

Cut It Out!

The Art of Editing Feature Films for the Airline Market

By Debbie Chariton

I STILL FONDLY RECALL my first flight on which a movie was shown: New York to Paris in 1986. I was almost as excited to get a movie on the plane as I was to be flying to Paris! I cannot recall the movie, but I can say with absolute certainty that I did not give one second's thought to how that movie ended up on the overhead screen, how much work it took to get it there, and whether or not the director was happy with the end result. All I cared about was getting a movie on my flight to Paris. The rest of the process was completely invisible to me.

I was a teenager back then. My parents were very strict about what movies they allowed me to see: no sex, graphic violence, or profanity. But what about when I was in an environment where they were no longer in control, like on my flight to Paris? The airlines are sensitive to the "captive audience" environment of an aircraft and therefore take the necessary measures to ensure that the mainscreen programming they provide is appropriate for all viewers. In many instances it means that movies must be edited for content before they can be shown on an airline's overhead system. If the airline wishes to play a film that contains objectionable content, it will order the edited version. But what happens between the time the movie is released and the time an edited version gets delivered to the airlines?

The editing process at Sony Pictures Entertainment begins well ahead of theatrical release and even ahead of principal photography (when the movie is filmed). I receive a copy of the shooting script about a month before the commencement of principal

photography. I read the script and prepare a list of airline coverage notes that itemize all of the content which will (or may) be objectionable for airline exhibition. The airline coverage notes are sent to the producers and director in the hopes that they will shoot coverage (alternate footage) for use in the airline version. For instance, if there is a scene with nudity, I will make a note to cover it. The director will hopefully shoot some alternate footage—perhaps using close-up shots or different angles—where the nudity is not visible.

WHAT GETS EDITED? (THE AIRLINE EDIT LIST)

A few days prior to theatrical release, I will screen the final version of the film and prepare an airline edit list. The list is composed of six primary categories of objectionable content:

1. Profanity
2. Nudity/Sexual Thrusting
3. Excessive Violence
4. Religious/Racial/Cultural slurs
5. Plane crashes/References to turbulence
6. Terrorism/References to bombs

HOW DOES THE FILM GET EDITED? (THE OFF-LINE EDITORIAL PROCESS)

The director has the first opportunity to prepare the airline version. Most directors recognize the highly specialized nature of editing for the airlines and therefore prefer for one of our staff

THE FORGOTTEN—Newspaper headline depicting airplane crash. This was an important plot point in the film, so in order to make the film acceptable for the airlines, the airplane crash was changed to a bus crash. The word "air" was painted out of the headline, and the word "bus" was painted in as a substitute.





THE FORGOTTEN—"Quest Air" was the name of the company which owned the airplane that crashed. Since the plane was changed to a bus in the airline version, the company name had to be changed, as well—to "Quest." The word "Air" was dropped from the audio track, and also painted out of the sign at the "QuestAir" headquarters.

editors to prepare the cut and submit a copy to them for approval. Occasionally a director will feel more comfortable having his or her own editor prepare the cut, since the theatrical editor knows the film very intimately.

Once a first draft edit list is complete, the editor will begin cutting the airline version on a computerized nonlinear editing system called an "Avid." The editor uses the original theatrical picture as a visual guide, and the final dialogue, music, and effects units (stems) as an audio guide, while creating the off-line edit. An "off-line edit" is a cut of the airline version that does not come from the final video and audio sources. It's done to avoid the greater expense of using final video and audio sources for a time-consuming process that may be revised later. It's like doing a dress rehearsal for a play ... as opposed to the final performance in full costume.

The goal of the distributor is to edit the film in such a way that it looks and sounds seamless and does not feel like it has been edited. We utilize creative techniques for handling the changes, since abrupt audio and video cuts can result in continuity errors and tend to be disruptive to the overall viewing experience. There are five primary editing techniques for accomplishing this:

1. Cutting around offensive material

The easiest way to delete offensive material is to simply cut it out and not replace it with alternate dialogue or footage. However, important information can be lost when cutting out footage, so while this method costs the least, it is not always the best creative solution.

2. Substituting alternate dialogue

If a film contains profanity, the best solution is often to replace certain objectionable dialogue, rather than just drop audio. The technical term for this process is ADR (automated dialogue replacement). The process involves contacting the actors, finding out if they are available and willing to come in and re-record dialogue for the airline version, and then making arrangements to rent a recording staged based upon our delivery deadlines and the actor's schedules.

