Film editors are divided in their opinions as to whether they have an identifiable personal style or not. Looking at their statements in the interviews collected in the books *Selected Takes: Film Editors on Film Editing* (LoBrutto, 1991) and *First Cut: Conversations With Film Editors* (Oldham, 1992), I find that of those twelve editors mentioning this point, six say they have a personal style, and six say they do not. But none of those who explicitly claim to have a personal style of editing specify what distinguishes their style.

If we do want to investigate if there really are stylistic distinctions in the work of film editors, the place to look is in the way they handle the editing of dialogue scenes, as these are the only sorts of scenes to be found in common in nearly all feature films. My investigation starts from some of the films in my samples of American films from 1959 and 1999 that were used for my previous papers in the *New Review of Film and Television Studies* (Salt 2004; 2009a), and subsequently in my book *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (Salt 2009b), but it spreads some way beyond that selection.

---

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Reaction Time: How To Edit Movies**

Barry Salt*

*Email: b.salt@lfs.org.uk*

Statistical Style Analysis is applied to the editing of dialogue scenes in motion pictures for the first time, to see if film editors have distinctive personal editing styles. The answer is that some definitely do, but others only do so in a minor and limited way.

**Keywords:** film style; statistical analysis; dialogue editing

---

*Email: b.salt@lfs.org.uk*
**Cutting Dialogue**

The central element of cutting dialogue scenes is the placement of the dialogue cutting point (my term for it) — that is, where the cut going from one shot to the next is made in the action and also on the sound track. I had to start thinking about a rule for the best point to do this forty-odd years ago, when I had to edit a dramatic film for the first time. A little later, in the early ’seventies, I tried discussing the subject with Thorold Dickinson, who had cut half a dozen British features in the early nineteen-thirties, before becoming a director, but could not get any opinion about rules for this out of him. More recently, I have also failed to get a really satisfactory answer from the other feature film editors, Bill Lewthwaite and Ralph Sheldon, who have worked at the London Film School with me. So the following is an objective investigation of what editors actually do, as opposed to what they say, or don’t say.

**The Dialogue Cutting Point**

Obviously the most common type of cut from one shot to the next inside a dialogue scene is that made at the same point in time on the picture and sound tracks, somewhere inside the gap between one speaker finishing speaking, and another replying. This can be illustrated in the following diagram, based on what one sees on the computer screen when editing with a non-linear editing (NLE) program such as Avid Media Composer or Final Cut Pro, which shows the picture track above, and the sound track area with the sound waveforms lying below.

I measure this sort of cut by counting the number of frames from the end of the last speech sound in the outgoing shot to the picture cut (length ‘A’ above), and the number of frames from the picture cut to the first speech sound (length ‘B’ above) in the incoming shot. An alternative description of this measurement is that the A length runs from the beginning of the pause between the voices of the two speakers to the picture cut, and the B length runs from the picture cut to the end of the pause, when the second speaker begins to reply.
This is a level cut, or straight cut. Strictly speaking, when inspecting a finished film, one cannot tell where the cut was originally made on the sound track when the film was edited, though we can presume it was at some point between the first speaker stopping speaking and the respondent starting to speak. However, this information does not matter for my purposes.

The other sorts of cuts are those made at different points in time on the picture track and the sound track. The first class of these is like the following:

![Diagram of a level cut](image)

In this cut, the sound of the voice of the person seen in the outgoing shot continues under the picture of the person who is eventually going to reply in the incoming shot, until that person replies. Again, I measure the exact placement of this cut in the picture with respect to the speeches by the lengths A and B from the cut in the picture to the end (or start) of the sounds, though in this case A is given a negative value. This sort of cut is nowadays called an ‘L-edit’, or ‘L-cut’, after the outline shape of an ‘L’ that can be made out in the layout of the shapes of the parts in the diagram above.

