the audience has been given a ride of excitement and the movie has started off with a bang pulling us into the story. The questions raised from this long shot merely act as a catalyst for the movie; who set the bomb? Why did they kill this couple? What crime is occurring between the Mexico/U.S. border that warrants this? While this is happening we are introduced to the main characters and the audience is left wanting more. As an editor we can look at this scene and see that the story is evolving and growing. One of the key things when making a cut is to ask, “does it progress the story forward?” and “does it reveal new information to the audience?” In this case it does. If the shots lagged at all there would be a need to cut but with Welles use of sound we’re pulled into the world and taken along for the ride in the car.

---

<sup>6</sup> Truffaut, François. *Hitchcock*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Ondaatje, Michael. *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*. Vintage. 2002. Print.

There is something else that makes a scene such as this one so successful other than the story? The visuals need to engage the audience. Welles does this to perfection, through intelligent blocking of the action, the camera is constantly moving and readjusting giving the audience time to refocus and refresh. The camera's movement requires the audience to be active in their viewing and re-negotiate their area of focus. New information and story elements are delivered to the audience forcing their minds to actively think.

As editors we should think about the movement as generated cuts. When we have *Shot A* and we cut to *Shot B* the audience takes mere milliseconds to scan the image and determine their focus. This is aided by the D.O.P.'s choice of focus and the choice of colours as well as who's talking, etc. When a cut is made, the audience must rescan the image to determine where to focus their attention. This is why graphic matches work so well. The audience doesn't have to rescan the image to determine what information is important. With a long take such as that in *Touch of Evil* the camera guides the audience through the scene allowing us to follow the characters and meet new characters that are important to the scene.

As editors we're going to have urges to tighten something up, make the cut, move things along, meet the time limit of a show. We should take the lesson that Michael Tronick learned. That not cutting can be just as affective as making the cut and sometimes a long take, such as Orson Welles work in *A Touch of Evil*, is just right for the scene.