Karen Pearlman, *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit* (Focal Press, 2009)

Watching a film can be an absorbing and emotional experience but how often do we consider what has contributed to its making? What is it that creates a certain mood, or emotional energy? How does a film connect with its audience? What is it that holds our attention and triggers our response to the images and sounds moving before us on a screen?

*Cutting Rhythms: shaping the film edit* is a new, internationally published, textbook written by Dr Karen Pearlman, Head of Screen Studies at the Australian Film Television and Radio School. The book, based on Dr Pearlman’s 2006 doctoral thesis (UTS), sets out to investigate the shaping of rhythm in the film editing process. Her exploration of rhythm goes a long way toward answering some of the questions posed above, while also offering a theoretical background for students of film editing and screen production.

Rhythm is something intrinsic to film, but rarely is an attempt made to define what it is or how it is achieved. Film editors will often say that their editing process is ‘intuitive’ or that they know they have made the right cut when it ‘feels right’. Pearlman establishes a solid and logical foundation for ‘rhythmic intuition’, based on human body rhythms – those of the film editor, the actors, and the audience. She considers neurological and physiological movement and responses as part of the editing process, along with *kinaesthetic empathy*. While she draws upon the neurosciences to support her hypotheses, she renders her explanations in clear language.

At the outset, she distinguishes the work of a picture editor from the work of sound design to avoid a narrow interpretation of the concept of rhythm. While sound is a component of the rhythms created by the picture editor, she works with the available sound and only occasionally makes adjustments to levels or effects, rather than creating sound rhythms, which is the work of the sound editor. The rhythms created by the picture editor are the *movements* and transitions between frames, which best tell the story or shift emotional energy between actors, and make emotional and rhythmic connections with the audience.

*Cutting Rhythms* gives the impression of a well planned and logically structured argument that builds chapter upon chapter to elucidate its ideas and provide practical exercises to help teachers and students of editing develop their awareness of the concepts put forward in the book. These exercises are clearly labelled and contained within separate text boxes, and seem suitable for class discussion. The book also includes several pictures of screen shots from well known films to illustrate particular cutting techniques; some, however, are a little too dark to be seen clearly.

Pearlman’s experience as a professional dancer and choreographer for many years enables her to draw insightful parallels between editing and choreography in chapter two, such as the importance of tensions between symmetry and asymmetry to both, and emphasising the centrality of movement.

I should declare that I am not an expert in film technique or theory, therefore, I am not acquainted with the seminal theorists in the field, but Pearlman supplies an extensive bibliography and draws upon the work of Theo van Leeuwen, Ken
Dancyger, Eisenstein, and Tarkovsky, to name a few; and philosophers such as Deleuze and Bergson. There is also a selection of brief case studies of films such as The Hours (2004), The Godfather (1972), Strangers on a Train (1951), and Gallipoli (1981).

In terms of style, Cutting Rhythms explores two ranges of editing choices between ‘Montage’ and ‘Decoupage’, and ‘Collision’ and ‘Linkage’. The two spectrums are brought together to illustrate a variety of editorial options, which are demonstrated through case studies.

For the reader interested in the production and editing of film, Cutting Rhythms may have something valuable to offer; for the reader with a specific interest in how rhythm is created in the film editing process this is a book you will want to read. What the book does not cover are the technical aspects of film production, such as equipment and software.

While it is useful to be able to determine and communicate some of the principles that underpin a film editor’s ‘rhythmic intuition’, it does not follow that studying the principles will make one a good film editor, nor that the principles are equivalent to intuition. Intuition is by definition an immediate apprehension, a perceptive and untaught ability. Superb and effective film editing remains the product of intuitive practice, which Cutting Rhythms attempts to unravel and present as a blueprint for film editors in training.

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