

POST PRODUCTION

ART OF THE CUT with Nicholas Monsour, editor of "US"

[Steve Hullfish](#) March 23, 2019[Comment](#)

Nicholas Monsour's previous feature work as an editor has included *Keanu* and *Action Point*. He also has experience in editing TV series like *Key and Peele*, *The O.G.*, *Cobra Kai* and the pilot for the series *Whiskey Cavalier*.

We spoke about his latest project, Jordan Peele's thriller, *Us*.

(This interview was transcribed with [SpeedScriber](#). Thanks to Martin Baker at [Digital Heaven](#).)

HULLFISH: Let's talk about the schedule.

MONSOUR: We had about a forty-two-day shoot. They started that in July and I was cutting from day one of production at Universal and then as soon as they wrapped production we moved into a little house that (director) Jordan Peele's company had rented in Hollywood and kept editing from there and we did our 10-week director's cut. After that, we had about three months to do two preview screenings and producer and studio notes, fixes, all that stuff.

We had a very solid story to start from. So that's a big difference in terms of the time it takes. It was a bit fast and challenging in that regard but that's what you get when you're working with a director who's so incredibly in demand. Their time is pretty precious.

HULLFISH: This is the first time you were working with Jordan as a director?

MONSOUR: As a director, yes. But I was lucky enough to get the job of editing the last season of *Key and Peele*. So as a producer and writer and actor, I worked with him. After that, I did the movie *Keanu* which he wrote and produced and was in. And then he also produced a show called *The Last O.G.* that I did a stint on as a sort of edit consultant which was a position we invented and then I am working on the *Twilight Zone* with him too.

HULLFISH: I was in L.A. last weekend and saw all of the *Whiskey Cavalier* promotions.

MONSOUR: Yeah. Boy, they're really not skimping on promotions for that. That is everywhere. I did the pilot for that. That was with Peter Atencio who was the director of *Keanu* and *Key and Peele*. So that family of people I've been lucky enough to be working with since I started with them back on *Key and Peele*.

Feedback





Director Jordan Peele

HULLFISH: Talk to me about that relationship with Jordan and how you guys collaborate and how it might be different from your relationships with some other directors you've worked with.

MONSOUR: Most of the directors that I gravitate towards and who seem to gravitate towards working with me are ones that are really interested in collaborating with other creative people. Mostly because they have the confidence that they know how it should be if no one else does, so they're open to new ideas because they feel like they have a solid starting point. I feel like that's true of a handful of directors I've worked with. Jordan exemplifies the kind of director who — if you take the time to go above and beyond doing what was on the page and try new things — he's always open to look at it and give it its chance if you can make the case for it.

Working with Jordan as director versus working with him as a producer was not all that different because in both roles it's the same discussion about what's best for the film. He has a real great objectivity about his films and is really most concerned with how an audience will view it rather than just getting his vision across. It's a dialogue with an audience, so he's always open to other people's reads on things which is cool.

The most radically different thing about Jordan is his openness to creative input, which I know isn't unique, but it's pretty special when you find it.

HULLFISH: You mentioned his objectivity. Can you explain a little bit about how that objectivity plays out — either in how the movie changes from the script or how much does his objectivity play out and how do you help with that?



MONSOUR: I like to think that I share a kind of creative outlook with Jordan in some ways. It's very useful to have people on your team who you have a sort of Venn diagram with in terms of things you've watched. The common factor with everyone on *Us* is that we are all insane cinephiles, who, given any amount of free time will just pump as many movies into our brains as possible and are always searching for what's new and interesting out there as well as the history of the genre or the techniques that we're working with. He very wisely brings on a team in the heads of department and producers and even working with studio executives with an understanding of the history of the genre we're working with and what the opportunities are for what hasn't been explored.

Jordan came to directing after a long productive writing and acting career. And I think through all of that he had been soaking up every bit of other directors, writers, actors, approach things. So by the time he did *Get Out*, I think he came to it with a kind of practical first hand observed knowledge of how others approach directing and writing and making movies. He comes up with some insane idea that is kind of magic and when he emerges with it, it's an object in the world that exists and now we all get to tell him our thoughts on it. We all get to say, "Oh, I think this means that" and he doesn't necessarily correct you unless it's really wrong. He'll allow for experiments in that direction. I really enjoy working on his films because it does feel like you're having a conversation with an audience.

