
UNIT 4 EDITING AND CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING*

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you would be able to:

- Discuss editing as a technique and process,
- Describe how editing is related with construction of meaning,
- Explain construction of meaning in a cultural context with regard to gender and ideology, and
- Describe how ‘meaning’ and ideology are interlinked.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, we observed the relationship between ‘the film-maker and the filmed’ and the ethics involved in it. In the present unit, we are going to take this discussion further and will be discussing the aspect of Editing and the construction of meaning. In the process of film making, post-shooting of the film, the next process is of editing. Editing helps in sequencing and systematic arrangement of a film or program in a logical or defined manner. It helps to streamline the narrative or the vision objective with which the film was made. Editing is related with the construction of meaning of the narrative which we will be now reading in detail.

4.2 EDITING

We will now look at editing as a technique and a process and how it leads to construction of meaningful stories. Editing is about the selection, arrangement and timing of visual shots together. The shot is the most basic unit on which a film is made. Films before editing were single, stationary shots of daily events.

It is through editing that the process of selection of shots takes place. The film needs to be shot well for the shots to be strung together meaningfully to create a beautiful visual story. An editor is then supposed to:

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- a) Select a shot;
- b) Display in an order all the shots and arrange them one after the other; and
- c) Choose the length of time single shot will be shown for.

In 1889, film/motion picture was born and continued with single shot representations till 1903 when ability to cut from one shot to another was developed. It was around 1915 that we see the emergence of the term ‘editors’ (in English) for people who put the images together emphasizing on the important evaluative part of the work. But in other places different terms were used, like in France “monteurs”, in Spain “montadores” and Italy “montatori” all signifying the aspect of rearrangement of images.

For example, in the 1950s Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* where same story with four different versions were shown and Kurosawa used editing technique of pacing the story differently to show each one’s perspective. Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* in 1960 showed how pace in editing could be used to take the story forward and create suspense. In India, Renu Saluja in films like *Jaane bhi do Yaaron* (1983), *Parinda* (1989) or Ram Gopal Verma’s *Satya* (1998) heralded a new era of slick editing in Hindi cinema.

For fiction films the story is written in advance of the shooting. In documentary films, story emerges in editing of the film. Filming or shooting accumulates scenes from which a film can be edited. Horror requires great deal of knowledge about editing as suspense is created through fast pace changing of shots.

Process:

- a) Synchronization of shot visuals and sound;
- b) A log is organized which puts together details of the shots, summarizing and classifying each shot;
- c) Evaluation of all the shot material (many shots get rejected at this stage);
- d) Selected shots are then put together;
- e) How long a shot will be shown for (seconds/minutes) is decided and extra parts are deleted;
- f) If required, extra music and visuals are added to enhance the story’s narrative;
- g) Final selection happens;
- h) Movie post-selection of shots is screened for the production team.

Re-Editing in Soviet Cinema in the 1920s

The relationship between editing and culture has been explored in various researches. Yuri Tsivian (1996) in his essay ‘The Wise and the Wicked Game: Re-Editing and Soviet Film Culture of the 1920s in Film History’ explains about the term “re-editing” (peremontazh) as used in the Soviet film industry of the 1920s meaning: the reworking of a film to suit it to a country other than that of its origin. Apart from the ‘re-editing’ in the proper sense of the word, this term also referred to re-titling, altering the main title, changing character names and adding new scenes to pre-existing footage. Generally, re-editing is associated with censorship, and is regarded as part of the political history of film. Tsivian looks at it through the lens of film style and culture, and discusses two activities:

- 1) The reworking of foreign films for Soviet screens
- 2) The reworking of Soviet films for export.

In fact similar practices served different sections of the film industry (re-editing for export was part of production-or, rather, post production-performed, as a rule, at the studio where the prototype print had been made, whereas incoming films were re-edited by their distributors). Each practice was motivated by its own policy and by its own aesthetic logic. He explains in his article how the process of re-editing afforded early Soviet filmmakers and editors an opportunity to test ideas of foreignness and to articulate (as well as play with) the ways in which Soviet identities ‘should be portrayed’.

Even in present times, films are re-edited to suit the tastes’ of varied audiences worldwide. American films have to go through Censor board certification (based on ‘Indian sensibilities’) before they are screened in India and some Hollywood films are even re-edited for Asian audiences.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What is editing?