The converse edit is illustrated below, which has the sound of the speaker who is about to be shown full face in the next shot being first heard under the end of the outgoing shot. This is called a ‘J-edit’ or ‘J-cut’.

![Diagram of a J-cut](image)

In this case I give a negative value to the length B from the picture cut to the start of the incoming sound.

Both these latter types of dialogue cut are nowadays referred to as ‘split edits’. All this nomenclature has only been used in the last decade or so in film editing,
after being taken over from videotape editing in television, where it is much older, dating back to the early computer-controlled linear videotape editing systems. However, these types of cut were made in sound motion pictures long before that, but they were described as ‘overlapping the sound’. That description had a certain degree of ambiguity, as it could be confused with laying one sound track over another sound track, often referred to as ‘overlapping dialogue’, but since the subject was extremely rarely discussed, this ambiguity was not that important. As far as I can tell, film editors have no specific name for what I call the ‘A length’, probably because it is in general very short. And the only naming of the B length of which I am aware is by Donn Cambern, in his interview with Gabrielle Oldham, where he calls it ‘the lead’ (Oldham 1992, 205). I will use this term interchangeably with my term the ‘B length’ in this article.

The three situations in editing dialogue detailed above cover most of the cutting that occurs in such scenes, with the exception of a cut to and from a reaction shot of someone in the scene who is not speaking, but just listening. I take a count of the number of such shots separately. There still remains the very rare situation where the relation of the speeches to the cuts is too complex to be covered by my schema, for instance when a number of people are speaking at once. I have just ignored these.

Method

Just about any non-linear editing program will do for this particular analysis, and the film material is ripped to the computer hard drive beforehand from a DVD, or from a videotape, in the case of an off-air recording of the film concerned. I only recorded the lengths A and B from cuts inside full dialogue scenes, not from scenes where there were a few words spoken every few shots in the course of otherwise wordless action. And I only covered at most 190 dialogue cuts from the start of the film. Despite the wide variation in the amount of dialogue between American films, this usually got all, or most, of the way through the film, though the most extreme case of a film with limited dialogue I encountered in my sample had only 34 dialogue cuts in the whole film.

Fortunately I was mostly working with PAL DVD and VHS tape copies, so the frame counts for the A and B lengths could be used directly, but for the DVD and VHS copies that were in NTSC video format I had to multiply the frame count by 0.8, and then round the result to the nearest frame, to get the required number of actual film frames, as opposed to video frames. This rounding introduces a small error sometimes, but not enough to invalidate the comparisons I am making here.

The percentages of cuts using the various possible A lengths in a film can be plotted as a bar chart, going from –20 frames to +20 frames. (For the moment I ignore the number of A lengths greater than 20 frames.) For The Grapes of Wrath (1940), which was edited by Robert Simpson, it looks like this:
The negative numbers represent L-edits, of which there are four. I find that, in general, nothing much interesting comes out of the distribution of the L-edit lengths, as opposed to their total number, so from this point forward I will instead just use the distribution of the positive lengths up to 40 frames, which correspond to simple straight cuts, as in the next graph:

As you can see, 31% of the dialogue cuts in this film are made right after the last speech sound of the first speaker, and 64% of the dialogue cuts are within 4 frames of the last speech sound. A similar graph for *The Grapes of Wrath* showing the B lengths (the ‘lead’) from the picture cut to the first speech sound emitted by the respondent speaker looks like this:

So here the B lengths (or leads) are a lot longer and more spread in length than the A lengths. For comparison, here are the results for the same quantities for two other films edited by Robert Simpson 17 and 19 years later; namely *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957), and *The Best of Everything* (1959):
You can see that the A and B length distributions for these two latter films are very similar to each other, and also fairly similar to the much earlier *Grapes of Wrath*. However there are a couple of noticeable small differences – the later films are not quite so insistent on cutting right after the last sound for the A length cut, and the B lengths have developed a mild emphasis on using an 8 frame lead that was not there at all a couple of decades earlier in Robert Simpson’s cutting.
The next question is whether the A and B length distributions for other editors are similar to those of Robert Simpson. Here are two 1959 films edited by Milton Carruth:

**Pillow Talk - A lengths (Milton Carruth)**

![Graph](image)

**Pillow Talk - B lengths**

![Graph](image)

**Imitation of Life - A lengths (Milton Carruth)**

![Graph](image)

**Imitation of Life - B lengths**

![Graph](image)

These are again fairly similar to the previous films, so after looking at five films, one might get the idea that there is only one style of dialogue editing, with maybe a bit of room for the odd mannerism like Robert Simpson’s concentration in his later career on an 8-frame lead, and stop the investigation there. However, five films is really an extremely small sample, so here are two more from 1959 and 1960, *Compulsion* and *Wild River*, edited by William Reynolds:
These two are still fairly similar to the previous films, but if you look carefully at the leads used in them (the B lengths), the distribution is rather flatter, with a more nearly even number of shots at each of the possible lengths, than in the previous five films. In those previous films there is quite a bit of a piling up of B lengths less than 20 frames – in fact there are around twice as many leads of length less than 20 frames than there are of those longer than 20 frames. So the ratio of leads less than 20 frames to leads of 20 frames or more (which I will call the ‘Lead Length Ratio’) seems fairly specific to individual editors, as shown in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Editor</th>
<th>Lead Length Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imitation of Life</td>
<td>Milton Carruth</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pillow Talk</td>
<td>Milton Carruth</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They Came to Cordura</td>
<td>William A. Lyon</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gidget</td>
<td>William A. Lyon</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best of Everything</td>
<td>Robert Simpson</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse James</td>
<td>Robert Simpson</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsion</td>
<td>William Reynolds</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild River</td>
<td>William Reynolds</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I have the distributions for a couple more films from around 1959 to throw in, and now we begin to see a feature noticeably different to those in the preceding films.

Here are the A and B length distributions for Last Train From Gun Hill, with Warren Low credited as supervising editor, and Ben-Hur, for which Ralph E. Winters probably cut the dialogue scenes.
The obvious new feature here is that the A length cuts that are right after the last sound are for the first time less in number than those with a length of several frames.

To complete this group, I include A and B length distributions for *Too Many Crooks*, a British 1959 comedy that was edited by my former colleague, Bill Lewthwaite.

We can make further distinctions by tabulating other basic quantities, namely the percentages of L-edits and J-edits used, and also the percentage of reaction shots used during the dialogue scenes. Another very important quantity is the average
‘pause’ length, i.e. the length in frames between the last speech sound of one speaker, and the first speech sound of the respondent in the next shot, regardless of where the cuts are. In the analytical system being used here, the pause can be obtained by adding the A and B lengths together, while including the negative sign in the case of split edits. In other words, this length is taken without regard for where the actual picture cut is, it is just a distance measured on the sound track, as you can see diagrammed in the illustrations at the beginning of this article.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Editor</th>
<th>L-edit (%)</th>
<th>J-edit (%)</th>
<th>Av. pause</th>
<th>Reaction Shots (%)</th>
<th>Lead Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grapes of Wrath</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Simpson</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse James</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Simpson</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best of Everything</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Simpson</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsion</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Reynolds</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild River</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Reynolds</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pillow Talk</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Carruth</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitation of Life</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Carruth</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gidget</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Lyon</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They Came to Cordura</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Lyon</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben-Hur</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Winters</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last Train from Gun Hill</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Many Crooks</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Lewthwaite</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the Beat</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Lewthwaite</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeout</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Rolf</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three to Tango</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Semel</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talented Mr. Ripley</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Murch</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela’s Ashes</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Hambling</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Sense</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Mondshein</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unbreakable</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Tichenor</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signs</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Tulliver</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Lies Beneath</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Schmidt</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the table on the previous page, I have added a group of films made after 1959, to see if any new stylistic distinctions emerge with time. And indeed we can see that the 1999 films have a smaller number of L-edits, and the pause between a speech and the reply tends to be appreciably shorter. Also the number of reaction shots has increased. The decrease of the average pause and the increase in the number of reaction shots are fairly certainly due to the general increase in cutting rate over the last 60 years, which is extensively documented in my *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*.