Our test screenings were one of the most vocal reactions I've ever heard in a movie. It really doesn't feel like a one-way transmission. It feels like a new layer of the film's meaning is added by the audience's participation in it. And he has just an amazing innate sense of how that works. I think that partially comes from his comedic background which is all about setting up an audience's expectation and then subverting it in a humorous way. But he's now doing that with scares and with things that make you rethink a narrative plot twist.



HULLFISH: Had you done anything horror-based before?

MONSOUR; Not really. My pre-professional career was working in more of a fine art and experimental video and film background in Chicago. I went to art school and made films and video installations myself and collaborated with others doing that and I think I did a lot of experimentation. Because of that, when I started working in official TV and film production around eight years ago, I had to intentionally study the official methods of doing these things and the official tropes in a more academic way. I really had to approach it more systematically so that when I read a script page or see a storyboard page I can recognize this pattern. I know the kind of thing they're going for. Or if I see a certain angle or a certain camera move, I recognize that and I think I know the kind of music that they probably want to hear with that or the kind of cutting pattern or whatever.

I started in comedy when I got actual paying editing work. Comedy and documentary were the two things I started with. I was doing nonprofit editing before I got an HBO documentary job. I had a lot of friends growing up in Los Angeles who do comedy and are actors and that was sort of the next move. So it was kind of by chance but I've always been trying to work on things that actually have some kind of social message embedded in them or at least some kind of dialogue with what's happening politically, whether that be comedy, horror, or documentary. I love horror, but this is my first chance to play with the big guns.

HULLFISH: Did you study at the Art Institute? I'm in Chicago.

MONSOUR: Yeah, I recognized your area code on the phone.



HULLFISH: I talked to so many editors that feel like they're typecast. It's nice that Jordan didn't restrict your contributions to comedy. As producers, you can kind of see why it happens, right?

MONSOUR: I still look around nervously when you say that it's good I broke out because it does feel that way and it does feel like an alarm is going off somewhere because it is difficult and I tend to think that it's because the business side of things that the type-casting happens for editors mostly which is understandable, but I think it's unfortunate. I was never an assistant editor or an apprentice editor. I started from the sort of DIY school where we were all kind of collaborating or making our own tiny budget experimental things, so I always have come to editing with the idea that I'm technically the editor, but we're all trying to make this idea real. And how do we do that? And because of that, I think most editors work this way, but you find your work through directors that you have a relationship with and if you have a good relationship and they trust your instincts,

I don't think it matters to them if it's comedy or drama or whatever. It seems to be more that the people putting money on the line get nervous if they don't see that you've done exactly what they're trying to do before. So it's been challenging at every turn to try and intentionally direct my career because as soon as you do one project that is seen in the world, that's the kind of thing people want to continue to hire you for, which can be great, but if you have a sort of omnivorous appetite for film it can be limiting also. I'm very thankful that Jordan recognizes talent and keeps people with him that he trusts in positions and that's a great

quality and it's worked out for me. I hope to continue to do many things — including comedy — because it's more for me about what the pi Manage consent 1
the world than the exact form of it.

HULLFISH: What is the social commentary of *Us*?



MONSOUR: Well, get ready for a frustrating answer because I don't want to speak for Jordan because I think the most interesting answers for that that aren't in the film would come from him. And I think one thing he's done so masterfully in the script and in this directing is to give you all the information you need to start asking the right questions and debating it with your friends after you see it and thinking about it without prescribing an exact reading or social message from it. So I'm hesitant to say exactly what I think it's about. I find the story and the film to be very rich in readings. I'm not bullshitting when I say that on the hundredth viewing I saw new things in it and the thousandth time I'd seen a certain clip I would still catch a nuance that I hadn't quite registered before and that just speaks to everyone on the film starting from Jordan's script and direction just pumping as much detail into the film as possible. But, to give some semblance of a real answer it has to do with your identity. Who you think you are. And how you decide to live your life and what you're afraid of and what you feel the need to protect has a lot to do with our politics and really getting into that in a deep psychological way about why are you afraid of the things you're afraid of and do we ourselves bear a responsibility for the things happening to us that are scary in some way. There's a real questioning of culpability as Americans that he's interested in looking at.

HULLFISH: Tell me a little bit about your approach, since you said you kind of came from a DIY background that leans more toward art school than film school. What do you do when you look at an empty timeline?

MONSOUR: Well, first of all, that's always horrifying every time. Imposter complex is always there, especially if you're trying to challenge yourself and taking something you haven't quite done before. There's always a moment of: "OK, they're going to figure out that I don't know what I'm doing."

