

THE FUGITIVE

Directed by Andrew Davis
Produced by Arnold Kopelson
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 1993

Of all the filmic arts, editing is the most elusive. While it is easy to explain that editing is the arrangement of shots and scenes, it is very difficult to anticipate the effect of a series of editorial choices (a 'cut' of a film) before it is actually viewed.

At it is even more difficult to have a goal in mind and to edit the film hoping to achieve that desired effect.

Because editing is so elusive, it may be preferable to study a famous experiment that illuminates its possibilities.

In the early days of the Soviet Union, an actor was filmed wearing a thoughtful, somewhat vacant, expression. Intercut with this footage were, respectively, a baby, a corpse, and a bowl of soup. Audiences, it is said, marveled at the actor's expressive performance. But the same footage of the actor was used each time.

So context provides meaning. The audience can experience something that is not even there—not just images, but meanings, and then feelings. Through editing, 2 plus 2 really can equal 5.

Good editing, generally, moves at a pace appropriate for the style of film (fast for action, stately for drama) but never too fast to be confusing nor too slow to be stultifying. For example, *JFK* (1991) is a standout for juggling myriad characters, using different film stocks, and employing different editing styles for different moods.

Unlike *JFK*, *The Fugitive* did not win an Academy Award for Best Editing. But it, too, is a triumph. Its genius, particularly its economy of construction, is conveyed through the very long title sequence. Appropriate for the name of the film, the credits end with the hero on a bus ride to the prison where he will await the death sentence, the credits ending right when the machinations of a fellow prisoner cause their bus to crash, only to be hit by a train so the hero can escape. Since action during credit sequences is generally insignificant, it is appropriate that the film proper starts when the hero becomes a fugitive. But we need to know how the hero becomes convicted because we are curious; and we want to know if he is worth our emotional involvement (was he unjustly accused, etc.); and, unique to this story, we must gather certain expository threads before doing so later would require slowing down the narrative. There's a lot of exposition, and the editing compresses it well without resorting to a strictly linear telling (A, B, C) or even classic flashback (B, A, C).

Arguably, we don't get a sense that what we're seeing is happening 'now' until Dr. Kimble's interrogation starts. Without that reference point neither strictly linear storytelling nor classic flashback is possible. Thus, we are left feeling just a little disoriented, not unlike our protagonist.

We begin with the Warner Brothers shield, accompanied by brooding music (letting us know it's time to get serious [entertainment] now). We get the non-thrilling blah-blah-blah

presents language, then a treat. Worthy of his performance in this film, then-relative unknown Tommy Lee Jones gets above-the-title billing with superstar Harrison Ford in a very nice graphic representation of huge bold letters turning into view and then returning to obscurity, just like a fugitive might do. The first shot of the film is of the Chicago skyline in what will become a kind of recurring visual motif for the film. We go into a pattern of skyline shot juxtaposed with slow-motion black-and-white attack footage—three sets of contrasting shots. Credits are not seen during the attack footage. (Any time during the fifteen-minute prologue that something significant is happening there will not be credits on the screen.) A synthesized arpeggio is established in the lower range while a mournful string melody takes shape high above. Finally, the woman is shot and the screen takes on its inverse, 'negative,' appearance in the only dated editorial choice of the film (but which sets up the unifying motif of quick, angry 'snapshots' that punctuate the editing).

Now we fade up to a street scene as a police truck arrives. A reporter feeds us salient information, and this is totally acceptable since his presence is not merely for exposition but can also be justified on a storytelling level as an indicator of the intense public interest in Dr. Kimble's case, an interest that will extend throughout the narrative. Anvil and bass-fueled drum hits (electronically-manipulated and filtered through an echo machine) accompany the shots of the gun (just as they complemented the 'Harrison Ford,' 'Tommy Lee Jones,' and 'The Fugitive' credits). As Kimball is led out of the house, with the arpeggios still providing a relentless churning, some bluesy electric guitar (representing the downbeat, urban realm) makes a small appearance. We cut (on a flash burst) to the fund-raiser, the music, which has not stopped, now continuing as source, not score.

The music, having succeeded in linking these short snippets of action together, finally ends with the cut to the interrogation room.

So far we've been granted some important information, but much has been withheld. The audience immediately anticipates the confrontation with the one-armed man. We don't see it. So even as we are shown that our hero is innocent, and thus, are looking forward to seeing how he will vindicate himself, we also want to look backwards and find out what really happened that night. Ultimately, of course, his vindication and what happened are inextricably interwoven.

The reporter tells us about the fund-raiser, and we jump on the aforementioned flash burst. We are shown nothing particularly significant at the fund-raiser. The details of what we see (Devlin McGregor Pharmaceuticals as host, the car loaned to Dr. Nichols, the awkward reaction of Dr. Lentz) will only become apparent later. But it is clear that Dr. Kimble and Helen have a very strong marriage.

Now we find ourselves at the police station, Richard Kimble sitting pensively trying to figure out what happened. He stares straight ahead as he fiddles with his beard. We hear his voice out of nowhere, and we cut to a rushing car (a variation on the 'flash-bulb' cuts?) and then quickly cut into the Kimbles' luxury sedan. So the jump to the car scene was set up aurally, and then visually—1, 2, and on 3 we're in the car. Where the reporter took us into the previous flashback, showing us something that pretty much anybody at the fund-raiser could have seen, now we jump into Kimble's head, showing us what only *he* knows. The purpose of this brief scene is to show us more of the couple's repaire as well as to show, strangely enough, that Dr.

