

# The Making of a Man in British Films

## How Masculinity is Constructed in the Editing Room

Wieland Schwanebeck

*(TU Dresden)*

### Introduction

In order to define what distinguishes cinema as an art-form, one probably thinks of the elementary techniques that are at its disposal: the mobile camera that records images, the combination of image and sound, and, of course, the cut, which arranges individual shots to build a sequence over time. Some theorists go so far as to say that editing is the soul of cinema and that it is in the editing room that a film is truly created. This means that the creative control of the director should extend all the way into the editing room. In fact, some of the most celebrated *auteurs* working in cinema today (like Alfonso Cuarón, a multiple Oscar winner and one of today's most inventive mainstream directors) edit their films themselves, while others are known to collaborate extensively with their editors. Either way, the characteristic syntax of their story-telling

often only comes together in the editing room, where the film finds its rhythm: think of the precisely choreographed fight sequences in the films of Matthew Vaughn or Guy Ritchie, or the way in which Danny Boyle will pace his scenes according to the music he has chosen.

But editing was not always the undisputed essence of cinematic storytelling, particularly not in Great Britain, which for many years failed to catch up with the international competition and thus earned a horrid reputation in the early 20th century. Critics would later quip that the British were genetically unable to produce great cinema, with François Truffaut going so far as to say that the terms 'cinema' and 'Britain' were incompatible, something that he blamed on stereotypical signifiers of Britishness like "the English countryside, the subdued way of life", and "the weather" (Truffaut 124). When

it came to exploring the possibilities of the medium in the early decades of the 20th century, some British filmmakers in fact were content to record theatre performances and otherwise left it to the Americans to conquer the British market.

The British discussion surrounding the cinema and especially the benefits of editing was frequently dominated by high-minded intellectuals who felt blasé about what they saw as yet another Vaudeville attraction for the labouring classes, and who thought that anyone seeking a career in the world of the Keystone cops and Mickey Mouse was a sell-out, not an artist. The same intellectuals continued to compare cinema unfavourably to the theatre and were opposed to the very idea of editing. Sergei Eisenstein, for one, remembers that the first montage experiments came under fire for allegedly destroying the very idea of man by reducing him to a fragmented appearance. Looking back at the early days of filmmaking, Eisenstein remembers that too many filmmakers insisted on presenting man “only in *long* uncut dramatic scenes” (59). In 1926, the year after Eisenstein’s groundbreaking film *Battleship Potemkin* premiered in Moscow, English film critic Iris Barry took the nation’s filmmakers to task over this issue, accusing them of “using the screen as though it were a stage with exits left and right” (qtd. in Barr 11); on a similar note, the producer

Michael Balcon later commented that early British filmmakers were “mentally ‘stagebound’” (qtd. in Ryall 69).

Not only British cinema has come very far since that time, and few people today would voice the idea that editing destroys *man* (neither in the universal nor in the gendered sense). Quite the contrary, the history of cinema suggests that montage techniques have often contributed to the *making* of a man on screen – in fact, what is the famous Kuleshov experiment if not the first successful demonstration that editing, rather than performance, is the most effective tool when it comes to displaying male emotion on screen? Lev Kuleshov, a contemporary of Eisenstein, famously placed the same image of a man looking straight ahead next to a series of other images (a plate of soup, a dead child, a beautiful woman), each time asking his audience to rate the actor’s performance. In each case, the audience confirmed that the actor had shown the appropriate reaction, and they interpreted his blank expression as hunger, mourning, and sexual desire, depending on the respective context (fig. 1).

On the basis of the Kuleshov experiment, filmmakers would argue that editing (rather than the performance itself) was the key to conveying emotion and to triggering audience responses. In a wider sense, editing, and montage sequences in



The Kuleshov effect

particular, are instrumental when it comes to constructing masculinity on screen.

### What He Needs Is a Montage

One of the most well-known uses of editing in narrative cinema is the training or sports montage that occurs in war and mercenary films, the sports film, or the adventure film. I am using the term montage *not* synonymously with editing here, though this is done in some textbook introductions to film studies. Unlike the very general concept of editing (meaning the assembly of

individual shots into a sequence), montage is more specifically a sequence that condenses a longer event into a short time span, usually without words. It is a somewhat controversial technique, because it runs the risk of alienating the viewer, deviating (as it does) from the rest of the film in terms of pacing and continuity. A montage amounts to cinema saying, “Look! I’m cinema!”, and this contradicts the traditional paradigm of Hollywood-style narrative editing, which tries to be as invisible and unobtrusive as possible in order to immerse the viewers in the story. Karel

Reisz, one of the pioneers of the British New Wave and the director of films like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), strongly warns against montage in his own introduction to film editing. He argues that montage disrupts the cinematic "harmony of form and content" by drawing attention to itself (Reisz & Millar 122). But this has not stopped montage from becoming a popular staple in male-dominated film genres that rely on a certain notion of muscular, monolithic masculinity.

