

Bob Sherrin / REVIEW: *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*, by Michael Ondaatje

The photographic image is central to contemporary culture, particularly Western culture — even more particularly to the Americanized, global form of it. Commercial cinema is its most popular and widely known constituent, often mesmerizing us with a sleek flow that combines the mundane and the magical, real images projected through the air onto a screen. But often lost in our fascination with film and its progenitor photography is the fact that what we viewers accept as a seamless whole, an accurate document of events, is made up of discrete still images exposed at a rate of 24 per second, accumulated in vast numbers through a nonsequential process, then rearranged, often for months or years, until a final order is created. Much like any narrative form, cinema results from the creation of a large pool of many possibilities from which the storyteller (or storytellers) selects. She may also reshoot, rewrite, and retell as part of assembling those images or ideas: this complex and rarely discussed process is called editing. To many people, an editor is someone with a razor-sharp persona who either delicately snips or wildly hacks at a body of work: that's surgery or butchery, not editing. An editor, rather, must be able and willing to consider details on many levels while simultaneously sensing the emerging narrative as a whole. While maintaining this balance and being sensitive to the new opportunities it may reveal, an editor shapes material, and in cinema the editor's pool of possibilities includes image, sound, speech, and music. Most writers *are* editors, and *all* writers must first create the material they are going to shape — unlike sculptors, for instance, who occasionally may be drawn to a piece of specific material (stone, wood, steel, for example) then by working it, begin to discern the piece (the narrative, the story, the sculpture) they ultimately create or reveal. Writers must first write and filmmakers must first expose film. Only then can they begin to edit, shape, discover both the nuances and the larger structures of their narratives.

The still photograph has about it an atmosphere of certainty and precision that is mistakenly seen as a mechanical, now digital, exactness — an accurate, objective recreation of a moment in reality. Photographs, in truth, are the result of numerous acts of selection, exclusion, erasure, and emphasis. Even so-called candid images are shaped by the same decisions, often instantaneous and unconscious. Thus, photos do not capture reality. They render or represent, and every photograph when closely studied reveals its maker — her biases and influences. Likewise a mainstream commercial film — that seemingly effortless, crystal clear narrative medium — is fabricated from 130,000 or more such still images. However, unlike a work of written narrative, unlike the photograph, modern cinema is an intensely collaborative process that requires enormous numbers of specifically talented people and enormous amounts of money, making it the most expensive narrative form we know. But despite its current popularity, despite the proliferation of home video cameras and computerized editing programs that allow us to function as independent filmmakers, few of us know how a feature film is finally brought into being. As well, most of us own pens and know how to write, thus being momentary writers, but few of us understand the hidden activities that bring a written narrative into published form.

Michael Ondaatje is a well-known novelist and poet, but fewer people know of his own films, fewer still of his intense interest in the medium. Even fewer have heard of Walter Murch, though millions are familiar with his work, which includes such landmark creations as *The Conversation*, *The Godfather* (all three individual parts, plus the re-edited trilogy), *The English Patient*, and *The Talented Mr Ripley* to name but six of the 27 films he has edited, or for which he created soundscapes and mixes, since working on *The Rain People* in 1968. Over decades, Murch has brought to final form the visions of Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Orson Welles, and many others — including his own film *Return to Oz*. Ondaatje met Murch during the shooting of *The English Patient* and it was then their conversations began. In the year 2000, Ondaatje proposed to Murch that they record their conversations, which they did at irregular intervals over the next year. The published result is *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*. Ondaatje introduces their

discussions by pointing out that the editing stage in his own writing and filmmaking processes is vitally important:

shooting or writing everything for a number of months or years, then shaping the content into a new form, till it is almost a newly discovered story. I move things around till they become sharp and clear, till they are in the right location. And it's at this stage that I discover the work's true voice and structure. When I edited my first film documentary I knew that *this* was when the art came in. When I watched Walter Murch at work during my peripheral involvement with the film of *The English Patient*, I knew that *this* was the stage of filmmaking that was closest to the art of writing. (xviii)

Ondaatje earlier admits that he'd "always been interested, perhaps obsessed, in that seemingly uncrossable gulf between an early draft of a book or film and a finished product. How *does* one make that journey from there to here?"(xii).