Kimble has a car phone. In 1993, cell phones were almost unheard of, and they were so bulky that they were usually relegated to semi-permanent installation in the automobile. We need to understand that he has this phone because just before the end of the film Deputy Girard will tell Kimble that a call was made from Kimble's car to Dr. Lentz (evidence of the nefarious connection between Lentz and Nichols). So Kimble gets a call asking him to return to the hospital. Helen says, "I'll wait up for you," and her words echo as we cut back to Kimble, waiting at the precinct.

Finally we jump back one more time to see what happened at the hospital. Considering the deference shown by the others in the operating room, we can see that Kimble is highly respected (just like the reporter told us). Moreover, we get a little information about Provasic, the artery-flushing wonder drug. Again, this kind of information is not important now but will prove to be the villain's motive later on. One line in this scene is especially rich, seemingly innocuous. In response to Kimble's question about whose patient this is, another doctor replies, "Well, Lentz's name is on the chart. We paged him, but no answer." Lentz didn't answer because he was busy trying to get Kimble killed (which is ironic since Kimble had to go to the hospital instead, and therefore was not home when the one-armed man showed up). Or Lentz wanted Kimble to go in for the surgery, leaving Helen home alone to die in a manner that would implicate Richard. The angry cry of the avenging Kimble—"Why Helen?!"—is never answered.

A detective's question (while we're still in the operating room) brings us back to the present. So we leave as we began, with an aural nudge. The interrogation scene is allowed to play out. The tension comes from the sense of impending doom brought closer by each loaded question. There is no music in the scene until, appropriately, Kimble orders, "You find this man." It's a string sustain coupled with a mournful oboe melody.

The editing is nicely balanced in this scene. We jump away twice for quick visuals. First, we get a shot of a cop checking for signs of forced entry; we can see the door looks undamaged. Second, we are shown the gun. We saw this already, but because of its significance and its inherent, self-contained danger, it's not gratuitous to show it to us again. Note that each of these jump-aways consists of two shots, the flash-cut bringing us closer.

We jump twice, as well, into the corridor, where other detectives are following the interrogation. First we're shown what Kimble doesn't know—the evidence against him seems to be multiplying. On the second jump out, the decision is made to prosecute.

With the courtroom sequence the stylistic editing returns. We're ushered into the courtroom as the prosecutor delivers his opening statement, laying out the evidence against our hero. We jump back to Helen Kimble getting tossed against the wall (in slow-motion) then we see her getting shot (full-speed). The visuals reinforce that these bad things did indeed happen. The role of the one-armed man is minimized in these shots because the focus is on what is *true* about what the prosecutor is saying. In effect, the editing is telling us that it's not 'the system' that lets Kimble down. Not until later do we realize that it was his colleagues who failed him, or, possibly, the capitalistic system (in the film's portrait of Devlin McGregor as a rampaging profit-monster).

We cut to Detective Kelley's questioning. He speaks of there being no forced entry. We cut to Richard walking in his house calmly. This is the entry Kelley *thinks* he is referring to—a

placid entry preceding a violent kill. But the real entry has already occurred. So this is a nice, ironic juxtaposition. We watch Kimble mosey on in, totally unaware. He asks a question of Helen, who, of course, cannot answer, as we cut to the upstairs. Now we cut to another witness, testifying to the lack of foreign prints. He says this right as the latex-covered hand of the killer is given emphasis. Helen's skull is crushed.

Now a doctor discusses the hemorrhaging of the brain (which was caused by what we just saw). So there's cause and effect in the editing.

There are no prints because there's a latex glove.

That glove didn't leave a print on the murder weapon.

That murder weapon caused the hemorrhage.

And then this hemorrhage precipitates the victim's confusion and her bewildered 911 call.

At last the flashback and what is happening 'now' overlap for the first time. The attorney, as if prompted by Helen Kimble's tentative dialing, asks to play the 911 call.

In final great example of this cause-and-effect editing, as we're listening to the 911 recording, the camera slowly tracks in on Dr. Kimble's face as he sits, devastated, in the courtroom. The evidence seems so damning that it's no wonder he looks upset, we might think. However, we jump to that exact moment, in the house, during the 911 call, and it's Richard we see, not Helen. He is ascending the stairs, contented—for the last time—and blissfully unaware. He looks devastated in court because he's thinking of everything he didn't do to save her. He's not worried about the trial. As far as he's concerned, his trial has already passed, and he lost. *He does not care about himself.*

We cut to Helen. She says, with as much force as she can muster, "Richard!" She hears him on the stairs, and hopes, perhaps, that he can save her. Little did she know that saying his name right before repeating, "He's trying to kill me" would seal her husband's fate.

As we have cut back and forth between the courtroom of listeners and Helen making the call, it's like there is no distinction between past and present, and this seems to be the ultimate aim of the entire prologue. The flow of information is not dictated by any mere chronology. Rather, we are given what we need, when we need it, to achieve the maximum *emotional* effect. The music (by James Newton Howard) works seamlessly in conjunction with the editing (by Dennis Virkler, David Finfer, Dean Goodhill, Don Brochu, Richard Nord, and Dov Hoenig) to cultivate the desired audience response. When these fifteen minutes are over, we are as frustrated, bewildered, and ignorant as Richard Kimble.

We have no idea who did this.

But we know *he* didn't, and now we're with him all the way.