JOHN PURCELL

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dialogue editing for motion pictures

A Guide to the Invisible Art



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Dialogue Editing for Motion Pictures

In memory of Grant Maxwell, 1958–2006

Foreword

I really like this book.

But, I am getting ahead of myself.

To begin, I am a rerecording engineer, more commonly known as a mixer. My job is to take all of the assorted sounds—dialogue, sound effects, music, Foleys—that have been painstakingly assembled for the film's track and create a final, smooth, and hopefully moving and emotional soundtrack that you will hear in the theater or on your TV.

I've been doing it for some thirty years now, and I've mixed just about every kind of film or video you can imagine, from student films to big-budget studio features, commercials, video games, documentaries, on and on. One thing that I have learned through all of this is that in any kind of project, every word is important. The loss of a single word in a sentence, sometimes a single syllable, can make the entire sentence unintelligible. Worse still, it can often cause the loss of the next few sentences as the odd audience member furrows his brow and says, "What did she say?"

This brings us to this book's subject, dialogue editing. The job of the dialogue editor is to make every single word as clear as possible. He or she has to remove any and all distractions, noises, or mumbles to make the words as clear as a bell. All of this preparation of the myriad bits and pieces of production sound and ADR is for the mix, that is, for me. Since my time is quite expensive and, usually limited, everyone wants me to spend as little time as possible fixing dialogue problems, and most of my time making it sound beautiful. Remember, every word is important!

This is why I think that dialogue editing is usually the most important part of preparing for a mix. I find it ironic that if the work is done well—if the dialogue sounds clean and natural—the dialogue editor's work is usually

Note: Dominick Tavella mixes films in New York. Among his many works are Romance & Cigarettes, State and Main, Chocolat, Far and Away, The Royal Tenenbaums, and Vanity Fair. He received an Oscar® and a BAFTA Award for his work on Chicago.

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invisible. Directors and editors expect to hear the words they heard on the set and in the cutting room. It's very easy to take notice of added sound effects, or Foleys, or music, because these things are added after the fact; they are embellishments, icing. But the dialogue editing is often not noticed unless there is a problem. Great dialogue editing is invisible, but its importance cannot be overstressed. Remember, every word is important!

This book is filled with lots of useful information and advice, but there are a few things that I particularly like about it. I like how John stresses the human factor. The interactions among the different editorial departments, and even among your own crew, can often make the difference between a great job and a lousy one. Listen to him on this.

Another thing I like is this author's approach to the "rules" of editing. If you ask just about any true craftsperson—editor, plumber, designer, or carpenter—he or she will tell you that each job is unique. There may be general approaches to solving a particular dilemma, but each job, even each element of a job, will have different needs from the last one. You have to listen to the work; it will tell you what it wants. John knows this.

So, this is more than a "how-to" book, as it should be. It's also a "why" book. The technical part of any of the film crafts, though daunting, is the easiest to teach. It is much more difficult to explain the subtleties, the "feeling" of when it's right, the elusive search for why it's wrong. This is the agonizing, keep-you-up-at-night part of the job. John does a great job of describing this, and his passion shines through.

As filmmakers, we are creating an artificial world, and asking an audience to pretend along with us for a couple of hours. This is a fragile construct, and we have to be careful to never show the process, never break the illusion of a real space in a real world, by inadvertently revealing the details behind the facade. The dialogue has to be as perfect as we can make it, or we risk losing the audience.

I really like this book. I think every aspiring, or practicing, editor can find a lot of good in these pages. Heck, even I learned a lot.

So enjoy this book, and remember, it's a map, not a turn-by-turn set of instructions. It should help you find your own way. Enjoy the journey, and I'll see you at the movies.

Dominick Tavella

Preface

There are many books about film sound. There are books about sound theory and the role sound plays in a movie. There are practical books that teach you about sound editing, sound design, or sound equipment. There are books for film music composers or those who wish they were composers. And there are books about Foley, sound effects, music editing, and mixing. But you do not hear of many books about dialogue editing.