The number of reaction shots that an editor can put into a dialogue scene is limited by the amount of material the director has shot showing the listeners in a scene, which is part of the general coverage of the action – that is, repeated shots of the same action from different camera positions. Traditionally, many directors, such as John Ford, prided themselves on ‘cutting in the camera’, and only shooting the shots that they knew they needed for the final edited film. Effectively, they were not shooting any coverage. In such cases, the editor was limited to the reaction shots the director wanted. But in recent decades the amount of coverage shot for commercial features has vastly increased, to get more angles on the scenes all the way through, so the editor is in a position to use many more reaction shots.

If you look at the figures in the table, you will see one film from the earlier period that has a large proportion of reaction shots in it, and that is *Wild River* (1960), which has a total of 55 in the dialogue scenes. This is because this film has a number of very long monologues addressed to large groups of people, both by the protagonist and his antagonist, for which the director shot the appropriate reactions. Incidentally, *Wild River* has another editing peculiarity that does not show up in the statistics I have collected. This is that the editor cuts away from Montgomery Clift much more than is usual when he is speaking, and not just to reaction shots of his listeners, but even to shots of the scenery in the outdoors scenes. This is surprising, since he is treated in the standard way in this respect in *Suddenly, Last Summer*, made the year before. But Warren Buckland has pointed out to me that his condition was rapidly deteriorating, to the extent that he couldn’t remember his lines in *Judgement at Nuremburg* (1961).

**The Triumph of the L-edit**

Bill Lewthwaite’s work on *Too Many Crooks* and *On the Beat* stands out in one way, and that is the very large number of L-edits he uses: no less than 64% of the dialogue cuts in the former, and 49% in the latter. Even the lower of these two figures is much greater than those for any other films in my sample. After I had tried to get him to talk about the subject of L-edits a number of times, he finally said that using them was more of a British thing than an American one. Unfortunately I had not done any quantitative checks in this area before he retired to the country, but on the evidence now available, and noting the figures for Gerry
Hambling, another British editor cutting *Angela’s Ashes*, it seems that the heavy use of the technique may be much more of a Bill Lewthwaite thing than a British thing. The other feature of his work is that in these two films he uses the shortest average pause length of all the films up to 1962. This corresponds to his standard catch phrase in later life, when faced with what a student considered to be the final cut of the film he was editing, Bill would nearly always say, ‘Now it’s time to get the air out of it.’

There is only one film from those made later than 1962 that begins to approach Bill Lewthwaite’s heavy use of the L-edit, and that is *Stakeout*, edited by Tom Rolf, with 37% L-edits. This heavy use of L-edits in *Stakeout* is no accident. Although he did not claim outright that he had a style, in his interview with Gabrielle Oldham (Oldham 1992, 126), Tom Rolf says, ‘I like to overlap a lot.’ He then says, ‘Another of my minor laws, I never let an actor start his dialogue off-stage. He should start on-stage, and then segue to whoever else is reacting to it.’ I think he is speaking figuratively here, and actually means ‘out of shot’, rather than ‘off-stage’. This would tend to account for the fact that Rolf almost entirely overlaps in the forward direction, with very few J-edits used.

This is the core point about using split edits, and also reaction shots. They can be effective if they show the listening character’s reaction to what the speaker is saying, but only if the listener’s reaction has real dramatic significance at that moment. But it is unlikely that the listener’s facial expression will be particularly interesting for a good deal of the time in a dialogue scene. The special beauty of L-edits is that the listener’s expression will be most likely to alter towards the end of a speech made to him, and an L-edit shows that, but does it without having to give extra time in the lead to the next shot to showing the listener’s expression before they start replying. This decreases the pause, and increases the overall speed of the story-telling. The reverse arrangement using a J-edit is less likely to show any dramatically significant facial expression, and so it is less used.

