

HOW TO ASSEMBLE A 'DRAGON'

The director David Fincher and his Oscar-winning editors break down the art of the edit, using a sequence from their forthcoming film, 'The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo.'

By GAVIN EDWARDS

Angus Wall has edited the last five movies directed by David Fincher — the three most-recent ("The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," "The Social Network" and "The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo") in partnership with Kirk Baxter. Earlier this year, Wall and Baxter won the Oscar for Best Achievement in Film Editing for "The Social Network," and while they each work on outside projects — Wall created the arresting title sequence for HBO's "Game of Thrones" — they spend much of their time in adjacent rooms, cutting and splicing copious amounts of

Fincher's footage. Wall explains the key to editing like this: "The human brain wants to put things together; it wants to create a narrative." Their job is to facilitate that desire.

To illuminate that job, and the trio's ongoing collaboration, we asked Fincher, Baxter and Wall to break down a four-minute sequence that occurs early in "Dragon Tattoo." The narrative set-up: The journalist Mikael Blomkvist (Daniel Craig) is visiting the aging industrialist Henrik Vanger (Christopher Plummer), who is asking him to investigate a decades-old mystery involving his niece Harriet. Blomkvist agrees to listen, reluctantly, though he is determined to catch his 4:30 train. And ... action.



0:28

As Vanger's story unfolds, the shot shifts to a flashback to 1966, as connoted by the frame's golden tones. "Very warm and familial," Fincher noted. "I was setting up an expectation for how we would see the past." The movie later revisits this day's events in "cold blue," offering a harsh new perspective.



0:30

Back in the present day, Vanger tells Blomkvist that his family was gathered on their ancestral island for a board meeting. "We've moved these two guys from where they were previously," Wall said. "And now they have drinks, so it's a bit of a time jump. Editing is all about compressing time so it gives you the illusion of continuity, even as we take out the 'boring' bits."



0:56

In the flashback, the young Vanger (Julian Sands) conducts business. "Here you're seeing three different shots glued together," Baxter explained. Fincher will shoot dozens of takes with the camera in the same position, then the editors will piece together their favorite performances with digital split-screen effects. Fincher joked that he should install a klaxon in the editing room, triggered by split screens: "Stop them before they split again!"



1:01

Here, Harriet interrupts. One character absent from this sequence is Lisbeth Salander, the girl with the dragon tattoo — though earlier versions cut between Vanger's memories and a present-day sequence in which Salander hacks a data line. They decided to excise it. "Even though [the flashback] takes the same amount of screen time," Wall said, "it actually seems quicker, because you're staying in that recounting of the event."



1:03

In voice-over, the elderly Vanger remembers telling Harriet, "Give me a few minutes" — and his voice is matched to an image of the young Vanger saying much the same thing. When the sound editor, Ren Klyce, noted that the dialogue wasn't precisely synched, Baxter said, "Well, they're actually saying different sentences, but as long as we keep the voice slightly ahead, then we stay in the rhythm."



1:20

In the flashback, Vanger is interrupted by an accident on the bridge connecting the island to the mainland. A precept of film editing is that, while you can show a scene from different angles, you will disorient viewers if you cross an invisible dividing line, say, suddenly switching the point of view from a character's left side to his right. "These edits here are very unconventional," Wall said. "This doesn't cross the line. But it's right on the line."



1:21

The editors cut to a reverse shot of the accident, taken from the bridge's other end. "It's all supposed to tie into the division of sides: here is the bridge, there's a crash in the middle, the family is on this side, and they're on that side," Baxter said. "This is the story of how Harriet couldn't have gotten out."



1:58

A flurry of cuts includes this glimpse of a young police officer, Morell, evacuating the scene of the accident; later, Blomkvist will meet the aged Detective Superintendent Morell. Wall said: "You see characters in this scene for the first time that you're going to see throughout the movie. And there are clues in here that you'd never catch on the first viewing."



2:12

Back in the house, the Vanger family eats dinner, but Harriet is absent. The head-on composition of this shot mirrors the accident on the bridge. "There's a lot of symmetry," Fincher said. A crucial decision was the inclusion of young Vanger in this sequence, even though he is the one narrating the action four decades later. "I wanted [the tone] to feel impartial and omniscient, because it is semi-Agatha Christie."



2:26

In the present day, Blomkvist listens to Vanger lament that he brushed off Harriet. Wall and Baxter had wondered: Should Blomkvist push Vanger by asking him questions? Or should Vanger pose the rhetorical questions to himself? They could cut the scene either way and tried both. Baxter said that, in the end, "it was nice to let Vanger lead it. Blomkvist is hooked by the craziness, but he's not hanging on Vanger's every word yet."



2:50

Vanger explains that Harriet couldn't have left the island without being seen — thus leaving murder as the only explanation for her disappearance. At the end of this shot, Vanger's dialogue from the next scene starts as a voice-over overlaid on this one ...



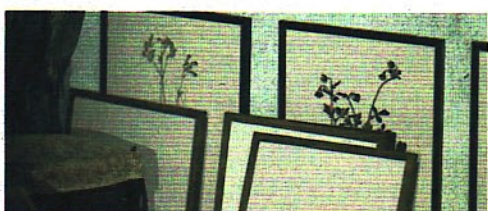
3:21

... leading the viewer into the following scene, in the house's attic. This technique, in which dialogue from the next scene starts early as a voice-over, is known as a prelap; it's common but often goes unnoticed. "Your brain fills in the gaps," Wall said. "If we don't do it," Baxter added, "it seems slow."



3:30

In the attic, Vanger tells Blomkvist that Harriet's killer taunts him by sending him pressed flowers on his birthday every year, just as she used to do. Wall cited this as one of his favorite Christopher Plummer moments. "I always feel like I'm in the scene," Wall said. That helps him showcase the actor's best takes. "In editing, you can say, 'I don't believe what you're saying, so I'm going to look for a better performance.'"



3:52

Decades' worth of framed dried flowers fill the room. This isn't second-unit footage — Fincher took an hour at the end of a shooting day to film a hundred or so floral close-ups himself. Baxter and Wall then picked their favorites. Wall said: "You use complementary shots. If something is at a slight right angle in one shot, it's nice to follow it with something that has a slight left angle."



3:53

The 4:30 train leaves, and Blomkvist isn't on it. This is the 83rd shot in the sequence; Fincher said, "I wanted to make the sequence move as quickly as it could, but still get the value of something that feels measured." Baxter says later sequences with Salander are edited at a speedier tempo: "Her decisions come faster; she's thinking at a higher level." In other words, editing not only requires intelligence; it can create a sense of it onscreen. ♦