Many actors want to convey the best possible performance and are eager to return many weeks or months after they have finished filming to record airline ADR. Other actors are not able

to fit the ADR recording into their schedule in time for us to meet our airline delivery deadlines, so they authorize the use of a voicealike to record their lines instead. When a voicealike is necessary, we schedule a date and time to record and audition actors whose voices have been pre-screened by a professional voiceover coordinator. The actor whose voice sounds the closest to the original actor is hired. Then we work with the actor to ensure that the voice intonation and the performance is identical to that of the original actor.

Our standards for recording ADR are very high. We make every attempt to record replacement dialogue that fits the lip movements of the original dialogue, so the edit will not be noticeable to the audience. Good examples of replacements are:

*"Jeez" or a grunt to replace "s***."*

(We very rarely allow "shoot" as an alternative to "s***," because when you see a character saying "s***," but hear him or her saying "shoot," it almost never works. (If you don't believe me, pay attention next time you are watching an edited movie on television and decide for yourself.) Occasionally, a "shoot" will slip in, and as long as it truly looks and sounds like a "shoot," we will let it go. "Shoot" spoken in a heavy Southern drawl is a good example.)

*"Loser" or "psycho" to replace "****hole."*

*"Con artist" to replace "c***sucker."*

Some profanities are particularly challenging, so we just try to do our best within context:

*"My brother" sometimes works to replace "mother****er."*

If not, our last resort is usually "motherlover."

*"Forget you" does not trip off the tongue as easily as "f*** you," but it's much more G-rated.*

Once in a while we get lucky, and the name of the person to whom the profanity is being directed fits the lip movements. "Frank" is a good example of the way in which the "f" word can be disguised when a character named Frank is the object of another character's wrath. We love it when films have characters named Frank.

3. Alternate visuals

For all the footage that finds its way into the final theatrical release of a film, there may be ten, fifteen, or perhaps a hundred

continued on page 22

This was one of the big battle scenes in the film *THE PATRIOT*, and depicts the types of violent sequences that are heavily edited for the airline version.

times more footage that ends up on the cutting room floor. “Dailies” is the term that describes all footage that was shot for a film, including the footage that was discarded. The editor searches through the dailies tapes to find alternate shots or angles that can be used to replace objectionable visuals. For instance, in the theatrical version of *SPANGLISH*, there was a love scene between Adam Sandler’s character and Tea Leoni’s character that was too intense to show in its entirety in the airline version. In addition to shortening the overall length of the scene, the editor substituted some wide-angle shots of Tea Leoni straddling Adam Sandler on the bed with close-up shots that did not allude to graphic sexual activity. The dialogue was exactly the same in the close-up shots, so by using alternate shots, the editor was able to continue the conversation between the two characters without losing any important dialogue and without affecting the language tracks.

4. Repositioned visuals

Since the film is shot in a widescreen format, panning and scanning is necessary to “fit” the picture onto a 4x3 standard airline monitor. Some of the picture inevitably gets panned out of the 4x3 image. In instances where there may be nudity, blood, or airline logos on one side of the frame, the editor can return to the original widescreen image and re-pan it so a different part of the shot ends up in the 4x3 image, and the objectionable visual gets panned out of the frame. This technique only really works when the objectionable visual is close to the edge of the frame. If it is in the middle of the frame, the re-panning of the shot to lose the objectionable visual would result in an image that appears much softer and more grainy than the rest of the film.

5. Paintbox (i.e., graphic arts)

What happens if the visual cannot be cut or re-positioned and no acceptable alternate shots are available? When all other possibilities have been exhausted, we can usually paint out just about any offensive visual. This is a painstaking process that involves painting or rotoscoping each frame individually, but the end result can be quite remarkable. Paintboxing is usually used to paint out blood, or perhaps paint a bra or panties onto a character to disguise nudity. One of the best examples of paintboxing occurred recently on the airline version of *THE FORGOTTEN*. The plot involves the disappearance of two children in an airplane crash. We recorded “bus” to replace “plane” in multiple languages, but much of the information is conveyed visually, with newspaper headlines alluding to the plane crash. By painting out the word “plane” and painting in the word “bus,” no integral information is lost to the viewer.