HULLFISH: I've talked to multiple Oscar winners that have this exact same feeling.



MONSOUR: I'll flatter myself and say that I think the best people probably do because I think that's a sign that you are looking at something critically and with fresh eyes. I'd get scared if it felt easy and or boring.

My general method for anything is to do my own research. I'll ask the director or writer or whoever will talk to me to tell me as much as they want me to know about what they were thinking; what they're imagining; and then I'll take all of that — I'll do my own research based on what they've mentioned — whether it's other films that seem relevant. In preproduction or leading up to an edit I'll just cram as much stylistic and conceptually related things into my brain as I can, with the goal that on day one I try and forget all of it and work somewhat intuitively based off of the dailies that come in and I try to throw a plan out at first. I try to give myself enough time and work out a schedule with the filmmakers that allows for the time so that I can respond intuitively and creatively at first to the material and not think, "OK, I know how this scene is going to go, and then where is that shot that goes there now? Where is that shot that is listed as the fourth shot in the storyboard?" And just sort of paint-by-numbers.

I'll usually try and approach something cold watching the clips — just absorbing all of the footage — and then kind of impressionistically put it together and then I'll compare that afterward. I'll go back and reread the script, relook at the storyboards if they exist. I'll often honestly ignore script notes until after I do my intuitive work on a scene because I never want to miss an interesting idea because they didn't know about it before they shot it. They discover so many things when filming — the performers discover so many things during a take — that if you try and follow a blueprint it can kind of come out at the other end a little dry or really not be making the best of what they actually captured. So that's the goal. But if I'm sending a director a rough cut that's different or deviates from what was scripted or planned I'd better have scripted one in my back pocket to show as well.

On this one Jordan was so open — involving me in the preproduction process — I was able to speak with the composer before we started and the effects supervisor, production designer, the dialogue had already been started so that my first passes on things were getting us pretty close. They finished production I had a reasonably watchable rough cut that felt like a solid starting place to explore rather than what can sometimes happen where you're just trying to put out fires to make something work.



HULLFISH: Tell me a little bit about the actual nuts and bolts of your approach. Do you use selects reels, string outs? Do you go straight from the bins? Are you putting locators in? Are you taking paper notes? What are you actually doing?

MONSOUR: I kind of try to customize that process to the project. I think some projects demand a heavily prepped project with select reels or even using ScriptSync. Doing internal rough edits before I build the full sequence. It really depends on the way they shoot and the type of editing I think I'm going to be doing with it. So on this film — on *Us* — they were very decisive during the filming. They primarily use one camera which is amazing and I love when people do it right because it demonstrates that they've really done their homework and made the decision for any particular moment in the film of the image that they want to represent it. That allowed me to really have a pretty solid clear starting point for a narrative scene. At which point I could explore what happened actually if we throw this off its axis and take it from an entirely different vantage point or try it in a one or whatever the other option would be. So in the nuts and bolts sense, I'm changing my tactics all the time. There were times where I used ScriptSync because there would be a lot of improvisation and selects reels aren't even do-able because it's hard to even categorize moments in a scene when they deviate from the script a lot.

HULLFISH: There are improvisational moments in *Us*?

MONSOUR: There are scenes that are played more naturally with the actors riffing. Not a lot, but there are some of the more comedic scenes really benefited from using ScriptSync.

I have an amazing assistant editor named Matt Absher who very quickly can understand what he's looking at when dailies come in. He locates the starts and stops in action, give different colors to deviations or alts and group all the footage so that very very quickly I have a very well organized bin of clips laid out in a way that I immediately understand how he's organized it and he's just excellent at that and that's invaluable. So once if I feel like I understand the movie and the idea of the movie well enough I'll start from a completely irresponsible creative point of view and just launch into cutting because that's what gets me excited. That's where I find the most interesting ideas. And then after I kind of work that out, I'll actually make a select sequence so that I know I didn't miss a better read of this line or that line or if it's a complicated action sequence or visual effects sequence I'll have to start there as well. But primarily, if I can justify it, I launch in to creatively editing as quickly as possible because it keeps me excited and I find that's where to find some of the best ideas.

<https://vimeo.com/325991852>

HULLFISH: One of the things that intrigued me was that you said that the film could kind of be read a bunch of different ways. Does that make it hard to edit because you are trying to allow people to read into it what they want instead of what you're telling them?