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4.2.1 Construction of Meaning

Let us now see how meaning is constructed in cinema. Watching a film seems simple-everybody looks at the image and the image leads to meaning. Film spectatorship builds on the connection between chosen features of the cinematic display like framing of the shot, its composition, background, lighting, colour, focus, costume, movement, etc. leading to the real world visual and social experience of the viewer. The viewer creates meaning only from what the framework of the film is offering and guiding him to create meaning for himself from the image.

Film viewing can be seen through three perspectives:

- a) Straight forward story telling where the film leads the viewer through the story;
- b) Consistency of the story is there but its treatment can bring out certain meanings, e.g. *Fargo* (1996) by Coen brothers or Kundan Shah’s *Jaane bhi do Yaaron* (1983) as satire is still considered a classic.
- c) Domination of style but coherence and realism in the post-modern narrative leave a lot of interpretation to the viewer. Wachowkis’ *Matrix* (1999) or Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010).

Burton (2005) states, “film viewing is a reflective process in which the spectator identifies not only with elements such as characters within the film, but also

with the process of looking that the film carries out through the camera. ... There is what is called 'subjectivity', in which the spectator appears to be the subject of the film's discourse, in which we inhabit the cinematic world – talking of both realism and narrative – as if by magic. We identify with the screen image and the screen world, although it is an illusion, a construction is socially produced, and is a manifestation of ideology." (pg. 189)

The psycho-analysis of viewing of films employs Freud's theory on fetishism, i.e. substitution of a specific object with the object of our desire. In early Western films simple symbolism was followed. The cowboys were given white and black hats which used to signify their characters as good (white) or bad (black). In the era of 1950s and 1960s in Hindi movies one can see the gender specific characterization of desirable traits of male and female characters. It could be a portrayal of their on-screen persona of ultimate beauty for men and women. It could also embody the ethical and morally correct behavior of the main protagonist. The viewer as a subject looks at the image as 'self' and embodies the main character of hero in the movie-romancing the pretty heroine, fighting the bad guys, upholding the morals or '*dharma*'. Cinema is often viewed as extension of our personalities mostly in ideal terms. For instance, in the Hindi film industry in Bombay, the Barjatya production house is known for idealistic portrayals and simple narratives. They made films like *Nadiya ke Paar* (1982), *Hum aapke hain Kaun* (1994), *Vivaah* (2006). These were mostly domestic family dramas around a love relationship and all characters portraying negative and positive roles were easily identifiable; there were no grey characters. These movies have a simple storyline narrated in a straight forward manner. Hindi movies like *Rockstar*, *Tamasha*, *Haider* and *Kabir Singh* have characters with shades of grey. The treatment of the films is post-modernist and leaves a lot to the interpretation by the viewer.

4.2.2 Construction of Meaning and Culture

In this section, we will look at the relationship between constructions of meaning in films with culture. The construction of meaning in a film is dependent on its cultural context. The cultural context could varied- rural or urban; gender based; class, caste and race as systems of stratification or any other. The cultural context plays a part in how a viewer as a subject creates meaning for himself in the process of viewing.

Content creators like actors, writers, producers and directors and other production personnel are located within a particular economic and organizational system. This system forms a part of their personal and professional lives. The social, legal, political and economic constraints within which they are live and function influence the narratives that they portray in cinema. Both producers and consumers are influenced by their spatial locations. Rockeach and Cantor (1986) observe, content is created within a social system. They contend that all over the world the power to create content for the mass media rests with a select few. These are generally people who usually occupy formal roles in bureaucratic structures. These 'communicators' are the most concrete controllers of media information resources- creating, gathering, processing and disseminating resources that have become fundamental to the conduct of societal, cultural, organizational and personal life' (pg. 15). As far as media consumers are concerned they are 'active individuals and members of social groupings who consume media products in

the context of their personal and social goals. And it is the media which connects audience to its various institutions' (pg. 17). For instance, in order to gain social and cultural acceptability and to create a balance the producers often add a positive character to the story if a character is shown as negative.

According to Booth (2000), Hindi film cinema is more dependent on social, historical and aesthetic context than most other commercial films. This is mostly owing to its audience. Hindi film audience is still quite conservative when it comes to themes and stories. Since the majority of the population is still living in villages they generally prefer simple stories. There has been some change in the recent times as seen in the works of a few young directors. These include directors like Anurag Kashyap (*Gangs of Wasseypur* in 2012) and Zoya Akhtar (*Gully Boy* in 2019). But their audience base is still small and is very niche and urban.

