

Lee Smith

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Born in 1960 in Sydney, Lee Smith had plenty of encouragement to enter the film business while he was growing up, considering his father worked as an optical effects supervisor and his uncle owned a film-processing lab. After learning multiple film disciplines at a local post-production company, during which he edited a number of science-fiction thrillers including **Communion** (1989) and **RoboCop 2** (1990), and served as an assistant editor, additional editor and sound designer on such Peter Weir dramas as **The Year of Living Dangerously** (1982), **Dead Poets Society** (1989), **Green Card** (1990) and **Fearless** (1993), Smith was hired to co-edit Weir's **The Truman Show** (1998) with William M. Anderson. He has since received solo editing credits on the Australian director's **Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World** (2003) and **The Way Back** (2010).

Smith has also enjoyed a collaboration with Christopher Nolan, for whom he edited **Batman Begins** (2005), **The Prestige** (2006), **The Dark Knight** (2008) and **Inception** (2010). He received two Academy Award and ACE Eddie nominations for his work on **Master and Commander** and **The Dark Knight**. His other credits include Gregor Jordan's **Buffalo Soldiers** (2001), Craig Lahiff's **Black and White** (2002), and Matthew Vaughn's upcoming **X-Men: First Class** (2011).

Lee Smith

“ I started cutting on a Moviola, which is that clackety-clack thing you see in old movies. I eventually graduated to a Steenbeck and a KEM, those big flatbed editing machines, which I worked on for years. My first non-linear editing experience was on Lightworks. There was a lot about that I loved, but I hated the image quality, which was so poor that I couldn't believe it was ever going to take off. But that changed very rapidly, and now I'm using an Avid, as I have for at least ten years. You can't go back; it's just not possible.

Still, I would've hated to miss cutting on film. Running the reels backward and forward gives you time to think. And I still make it a point to think hard about what I'm doing, so as not to forget my training as a film editor. I know I can fiddle, but my rule remains: Do it once right.

Non-linear or non-destructive editing is fantastic because you get to play. You get to change things and keep things, which you couldn't do on film. You couldn't just sit there and fiddle, because the mechanical method of cutting was mostly about keeping the work print in good condition, and it would take so much time to

make a single splice. I cut so many movies that way and never thought twice about it. Nowadays, I watch editors who haven't had film experience, and they tend to jump around a lot, as if they've all got ADD. They can't calm down and just look at something. Because it's non-linear, that's the way their brains work now.

Films look better when they're shot on film. The film process is still superior to the digital process, which makes me wonder why everyone's racing to convert to something that is still theoretically catching up. It's a weird thing. In digital, it's always “almost as good as film.” If it's almost as good, my suggestion is to keep it in your back pocket and then bring it out again when it's better—which will happen, of course.

I got my start as an apprentice at a small post-production company. This was during the early days of the Australian film industry, and people like Peter Weir, Phillip Noyce, Gillian Armstrong, and Jane Campion were coming up through those facilities, though none of them was well known yet. I worked my way up, learning how to operate sound equipment and fix editing

THE TRUMAN SHOW

This film proved difficult to edit, not least because it was unclear exactly how explicit the film should be about its central premise. Initially, it became quite obvious early on that Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) was the unwitting subject of his own TV show, due to numerous scenes of supporting characters smiling directly at the camera. At director Peter Weir's request, Smith ended up cutting a brand-new prologue that introduced the characters yet remained cagey about the true nature of their role in Truman's life.

All in all, the film (which was co-edited by William M. Anderson) was screened in about 18 different versions before Weir and Smith settled on their final cut. Finding the right structure required a delicate balancing act. “Sometimes it got better and better, and other times it just crashed and burned,” Smith says. “There were a couple of screenings where you'd be forgiven for asking, ‘Wow, is that the same movie?’”



“I worked my way up, learning how to operate sound equipment and fix editing machines and project films; you had to be a real jack of all trades.”

machines and project films; you had to be a real jack of all trades. I was offered the opportunity to do the sound on a couple of very B-grade movies no one else wanted to work on. And eventually I managed to get onto **The Year of Living Dangerously** (1982), which was my entry into quality filmmaking and the first time I met Peter Weir.

The way Peter shoots is very organic; he covers scenes in many varied ways, as he demonstrated on **The Truman Show** (1998). We originally planned to start that film by essentially letting the audience in on the it's-all-a-TV-show gag, right at the beginning. We had many shots of characters looking down the barrel of the lens with a wry smile. Very quickly we realized this wasn't the right tactic. Peter told me he wasn't happy with the beginning of the film and asked me to come up with something different. Fortunately, we had a **Truman Show** mockumentary that had been filmed, and from that I managed to find all the material with which to assemble the actual prologue of the film. So it was just a matter of working my way through the footage. Peter tends to shoot more than he needs.