MONSOUR: (laughs) It might make it difficult in the hands of a lesser writer or with a different director relationship. Luckily, Jordan is so happy to get into the discussions with me about what something might mean or what the idea behind something is and really fully brief me on his thought process on things and be that generous with me as a collaborator, so it makes it a little less scary to just take a stab in the dark about what I think it's about, because I know if I'm off he'll let me know in a creative way. He'll explain to me more about his thought process which will allow me to continue to work on it creatively rather than him saying "actually we should just be saying on this actor for this shot because it's about this." He will almost never prescribe a technical solution. He'll give the people he works with the logic of the idea of the scene — the concept of the sequence — and then allow you to continue to explore the technical means through which to do that; which is wonderful.

HULLFISH: I'm still interested in this idea that the audience is allowed to kind of read into it or have different readings. Does that limit or change the way you use music? Because so often music is used to kind of guide the audience — as bad as I think that is. What did it do to your music choices since you weren't trying to do that to the audience?

MONSOUR: That's a great question. One thing I love about the history of the horror/ thriller genre is that because it's so rooted in psychology, the history of music in horror films is probably the most experimental use of music and sound of any popular genre. It has been since day one going back to Hitchcock and then through the 70s. There's been a constant search for sort of whatever can disturb the audience into more uncomfortable sensations or clue you into some of the more difficult types of emotional landscape. So there's a history of using avant-garde 20th century composed music from Bernard Herrmann to Penderecki. William Friedkin's films and Hitchcock films and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and all these films often have landmarks scores as well. And I think Jordan is very clued into that. He's picked a composer in Michael Abels — both for *Get Out* and for *Us* — who is fully versed in that lexicon musically. He's an incredibly serious composer and then has started working on films with Jordan and he has this background where he can really get into areas that are unique for me in terms of composers I've worked with, so through a discussion with him and with Jordan, we were able to hone in on a musical palette pretty early that works with the film and often we were using music in an almost physiological way to create rhythms and pulses and textures that could be used to manipulate the expectations of the action in a scene and throw you off and jolt you out of what you were thinking was happening. Lull you into some expectation and then change it, all while trying to link it to a character psychology at the same time, because in this film if we drift too far from the music feeling rooted and in the character that we're really tracking the emotions and motivation then it would start to feel added or forced or gratuitous.



I do try to cut without music whenever possible so that I know what's happening rhythmically with the sound design and the dialogue very clearly and then the music can be woven in in an organic way. Then there are sequences that are very driven by the rhythmic element of music and you need it there to work with from the beginning and I was able to get very early demos from the composer to work with so that we already could kind of be building these ideas organically with the picture.

HULLFISH: So did you primarily temp with stuff that you got from the composer or from his previous work or did you try temping with other horror film score?

MONSOUR: We definitely used his demos and some of his other work from *Get Out* and other things whenever possible. Partially because the reality of our time frame meant he had to be writing as we were editing and if I could keep it close to the palette that he would be finishing in, that only makes all our jobs easier. But also through discussion of where his influences come from — what are the things he's thinking about musically — and where can I find more of that to use? All of us — producers and Jordan and Michael — kind of share some similar musical loves and interests in terms of score. So there are ample scores that we go back to. There are a lot of horror scores that are collages of pre-existing avant-garde or composed music. I think of *Shutter Island* has an amazing score which is composed entirely of pre-existing pieces and some really disturbing things. A lot of David Lynch films do that. Those are good starting places. So I see that they use a specific composer, like, they use Penderecki for *The Exorcist*. So then I go do a deep dive on other Penderecki pieces. Scott Walker was another big musical touchstone for this film. He's been doing scores recently and I love his scores and I've always loved his music. That was one that we kept going back to for certain moments.

HULLFISH: How did you deal with editing around doubles and the need for special effects to get the actors to act in the same frame as themselves?



MONSOUR: Well, a few ways. Something I have always wanted to have happen — but it doesn't happen enough — is that I was able to be involved in the early pre-production meetings with the visual effects department, the practical effects, the DP, storyboard artist, so that I got a pretty clear sense before filming of how they were going to approach the use of doubles. I did a ton of research and homework on that in terms of how did they do this and other films. What techniques were used editorially or through visual effects? Then I hired Jorge Diaz as a second assist, who's also a visual effects editor. That was an intentional choice because I knew that a lot of what we would need to be doing — while just creating rough edits — was creating rough stitches of various shots to put the same actor in the same scene as a double. So we did so much prep and research and planning — and the truth is they shot it so well — it mostly wasn't an issue. In fact, we were overprepared to sell the double situation and concept and then realized honestly if we cut this the way we normally would it works better because you're not thinking about it and so much of the credit goes to the actors.