Through his conversations with Ondaatje, Murch regularly reveals the invisible activities of the film editor, always placed within the intensely personal context of an artist moving through the creative process. In so doing, Murch responds to Ondaatje's questions, prompts, and comparisons by anchoring his decisions as editor within an evolving portrait of himself, both as an individual artist and as one dedicated to realizing a collaborative vision. Murch's background plays a vital role in shaping his approach to what some consider a purely technical calling. He became fascinated with sound as a young boy who grew up in a New York home where his father painted extraordinary still lifes of common, everyday objects, thus bringing together in Murch's youth a combination of sound and image that he first pursued by convincing his parents to buy a tape recorder — ostensibly to record music off the radio. Instead, he taped street sounds from an apartment window, then began to adhere his mike to pieces of metal that he struck in order to generate original sounds. This step was followed by the revelation of cutting tape, literally slicing it into segments that he rejoined in

order to create harmonies and juxtapositions, even turning the tape upside down to play it backwards or flipping it over to create a muffled soundtrack. Not long after, on the classical station WQXR he heard the compositions of Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry, practitioners of *musique concrete*, a form that Murch realized he was already working in — “taking ordinary sounds and arranging them rhythmically, creating a kind of music on tape Up to that point I’d thought that this was just my strange little hobby. But here was validation It was very close to what my father was doing in his paintings: taking discarded objects and arranging them in ways to make you see them with new eyes”(7-9). Murch was 11 years old at the time.

Until his early twenties, Murch assumed he would become an architect or an oceanographer, but as a student at Johns Hopkins, he and a group of friends made short films, and Murch discovered that editing images had the same emotional pull for him as editing sound. Murch later went to grad school at the University of Southern California and there sound and image again came together for him. During this time Murch met and became friends with George Lucas, a fellow student at USC, and Francis Ford Coppola, who attended UCLA. After graduating in 1967, Murch worked at Britannia Educational Films where he edited his first professional film — on the function of the eye. In 1968, after a short stint at Dove Films making commercials and industrial films, Murch received a call from George Lucas, who’d joined with Coppola to shoot *The Rain People*. Lucas asked Murch to come to San Francisco to create sound effects and edit the final soundtrack — as well as become part of American Zoetrope, the film production house that Lucas and Coppola had created.

In addition to his fascination with sound and image, Murch is steeped in a broad spectrum of interests that include many areas of scientific knowledge and metaphysics. He moves easily from his research into Bode’s planetary theories to playing on the piano his own compositions based on the distances among planets. He happily discusses the different perspectives of Medieval and Renaissance life and art and their relationships to cinema, as well as his theories about the link between musical notation and the development of

polyphony — again connected to cinema. Murch is also translating the works of Curzio Malaparte from Italian into English. All these complex interests, and more, feed into Murch's work as a film editor. For example, he considers Edison, Beethoven, and Flaubert the three fathers of film: Edison represents all the technical geniuses who contributed to the mechanical and chemical foundation of cinema; Flaubert contributes his refined realism, spending, for instance, "a whole page evoking tiny sounds and motes of dust in an empty room because he's getting at something" (89); Beethoven brings a heightened sense of dynamics and reveals "that by aggressively expanding, contracting, and transforming the rhythmic and orchestral structure of music you could extract great emotional resonance and power" (89). Murch believes Beethoven moved away from the architectural qualities of composers such as Haydn in which movements seem complete and resemble one another, "as if you were moving through different rooms of a palace When you listen to Beethoven's music now, . . . it's as though you can hear the grammar of film — cuts, dissolves, fades, superimposures, long shots, close shots — being worked out in musical terms" (90).

Murch sees the streams of science, music, and literature feeding into one another through the 19th century. By the beginning of the 20th century, dynamism and realism had been fundamentally absorbed into European culture, and "then along came film: a medium ideally suited to the dynamic representation of closely observed reality [R]ealism from literature and painting, and dynamism from music . . . surged together within the framework of film to emerge, within a few decades, in the new artistic form of cinema" (91).

Murch in part sees his work as one "of finding those . . . visual harmonies, thematic harmonies — and finding them at deeper and deeper levels as you work on the film" (29), and to do so Murch submerges himself in the sensibility of the film, becoming acutely aware of the small details, stimulating or mystifying, that make fine editing seem natural even though it is an intricate, multi-textured fabrication. To succeed, Murch must also hold within his vision the larger themes of a film: the latter is what the narrative is "about", the former allows us to see it for ourselves. As much as a writer lingers over the subtleties of syntax, grammar, image, texture, implication,

and suggestion, she also must sense how those shifts and edits on the line ripple through the whole of a text. In both worlds, the artist combines forms of precision with moments of insight and serendipity. In both worlds, the artist works and plays simultaneously, the conscious and subconscious in orchestration.