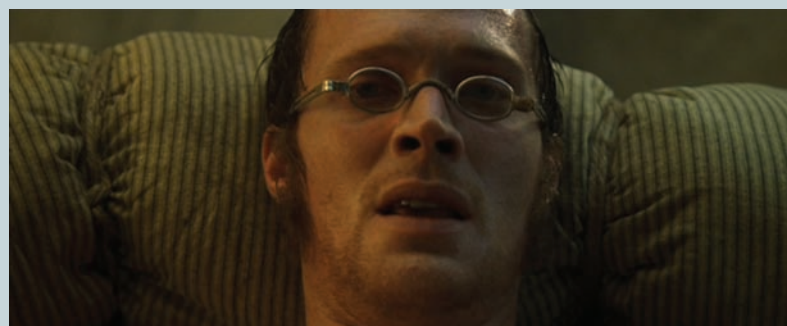
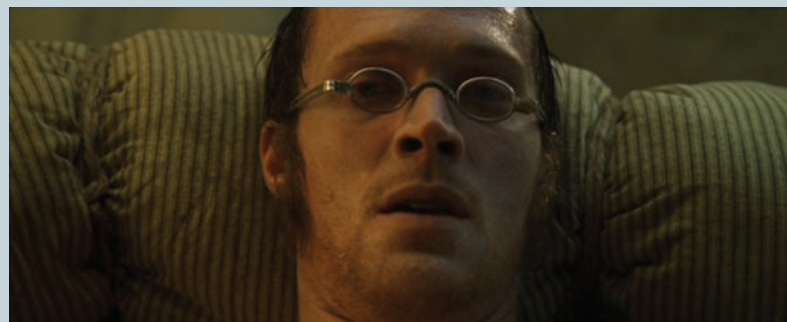
It was a very complicated film to edit. Peter would push the envelope by having us change even parts of the film that were working and move them around, just in the hunt for the best possible result. Sometimes it got better and better, and other times it just crashed and burned. We did about 18 screenings of that film, and there were a couple of screenings where you'd be forgiven for asking, “Wow, is that the same movie?”

Every film is like a puzzle, and you just have to keep watching it, and eventually you can tell where the stumbling blocks are. Then it's just a matter of repositioning them, and the effect of that can change the entire outcome of the movie. Simply moving and manipulating sequences can derail a film. You can build a film for either complete destruction or complete success in the editing room, and I've definitely seen both. But you have to watch the whole movie to be able to tell, and I think a lot of editors make mistakes because they don't take that step. How many movies have you seen where you watch a 20-minute chunk and you think it's genius, →



MASTER AND COMMANDER: THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD

The sequence in which Dr. Stephen Maturin (Paul Bettany) performs a brave feat of auto-surgery represents an especially deft example of how restrained editing can yield both humor and tension in the same moment. Smith cut from Capt. Jack Aubrey (Russell Crowe) and other quietly horrified onlookers to tight close-ups of Maturin's clenched face, never showing the wound itself in detail, but rather leaving the audience members to imagine the pain on their own.



and then another 10-minute chunk that's not so genius? You drop in and out of the film, and every so often it's amazing, but when you watch it as a whole, it does not work. You, the editor, have got to make the movie work as a whole; that's how they're designed to run. The more you can keep watching the movie, the more it'll throw its issues back in your face.

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World (2003) was the first film Peter asked me to cut as sole editor, and it was the first time I'd worked with that kind of budget. I loved everything about that movie, though we had a rocky ride in post. Neither Peter nor I had worked on big, effects-heavy films, and there were so many holes and placeholders, which was a bit awkward. When you're not used to it, the footage just looks disgusting with all the greenscreen and cranes and crap in the shots. You're sitting there, wondering, "Is this ever going to look good?" The first assembly was four hours long; it was a big, unwieldy beast of a movie. The terrific thing about Peter is that he's really good at removing what needs to be removed. It might have been the hardest sequence in the world to shoot, and he could look at it once and say, "Take it out. It's not for the movie."

A good example of that was on **Dead Poets Society** (1989). I had cut a very funny scene in which Robin Williams' character is teaching the boys the art of concentration. He's got an overhead projector and the boys are all taking an exam, and he tells them, "Eyes down, eyes down." And then he starts putting nudes on the projector. It was funny as hell, and we were all sitting there killing ourselves laughing. Peter laughed and laughed like he's never laughed before. And as soon as the scene was finished, he said, "Take it out. It's a great scene, but that's not the character." And when I reflect upon it, I believe he was 100 percent right: That was not the character. As good as that scene was, it didn't belong in the movie. Over the years I've learned to be able to look objectively at something and say, "Brilliant scene, but it does nothing, and it's got to go." →

Stages of cutting

Editor's cut: "Post-production" can be a misleading term, as as the editor starts working at the same time principal photography begins. In cutting scenes together from dailies and placing them in the structure dictated by the script, the editor will make every effort to stay "up to camera," so that the initial assembly will be complete shortly after shooting ends. Because it essentially represents a rough draft, the editor's cut is often longer than the film will end up being.

Director's cut: Once shooting has wrapped, the director will join the editor in the cutting room and the two will work together to improve and refine the cut of the film. Reshoots may be conducted during this period if needed. Directors Guild of America rules stipulate that directors have a minimum of ten weeks after completion of principal photography to prepare their cut.

Final cut: The final cut of the film is determined and supervised by the film's producer(s), although in some cases the director may negotiate with the studio to receive final cut approval.