Every live-action film contains dialogue. Lots of it. After all, that's how most films tell their stories. When you, the dialogue editor, receive a locked film from the picture editor, the sound is a mess. It sounds bad, it's unorganized, it doesn't "act" like a movie. You have just a few weeks to untangle this mess, to create a believable cinematic flow, and to remove the artifacts of the film-making process. You have to fix what you can and rerecord the rest. During this short time you work with a film's dialogue tracks, you must get to know them, cajole and seduce them, and get them to behave the way you want—this is dialogue editing.

This is a book for people who need to edit production sound for dramatic films but were never taught how to do it. Dialogue editing operates under a different set of rules than music editing or effects editing. There are some things you've simply got to know, but unless you're fortunate enough to work with more experienced editors in many different situations, there's no one to teach you the process. This book offers you that education.

Who Can Benefit from Reading This Book?

- · Anyone who wants to edit dialogue tracks in a professional manner
- Sound editors who want to better understand dialogue editing and how it fits in with the rest of the postproduction process
- Dialogue editors who want to run a more organized cutting room
- Film students and students of motion picture sound engineering
- · Picture editors and assistants
- Anyone who sees dialogue editing as a boring, tedious chore and who could use a bit of inspiration

- Amateur video enthusiasts who want their movies to sound better
- Anyone who's wondered, "How do they do that?"

How a film was shot, recorded, and edited will dramatically influence the dialogue editing process. Much of this book, then, deals with things that at first glance don't appear to be dialogue. There's a lot of talk in this book about *process*—the overview of how things work. You'll find technical overviews of motion picture postproduction: film, tape, NTSC, PAL, 24p, and more. There are summaries of film picture editing, OMF manipulation, and ADR management.

You'll also find a lot of discussion about organization. If you keep your work organized, you stand a better chance of learning what the tracks are trying to tell you. A well-run dialogue editing room helps to make the process rewarding and fun rather than the dreary, repetitive, nerdy chore that some allege it to be.

There's a section in this book that deals with managing your time and another about getting along with the picture department. Brilliant tracks and subtle manipulations aren't enough when you're miserably behind schedule or if you can't get what you need from the picture cutting room.

A Note about Word Choice

In an attempt to make this book as universal as possible, I've included Englishlanguage professional film terms used the world over. And in an attempt to be as fair a possible, I've used relatively interchangeable words, well, interchangeably. This is meant to prevent confusion, but like all good intentions, it may backfire.

For example, you'll find the terms "ADR," "looping," and "postsync" used almost indiscriminately. I do explain that *looping* is a specific process that is not the same as ADR (see Chapter 15). However, so many people use ADR, looping, and postsync interchangeably that once you know the difference between them, you might as well use the word that most easily rolls off your tongue and is acceptable to your colleagues. Sometimes, tilting at linguistic windmills is pointless.

You'll notice that I cavalierly exchange "sound designer" with "supervising sound editor" and "sound supervisor." These titles do not mean the same thing, but depending on the crowd you run with, it is difficult to tell one term from the other. Out of fairness, I have sprinkled a bit of one term here and a

bit of another term there. In general, I use *supervising sound editor* to describe the person in charge of a film's postproduction sound.

A "mix" (New York) and a "dub" (Los Angeles and London) are the same thing. From lifelong habit, I use *mix*, try though I do to be fair to the *dub* people. Practices vary by location, each film culture having its own system and terminology. The techniques and jargon described in this book have their roots in New York, but there's a smattering of Europe, Los Angeles, and the rest-of-the-world tossed in.

Avid's not the only picture editing workstation in the world. But let's face it, Avid currently maintains a near monopoly, with Apple's Final Cut Pro still a distant second in market penetration. It seems silly to constantly write "Avid or Final Cut Pro or whatever else you use to cut picture," so often I use *Avid* to mean "picture editing workstation." It's easier to read.