The only other film that begins to approach the figures for *Stakeout* and *Too Many Crooks* is *The True Story of Jesse James*, but there most of the L-edits only lay the incoming picture a few frames over the end of the preceding speech, as is shown by the distributions of the A-lengths for the three films, in which I revert to the display of the negative lengths as well as the positive lengths to make this point.

**Stakeout - A lengths**

![A length distribution graph for Stakeout]
A long time ago I commented that many of the cuts on dialogue in *New York, New York* (1978), which was also edited by Tom Rolf, seemed to be made at random, although I did not analyse it in detail, and I have the same feeling about his editing of *Stakeout*. That is, I cannot in general see any dramatic advantage in seeing a shot of the other party in the dialogue long before they reply to the actor who is still speaking. What the above distribution for *Too Many Crooks* shows is that Bill Lewthwaite’s L-edits are geared to get the most out of the actor’s expressions around the point in time at which the cut is made.

**Murch Blinking**

The above sample of films from 1999 includes *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, which was edited by Walter Murch. Murch is well known for developing his own personal theories about editing, which centre on the human physiological feature of eye blinking. This has three aspects for him. He believes that his choice of the best point to end any shot is when he, Walter Murch, blinks while examining the uncut shot, secondly that the film audience blinks in unison at each cut in the film that they are watching, and thirdly that the best point to cut a shot is near where the actor in the shot blinks. These ideas are expounded in pages 57 to 72 of his book *In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing* (Murch 2001). If you look at the table above, you can see that for the editing variables that I am examining, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is very close indeed to *Three to Tango*, a comedy made the same year, so Murch’s ideas are not making him cut any differently to Stephen Semel.

As to how people actually react to film cuts, the best experimental evidence is in the article *Edit Blindness: The relationship between attention and global change blindness in dynamic scenes* (Smith and Henderson, 2008). This research shows
B. Salt

that insofar as there is any synchronism of viewer blinking with cuts in a movie, it is weak and very limited, and it is not exact, but only approximate. As far as Walter Murch’s other idea about cutting near the point when an actor blinks in the shot, I observe that he does not specify whether this should be before, after, or during the actor blink, which makes searching for the postulated effect a little difficult. Personally, I think that the general tendency is for editors to cut before any blink by an actor, as including a blink at the end of a shot gives an impression of psychological weakness to the actor’s performance. Incidentally, most good film actors consciously control their blinking at crucial moments in a shot.

The Big Pause

Another film in the 1999 sample has a very distinctive editing feature. This is The Sixth Sense, which has a very long average pause of 44 frames. That is very nearly two seconds, which is a very long time to wait in a movie for the next thing to happen. The only other film that even approaches this pause length is Ben-Hur, but that is a religious subject, and such films have traditionally been slow-moving and awe-struck from the dawn of cinema. The A and B length distributions for The Sixth Sense are inevitably like those for Ben-Hur, though with even more of a flat random distribution of lengths.

This technique is repeated in the next two films directed by M. Night Shyamalan, Unbreakable and Signs, even though all three Shyamalan films have different editors. So here we have a prominent stylistic feature of the editing which has clearly been insisted upon by the director, and is not due to the editor. As a control test, to show that this is not just a generic feature of this sort of spooky suspense film, I quote the results for What Lies Beneath (2000), which has similar content elements.
to *The Sixth Sense*, with the protagonist experiencing ghostly visitations that are treated by psychiatric sessions.

Here the A and B length distributions have reverted to the standard profiles of recent times, and this goes with the use of an average pause of only 23 frames, which lies within the standard region for this quantity.

