Editors take pride in their craft being invisible to audiences and their artistry being intuitive. But, as technology and film production practices change, editors need people to be able to see what good editing is and they need to be able to say more than, “You just know when it works,” or their art and craft may be threatened. If editors cannot articulate what makes edits, even “invisible” ones, good, then the job of editing might as well be done by someone cheaper, for example the director’s brother who is good with computers. So the question is: What is the special, particular skill that editors have that the director’s brother does not? What have they implicitly trained themselves to do through years of editing practice that no one else on the crew can do as well? My proposition is this: that the editor’s particular skill is the shaping of movement. The edits may be “invisible,” but the movement of story, the movement of emotion, and the movement of images and sounds are not, and what the editors does, which no one else can do as well, is organize the flow of these three kinds of movement.

The notion of editing being an art of shaping movement no doubt derives, for me, from my background as a dancer and choreographer. From there it found its way, via my doctoral thesis and forthcoming book, Cutting Rhythms, into the Australian Screen Editors Guild Awards judging criteria (reprinted opposite). This article will use some of these criteria to judge two pieces of outstanding editing against each other: the 1972 film Cabaret, directed by Bob Fosse and winner of an Academy Award for Editing for editor David Bretherton, A.C.E.; and Chicago, originally a Bob Fosse stage production, which was made into a film in 2002, 30 years after Cabaret. Chicago was also directed by its choreographer, Rob Marshall, and its editor Martin Walsh also won an Academy Award. I’ve chosen these two films because it seems fitting to test my own theory about the choreographic nature of editing against films that were created by masters of shaping movement.

I’ll apply each of the first three Australian Screen Editors Guild Editing Awards criteria to Chicago first, then Cabaret, with the intention of giving one a hypothetical editing award, and, in the process, discovering what makes each of them great.

Movement of Story: Chicago

Clarity of story is one of the great accomplishments of the editing of Chicago. It is a story and style of telling which could have been a mess, particularly as the film pioneers a new direction in movie musicals, but instead of being a mess it unfolds coherently and with a very compelling rhythmic structure. Chicago takes fantasy sequences to a new level of substance and significance, revealing all but one or two of the major plot events, characters, and ideas through Roxie Hart’s (Renee Zellwegger’s) emotionally charged song and dance fantasies of them. Much has been made of key shots early on in the story, which tell us that the songs and dances are in Roxie’s mind. They have been discussed in articles and reviews, but in my opinion these shots of Roxie’s eye looking, and her point of view dissolving into heightened reality, set up the story clarity but are not its cause.

Razzle-dazzle editing style keeps a pair of energetically conceived musicals on their toes.
The story moves in a clear and compelling way because it has been written as choreography, with choreographically conceived transitions between shots and ideas embedded in the shooting script and realized in the edit. This “choreography” is a dance between the real and the musical that makes them equally plausible, allows the drama to be rhythmic and driving, and allows the music a forward momentum of story. There is a musical number roughly every eight to twelve minutes throughout the film, each triggered by the opening of a dramatic question (which is a question, problem, or opportunity for the main character that has stakes and implies an action). Each number then is not just a song, but a complication of the dramatic question, a raising of the stakes, and a resolution or a complication of the dramatic question, a character that has stakes and implies an action).

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The overall structure of the story is actually quite classical and balanced in its rhythm-mic organization. It starts by flinging us into a wild frenzy of murder, jazz, sex, and dance, and ends in a wild frenzy of roaring applause, mock mayhem, jazz, and sexy dance. In between there is a rise and fall of tension and release, of action and rest, that builds in smooth arcs. My only caveat with the shape of these arcs is the sequence at fifty minutes into the film when Roxie sings her own fantasy song, “Roxie.” The cutting, design, and camera all work hard to support the solo performer in this song, but the lonely narcissism of the song’s theme makes Roxie’s sequence uninspiring. Also, it is not intercut with any story points.

It doesn’t ask, or answer, any dramatic questions, and dramatic questions provide the energy that maintains the spectator’s attention, keeps us asking, “What happens next?” When an editor is shaping the movement of story, he or she is shaping the opening and closing of these questions, their rate, intensity, and emphasis. It makes sense in the movement of story to drop the energy down, so that it can build back up to its climactic ending, but, because it lacks dramatic tension, this song drops it down too far and makes the film work harder than it needs to recover, though in the end it succeeds, very effectively.

Movement of Story: Cabaret

Three complex, emotionally laden stories intertwine in *Cabaret*, the story of the rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930s, the story of Fritz (Fritz Wepper) and Natalia (Marisa Berenson) falling in love and vanquishing the odds to marry, and the story which steals the show, the story of Sally Bowles (Liza Minnelli), an aspiring actress who is both the tale’s emotional center and its whirlwind of energy. *Cabaret*’s story shape ends by pulling the two worlds back apart, physically, and leaving us with the knowledge that they are inextricably intertwined emotionally. The now worldly Brian gets back on the train to leave in a scene that is distinctly separated from the scene of Sally singing, alone in the cabaret, in her most sincere and open number of the film.