In addition, this book is very Pro Tools-centric. Examples must be described and shown on *something*, and Pro Tools' omnipresence makes it an obvious choice. Still, all this DigiSpeak isn't meant as an endorsement, and this is *not* meant to be a book about editing dialogue using the Pro Tools products. The examples that specifically mention Pro Tools can be transferred easily to other workstations.

I've tossed around the terms "location mixer," "sound recordist," "location recordist," and the like to mean "the person responsible for the location sound recording." This rather clumsy randomizing of terms is due to two problems faced in writing a book like this. First, depending on where you live and how big your production is, a different term is used for the role. Second, wanting to keep you, the reader, on my side, I've generally tried to avoid gender-specific terms such as "soundman." All of this results in occasionally inelegant prose, but you're here for the information, not the eloquence.

Finally, on the topic of gender-specific language, please forgive me my use of *he, his, she, her,* and so on, or if it looks like I'm giving the guys too many of the good positions. I've tried to randomly distribute the jobs in my make-believe productions, and I alternate between *he* and *she* with military regularity. But someone may be put off, either by my goofy inconsistency or by my failure to accurately balance the use of gender pronouns. It's not that I didn't try.

Key Words

Every book like this has a glossary of relevant terms. There are many, many excellent books about film sound that offer outstanding definitions of

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"industry" terms, a few of which are cited at the beginning of the glossary. I won't try to top those. However, some words that apply specifically to dialogue editing are written in **boldface** when they first appear in the text. These words are defined or discussed in the glossary at the end of the book.

This book's objective is to tell you about those things you can't figure out on your own. Dialogue editing may be misunderstood, but it's not magic. If you don't lose sight of the needs of the film and stick to a few rules, you can create brilliant, interesting dialogue. This is a practical guide for getting the most from dialogue tracks, telling a story with production recordings, and making a huge invisible contribution to the narrative success of any film.

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As much as it's fun to think otherwise, it's impossible to write a book like this without help. Having said that, I'd like to acknowledge the following people.

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CHAPTER 1

What Is Dialogue Editing?

Dialogue editing is one of the least understood aspects of motion picture sound postproduction. Most people have some grasp of the roles of sound effects editors or backgrounds editors or music editors. To most moviegoers, Foley is a charming—yet perhaps a bit silly—process, and it's not hard to understand it once you've seen it. Mixing, too, is a pretty straightforward concept, even if massively complex in actual fact. Few non-pros, however, understand dialogue editing. "Does that mean you take out the dirty words?" is a common response when I tell someone what I do for a living.

A dialogue editor is responsible for every sound that was recorded during the shoot. She takes the more or less finished film from the picture editor, makes sense of the edited sounds, organizes them, finds out what works and what doesn't. The dialogue editor wades through the outtakes to find better articulations, quieter passages, sexier breaths, and less vulgar lip smacks. He replaces washy wide-shot sound with clean close-up takes, establishes depth in otherwise flat scenes, and edits tracks for maximum punch and clarity.

Dialogue editors work to remove the filmmaking from the film. Dolly squeaks, camera noise, crew rustling, and light buzzes must go; otherwise, the magic of the movies is compromised. These editors help present the actors in their best light, quieting dentures, eliminating belly noises, and sobering slurred syllables. And when the production sound can't be saved, the dialogue editor is involved in the ADR process, that is, the rerecording of voices in the studio to replace problem field recordings or to beef up performances.

Dialogue editing is all of these things and more. Dialogue is what makes most films work. The dialogue editor makes the dialogue work.

There are many kinds of films. Some are driven largely by juxtaposition of images, most notably silent classics such as *Potemkin* and *Alexander Nevsky*. Others use a language of camera motion or composition to speak to the viewer, obvious examples being *Citizen Kane* and *Besieged*. Still others use color or shading to make a point. Among the many examples of color in

storytelling are films as diverse as *Juliet of the Spirits, Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, and *The Corpse Bride*. Many films rely heavily on music to express themselves, while others manipulate through sound effects. Filmmakers concoct a personal stew of visual and aural tools to reveal or enhance a story.