When I first saw *The Sixth Sense*, I did not particularly notice the long pauses between speeches, but I noticed them straight away while watching *Signs*. I would say that my initial subjective impressions correspond to the dramatic grip of the story of the first film, and the relative lack of that in the second. In *The Sixth Sense* the problems of the main characters and what they are trying to achieve connect together with one another and with the story convincingly, whereas *Signs* is really just a standard unearthly monster film, with the themes of the redemption of the failed priest and the failed athlete not really connected to the basic plot throughout the story. And this is why we do not see more of the long pause in editing, for it can interfere with the film’s hold on the audience, unless the script is particularly gripping dramatically. In the M. Night Shyamalan films, this editing feature is obviously imposed by the director, and is part of his style, not that of their various editors. However, Barbara Tulliver does register her individuality in another way in *Signs*, as can be seen in the values for the lead ratio in the table several pages back, where she registers a value of 1.8, which is much higher than the 0.6 and 0.7 used by the other two editors working for M. Night Shyamalan.

**New Review of Film and Television Studies**

**What Lies Beneath - A lengths (Arthur Schmidt Jr.)**

Here the A and B length distributions have reverted to the standard profiles of recent times, and this goes with the use of an average pause of only 23 frames, which lies within the standard region for this quantity.

When I first saw *The Sixth Sense*, I did not particularly notice the long pauses between speeches, but I noticed them straight away while watching *Signs*. I would say that my initial subjective impressions correspond to the dramatic grip of the story of the first film, and the relative lack of that in the second. In *The Sixth Sense* the problems of the main characters and what they are trying to achieve connect together with one another and with the story convincingly, whereas *Signs* is really just a standard unearthly monster film, with the themes of the redemption of the failed priest and the failed athlete not really connected to the basic plot throughout the story. And this is why we do not see more of the long pause in editing, for it can interfere with the film’s hold on the audience, unless the script is particularly gripping dramatically. In the M. Night Shyamalan films, this editing feature is obviously imposed by the director, and is part of his style, not that of their various editors. However, Barbara Tulliver does register her individuality in another way in *Signs*, as can be seen in the values for the lead ratio in the table several pages back, where she registers a value of 1.8, which is much higher than the 0.6 and 0.7 used by the other two editors working for M. Night Shyamalan.

**Summing Up**

So overall, it is the ‘lead ratio’ – what fraction of the various lengths of the lead (or B length) fall below 20 frames – that best differentiates amongst editors
B. Salt

stylistically, as you can see from my table of the key variables in editing shown above. It could be thought of as playing the same role as the Average Shot Length (ASL) does for the general statistical description of film style, though the lead ratio is a somewhat more esoteric measure than the ASL. The other variables I use above to describe editing style seem to show less consistent variation between editors, but can nevertheless still provide additional differentiation between them. It is not yet clear exactly how much change over history there is in these variables. Ideally, what is required is a further accumulation of statistical data in this area.

So the simple recipe for adequate dialogue cutting is: cut the shot immediately after the last sound of the speech in the outgoing shot, and give a lead of around 8 to 20 frames to the incoming shot. Use the occasional reaction shot in the appropriate places, and other exigencies, such as the occasional necessity, even in a dialogue scene, for a cut on action will stop this approach being too mechanical. But the essential expressive function of the cut with relation to the dramatic content of the scene comes from variations in the length of the pause, and hence variations in the length of the lead. Manipulation of this worked for Robert Simpson, and he got two Oscars and several award nominations doing it. If you want to really push the movie along, while still allowing appropriate reaction time for the respondent, use more L-edits like Bill Lewthwaite, instead of cutting just after the end of the sound.

I will add that my personal belief, based on working on the cuts of lots of student films, is that altering a cut (any sort of cut, not just dialogue cuts) by one frame either way does not make any difference to the quality of the cut, but two frames either way can.

References
LoBrutto, Vincent. 1991. Selected Takes: Film Editors on Film Editing, California, Praeger
Oldham, Gabrielle. 1992. First Cut: Conversations With Film Editors California, California University Press