4.2.3 Meaning Construction and Gender

In this section we will examine the portrayal of gender and the gendered construction of meaning in cinema. Most films and television serials discourse on 'appropriate' behavior for women. The depiction of 'appropriate' behavior is generally patriarchal. For example, adultery by women is punished or is considered negative. Men on the other hand are given more leeway in terms of their behavior. Homosexuality is often made fun of in the narrative. The asymmetry of power between men and women in society is represented in cinema and television. The depiction of women in terms of their behavior and otherwise is derived from a patriarchal construction. The depiction of men too is derived from the heteronormative thus homosexual men are portrayed as deviants and are made fun of. The social construction of meaning in society in the context of gender is portrayed in cinema and television (Mulvey, 1975).

Stereotypes can also be seen as ways of referring to complex social relationships and portray power equations in the society. In the West the 'dumb blonde' stereotype portrayed in many Hollywood films refers to the subordinate position of women in western society. In *Feminine Mystique* (1964) Betty Friedan had criticized the ideological messages in American culture mostly conveyed through popular media images. The messages that they conveyed was one wherein women were fulfilled through housework, marriage, sexual lives, and children. An ideal woman must not aspire for a career, education or have political aspirations. She challenged the widely held belief that "fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949— the housewife-mother." (Page ix-xx).

Laura Mulvey gave the Male Gaze theory (Mulvey, 1975) women in the media are viewed from the eyes of a heterosexual man. Women are represented as passive objects of desire for men. In her analysis of the cinema's system of representation sees it as offering men the dominant spectator position, the implied viewer who is seen as the 'bearer of the look' while women are enclosed within their sphere, as they are given the position of identifying with objectified and passive images of themselves. This theory can be viewed in three ways:

- How men look at women
- How women look at themselves
- How women look at other women.

Typical examples of the male gaze include close-up shots of women from over a man's shoulder. Such shots are fixated on a woman's body. These scenes that occur frequently in a movie for example show a man actively observing a passive woman. The Male Gaze implies that the female viewer must experience the narrative secondarily, by identification with the male. It is the duty of the man to 'act' while woman just appears/exists. The dominant-male and dominated-female are depicted by representing the female as a passive object for the male gaze. The social depiction of the dominant male and the dominated female is accepted by the viewer as it is a part of patriarchal gendered norms. The mainstream cinema reinforces these stereotypes. The female gaze directed at themselves and at other women are also influenced by these stereotypes. The movies that feature the male gaze are considered to be more important from the point of view of audience-male and female- acceptability. This also translates into commercial success. The same is true for the telecast and depiction of sports. Only some sports are viewed as entertainment. Women athletes who participate in traditionally unacceptable sports like rugby, softball, volleyball, hockey, basketball are neglected. While 'socially acceptable' sports are sports like swimming, tennis, gymnastics, golf, figure skating. The former involve power and aggression and are thus ignored and neglected by the media. The latter are considered to be more acceptable and are telecast more often. The guiding principle is one of highest return on one's investment or the TRPs (television rating points). The male dominated institutions like the movies, advertising and television thus influence and determine what is "natural and normal" in society (Mulvey, 1975).

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Explain the Male gaze theory.

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4.2.4 Media, Meaning and Ideology

As we have discussed in the preceding section media depicts the cultural model. It upholds the patriarchal norms. In this section we will discuss the role of ideology in the construction of meaning in media and films. Media organizations are varied and complex. Media upholds a cultural model, essentially a Durkheimian model in which the normative integration of a society is important. Anomie endangers this integration. For Durkheim, religion and the state act as symbols of the collectivity. They reinforce a collective consciousness and a solidarity. They create a shared identity that reinforces and reproduces the normative integration. The media helps in promoting this solidarity amongst diverse regional and cultural groups in various ways. It could be through the use of language or cultural symbolism (Mc Cormac 1986). For example, the telecast of the Independence Day speech on 15 August by the Indian Prime Minister or the 4 July fireworks in the United States of America or the Olympic ceremony help reinforce a common identity through the use of rhetoric.

