

THE ART OF EDITING

MA Editing & Post-Production

Critical Analysis

Date: 05.05.2024

Short film: The Wilderness

Link: <https://youtu.be/l4e3xwWS3M4>

Stop motion animation: Squirrel Island

Link: <https://youtu.be/737RiimxKTY>

Viktor, Juhasz-Dora

Student Number: 4237300

THE WILDERNESS (*Edit Stock footage*)

Introduction

I choose *The Wilderness* stock footage for this assessment because, given the impact of *Raging Bull* (1980 - M. Scorsese) on film history, I felt it was a great challenge to see how far I can go down that road as a student. Upon initial review of the received clips, the framing and composition appeared rich enough to make me want to try out certain editing techniques.

Summary

Based on the script *The Wilderness* is about a boxer who gets distracted during a boxing match by his WWI memories. In my reading the core of the story is how one struggles with PTSD and as a survivor tries to find meaning and his place back in the everyday of a normal life when he cannot forget witnessing the most horrifying nature of mankind.

Apart from the referee's counting or the coach's corner talk, there is no dialogue in the script. Luckily the footage seemed more complex and provided more possibilities for the short film than the script or the storyboard. I only used them as a suggestion, to follow the protagonist character's arch, how he turns around a lost match and comes out victorious not against his opponent, but against his demons.

Analysis

I was sure that the film's limited dialogue will emphasize the importance of audio in driving the narrative. We can still maintain a realistic and engaging atmosphere even with the absence of dialogue, since there is not much talk during a boxing match. The sound and music can also work here in a poetic way, to effectively reflect the drama and tension between past and present, the moral ambiguity, and emotional journey of the characters, guiding the audience through the visual narrative without words.

I started the movie with the sound of heavy breathing. I felt what everyone can associate with, if we think about professional sport, is the physical exertion. As a shared experience it immediately draws you in and connects you with the boxer who we slowly see appearing from the darkness. Still gasping for breath, we find him alone, staring into the camera, throwing punches at the audience. This perspective is captivating since we're not only observing his preparing, the struggle, the determination, the fire in his eyes, but we stand opposite him, making him feel more alone, more isolated. As the start of the film, our relationship with him is non-existent, first we need to follow him to take his side on his journey. After his last punch I used the sound of an explosion, to foreshadow the darkness of

the war-torn heritage of the protagonist, preparing the audience, that there is another layer under the reality of what they will see.

This transitions us to his outside training. We see him jogging in the park, peacefully surrounded by the atmosphere of nature. The camera follows him, we are behind him, which creates the feeling that now we are on his side. I wanted to show in a little montage how he prepares for the fight, as he trains in a peaceful environment, compared to the coldness of the boxing ring, that feels closer to the trenches. I used the coach's inspirational speech, showing how it echoes in the boxer during his training session. I also used an emotional background music to elevate the voice, and to help the audience drift into the boxing scene. As Gary Richardson, the sound engineer of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998 – S. Spielberg) said: "With music you've got something to hold onto, the score is often used as a life raft, you have an emotional moment in a movie, and the score comes in, it has something to hold onto."

I found it important to show the coach during the training. I think it's the audience can register information easier, if they see who speaks. The boxer not only fights with his opponent, but with his past as well. He seems lost and alone, so I wanted to give a face to the only person who appears next to him, who he can count on in his life.

First, we saw the boxer throwing punches at us, like he is in fight with the whole world:



Now that we joined him at training, the coach is talking to us, we are in this fight together with the boxer. Before the coach's voice lead us back to the match, for the final training shot in this montage I used the one where

we see the boxer in front of a huge brick wall. I started with a close up zooming slowly back, cutting it before the top of the wall reveals, making it look endless, and the boxer tiny. I built up this montage so that first we see the boxer's back that pulls us in to his story, later we see close ups of him showing his power, his capabilities combined with the sound of the coach and just before the actual fight we see him small with this huge wall behind him, like the past he needs to bring down to be free.

We still hear the voice of the coach when we slowly fade into the ring. I chose this shot, since with the slow movement from the floor and the shoes of the boxers to the arms it creates a natural establishing shot, helping the audience place the fight in the ring without any forced cuts. I positioned the background music so that the dramatic change comes when the punches start raining down on the boxer. I created a row of jump cuts only showing the hits, the moment of impact just to create the feeling that he is powerless and have no chance to respond, to defend himself. We can find similar idea in the movie *Snatch* (2000 – G. Ritchie), where at 1:32:50 the character played by Brad Pitt being punched countless times in a few seconds. With these cuts I was able to maintain continuity while still creating a sense of disruption in the viewer, by the discontinuity of flow in time and space.