In between the opening and closing, the strength of the shaping of story in *Cabaret* comes through the hard cuts between scenes that slam together, for example, laughter, death, and the idyllic countryside. Or which resolve a major subplot in three shots—the mocking face of the powdered and rouged MC (Joel Grey), is cut to Fritz’s confession that he is a Jew, then to a traditional Hebrew wedding, all in about six seconds. There is a rhythm to events through *Cabaret* that alternates lingering and rushing. People are stuck in their predicaments, fleshing out their stories in shots and performances that move, but situations that don’t. Tears and tea, whiskey, and conversation are then contrasted with a furious rush of events when they do resolve. For example, when Sally decides to abort the baby that has been the subject of much discussion, there is a quick montage through moments of her life, hopes, and dreams, a ball drops from a child’s hands and the deed is done.

This unusual rhythm of events is a cinematic expression of one of the story’s key themes: Love triangles and narcissism rage, pull focus and consume us, meanwhile Nazism rises almost unnoticed around us.

There is a lull in the strength of the story flow at about sixty-three minutes in, when the production dwells on an elaboration on the relationship between Sally and Brian, who are a couple, and Max (Helmut Grein), who toys with them both. Although this lull frustrates, as does a similar one when Liza decides to marry Brian, which is, of course, an impossibility for her character, the story needs these moments where we are moving ahead of the characters, where we know that they are doing the wrong things and that they have to wake up. The story has to place us in this position because that is the story’s dramatic question for us: If we had been there would we have seen more clearly than the characters do or been absorbed by our own little dramas?
Movement of Emotion: Chicago

The movement of emotion is a two-sided question. One side is the movement of emotions between the performers, how the rise and fall of emotional energy between them is shaped, how emotion is thrown from one shot to the next to give an impression of an emotional chain of cause and effect. The other side of the question is the movement of emotion in the spectator; how the energy cycles of tension and release in the story are acting on us emotionally, synchronizing our responses to the rise and fall of feeling in the story.

In Chicago, much of the spectator’s experience of tension and release is shaped by patterns of music and dance. Heartbeats synchronize to song beats, pulses align with the pulsing movement and the dancing edits. Intercutting of drama into these songs gives the songs an emotional weight and the drama a driving beat.

But this didn’t happen by itself. The editor, Martin Walsh, worked with the cadence of the songs to make an acted performance elide with a sung one, or a danced step throw its energy to the pulsing and the dancing edits. Intercutting of drama into these songs gives the songs an emotional weight and the drama a driving beat.

The performance of “Tomorrow Belongs to Me,” and its inherent meaning, is brought to life by David Bretherton’s editing in Cabaret.
ly charged song carrying us along. This fierce contradiction of beauty and horror is created through a juxtaposition of images and sound that seduces and then repels us, making us exactly like the characters in our susceptibility, our desire for belonging, and delayed realization that we have indulged our emotions and ignored the malicious rise of the powers playing them for their own purposes.

Movement of Image: Chicago

Movement of image is the point of Chicago. It is a film that audaciously, and for the most part successfully, declares that the razzle-dazzle of punchy and aggressive dance, cinematography, and cutting can sweep away our moral compass and lose us in frenzied pleasures. It uses the same tricks that Cabaret used so effectively to get us unwittingly aligned with the Nazis, the seductive powers of movement and song, but never forces us to wake up to the moral corruption underlying our pleasure.

“The Cellblock Tango,” a number in which six prisoners tell their stories of murdering their lovers in dance and a song with the refrain, “They had it coming,” is a shining example of this “razzle-dazzle” artistry. The first of the six, a woman who kills her husband for popping his gum, is played by the stunning Susan Misner, whose angular features and razor-sharp dance technique collaborate with the editor to make a cinematic dance that slices through any concern about her dubious motives.

Misner and Walsh tango through a series of cuts that modulate her rage into concentrated fury. Walsh cuts boldly: two shots before one beat, so the peak of Misner’s movement energy lands hard on the beat, another synchronized two cuts giving her a second smash of movement energy right on the beat, and then no cuts for two whole beats, letting her build up for a huge leg swing and a running pounce onto her victim, in the two shots that nail his defeat. Killing someone for popping their gum is entirely justified by the emotion and energy that courses through the body of the dancer’s performance, shaped by the editing, to give her the convincing slam that signals her righteousness, even through the incredible cynicism of her story.

If the accumulation of each of these six stories has not already convinced you that it is better to be a sexy murderess than a law-abiding patsy, the finale will. Walsh finds the most powerful individual moments, often of Misner, who has the perfect strength and style of attack for this sequence, and intercuts these solo shots into the unison force of the whole crowd. Dozens of prisoners march forward on us with high heels, high kicks, lunges, and aggressive sexuality. They are framed to come at us and then swoop against us, slapping us around and asserting their strength in gesture, spatial configuration, and the power that only a unity of voices and bodies can create, punctuated by details of the strongest and sassiest of the crowd, who lend their strength of emotion, by association, to the movement of the whole.