According to Burton the relationship between the media and society and the construction of meaning is through various means. These are (Burton, 2005, pg. 6):

- a) Media institutions and the production of cultural goods
- b) Regulations by the government and those institutions themselves,
- c) The relationship between representations and conditions of production and consumption with reference to media texts, and
- d) The consumption of culture with regard to social and cultural inequalities.

Schudson observes from 1972 to 1985 media sociology has developed in three directions. It has been neo-Weberian, with an emphasis on concepts of organization, profession or occupation, production and market; neo-Marxist, with attention to the concept of hegemony and ideology and neo-Durkheimian with a focus on concepts of ritual and culture. Neo-Weberian examine the producers of culture, from the point of view of the market. Content which sells is produced. The neo-Marxists control the symbolic content of culture. Journalists share the world view of the owners and use gatekeeping and agenda setting to keep items which are harmful to elites out of the media agenda and thus voluntarily spread the dominant ideology. This perspective is also known as the Dominant Ideology, or Hegemonic perspective on the media. Neo-Durkheimian position holds that the experience of audiences with the mass media provides people a sense of connection to the collective whole that few other institutions today can rival. (p.46) Media events also create a sense of 'community' (e.g. Olympics ceremony, funeral of Mahatma Gandhi/Nehru, oath taking ceremonies, etc.).

Critical approach in media views the effects of mass media on society. They argue that competing points of view provide an illusion of openness. In actuality it is confined or limited to an agenda or 'overall discourse'. This sets the limits to what shall or what shall not, be discussed by society. The term 'agenda setting' is often used to refer to a process where the terms of reference for the debate are fixed to suit the interests of the powerful. For example, media is often accused of showing urban stories from Delhi and Mumbai. As in 2017, according to the World Bank collection of development indicators, 66.46 % of the population in India is rural. Control for the content rests with organizations responsible for manufacturing and transmitting cultural products. They are obviously urban elite and dominate the bureaucratic structures of the media organizations.

Frankfurt School critical approach theorist Stuart Hall has talked about how the ruling class retains its control over other groups' and creates 'consensus within society. Media often becomes a tool which helps in reproducing dominant ideology. The dominant ideology which they express through images and words in popular mass media, is a dominant way by which the powerful secure their position. Horkheimer and Adorno in their work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) talk about how art and culture forms become increasingly standardized and commodified as films, TV and radio. They do not challenge an individual's fantasies or intelligence. They presuppose and foster the lack of imagination and spontaneity of the passive spectator and induce conformity. The culture industry is suspicious of the new does not want to experiment. The culture industry converts individuals into consumers. It systematically conveys the message that the consumers cannot conceive of themselves in any other way. As Adorno states it

impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves. (Larrain, 1994).

Horkheimer and Adorno, fresh from the political and economic totalitarianism of Nazi Germany, discovered a new form of tyranny in the United States in the form of Hollywood and the cultural industry. The cultural industry produces a standardised, homogenised mass culture in which the market, like a lava flow, consumes everything of value in its path. Citizens are turned into consumers. Culture and entertainment are fused. Consumers are classified and labelled in the same way as commodities are. The media, and especially the new medium of television (they were writing originally on these matters in 1944) provide a constant and de-differentiating flow: of repetitive, predictable, smug and superficial programming. Real life is becoming indistinguishable from its mediation in film and television. All is false: pleasure, happiness, spectacle, laughter, sexuality, individuality. Amusement is structured according to the rhythms demanded by the entertainment factory- the media.

Kapsis (1986, p. 162) quotes Gans (1957):

“The making of a picture itself can be viewed as a decision making process. As each creator applies his audience image in the decisions that have to be made, he is “representing” some of the publics who will eventually see the movie. The completed picture is a combination of the decisions made by its creators, and also a compromise or perhaps more correctly, a ‘negotiated synthesis,’ of their individual audience images. However, this synthesis takes place within a power structure, and the final decisions are often made by studio executives who point the compromise in a direction that seems to assure the largest box office (p.318).