After the boxer receives a left hook, I used slow motion for him and for the coach's reaction shot. This elevates the hit, creating a seriousness around the damage. Also, by using slow motion for both action and reaction shot, I can avoid to *upset the viewer's mental map and require an unnecessary cognitive correction manoeuvre*. With continuity editing I was able to blend multiple camera shots into a consistent narrative, where the audience becomes more subjective and less objective, as they are able to see the impact from inside and be more emotionally affected by it.

For a moment, the boxer tries to bring himself back to the game, but when he looks up, we understand how lost he is, how unnatural his behaviour is. We can hear his heavy breathing, that isolates him even more, he is inside his head, we can't hear the coach, or the noise of the boxing ring, there is no music, no life raft, he is alone, he is already gone. And as the camera tilts upwards, for seconds I cut to the barbwire shot. With the previously used explosion sounds and this WWI barbwire around the boxing ring, I'm slowly injecting the layer that lies beneath the surface. Before this the timing and rhythm of the shots were fast, now it's all a blur, there is no rhythm, nor in audio nor in video. As he has this out of body experience, he gets a huge hit, which is immediately followed by a longer shot of the barbwired ropes around the ring, then darkness, and black out. I used mainly silence here, to emphasize the exhaustion of the boxer it also helped to create a sense of anticipation before the knock out.

Slowly fading in we find ourselves back to the training ground. This training is not like the one we saw at the beginning. The focus is not about preparing for the fight, it is more like an escape. The sound of nature in the park appears with a bigger contrast now, then when we first saw him jogging at the start. After showing the barbwire and the brutality of the fight, it is more about the peaceful days before the war. We see him again in front of the brick wall, but this time it is a closer shot, he seems much bigger, showing that as long as he stays in the fight, he gets stronger. I wanted to use contrast editing, so the peaceful scene would feel more pleasant, while the fight in the ring would be seen more violent. With this technique showing actual war scenes was unnecessary, since juxtaposing the two scenes, the boxing match would represent the same level of shock in the viewer.

We got back to the ring, where the boxer is alone, facing his demons, the memory of the war that clings to the present, accompanied by the sound of a crow, shadowing death over him. Following this we see for the first time the opponent, in a super close up, filling the frame like a supervillain. Using a match cut I framed the protagonist in a similar way, like the close ups of the eyes before the shootout in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966 – S. Leone).



With this shot the opponent feels demonic while the protagonist appears as a heroic character. With a cut away to an objective perspective I hoped to bring back the audience to the reality of a boxing match. I decided that the lead to the main knock out should be only seen by the boxer's POV, showing only the opponent throwing punches towards the camera. By taking the protagonist out of the picture during the fight, I eliminated his involvement, showing his distance from reality. We are the ones facing it.

After a right hook, I chose to show the boxer from behind from a lower angle, which gives the hit a much bigger intensity. This is the moment where past and present comes together, as the protagonist falls back to the barbwired ropes. This was not just a hazy nightmare, this is his reality, a shocking acceptance of the package he has to carry on since the war.

I mixed two different sounds, although both of them empathetic sounds, they come from different place. I used an underwater sound layer just to muffle every other sound, to bring the viewer closer to the experience of the boxer. Films usually use a tinnitus sound effect, representing a ringing ear like after the explosion during the D-Day scene in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998 – S. Spielberg). I chose the underwater numbing effect as I really loved how *Danny Boyle* used it in *Trainspotting* (1996), when the main character, Renton has to dive in a toilet, to retrieve his lost drugs, and all the noises he hears, even the music is muffled like he hears everything from underwater. This sound effect expresses more damage in my opinion than the tinnitus high pitch sound, since the underwater represent the loss of breath, that sinking feeling, where the whole body is affected not just the ear. It is an important effect on the viewer, since not only they see what is happening, they hear the same way as the main character.