Such montages depict the customary build-up of masculinity, as the hero prepares for the climactic battle and gets into shape, often to the sound of an emotionally charged, rousing theme tune. *Rocky* (1976), Sylvester Stallone's quintessential underdog tale, was an important film in that respect, providing a template that genre films (not just *Rocky's* very own sequels, all of which feature increasingly iconic and campy training montages) would continue to riff on for years. Montage sequences in the tradition of *Rocky* are used to restore or even produce a particular type of normative masculinity within the confines of narrative cinema, speeding up a strenuous, time-consuming process. Moreover, they draw attention to the spectacular sight of the muscular male body while at the same time having to keep homoerotic subtexts at bay, at

least in mainstream genre films. After all, the sports training derives much of its pleasure from an extended look at aestheticized male torsos. Laura Mulvey famously wrote about the 'male gaze' that is at work in classic Hollywood filmmaking, and its essential set-up is potentially threatened when a male (rather than a female) body is objectified, which means that the training montage constantly has to *work* (in the most literal sense of the word) against the stain of effeminacy. It does so by subjecting the protagonist(s) to hard labour and suffering. As sweating male bodies are seen to endure all kinds of exertion and, in some cases, outright martyrdom, the viewer gets to witness how isolated (and, in some cases, disenfranchised) men are transformed into resilient fighting machines and outright alpha-males. The montage frequently plays out as a non-verbal event that both fragments the body (so that the viewers do not indulge in too much uninterrupted gazing at particular anatomic details) and, paradoxically, makes it *whole* at the same time. This is because montage is always more than just the sum of its parts and conveys an overall impression to the viewers, even if this means manipulating them. To quote a famous example, the audience is convinced that they *see* Janet Leigh's body be mutilated in the shower montage in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) but in fact, the knife only touches the body for a split second. In the case of

the training montage, they come away thinking that they have witnessed the hard work necessary to build masculinity up from scratch, even though they have actually only been shown a small excerpt from the actual training regime with a few token beads of sweat. It is also worth stressing that the use of montage in the context of ‘making men’ highlights that masculinity is not naturally given but must be achieved by way of a strenuous labour process, one that cinema continues to accelerate and manipulate at will.

It might be because of British cinema’s belated discovery of the cut that training montages do not feature as often as in American genre cinema, but this does not mean they are completely absent from it. The training montage

(*Skyfall*, 2012), and it is also an integral part of the ‘male underdog’ comedy, which is brimming with intersectional and culture-specific themes. *The Full Monty* (1997) is a case in point: a hit comedy about six unemployed men from Sheffield who decide to put on a striptease show, the film has its protagonists try to come to terms with self-consciousness, homophobia, and male anxiety in the face of what Mulvey calls “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (62), usually thought of as a female anxiety. *The Full Monty*’s training montages dedicate as much time to dancing as to male-bonding rites like playing football or tussling, and it is much to the film’s credit that it does not succumb to homophobic bouts of ‘gay panic’ in these scenes but pokes gentle fun at them. In one training scene, the



The Full Monty © Fox Searchlight Pictures/20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox

has a place in the James Bond universe when 007 has to be resurrected from the dead and struggles to regain his stamina

guys calm down their male *angst* by pretending that they are merely acting out “the Arsenal offside trap” on stage, which

makes it okay to “wave our arms around like a fairy” and to perform their carefully choreographed dance moves (fig. 2)

Satirical uses of the training montage have been around for much longer than this, of course. In Woody Allen’s satirical comedies of the early 1970s, like *Bananas* (1971) or *Love and Death* (1974), frail anti-heroes fail at military training, particularly when it comes to handling phallic weapons – the gun falls apart, and the sabre gets stuck in the sheath. Mel Brooks’s Robin Hood spoof (*Robin Hood: Men in Tights*, 1993) has the protagonist call out to his merry men to “grab [their] uniform and equipment and prepare for the training sequence”, while *Team America: World Police* (2004), a send-up of the mercenary film made by the creators of *South Park*, features a song called “Montage” that directly comments on the protagonist’s predicament: “The hours approaching to give it your best, / And you’ve got to reach your prime. / That’s when you need to put yourself to the test / And show us a passage of time. / We’re gonna need a montage!”

