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2015-09-09

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/14115>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Murphy, Amanda; Aust, Rowan; Jackson, Vanessa; Ellis, John: 16mm Film Editing for Television: Using Filmed Simulation as a Hands-on Approach to TV History. In: *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*, Jg. 4 (2015-09-09), Nr. 7, S. 7–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/14115>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.18146/2213-0969.2015.jethc077>

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16MM FILM EDITING

USING FILMED SIMULATION AS A HANDS-ON APPROACH TO TV HISTORY

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Abstract: Two television editors who once worked with 16mm film discuss and explore their former working methods and demonstrate how to make a picture cut using film. The method of 'hands-on history' used for this simulation is discussed, as are the problems of presenting such data.

Keywords: Film editing, television technology, BBC, Steenbeck, television history, documentary, cutting room

1 INTRODUCTION

Analogue television production has largely given way to digital, and digital technologies are making the heritage of analogue production ever more available. But the meanings and formal habits of archival analogue television are not as obvious and self-evident as they were when originally produced. The old ways of making television were, we can now see, quite specific to their times. The European Research Council funded **ADAPT** project is tackling one aspect of this specificity, the normal methods of production and their typical technologies, in order to provide context for archival material. ADAPT uses the method of ‘hands-on history’¹ by reuniting retired television equipment with the professionals who once used these machines on a daily basis. Using an adaptation of current television documentary techniques, the resultant encounters will be recorded and the data will be both analysed by ADAPT researchers and made available (when open access systems allow) to other researchers.

These are not ‘reconstructions’ in the sense that they do not seek to reconstruct any specific past event. Nor do they seek to take the participants back in time to behave as they once did. ADAPT’s simulations are acts of memory for the participants, but they are memory events which are quite unlike those which take place in an interview. The participants are asked to demonstrate what they used to do regularly: how their machines worked, how they worked together, what their routines once were. They are active collaborators in the research, living again their physical and emotional encounters with machinery that they used to use on a daily basis. They exchange information with each other as well as the filmers observing them, often struggling to recall specific and intricate details of their past working habits. The gamble of the ADAPT project is that this technique will be able to produce a number of generalizable insights into the normal everyday production techniques which lay behind the thousands of hours of television material now becoming available from the archives.

This video essay is the first attempt to present this variant of hands-on history, using material from the first pilot simulation in August 2014. This one-day event brought together two editors of 16mm film who worked for the Birmingham regional BBC centre at Pebble Mill. The older of the two, Oliver White, had begun his career when the BBC was still using 35mm film. Normally working on a range of productions from news to documentary and fiction, his outstanding screen credit is Mike Leigh’s first film, the television drama ‘Nuts in May.’ Dawn Trotman was his assistant for over a year, and they still remain friends. Trotman went on to be the chief editor on the BBC’s long-running rural magazine series ‘Countryfile’ which evolved from a niche daytime series to become one of the staples of the BBC1 Sunday evening schedules.

Film editing using a Steenbeck flatbed editing table (or a similar machine) used to be typical for television in much of Western Europe. Most broadcasters still have such machines gathering dust somewhere in their buildings. 16mm film was the only practicable medium for many TV genres until the arrival of digital tape cameras, and film editing was the only way of dealing with their output until the development of reliable and high quality non-linear editing. The machines may remain, but what has disappeared completely is the film cutting room: the Steenbeck installed in a room with all the necessary ancillary equipment of picsync, trim bin, splicer, tape etc. We were able to find a last example at the London Film School (LSF). In addition, Jaime Estrada Torres of the LFS was able to provide some film and sound rushes that had not been completely edited for demonstration purposes. So we were able to provide White and Trotman with an approximation of conditions that had once been everyday.

We did not know what to expect from this first simulation, and neither did Trotman and White. They had probably planned and discussed what they would do, and Trotman had even brought a splicer in case we had not provided one, but the circumstances allowed them to improvise. Old working habits, even an outmoded style of joking or banter between men and women, began to reassert themselves. Technical terms litter their speech just as their hands and bodies rediscover old working habits. In this video essay we try to analyse this data to show the conditions in which television was once produced, the time demanded by the simple act of making an edit, the necessary skills which were

¹ Andreas Fickers and Annie van den Oever, ‘Experimental Media Archeology: A Plea for a New Direction’ in A. van den Oever, ed, *Technè/Technology*, University of Amsterdam Press, 2012, pp. 272–285.

once commonplace. This video essay also presents the struggle that we have in presenting this data, which should have a wide application beyond the television history research community. Verbal analysis can go some way to explicating the details, but in the end this is hands-on history where information has to be experienced as well as written.. or, at least, has to be read audiovisually.



Watch the video essay at: <https://vimeo.com/123212931>

Biographies

Amanda Murphy is Digital Producer on the **ADAPT** project. She oversees the filmed simulations that reunite technical TV personnel with the equipment they once worked with. Amanda is an established TV Producer and Executive Producer who has won RTS and Rose D'or awards for establishing hit series, Big Brother (she was Senior Producer of the first UK Big Brother in 2000), and Supernanny (she was the Founding Producer & Executive Producer for Channel 4 and on Supernanny USA for ABC in the United States). Amanda has produced many documentaries and prime time series and has served on RTS award panels. She is a visiting mentor and workshop tutor at NFTS and Brighton University, is leading the Producing Documentary element of the FTDP BA course at RHUL 2015-16 and is presently also developing new formats for television.

Rowan Aust researches editing technologies for the **ADAPT** PhD, looking into the transition from film editing to digital which has taken place across the television industry in recent decades. Prior to joining ADAPT, she worked in television production within both the BBC and the independent sector, specialising in arts news and documentaries.

Vanessa Jackson is a former BBC series producer, working mostly on documentary and factual series; she was part of the BAFTA Award winning team on *Coast*. Vanessa is now course director of the BA in Media and Communication, and degree leader of Television, at Birmingham City University, teaching practical television production skills to undergraduates. She is studying, part-time, for a practice based PhD at Royal Holloway, in television historiography, under the supervision of Professor John Ellis. Her research interests include the history of television, as well as the uses

of social media in community history projects. She has also published on the use of social media in enhancing student employability, and on student engagement.

John Ellis is Professor of Media Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London and formerly a TV documentary producer. He leads the ERC funded **ADAPT** project. He is the author of *Visible Fictions* (1982), *Seeing Things* (2000) and *Documentary, Witness and Self Revelation* (2012). He is chair of the British Universities' Film and Video Council (BUFVC) and past vice-chair of both the subject association MeCCSA and the producers' organisation PACT.