Fred Astaire may be gnashing his teeth, looking down from his throne in dancer’s heaven, but this is a different idea of dance on screen. For one thing it has nothing to do with easy elegance. Quite the opposite, it is all about forceful aggression. For another thing it has nothing to do with the power of love, and everything to do with the love of power. But most importantly, it is not an image of a dance for us to admire the dancer. It is a dance where the cuts and shots create the image as much as the choreographer, and all the power of cinematic technique is brought into concert with dance technique to create a compelling idea through the movement of image.

Movement of Image in Cabaret

The long and nearly silent credit sequence at the beginning of Cabaret is a daring enticement. It opens a dramatic question by depriving us of image and sound. What is going on? We want to know immediately. What is that strange image? Uneasiness and excitement creep over us as the warped mirror fades in and begins, slowly, to reflect amorphous figures. Joel Grey pops, up, smiles, and with a strange gleam we surrender to his highly suspect charms, since he welcomes and promises to guide us. No sooner are we oriented in the cabaret, than Bretherton throws us out again, this time to a train station to meet Brian who is arriving, clean-cut, bright-eyed, innocent, and pure in image by contrast with the corrupt and salacious MC. Nothing much has happened, but the strange and contrasting images and the withholding and introducing of sound creates a visual and aural tension that sets the feeling and rhythm for the whole film.

The song “Willkomen” and Fosse’s mise-en-scène continue to work in sharp contrast with each other as the notion of beauty is introduced—the sleazy cabaret audience is seen frozen in tableau, while backstage the coarse showgirls (and boys as girls) apply the trappings of image that gives “beauty” a taint of decadent theatricality. Meanwhile Michael York’s startlingly pure actual beauty strides forward towards a head-on collision with Berlin. Cutting around the cabaret and back to the train station, layer upon layer of innocence to be lost, and corruption to be drowned in, are revealed.

By contrast with the fluid motion between images, Fosse’s choreography is notable for its repression of energy. Movements are precise and contained. Dancers hit their marks with perfect accuracy and the implication of sex, but not the abandon. This movement tension creates an irony that is underlined by the choices of shots and their timing.

The sequence inside the cabaret is capped with a finale introducing the chorus and all the performers, while the sequence outside is capped by the introduction of Sally and Brian to each other. Sally, with her exaggerated eyelashes and green fingernails, carries the image of the cabaret into direct conflict with the image of Brian, and when he says his name, she slams the door in his face, ostensibly to release the chain lock, but in fact carrying the entire story and the outcome for both of them—that they cannot really enter each other’s worlds—on one sharp movement and sound.

This judge’s scoring then, for these two beautifully cut films, is as follows:

Movement of Story

Chicago: 9
Cabaret: 10

Movement of Emotion

Chicago: 9
Cabaret: 10

Movement of Image

Chicago: 10
Cabaret: 10
And the winner is… *Cabaret*! But only by a hairsbreadth—30 to 28. Each of these films deserves the accolades it won, but in the end, *Cabaret* has three advantages over *Chicago*: casting, style, and movement of story.

Casting should not be salient to the editing awards, but it is very hard to see around, since it is the vehicle for movement of emotion. In *Cabaret*, Bretherton has undeniably stronger performances to work with. Renée Zellweger simply can’t compete with Liza Minnelli as a singer and dancer, and Richard Gere (to paraphrase Lloyd Bentsen) is no Joel Grey. Although *Cabaret* obviously has distinct casting advantages, one could almost say that *Chicago’s* editor should be awarded extra points in this case. *Cabaret* is a more powerful film but the fact that the two films can even be compared is a very strong tribute to Walsh’s skills in shaping performances. We can judge only the emotion of the final film, however, not the process of shaping it, and as the cast is so much stronger in *Cabaret*, so then is the movement of emotion, in spite of the wizardry of the editor.

Another advantage that *Cabaret* has over *Chicago* is editing style. This article does not have the scope to define what style means in editing, or to compare the two film’s styles in any depth. But it is the fourth criteria for judging editing on the Australian Screen Editor’s Guild awards, and is defined expansively in my book *Cutting Rhythms* (chapter ten). The most distinctive aspect of *Cabaret’s* style is the hard cuts between scenes. These cuts “slam together the energy in images to make surprising connections between ideas and create a physical jolt or shock for the audience that underlines the film’s themes and makes them palpable experiences of the motion and emotion of life in Berlin in the 1930’s.”

Finally, *Cabaret* must be declared the decisive winner because its movement of story is more completely aligned with its themes and meanings. *Cabaret* is holding up after thirty years and still creating complex internal conflicts for us, the audience, through its sharp juxtapositions of images and ideas contrasted with complexly woven emotional moments. *Cabaret*’s themes and ideas are also stronger and more significant than *Chicago*’s, but that was not a consideration in this contest. Rather, it is a question of how the editing artistry reveals themes, creates emotion, and persuades the senses by shaping the movement of story, emotion, images, and sound.

In the end, *Cabaret* is a more significant piece of editing because it specifically employs the techniques and potentials of editing to place us inside the moral dilemmas of the characters, allowing us to be immersed and then self-aware, while *Chicago*, although it creates new heights of cinematic delights, lets us off the hook morally and just gives us pure pleasure in sensation.

*Editors’ Note: All films were seen via video in the documentary edition.*