WHO DECIDES WHAT GETS EDITED? (THE TALENT APPROVAL PROCESS)

The distributor owns the film, has the best understanding of the unique aspect of the airline marketplace, and is therefore in the best position to decide what content should be addressed for the airline version. However, the director is the creative force behind the film and must be consulted on all editorial changes required for the airline version. In addition, producers are often consulted on the creation of the airline version. The distributors value their relationships with both the customers and the talent, so diplomacy is critical to the talent-approval process.

Timing is just as critical. Due to the proximity of the airline window to theatrical release, the process of creating the airline version must commence just prior to theatrical release. This is not the time to begin the dialogue with the talent on the changes required for the airline version. They’ve just spent



continued on page 24

almost every waking moment of the past year or more consumed with the film and are nervous enough about how the film will open at the box office. We therefore do as much prep work on the airline version as possible prior to beginning the cut. This includes preparing the edit list, pulling in all of the picture and sound elements we will need to make the airline version, and loading the Avid. The talent is normally contacted just after theatrical release. The director at this point may request to have his or her own editor prepare the cut. If not, as is usually the case, we discuss how the director would like to participate in the editing. Sometimes the director will sit with the editor and go through the cut, but in most cases the director will ask us to send him/her a tape of the off-line edit to review. In many cases the director approves the proposed edits on the first pass, but sometimes we are asked to address content in a different manner than originally submitted. Timing again becomes critical in this process, since by the time the first cut is completed, the director is often simultaneously opening the film in markets outside of North America and working on the DVD version.

WHAT HAPPENS IF THE DIRECTOR DOES NOT AGREE TO THE CHANGES?

Thankfully, I cannot speak to this topic from experience and, with any luck, I will never have to. The director is just as anxious to have his/her film seen as the distributor is to sell it and the airlines are to exhibit it. It is therefore in everyone's best interest to work together to create an edited version that is acceptable to talent, distributor, and customer alike. We make every attempt to retain the spirit of the director's original intention, so we will usually elect not to edit a film if we feel the amount of editing required would be detrimental to the plot.

THE AIRLINE VERSION IS APPROVED. NOW WHAT?

Now that the off-line edit is approved, the film can be prepped for the final airline mix and online edit session:

Airline Mix

When picture cuts are made in areas where there is music, bumps in the music track result. Similarly, the sound effects go out of sync. And what about all of that great dialogue that was recorded for the airline version? It has to get into the airline version somehow. Hence, the need for the airline mix. We want the airline version to sound just as good as it looks, so all individual sound units (original and airline-specific) are re-cut and conformed to match the airline version picture. Then they are all mixed together to create a two-channel stereo airline soundtrack that syncs up perfectly with the airline version picture. The audio dynamic range of the composite stereo airline track is reduced by increasing the dialogue levels and decreasing the music and effects levels. This process better enables the viewer to hear the dialogue over the drone of the jet engines.

Airline Online Edit Session

Remember the off-line edit dress rehearsal discussed earlier? Well, now it's "showtime." The original film negative of all alternate footage used in the airline version must be located and cut by a professional negative cutter. A 35mm interpositive film reel containing the new shots is created, transferred to videotape in the original film aspect ratio, and panned and scanned to fit a 4x3 monitor. The paintbox work gets completed. All audio and video sources are assembled in the online edit bay to create the final airline version. The final airline version gets checked for technical quality, as well as for final content acceptability. Once the technical quality and content is approved, the airline version gets delivered to the lab, where the language tracks are waiting patiently to get laid back and conformed.

continued on page 26



And Speaking of Languages ...

How is profanity addressed in the language tracks? Most foreign theatrical tracks are dubbed with "softer" dialogue than the English track that is not objectionable to the local population. Accordingly, many profanities get lost in the translation process. Many English profanities are deleted with audio or visual cuts, so any profanities in these areas end up on the cutting room floor when the language tracks are conformed to the airline master. The only really problematic areas are sexually explicit dialogue and references to bombs and/or airplane crashes. In these instances, we address the languages based upon how the area was addressed in the airline version: Sometimes we can cut it out, and other times we mute specific words or re-dub certain lines in the languages.

