



Conrad Gonzalez

Editor of *The Sopranos*.

By Tom Soper

T.S.: *The Sopranos has been phenomenally successful. How has the editing contributed to that?*

There is a unique style in how we edit Sopranos. It's so dialogue driven, it's fortunate that it's so well written. The challenge is to have the dialogue just be crackling. We've devised a way to cut with very little air between sentences, so that you keep the dialogue going. We suck as much air out between lines as we can get away with, so that it doesn't feel that it's cut too tight, but it gives you room to play the dramatic pauses. This gives you a pace in the show that keeps you moving forward in the story, but also it keeps the dramatic intent of the scene. We collapse the dialogue. As you cut to someone listening, you collapse lines, pulling the air out.

T.S.: *Do you overlap lines?*

In rare instances we overlap lines. It has to be motivated. Usually that happens when things are heated up. Sometimes the actors do it during the production, but that contaminates the tracks. They don't record with two mics, so the off-camera character will sound like he's off-camera and in that instance you have to steal words, fudge it and basically undo the dirty overlap. Or if you can't do that, you have to do looping to create clean tracks. But, mostly, we just cut the air out and if you really studied it you'd realize that it's really pretty rapid, even though it feels normal.

T.S.: *Do you think that television is speeded up from real life?*

No, I find most episodic television is traditionally cut, not that it's loosely paced, but it's normally paced, but we have an accelerated pace. It's not noticeable, it feels truthful and I think all three editors figured this out independently. The other two editors are Sidney Wolinski and Bill Stitch.

T.S.: *Do you get together and discuss how the editing should go?*

Not now. In the first series we used to exchange tapes to see what each other was doing. And that's when we realized we had to up the tempo of the dialogue and through a sort of osmosis, by being aware of what we're each doing, we developed together.



T.S.: *Have you taken the same style to Kingpin, the series you're now editing?*

Yeah, but they have a different sensibility. They want it more traditional. There are more action moments.

T.S.: *Are there any general rules for editors approaching dialogue or action sequences?*

Well, when we do have violence in the Sopranos it's very explosive and it's very shocking usually. So you try to work the film so that it has the maximum impact. You want to create a shocking moment. Because in our show, you get so engaged in the characters and the colorful stories, that when we do depart to payback time, these sequences usually have to do with paying back, even when you know it's coming, they tend to be sudden, explosive moments.

T.S.: *So you don't go for a lot of drawn out tension, like a thriller technique?*

No, they're usually very sudden and with that in mind you want them to be as shocking as possible.

T.S.: *You've said that you find Close Ups over used in film and television. Is there any percentages you would advise between Close Ups, Medium shots, Masters?*

Well, the producers are insecure that the audience will be less involved if they don't see these big heads on screen. And I think they're doing themselves an injustice in that their programs aren't as dramatic as they could be if the editing was structured more properly. The reason I say that is because I've studied all the great filmmakers and they know how to use close ups. And the power of the close up is getting inside the characters' minds through their eyes. But it has maximum impact when you are selective about using those shots. Lets say that a director shoots a beautiful master. For the layman, that's a wide shot that gives you the geography of the scene and shows all the characters. Usually that's a really nice shot, beautifully lit.

And then you might get into coverage, which is your over-the-shoulder shots, what they call Cowboy shots - where they shoot somebody from the knees up. I love those shots because actors have a lot of expression not only with their faces, but with the body language. And so with close ups you've lost the characters' physicality, which to me can speak volumes. If you look at all the greats, a lot of them shoot with wide-angle lenses so even in close up you can see the background in great detail and they light for that and articulate the props. They've arranged the shot to be



artistic as well as having the face. A lot of what you see in television is a telephoto lens with a non-descript background out of focus. So my whole thing is I like looser coverage. I'd prefer not to have close ups unless it's dramatically germane to have a close up. I like Cowboy shots, loose close ups. If I have a scene with a nice master, a closer master, two-shots, a cowboy shot, then I would look for a moment to get really close and it better be in the script. If it's not dramatically correct to get in close, I like to cut loose and only go in for real impact. Then you're telling a better story and it penetrates deeper.

T.S.: *What other skills might be good for an editor to have? I know you used to sketch for instance.*

Yeah, I used to sketch and I also used to play the drums, so I definitely have a sense of rhythm and tempo. I think that's important. And I think editors have a strongly developed intuitive faculty. And you have to have a great deal of concentration. When people ask me what kind of work is editing, I describe it as being high-focus work, because you have to sit there for hours and hours until you satisfy yourself.

T.S.: *Writers are often told to "kill your babies", things that initially you're very attached to you have to let go and move beyond. Is that true for editors also?*

Absolutely. But I find that's more true for a writer/director that you're sitting side by side with. I write scripts also and I find it's much harder to kill my babies as a writer than as an editor. It's the editor's job is to be a bit more detached. But on Sopranos there's been some classic stuff that's been lifted out. David Chase doesn't always disclose his reasons for doing that, but he has a very clear vision of how the stories work. I realized very early in my career that sometimes some of the best scenes have to be lost because where they are in the film they bog it down completely, or they were repetitive information.

T.S.: *How would editing the Sopranos be without the digital technology that you use these days?*

Oh God, I think I'd die a thousand deaths because David Chase tries a lot of things. He really works it, doing so many re-cuts and they're extensive. He really does examine the possibilities. If I had to reconstitute everything back on film, it would not only be physically impossible but it would kill us. We'd have to order more prints so it could run through the gate in the projector.



But, one of the things that I did notice with the random access in the digital realm was that since the material was at your fingertips you would hastily try things and whatever impulses you had in your gut when you saw the dailies would get superseded by having all these choices. And though it would seem like I had an impulse when I hastily cut a scene together, I would find myself getting lost really quickly. What I was putting together with all this power to see anything and try anything was just a mess. It would take me longer to cut a scene because I wouldn't really know where I was going and my intuition wasn't really directing me. So, I remembered from cutting film, because it would take so long and was so mechanical (to re-look at a take you would have to reconstruct the take and that just took too long) I remembered just be patient and allow your impulses to govern what you do, know where you're going in your mind, feel the process. I had to slow myself down and I ended up cutting faster because most of the edits I then made worked.

T.S.: *You talk about intuition. Is there a way you can focus internally?*

There are a few things. When you feel yourself frustrated with the problems you'll always have with footage, continuity problems, the actor never says the line in the same place... What I do is just stop and go sit on the sofa, or make a call, just step away from it. We have a beautiful balcony and I get some ocean air, or I just do nothing and stare into space. Because it's such high focus work, I always compare it to someone who wants to run a marathon. You're not in any shape for that when you start. You have to build up the mental muscle. Every time I've been off work and I come back into the editing chair my powers of concentration has to be rebuilt again to be at the right pitch.

T.S.: *Is it useful to be at those really busy moments?*

I think so. Human beings are so adaptable. You do have to keep reaching. *Sopranos* you have to give your best effort. David has such a standard of excellence and at times it's mentally and physically painful. You're on your rear end all day. That's another thing you have to get up and move around now and then. That's very important.

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