In order to demonstrate how the training montage not only constructs masculinity but also contributes to the masculinisation of formulaic movie narratives, I would like to discuss *The Wild Geese* (1978), one of the most iconic British mercenary films.

## A Celebration of Group Strength: *The Wild Geese*

Sylvester Stallone’s *Rocky* franchise had heralded the return of the sports film in the United States; his subsequent *Rambo* franchise, on the other hand, popularised ‘men on a mission’ narratives in the United States again in a series of films that attempted to address the Vietnam trauma. Mercenary films of this sort had already returned to European cinemas with a string of hits in the spirit of *The Dirty Dozen* (1967). British producer Euan Lloyd, who specialised in these, would cast renowned, aging British actors who had proven their box-office credentials in the previous decades, and send them on various suicide missions all over the globe. The most well-known and successful of these was *The Wild Geese*, an African-set adventure starring Richard Burton, Richard Harris, and Roger Moore. The history of British ‘courage under fire’ pictures certainly does not start with *The Wild Geese* – nostalgic tales of British military excellence were extremely popular during World War II and afterwards; look no further than *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) or *The Guns of Navarone* (1961). Yet *The Wild Geese* was instrumental in updating the format for the hard-boiled 1980s, merging its tropes with the trademark vigilantism and body-count that would attract a younger audience.

*The Wild Geese* sees a group of retired British soldiers recruited for one final mission, in order to extract an African politician from prison in the fictional country of Zembala. The Geese's ultra-masculine Colonel Faulkner (played by Richard Burton with trademark gravelly machismo) leads them into what looks like an easy job, but the group is betrayed by their employer, a shady banker, with the result that only a handful of them survive. Though often dismissed for its (neo-)colonial politics and its borderline-fascist disregard for human life, the mercenary film is at the same time characterised by a pronounced scepticism regarding ideology and traditional master narratives of political thought, and *The Wild Geese* is no exception. This is why the growing disillusionment of the mercenaries co-exists with their nostalgic yearning for the 'good old days' of fighting for an allegedly justified cause and British camaraderie. Most mercenary films emblemise this attitude in a customary 'Band of Brothers' moment in the spirit of *Henry V's* St. Crispin's Day speech, with the team leader urging his men to exhibit courage when the odds appear to be stacked against them.<sup>1</sup> In *The Wild Geese*, such a moment occurs halfway through the film when Faulkner promises to take care of the "fifty good men" whose "lives are my responsibility", but his final speech is much more disillusioned and cynical. Effectively, it is a monologue that rejects the idea of

speechifying (delivered by one of the great Shakespearean actors of the 20th century), as Faulkner settles the score with his corrupt employer: "I had a speech prepared for you. I've been rehearsing it for three months, it was pretty good, as a matter of fact. All about the betrayals of dead friends, kind of a passionate requiem. And naturally, what a filthy and cold-blooded monster you are, et cetera, et cetera. That part was very eloquent. It even went into the philosophical implications of the relationships between a mercenary and his employer. You would have been impressed. But right now, face to face with you, I don't really want to go through all that".

The film's politics are similarly ambiguous: a surface appeal for a communal spirit that even overcomes segregation is rather on-the-nose and at the same time is undercut by the mercenaries' careless disposal of faceless African soldiers. The protagonists are in it for the money, their code of honour is revealed to be obsolete, and their failed heroism turns *The Wild Geese* into a kind of mournful western of the post-colonial era; one that laments the 'loss of a continent' instead of celebrating the 'birth of a nation' (Ritzer 85-88). Fittingly, the film was directed by Andrew V. McLaglen, a British-born director who had specialised in Westerns starring James Stewart or John Wayne throughout the 1960s.

Having dedicated the first section to the recruitment of the soldiers, the film employs a training montage in order to evoke the idea of group strength and to prepare the viewer for a radical shift in tone, merging the idea of masculine resilience with some final moments of comic relief. Unlike more generic examples of the training montage, this one does not assemble material from different exercises; it merely summarises one unit of endurance training. The sequence contains 39 shots in 119 seconds (Ø shot length: 3.1 seconds), constantly alternating between slowing-down and speeding-up (to emulate the task of the soldiers, who jog and spring around the courtyard), and cutting back and forth between large-scale ensemble shots, medium close-ups of the film's main players hitting dirt and getting up again, and two rather comic micro episodes that single out two soldiers who have run out of steam (fig. 3). This interplay between orchestrated shots of the group on the one hand and individualised episodes of suffering and recovery on the other not only highlights the varying degrees of fitness among the group, it is also indicative of *The Wild Geese* at large, as the film zooms in on the fates of about half a dozen men among its 50-strong army, sketching out their reasons for going to Africa and whether or not they make it back home. Repeatedly, the montage adopts the point of view of individual soldiers above whom Jack Watson's fierce