However, in the world of cinema, the editor faces what most would consider a daunting task. The shooting ratio in contemporary commercial cinema can be as high as 100:1 — 100 feet of film exposed for every foot that eventually finds its way onto the screen in a movie theatre. As Murch points out, “Film travels at one mile an hour through its projector. So in *Apocalypse Now*, we shot over two hundred and thirty-five miles and reduced it all to two-and-a-half miles — a ratio of just under 100 to 1. That’s high, but not unique And how you prune or chop will determine the very character of a film” (136). In his case, Murch combines precise technologies and intuition, even chance, to create the character, the voice, of a film.

As film is shot (“burning celluloid”), Murch along with the director views the dailies, the most recently filmed material straight from the lab, which may include pick-ups — additional footage for earlier-shot scenes. As he watches, Murch creates on his laptop a set of notes that provides a diary of the film’s shooting, a process that always occurs in a pattern different from that of a final script. In fact, Murch creates a formal record of the relative chaos common to exposing miles of film, doing numerous takes of a scene, or shooting it from several angles at once. The result is a pool of possibilities for the editor, but Murch still must personalize this record:

I write down whatever occurs to me about what I see on the screen. And that text appears in the left-hand column of my database. These are the *emotional* responses: How does the shot make me feel when I see it for the first time? Are there any associations? If, say, the image of a banana occurs to me for some reason, I write “banana,” even if I have no reason why. Maybe later I’ll find out the reason Later, when I’m getting ready to put the scene together, I take a second series of notes: these are less emotional and more surgical I’m no longer the lover beholding the beloved, I’m the surgeon looking at

the patient, analyzing her joints and ligaments, writing down the exact footage number at each comment. The free-associative emotional notes give me insights about primary reactions; the surgical notes give me insights about how best to take things apart and connect them again . . . Both columns of notes are always in front of me when I'm assembling the film for the first time, but afterwards, in re-editing, I use them less . . . At a certain point, I've internalized them. (44-45)

As he moves further into the editing/re-editing process, Murch relies on his own instincts to establish and confirm cut points, looking now at what he's called the grammar of film editing:

The decision where to cut film is very similar to the decision, in writing poetry, of where to end each line. On which word? That end point has little if anything to do with the grammar of the sentence. It's just that the line is full and ripe at that point, full of meaning and ripe with rhythm. By ending it where he does, the poet exposes that last word to the blankness of the page, which is a way of emphasizing the word. If he adds two words after it, he immerses that word within the line, and it has less visibility, less significance. We do very much the same in film: the end of the shot gives the image of that last frame an added significance, which we exploit . . . In film, at the moment of the cut you are juxtaposing one image with another, and that's the equivalent of rhyme. It's how rhyme and alliteration work in poetry, or how we juxtapose two words or two images, and what that juxtaposition implies. (268)

Murch understands this process as both organic and constructed, "a mosaic in three dimensions, two of space and one of time" (268), but even more intimately, he relies on his own particular sense of appropriateness for each cut. When he assembles a scene for the first time, Murch does so in total silence, turning off the sound so he can watch the actors' body language, note facial expressions, and thereby sense what they're saying and how they're saying it, "and then at a certain point I flinch — it's almost an involuntary flinch, an equivalent

of the blink. That flinch point is where the shot will end" (268). Murch explains that each shot or sequence of them is a thought rendered visually, and when that thought reaches its full expression, its ripeness, he detects the need to cut to another shot — another thought that works with, against, off the one he's just clipped. But Murch always checks his flinch edits by repeating the process and noting the frame number of his flinches, accepting them as appropriate edits only when the frame numbers of his flinches are identical. A frame discrepancy of two is enough to cause him to reconsider his approach. Often, Murch finds this pause instructive:

When I mark frame 17 and the next time frame 19, I have a feeling that goes with each. When I watch frame 19, I feel, Oh, it was a little longer that time — I can feel it. Then, looking at the counter I realize, That was two frames. In this context, that's what two frames feels like: one-twelfth of a second. But I now have an emotional feeling in my gut about what a twelfth of a second feels like, with these shots in this context, and that's teaching me something . . . What's the rhythmic signature of this scene? And then, of the whole film? Every time conductors confront a piece of music with a new orchestra, they have to determine the rhythmic signature. An editor is doing that with the film. (270-71)

Rhythm implies music or orchestrated sound, something that profoundly attracted and influenced Murch as a boy experimenting with a tape recorder and listening to *musique concrete*. As an editor, as someone sensitive to Flaubert's intimate and allusory realism, Murch also uses sound effects and music to layer suggestions into a scene, hints that create the necessary ambiguity which draws viewers and readers into a narrative in order to complete it, to give it a meaning that is both personal yet often shared with other audience members.