But the overwhelming majority of narrative films rely on the spoken word to tell the story, develop characters, and touch hearts. The modern motion picture has more in common with theater than with early montage cinema, in that only a minority of current (especially commercial) films trust image over dialogue. However cinematic or structurally sophisticated, most of the films you work on will tell their story through dialogue.

You can eliminate all (or most) of the sound effects in a scene, the backgrounds can largely be muted, or the music can be dumped. The scene will still work. But for the most part you can't eliminate the dialogue track, even for a moment. The dialogue holds key story information as well as the **room tone**, the "air" that defines the location of the scene.

We've grown so accustomed to the language of film that blind acceptance of the implausible is the norm. After a century of tutoring in film language, we accept the convention of cutting from one speaking character to another and we interpret this unnatural collision as a "conversation." We have no trouble accepting the abnormal **phone split**, in which we hear both sides of a telephone conversation. And we don't shake our heads in disbelief when listening to a conversation in a distant long shot—sounds we rationally know would be out of bounds to us. We *want* to believe that what we see and hear is very real. Only something that patently breaks the rules of the language of film will shatter our confidence and make us question the reality we've been accepting.

Most people know that films are rarely shot in order but rather in a sequence determined by location and set availability, actors' schedules, exotic equipment rental coordination, and (hopefully) overall efficiency. Even within scenes, the shot sequences may not be in script order. Don't be surprised when you find that two people who are apparently talking to each other on screen were not together when the close-ups were shot. This shooting discontinuity makes the dialogue editor's job even more crucial. We must do everything in our power to convince the viewer that these characters actually were talking with each other; we must remove any impediments to the audience's total belief in the reality of the scene.

Many photographic mistakes dash our confidence in a film. Crossing the axis, exposed flying wires, ridiculous costumes or makeup, or absurd anachro-

Introduction

nisms can take us out of the magic. Many audio mistakes jar us out of the fantasy as well. Poorly matched ADR, grossly inappropriate backgrounds or sound effects (birds out of season or location, incorrect guns or motors, etc.), insensitive use of perspective, or a sloppy mix will drag us out of the film, even if for a moment, and it's a battle to reestablish trust after such a betrayal.

Dialogue editors play a vital role in the subterfuge of moviemaking. It's up to us to turn the many shots and production sounds into a convincing, coherent scene that even the most skeptical filmgoer will watch without being aware of the filmmaking that went into it. Unlike sound effects editors, background editors, or music editors, our magic most certainly goes unseen (or unheard)—if it's performed well. Only our failures attract attention.

So, just what is the dialogue editor's part in this process?

- To organize and manage the material. When you first screen a film, the sound may seem to work, but just beneath the surface it's unorganized and unfocused. One of your biggest jobs is to make sense of it; otherwise, you can't help the dialogue discover itself.
- To smooth the transitions between shots so conversations appear to be happening in the same space, at the same time.
- To fix articulation problems, overlaps, and other language issues. This
 usually involves searching through alternate takes to find similar
 deliveries that can be used for patches.
- To address unwanted, unseemly actor noises such as lip smacks, denture clatter, and hungry belly rumbles. At times any one of these may be appropriate, but each must be challenged, removed, replaced, or at least thought about.
- To pay attention to changes and adds that will enhance the story or motivate characters' actions. This often involves a combination of observation and talking with the director, editor, and writer.
- To remove unwanted external noises, whether crew or dolly noise, unnecessary footsteps, or birds chirping during day-for-night scenes.
 The list of on-set noises is endless, and each one of them reminds the viewer that we're making a movie.
- To replace sections of dialogue corrupted by distortion, wind, clothing rustle, boom handling, and the like.
- To determine what can't be saved through editing and must be rerecorded through postsynchronization. This is done in conjunction with the ADR supervisor.