THE COSTS OF CREATING AN AIRLINE VERSION

The general guidelines for estimating the costs of creating an airline version are primarily based upon the theatrical MPAA rating, as follows:

G	\$ 0
PG (Minor editing)	\$ 5,000 - \$ 25,000
PG-13 (Moderate editing)	\$ 40,000 - \$ 75,000
R (Heavy editing)	\$ 75,000 - \$150,000+

Every film is different, and therefore it is difficult to categorize costs based upon MPAA ratings alone. A G-rated film may contain references to terrorists or airplane crashes and may require editing that is highly specific to the airline market. Certain PG-rated films may run longer than the airline running time requirement of 120 minutes and thereby require time editing. Some films are assigned R ratings due to one explicit love scene, which can easily be deleted, keeping the budget down.

The heavier the talent involvement, the more money it is likely to cost to complete the airline version. Some directors prefer to make time edits by lifting entire scenes, while others prefer to make little trims in every scene. Some directors like to come in and spend a couple of days with the editor trying different ways to approach the edits, while others just prefer to have us send a check cassette, and they sign off with no further changes. But the general rule is: The more mature the rating, the more it will cost to create the airline version. And we take these factors into consideration when determining whether or not to make an edited airline version.

THE FUTURE OF AIRLINE EDITING

With the advent of new IFE technologies such as AVOD, handheld players, and 16x9 monitors, the programming needs of the airlines are shifting more toward theatrical programming and more liberal editing requirements. However, there is still a great demand for traditional main cabin programming.

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When we create airline versions, we adhere to the most restrictive editing requirements to make the airline version acceptable for all audiences. If an airline version is available, the airlines are given the option of ordering either the theatrical version or the edited airline version. The assumption of the content provider is that the airline will select the version that best suits its programming needs. Will there ever come a time when the standards for airline editing will loosen? Perhaps. But I expect any shift toward more liberal editing requirements to be initiated by the IFE programmers and not by the content providers.

I anticipate that the television marketplace will also have a tremendous impact on the IFE passenger expectation level. I can foresee passenger demand for high-definition edited airline versions to fit 16x9 with 5.1 surround sound within the next few years as more and more homes upgrade to high-definition television with home theater systems. Due to the cost of retrofitting aircraft,

there will probably be many years of overlap in which 4x3 and 1x9 edited versions will be requested. The costs for creating a separate 16x9 high-definition airline version with 5.1 surround sound are often equal to the costs of creating the original 4x3 standard definition airline version. The costs for creating two separate edited versions are certain to factor prominently into the decision-making on what versions to make available to the airlines.

The ultimate goal is to entertain the passengers, and this is the end result we constantly strive to achieve when creating airline versions. If we can enhance the passenger viewing experience by subtly "editing out the bad parts" and, at the same time, keep costs within an acceptable range and keep the talent happy, we have succeeded in our mission. I only wish I could recall what movie I saw on the flight from New York to Paris in 1986. Perhaps the fact that I don't remember is a testimonial to the seamless behind-the-scenes efforts of those of us who toil in the IFE trenches.

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Debbie Chariton has spent her entire professional life at Sony Pictures Entertainment, joining the company in 1991, working in Business Affairs in the Theatrical Division. In 1992, she transferred to the Motion Picture Sales Department at Sony Pictures Television Distribution. In 1996, she joined SPE's Post Production Services Department as Editorial Coordinator, assisting the Director of Post Production Services in editing SPE's films for television and the airlines. Shortly thereafter, she was promoted to head of the TV/Airline Editorial Department and now supervises all of the editing of feature films for the airlines, as well as U.S. domestic free television and basic cable.



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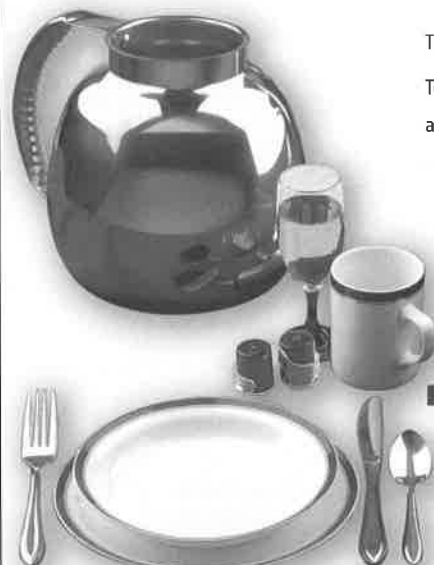
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