Consider three aspects of one scene in *The Godfather*. Ondaatje asks Murch to elaborate on what he calls metaphorical sound, or "emphasizing the visual by artificially focussing on a possibly disjointed or unrealistic layer of sound" (119). Murch explains that

Roman Polanski alerted him to this aspect of filmmaking when Polanski spoke at USC in 1966, using the example of a dripping faucet and what it might reveal or suggest about a person, about her home, about her relationship to many things. From Polanski's comment, which celebrated the authenticity of sound, Murch ultimately moved to finding a balance "between something being authentic, and celebrating that authenticity, and yet at the same time trying to push the sound into other metaphorical areas" (120).

Murch recalls a key scene in *The Godfather* where Michael Corleone, so far uninvolved in the family business, murders Sollozo and Captain McCluskey. The scene takes place in a quiet Italian restaurant. Michael returns from the washroom with a gun that had been previously concealed in a toilet tank, and as he raises the gun to shoot the men, Murch lays in the screech of an elevated subway train. The metaphorical suggestions here are numerous, obviously prompted by connections made by individual viewers but equally tempered by more universal connotations associated with an unseen screeching train: speed, power, threat, danger, collision — plus all the imaginable consequences thereof. As well, Coppola shot the scene in Italian without subtitles, thus creating for viewers a situation analogous to Murch working in total silence as he first assembles a scene: each viewer must carefully read the actors' gestures, expressions, and body language, as well as the smaller details around them, to sense the undercurrent of negotiation and threat. Finally, the music for the scene is held back until after the shooting — an extended moment of silence — during which some viewers might well recall "Clemenza saying 'Remember, drop the gun. Everyone will be looking at the gun, so they won't see your face'" (122). Only after that silence does Michael toss the gun to the floor and the score intercede. Murch considers this combination of image, sound, silence, and music one of the great aspects of the film:

It's a classic example for me of the correct use of music, which is a collector and channeler of previously created emotion, rather than the device that creates the emotion . . . I think in the long run this approach generates emotions that are truer

because they come out of your direct contact with the scene itself, and your own feelings about the scene — not feelings dictated by a certain kind of music. (122)

Editing is central to any published text. *The Conversations* itself is no exception, yet unlike the nearly invisible activity of the usual film or text editor, Ondaatje has gone to remarkable lengths to create a book that in both its form and contents pays homage to an art form and to one of its great practitioners. First, *The Conversations* as a title alludes to the first film that Walter Murch edited, a work noteworthy for its subtle, unusual combinations of image and sound, mystery and clarity, not to mention the Palme d'Or it was awarded at Cannes in 1974. As well, Ondaatje introduces his conversations with Murch so the reader always knows where and when the two met, as well as what they generally discussed before getting to the conversations themselves — which Ondaatje has edited to maintain the uniqueness of both voices, the pace of enthusiastic discussion, including as well the oral hesitations and idiosyncrasies of actual conversations between friends and peers. Furthermore, a constant pleasure in this text is the range and wit of the images that complement it, that indeed are as vital to its effect as every word on its pages: pulls from films, reprinted sequences of actual footage, script pages, reproductions of Walter Murch Sr.'s paintings, personal photos, editing charts, photo boards, a computer screen of notes, page one of Welles' famous memo on *Touch of Evil*, even edited versions of a poem by Elizabeth Bishop. Like an elegantly edited film, *The Conversations* leave much room for the reader to layer comments over images, to place Murch's and Ondaatje's insights and queries against statements from Coppola, Lucas, Rick Schmidlin, and Anthony Minghella; to savour the leaps and linkages that these discussions engender; to tend the desire to read, think, reread, and rethink. The final pleasure is the one that some readers will experience beyond the frame of the book itself, when they sit in a cinema and enjoy the invisible specifics that Ondaatje and Murch have revealed to them.