I also slowed down the picture doubling the effect. I used the sound of war, which worked perfectly with the scared look of the boxer after the punch. I dimmed the lighting here and increased the contrast, as if the darkness is about to swallow him. As he gets back form the barbwired ropes the effect fades out, and he is back to reality. I kept the underwater sound effect and used slow motion to represent that although he is physically back in the fight, if he is not saved by the bell, he only has seconds left. The cuts are deeply overlaying into each other, this time the fight seems like a timeless, endless dance with the death, until the opponent finds another left hook, when we hear a gun shot and the drop of a shell as the boxer hits the ground.

The following two scenes, I used jump cuts for seconds in a non-chronological order. I wanted to represent the power of this final impact, showing his body trembling, shivering as he is trying to stand up without any coordination. With these rapid cuts I was able to show what he feels, at one point he is up, another one, he is down, he thinks he moves forward, but falls back again. These fast cuts are not unknown to the contemporary viewer. Usually, the duration of the what we see in a movie corresponds to the duration of the represented event. Unless we're talking about sci-fi films, movies only change time speed if they want to represent how we should feel about that time. Jump cuts can show the speed of time, and can create playfulness, like the waiting for a customer scene in *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986). In my case, I wanted to show how time breaks up for the boxer.

Today, most films are cut more rapidly than at any other time in film history. The average shot length between 1930-1960 was about 8-11 seconds, and till the end of the century it dropped just between 3-6 seconds. As David Bordwell says: "When shots are so short, when establishing shots are brief

or postponed or non-existent, the eyelines and angles in a dialogue must be even more unambiguous, and the axis of action must be strictly respected.”

Since boxing combined with PTSD, distorts the protagonist’s reality, I justified using these rapid cuts, so I could bring the viewer closer to his experience. One of the finest examples of this rapid cutting is in *Fight Club* (1999- D. Fincher). The using of these short shots was booming in the late nineties and early 2000s, mainly helped by the wide usage of the digital technology among viewers and directors as well.

As the referee starts counting, I used a red tone effect on the last five jump cuts, representing the force and fire that is inside the boxer, that holds that last resource that makes him stand up again. During this scene, I used the sound of an air raid and anti-aircraft siren. The purpose behind this was to show how while lying on the floor he has to find his safe place, his bunker to escape from the bombs, to survive, to be able to carry out a counter-attack.

He stands up, survives the round and gets in his corner with his coach. This is the turning point, this the only time we see the boxer with someone, who cares for him, who believes in him. Showing this makes us believe that if he manages to keep himself in reality, he has a chance to survive. To elevate the coach’s words, I cut an uplifting background music under his speech that takes over as the last round approaches. For a few seconds I cut back to the moment when he got knocked out, we see the boxer lying on the floor. We heard the coach saying “that was good” and now we understand that the fight is not about winning, the fight is about standing up, no matter how hard life knocks you down. I found it important to show that there is someone who we see taking care of the boxer, that in the present, kindness is not lost, there’s a steady point he can count on.

This support is what gives him power to continue. On the opening shot of this sequence the back of the boxer fills out the whole frame, he is like a giant blocking out his opponent. As the supporting background music climaxes the boxer gives everything, he has left in him. I was hesitant at first to use crowd noise at this point, but the silent happiness of the coach followed only with the background music just did not work. Knowing there was a scream coming in the closing scene, I needed human emotions clearly represented and it felt only music would not be enough I needed either better shots, or acting or dialogue, something realistic, that comes from the scene and reacts to the action.

I think the final scream, that takes us back to the training ground, is not about the anger over losing this match. It’s more like a scream that shows how much work he has done, how he was able to fight his past, and

how he will keep going to fight, not just in the ring but outside of it, to keep his memories and demons where they belong.

The final scene portrayed a touching message of resilience, how losing a fight doesn't mean giving up, rather it's about standing up to move ahead, just like in *Rocky* (1976 – J. G. Avildsen). Both our boxer and Rocky lost the game, but in our case the boxer won his life back, and Rocky has the love and support of a girl.

The essence of the fight was not in triumph, but in the struggle itself.

Conclusion

I tried to compensate the absence of dialogue with the use of sound and music, to be able to create an emotionally compelling short film based on the script. The most challenging part was to create the sound. If I could do it again, I would look deeper into sfx libraries to support the footage better.

My aim was to show the boxer's past, his war memories, his inner fight through only sound while showing visually how the present is distorted as he struggles with PTSD. Creating this contrast was crucial just to signify the importance of this subject.

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