Sergeant Major towers. The fact that he spits abuse at them and even fires a shot next to the head of an exhausted soldier who claims to be "dead" tired is a crucial difference to other genre films: the scene, set to a march composed by Roy Budd and edited by John Glen (who would later direct five James Bond films), is neither wordless nor without wit, which means it willingly runs the risk of undercutting its surface celebration of male bravado and its hard-as-nails, 'no mercy' rhetoric with moments of irony that look ahead to more playful, tongue-in-cheek uses of the trope, which is a particular virtue of British cinema.

This quality was notably absent from *Rocky*, where the montage sequences did everything they could to camouflage male anxiety and to hold effeminacy at bay. Unlike *Rocky*'s disarming what-you-see-is-what-you-get gender politics, *The Wild Geese* plays with duplicity and deceptive appearances. This applies to the team's ruthless employer as much as it does to some of the soldiers. The unforgiving Sergeant Major tends to his rose bushes; the trademark debonair quality of Roger Moore's performance as Fynn hides a sadistic streak; and even the film's most homophobic caricature of effeminacy, Kenneth Griffith's medic Arthur Witty (a telling name if ever there was one), is subsequently revealed to be a skilled combatant. While the Hollywood Production Code ruled out the presence

of gay soldiers in traditional war films, combat film's typical "repressed



The Wild Geese

*The Wild Geese* features a gay character who not only takes pride in his sexuality, but who is also given the privilege of quick repartee. This is another marked contrast to the traditional and completely non-verbal training montages, because it puts the virtue of eloquence on par with other skills that are emblematised by the soldiers. As Witty manages to turn the Sergeant Major's homophobic taunt ("You screaming faggot, move it before I sew up your arsehole!") into a double entendre ("The Lord in His infinite wisdom would never ordain that!"), he not only wins the argument but also queers the clichéd scenario and effectively puts the 'Camp' into 'training camp', releasing some of the Hollywood

homosexual tension" (Sikov 65). This does not make *The Wild Geese* a very progressive film – it arguably remains rather problematic in its depiction of race relations and never fully cuts ties with the genre's trademark nostalgic yearning for military glory – but it demonstrates that montage can exceed the dominant notion of masculinity. Like a lot of genre films – and one might consider some of the examples that I have briefly alluded to in this text, including the James Bond series and the British working-class comedy –, *The Wild Geese* looks back to retrograde notions of masculinity in order to navigate male anxieties. In the film's coda, Faulkner approaches the young son of his late comrade, Janders

(Richard Harris), presumably to present him with a narration of his father's heroic deeds, which underlines the instrumental role that story-telling plays in the reproduction of male stereotypes. It is worth stressing, however, that the constructedness of this endeavour is very much highlighted by montage scenes, and that even a film as problematic and, to an extent, reactionary as *The Wild Geese* does some tentative steps towards pluralising the idea of masculinity.

## Works Cited

- Barr, Charles (1997). "Before *Blackmail*: Silent British Cinema." *The British Cinema Book*. Ed. Robert Murphy. London: BFI Publishing, 5-16.
- Eisenstein, Sergei (1977). *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Ed. Jay Leyda. San Diego et al.: Harcourt Brace.
- Mulvey, Laura (2012). "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *The Gender and Media Reader*. Ed. Mary Celeste Kearney. London; New York: Routledge, 59-66.
- Reisz, Karel, and Gavin Millar (1988). *The Technique of Film Editing*. London; Boston: Focal Press.
- Ritzer, Ivo (2014). "Ein entbehrliches Genre? Aspekte der medienkulturellen

Rekurrenz von 'Minigenres' am Beispiel des Söldnerfilms." *montage AV* 23.1, 81-99.

Ryall, Tom (1996). *Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema*. London: Athlone.

Sikov, Ed (1994). *Study Guide for American Cinema*. New York et al.: McGraw-Hill.

Truffaut, François (1985). *Hitchcock*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

## Endnotes

- 1 It is no coincidence that Laurence Olivier's adaptation of the play (*Henry V*, 1944) was an instrumental film during the Second World War – incidentally, he films Henry's big two-minute speech *without* a cut, thus maybe confirming the old stereotype about the theatre mentality of Britain's leading directors.