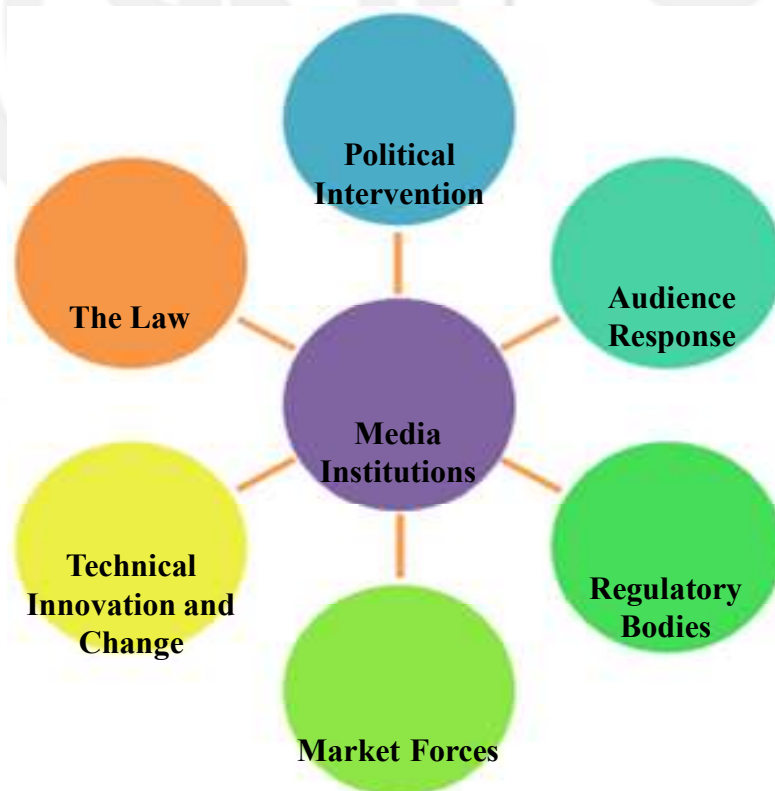


Figure 4.1: Dependency and Pressures over media (Burton, 2005)

The film industry is now composed of corporate firms and trade associations. Firms are of two types, Major corporations which control a large part of the market, generally produce, distribute and exhibit their own films. Independents are smaller companies that limit themselves to only one or two of these functions. They regulate institutions and try to make media content conform to their ideal social order. The most active public organizations are the state censorship boards and federal propaganda agencies. The same control is visible in advertising too. Advertising in capitalist economies is a major source of revenue. These large corporations influence content and development. People are encouraged to identify themselves with brands (Pepsi generation), based on what they consume rather than what they produce. In some countries, where mass media is state controlled it becomes instrument of the government. In countries where private companies own mass media the influence of the market forces of capitalism dictate policy and profits are aimed for at the cost of information.

Television newsrooms have a hierarchy of specialized staff divided into:

- i) News-gatherers (journalists who work in the field) and
- ii) News processors (like editors and sub editors) who filter the news/information and decide what goes where.

The story is written by the sub-editor and duty editor supervises the compilation of the bulletin, fixes the running order of the film and gives it shape. (Hood 1972). Because all of these media workers tend to be drawn from certain class background (urban middle class) their view of their judgement of events and their newsworthiness gets affected. The shots which get included with the story are selected by the film editor. The day's story is decided by the editor, the day's coverage, briefs' about the story, camera crew and reporters' are dedicated to different news stories.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) What is culture industry?

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4.3 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed editing as a technique and process for films. We looked at how meaning is constructed in the narrative in a cultural context and gets affected by various external factors. We also observed how gender and ideology both play a big role in the construction of meaning and affect media in its various forms and mediums.

4.4 KEYWORDS

Editing: It is about the selection, arrangement and timing of visual shots together.

Shot: Shot is the most basic unit on which a film is built.

Male Gaze theory: Laura Mulvey gave this theory and observed that films offer men the dominant spectator position, the implied viewer who is seen as the 'bearer of the look' while women are given the position of identifying with objectified and passive images of themselves.

Culture industry: It produces a standardised, homogenised mass culture in which the market, consumes everything considered valuable in society.

4.5 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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4.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISE

Check Your Progress 1

Editing is about the selection, arrangement and timing of visual shots together, and shot is the most basic unit on which a film is built.

Check Your Progress 2

Laura Mulvey gave the Male Gaze theory (1975) and in her analysis of the cinema's system of representation sees it as offering men the dominant spectator position, the implied viewer while women are given the position of identifying with objectified and passive images of themselves.

Check Your Progress 3

Culture industry produces a standardised, homogenised mass culture in which the market, consumes everything considered valuable in society.

