

The Film Editor

by ReadWorks



When deciding whether a movie is good or not, most people think about the storyline. They think about the quality of the acting. Some might even remark on how well the movie was directed. Almost no one says: "Boy, that movie was really well edited!"

This is a dilemma that every film editor faces. Their work, while crucial to the success of a film, is rarely celebrated. Many don't even know that the job title "Film Editor" exists. People win Academy Awards for Best Actor and Best Director. No one seems to care about the Best Editor.

"Everyone knows that Meryl Streep has won three Academy Awards for acting," says Marc Rodriguez, a professional film editor based in New York City. "Nobody knows that Michael Kahn has won three Academy Awards for film editing."

Rodriguez graduated from film school at New York University in Manhattan. As a teenager, he was always shooting footage of his friends on his family's video camera. He worshipped legendary directors like Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg. Someday, he thought, I will make films of my own.

So after graduating from film school, Rodriguez took a job as an editor of television commercials. The idea was to make some money to afford making a feature-length film. But as he got more involved in editing, he fell in love with it. At 37 years old, he still hopes to direct a film. But film editing has become both his passion and his full-time job.

Speaking over the phone from his office in Brooklyn, Rodriguez explained what exactly a film editor does.

"I don't want to take too much credit," says Rodriguez, a stocky guy with floppy red hair, "but we essentially bring the film to life. For a big feature film, a director will often shoot over 100 hours of footage. Documentary filmmakers tend to shoot even more hours, because they don't know what the story is when they start. As the editor, it is my job to cut all that footage down to an hour and a half."

"As you can imagine," Rodriguez adds, "this requires a lot of time and patience."

Luckily, Rodriguez is a patient man. Directors tend to have less patience. Their job involves gathering footage and making sure the actors get along. But after the film shoot is over, the director's job is pretty much done; he or she hands over the footage to the editor. The editor is then tasked with taking out everything that doesn't fit in the story.

Rodriguez works alone in a small, quiet office. His job requires intense amounts of concentration. On his desk, he keeps two computer monitors. One allows him to check the Internet and answer emails. The other is for editing films.

A typical day involves editing a 20 to 30 second scene of a movie. That's right: an entire day spent going over the same 20 or 30 seconds of a movie. In the end, this is how movies get made. As the editor, Rodriguez matches the sound with what is happening on-screen. He makes sure the storyline flows from scene to scene. He ensures that the stars of the film appear in as flattering a light as possible.

"For me, editing is like putting together a giant puzzle in which most of the pieces don't fit," he says with a laugh. "You look closely at all the footage. You examine it to see whether it should go into the final cut, as we call it. In the end, though, only a tiny percentage of the original footage makes it into the actual film."

Now and then, Rodriguez says, he decides that he does not have enough footage to make a film. In such cases, the director is forced to film new scenes. This can be stressful for everyone involved. The actors may already be acting in other films or TV shows. The camera operator-the person who holds the camera-may have moved on as well. And yet the director must get everyone back together to shoot the final scenes. Otherwise the movie may never be completed.

"You really don't want to tell directors that they have to shoot more footage," Rodriguez says. "It's something they really do not want to hear. Hopefully they understand it's for the sake of the film. After all, no one wants to get a bad review! If it comes down to shooting more footage or getting ripped apart by movie critics, most directors will gladly shoot more scenes."

Speaking of bad reviews, critics almost never mention the film's editor in their reviews. To the press, the director and the writer are responsible if a film fails. The editor is left blameless. Of course, when a film is praised and wins awards, the editor does not receive much credit either.

Rodriguez understands that his profession will remain underappreciated. But he does make a good living. And he enjoys the challenge of putting a movie together. Seeing the final product on screen can be a thrilling experience. Then again, seeing all his intricate editing work projected onto a giant movie screen before a crowd full of people can come as a shock, too.

"You always see a thousand little mistakes," he says. "But of course, the audience never notices, since they didn't put the thing together. And even if they did notice the mistakes, they probably wouldn't blame me. As I always say, no one blames the editor!"