History Overview Of Film Editing: Edwin Porter, George Melies, And D.W Griffith

The purpose of film editing is to assist in bringing across the message of the film and serve its genre by arranging the footage in an ordered and particular manner. Editing helps the viewer not only see the direct message being conveyed but the underlying ones too. There are different styles of editing where different editing skills are used to convey certain meanings in the narrative. In this essay, three pioneers of film editing and their films will be analysed in order to see the contributions they have made towards developing film making and modern editing styles.

Edwin Porter was not just one of the first people to bring film to the public but one of the first people to bring about continuity editing by arranging shots and editing a film so as to let the audience witness a visual tale says Igal I. Mashiah (1980:355). It was through the idea of editing that the film maker could choose what they intended the audience to see. This took Edwin Porter's films from being all in one shot to having some sort of an arrangement in order to convey a plot.

One of Edwin Porter's most well-known films would be The Great Train Robbery. (Porter & Porter 1903). This is a 12 minute long film of the Western genre. The film revolves around some outlaws who arrange to have a train stop somewhere, only to enter it, threaten the people on board, rob them and escape on the same train. People, who have heard about what had happened get together, track down and confront the thugs, which ends in fatality for all. A gunshot is then fired at the camera.

Each of the shots was played out entirely without any internal cuts. They were instead placed in a meaningful order to reveal the conflict, which was because during the time that the film was created; the public were still captivated by the continuous flow of movement of film which depicted real life, instead of craving a stimulating storyline, says Mashiah (1980:355). This sort of film style reveals the narrative so clearly for the audience to follow; however, since the film makes use of mostly long shots and medium-long shots, the audience will fail to see finer details. The only variation seen at the end as a close-up shot (also breaking the fourth wall) which was one of the first on record states Mashiah (1980:358). This shot aimed to stir up a larger reaction and emotion from the audience as it connected more intimately with them (which has now been used throughout the progression of filmmaking).

This was one of the first films to make use of composite or parallel editing (an editing technique that goes back and forth between more than one sequence, giving the illusion of different action happening at the same time- but not necessarily). The film also introduced different camera angles (such as low angles) and placements which broke away from the traditional 'drama' or theatre type; eye level positioning that was being done. This introduced more dynamism and made film more interesting to the viewer. Edwin Porter also introduced the use of the Dissolve technique which allows for a gradual convergence between two shots. Cross-cutting and shooting on location were amongst the other techniques that Edwin Porter launched. Even though Edwin Porter is still seen today as one of the founding fathers of film making, not all his ideas were his own, but rather even older film maker's ideas which he bettered.

Film had become fully embraced by the public and its popularity had film makers eager to make even more progress. According to Matthew Soloman (2012:305), George Melies was a film maker who had always had a fascination with magic; the unreal and creation. Melies therefore had his own innovative ideas with regards to film. He wished to create films which could fool the audience into seeing something fantastical states James Neibaur (2008:66).

Alissa Wilkinson (2018) writes that, since film had been developing, film had been focusing on what interested audiences. During the times of cinema when George Melies began producing films, the world had shifted into a new era of scientific breakthrough and an interest of universal discoveries; research and travels writes Wilkinson (2018). George Melies and his creative mind took advantage of this and began a whole new development of film making and genre of Science-fiction. The films marched into the unknown revealing to the audience that with the headway that the world was making, anything was possible. Melies introduced the idea of creating whole, elaborate sets and enhancing the narrative by getting his character's into outfits and make-up, beginning the use of special effects we know in film- something that stemmed from his early life in theatre and magic states Wilkinson (2018).

A well-known film by George Melies would be A Trip to the Moon (Melies & Melies 1902). The film has no spoken dialogue and is of the Science-Fiction genre and the story revolves around a few people who travel into space and go to the moon. Once there, they come into contact with aliens and abduct one, bringing it back home to Earth.

The film made use of showy production design sets for its time, with painted back drops; set pieces and props. The use of special effects such as smoke when the rocket is launched and the face of the moon was also incorporated. His editing style gave the audience the illusion of enchantment, such as the telescopes turning into stools. Seeing as there were no editing software at the time; the editing or cutting was achieved by ending the filming process and resuming from where the next shot would preferably begin. This gave rise to stop motion which has today become a technique used to create whole feature length films. Several jump cuts can also be seen in this film which appear as glitches. Dissolve transitions were used, such as from the first scene to the second of the characters building the rocket. The film also makes use of a double exposure technique and fade-in transitions. During the scene of the astronauts asleep on the moon, a second filmed piece of the 'planetary people' appear above them, fading into and out of the scene for their brief moment of film time, giving the illusion of having them gradually appear out of thin air. These were not the only filming techniques that Melies brought about, but several of his other films made use of colour which were individually hand painted frame by frame; a split screen technique in The Four Troublesome Heads. While no sound or dialogue was used in the making of this film, orchestral music was played in order to aid the narrative and the feeling that the director wanted to illicit in the audience.

Melies' breakthroughs in cinema inspired so many directors to further develop and perfect the art of filming, to go on to make even bigger and better films. One of the directors was another original founding father of film known as D.W Griffiths.

D.W Griffith, He tried out different shot lengths and different camera arrangements which bettered the continuity editing- to make the audience believe in constant flow of time- which had previously been executed by Edwin Porter writes John Hess (2017). Hess (2017) goes on to reveal that Griffith, through experimentation with the camera, founded the 180 degree rule, which is one of the most important film making rules still applied today. Griffith also enjoyed

furthering the concept of cross-cutting which was a technique that Edwin porter tested out. Griffiths also examined what it would be like to use different paces and lengths of cuts in order to convey different messages or evoke different feelings in the viewers. Hess (2017) states that through this examination, all types of new shots were discovered by other film makers, such as over the shoulder shots and more. Through all his efforts, future film editors further developed what is now known as Montage editing, believes Hess (2017).

A film that Griffith is most well-known for would be The Birth of a Nation (Griffith & Griffith 1915). This is a film about the slavery of Black people by southern, white Americans who later form a cult known as the Ku Klux Klan- who believes their race is more superior to others- and continue to ill-treat everyone else. Tim Dirks (2010), writes that besides the discriminatory content of the film, it is recognized for its editing style. It makes use of being shot on a real location instead of a staged set, much like the work of Edwin Porter instead of George Melies. There were various camera angles used as well as camera tracking and panning. Cross-cuts were used in order show the different, yet simultaneous action going on between the opposing groups of characters. New, as well as old types of interesting editing transitions, were used such as fade-ins and outs and iris transitions.

These three early film makers not only came up with ideas that have shaped the current art of film editing but have also borrowed and surpassed the work of others before them as all people of all crafts do. The combination of the work of all three has lasted throughout history to help make the art of cinema the impressive realm it has become today.