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I’m continually surprised when I cut scenes and look at them and think, well, that kind of works, but I don’t quite remember how I got there. You just have to trust your gut and your intuition. I don’t question what I think the first time around. As Chris Nolan says, there are a million ways to cut a scene, but only one correct one. When you look at a mountain of material, if you start questioning your own thoughts, you’ll just turn into a puddle and it will take you three years to edit the movie.

Generally speaking, I only read a script once—unless it’s a Chris Nolan film, in which case I read it about five times. **Inception** (2010) was probably the most intense editorial experience of my life. I was finishing Peter Weir’s **The Way Back** (2010) when production on **Inception** began, so I had my assistant, John Lee, do the initial assembly for Chris. I came on quite late, and we were probably within a couple of

months of finishing shooting, and Chris didn’t want me to look at any of the work John had done. He wanted me to assemble strictly from dailies, which I was somewhat anticipating. The advantage was that I was able to come in while the film was still being shot and start from scene one, which I’ve never been able to do in my life, though I’m not sure whether that ended up making the film make any more sense to me. There was a huge amount of coverage and an enormous number of conceptual ideas being bounced around while they were shooting. The script, of course, is helpful at first. But once the film is shot, the script becomes irrelevant, and you have to cut with what you’re given. Let the images do the talking.

The cross-cutting among dream levels was especially challenging. My approach, as with all editing, was to construct each sequence as a standalone, and then I would start to intercut, and



intercut, and intercut, working out where all the best transition points were. Some of those were script-based, some weren't, and some I just discovered as I proceeded. It was like a gigantic game of chess, and I would just have to keep making my moves. Occasionally I would make the wrong move, and I'd realize that a certain sequence had gone on too long and I had lost the thread. But truthfully, there were so many ticking clocks, it would actually become quite obvious when I had it wrong, because I would cut back to something and realize it didn't work.

In editing, as in mathematics and music, we all have an in-built clock. When your clock is off kilter or out of step, you tend to feel it quite strongly. I certainly do. It's like a sledgehammer. If I watch something and it's wrong, it's not subtly wrong. It's like an alarm bell that goes off. The trick is to keep screening the film and get it to the point where you know it feels right. →

THE DARK KNIGHT

Heath Ledger's performance as the Joker in **The Dark Knight** underscored the intense physicality of the film, particularly in the editing, as Smith used sharp, jolting cuts so that the punches and blows would register with particularly visceral force. Still, he and Nolan opted to limit Ledger's exposure, knowing that his performance, strong as it was, would be more effective in small, potent doses. "It was the old adage of 'Keep them wanting more,'" says Smith, who had previously edited Ledger's work in the Australian film **Two Hands** (1999).

THE PRESTIGE

Despite the strength of the script, the first cut of **The Prestige** was surprisingly clunky, according to Smith. "Neither Chris Nolan nor I cared for it much the first time," he says. "But then it became really good, really fast. Within a couple of weeks, we managed to crack it."

Their method in assembling the film, with its brisk shifts back and forth in time, was to make the puzzle bulletproof, so that there would be a satisfactory answer to any question a viewer could pose. This required maintaining certain key lines of dialogue in the film despite the usual pressure to trim it down. "Chris would always say, 'No. If we take that out, we're cheating.'"



The first time we screened **Inception** was probably about four weeks or so into Chris' director's cut. There were just four of us: Chris; Emma, his wife; John Lee, my additional editor/assistant; and myself. I felt pretty reasonable about it, but it was such a complicated film that I was nonetheless on the edge of my seat, wondering if we had cracked all the nuts that needed to be cracked. That first screening was amazing. The film worked so well. We were all sort of sitting there with our mouths hanging open. I had thought it would be the mother of all problems—the Rubix cube of filmmaking.

Of course, if you thought **Inception** was complicated, **The Prestige** (2006) was even more so. When you're editing a puzzle movie, the rule is: Don't cheat. When you establish a mechanism or a condition of the film's world, don't cheat. In film, you can cheat endlessly; it's the lazy way of doing it. You think no one will notice, but it always ends up letting the audience down. We wanted to make **The Prestige** bulletproof, so that at the end of the day, people could question it to death and there would always be an answer to every question. It can be dangerous when you're trimming down; some lines of dialogue are essential parts of the film's DNA. Some of them perhaps seemed not so useful, the type you could get away with trimming, but Chris would always say, "No. If we take that out, we're cheating."

I never want to mystify or confuse an audience without good reason. There are moments in any film when you can use confusion well, but I never want someone to come up to me after that film and say, "What was that?" or "I didn't understand it at all." Of course there's a small percentage of people who will fall into that category. But a film's success is evidence that the film did indeed translate to a reasonably broad audience, which gives me faith that "reasonably broad" means "reasonably smart." You respect the audience, and it works. ”

INCEPTION

Cutting among the various dream levels in **Inception** "was like a gigantic game of chess," says Smith. "I would just have to keep making my moves." He constructed each level in standalone sequences before intercutting the individual strands; at one point, the film is so fiendishly complex that four different parallel levels are in play. Still, Smith notes, "There were so many ticking clocks, it would actually become quite obvious when I had it wrong."



