

Beat

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This article will showcase some common ideas about the use of the term 'beats' in editing and direction of film and video to determine the most concise definition of the term.

I have always been dubious of using the word 'beat' as a measure of time in editing. When asked to describe exactly what they consider a beat, colleagues describe some very contradictory scales of time.

Some examples follow. At a recent editor's meeting involving a panel discussion about professionals in the television business, an editor for a Canadian-British co-production described her working style as "working with beats" to nail down the best flow to a silent dream sequence. A member of the audience asked if she could describe a beat, so to pass along her experience with the drama, and she replied "...it's not something that you can really define, it's just a feeling that you get after working long enough in editing."

In the rushes of a short-film this summer the word 'beat' was written between words in the script to emphasize a line's delivery. When the actors used these pauses in the place of words on set, the director said "There is a beat there in the script." The actor replied "I did a beat." So the director came back with "how about three beats then."

Also in a fast-paced pop-punk music video that I cut earlier this year, I was asked to extend one shot by a beat. I lengthened the shot by one-eighth count in the tempo of the song. When asked again to add a 'beat' I replied that I already had added one, which amounted to 7 or 8 frames. I asked the director what his 'beats' were and he said "Usually a beat is a second." (24 frames)

These blatant differences in use of the term are confusing. Needless to say, there are very different interpretations of the term 'beat' and because it seems to be a subjective, indefinite measure, it leaves much

to the user of the term to define. Let's look at the way that directors Elia Kazan, Constantin Stalinslavski and Bruce Block do this.

While discussing directing his actors, Elia Kazan told an interviewer at the American Institute of Film:

You divide a scene—or I tend to—into sections, into movements. Stalinslavsky called them 'beats.' The point is that there are sections in life. Sometimes even a short scene has a three-act structure. You lay bare the actor, you make him understand and appreciate the structure beneath the lines. That's what's often called the subtext, and dealing with the subtext is one of the critical elements in directing actors. In other words, not what is said, but what happens. (396)

Stalinslavsky developed his 'system' for directing actors in the Moscow Art Theater. By emphasizing the actor's use of imagination and belief in the given circumstances of the text they create a practical inquiry and theory of the real-life situation being acted out. Many attribute his work to the form known as Method Acting, which is similar, but incorrect.

Bruce Block reaches the heart of his rhythm section on editing picture in his book *The Visual Story* with the breakdown of an 'event' (such as walking through a door) into 'sub-events':

Lets say the event is 'a hand opens a door.' Here are the sub-events that make up that event:

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- 1 hand reaches for the knob.
- 2 hand grasps the knob.
- 3 hand turns the knob
- 4 door latch moves.
- 5 door opens... (166)

Block goes on to describe uses of Editorial Rhythm Control:

The rhythm of a scene can be altered when using a fragmented approach. The tempo of sub-events can be created increased or decreased through editing.

Since fragmenting allows an event to be broken down into a series of sub-events or separate shots, the visual components can be rearranged for each new shot. This means that the director can create changes of contrast or affinity for every visual component in every shot. In postproduction, the editor can further arrange the fragmented shots to enhance either the visual contrast or affinity. (167)

In each example of defining their 'beats', Block, Stalinslavsky and Kazan emphasize that each event has subcomponents, and that when looked at as individual 'beats' or 'sub-events' they each reveal a structure in an event-based scene, not a timed or chronological sequence of events. They see a three act structure in a scene, or within any action. They see an underlying rhythm with potential for an equivalent to an orchestral crescendo. The notion that a 'beat' is not a measure of time, but rather a measure of discernible change in action, is synonymous between Block, Stalinslavsky and Kazan.

Given that people use 'beat' as an arrow in their quiver of everyday jargon, I see reason to clarify the term before using it, and possibly to consider using an event or action breakdown rather than chronological breakdown when using the term. Like the Ninja or Yogi breaks down their katas (scripted series of movements) into fragmented-individual actions, the director uses the 'beat' to realize the structure underlying the overall story.

Works Cited

1. Block, Bruce. "The Visual Story." Burlington MA: Focal Press, 2001.
2. Stevens, George, Jr. "Conversations With The Great Movie Makers of Hollywood's Golden Age." New York NY: Knopf, 2006.

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