I half-joke that Lupita Nyong'o should be nominated for two Oscars. You totally forget it's the same actor playing these two roles through so much of the film. And that's true for all that all the performances. They all did such an amazing job on the set of working with their doubles, their performance doubles, stand-ins, and photo doubles, and stunt doubles to create a consistent performance that could be composited later. So that was crucial and it honestly became pretty much more fun than a challenge in the edit because what editor doesn't love match cuts. When you get to do a match from the same faces to the same face it just adds another fun trick you get to play with all of the implications of mirroring or doubling action or expressions or calling back moments from earlier in the film with echoes of performance and what it means when the same action is performed by different characters. ILM was great and involved. Grady Cofer, the VFX supervisor and a crucial part of the process of making everybody feel like it was all going to work in the end.

HULLFISH: And was a lot of stitching done by your second assistant in After Effects before ILM finished it?

MONSOUR: It was a mixture of After Effects postvis — or whenever I could keep it in Avid, I would because that would allow me to manipulate it quickly when working with Jordan or the producers so that we wouldn't have to stop down to do a full output or turnover in order to get a shot back. I tried to keep things

roughly malleable so that we weren't limited when possible. Certain shots obviously are complicated enough that that temps that you can do in Avid would be distractingly bad.

HULLFISH: I have a super "nuts and bolts" question about that. When you had two Lupitas that you needed next to each other and you sent it off for a temp postvis shot, did you leave those two parts of the edits in the timeline and then put the comp on top of that?

MONSOUR: Some assistants I've worked with or other editors who have looked at my timelines can be horrified because I tend to work with an absurd amount of tracks — both audio and video largely for the reason that I hate when we are trying to creatively explore something in the editing room and can't because of the workflow, so if I can leave the archaeology of how a visual effect shot was constructed beneath the mixdown so that the component clips are there. Even on films and projects without doubling people are always wanting to split performances and scenes.

HULLFISH: So between two regular actors who are actually performing in the scene at the same time?

MONSOUR: Exactly. Yeah. That's more and more common as is monitors being comped in or set extensions. Any number of things where you the editor have to select the material that then becomes the different layers of the comp. I do try to keep that stuff in the timeline readily accessible and move it and cut it while I'm cutting so that it's always there and we can continue to work with the material the whole time. That said, there are — of course — shots that are just too complicated to do that and they require building special sequences that could involve up to four or five elements that are being comped as well as comped in temp graphics for what will be visual effects elements just to get the timing right.

HULLFISH: Tell me about those screenings that you did. Because this is a horror film, how much did what you learned from them play into the final edit as you were sitting in a screening and watching an audience react?

<https://vimeo.com/325991658>

MONSOUR: Well the truth is: working with Jordan was a breath of fresh air in a lot of ways — one of which is: because of the success of *Get Out* and because of the clear competence and mastery he brings to any project and because he is the writer/director, there was very little input from the studio that was ever adversarial or contradictory to what Jordan wanted to have happen. And part of that is because of Jordan's attitude that the film is really working best when it's working best for an audience. These films are really a dialogue with an audience and not just a monologue from a genius. The approach to the screenings is really healthy which is: you get some really valuable information but then have to interpret that information. You can't take it at face value that the audience was looking for more scares in a section of the movie that doesn't have any, it's all about rhythms and setups and payoffs and expectations and sometimes the scariest thing you can do is create a long section where there isn't anything except that when it happens it really has an effect. I think we've got some really useful feedback in terms of what an audience

read into certain scenes, certain lines of dialogue that maybe don't give you an exact answer as to what might be happening and we would learn a lot of people are reading or interpreting that like this. And that isn't exactly what we were thinking. That's actually a little distracting. So it could be story related or it could be a rhythmic thing where you could feel a little bit of the audience's attention drifting. It's all about interpreting it. And I think that Jordan had a really good sense of taking the information from the test audiences that help with the things he was already trying to do. Not changing his ideas and throwing out what was working.

HULLFISH: It's interesting you've done comedy and horror because I think that they're similar because I would think that it's especially difficult to stay objective because after you've heard the same line 40 times or 100 times it's not either funny or scary anymore. So how do you stay objective?



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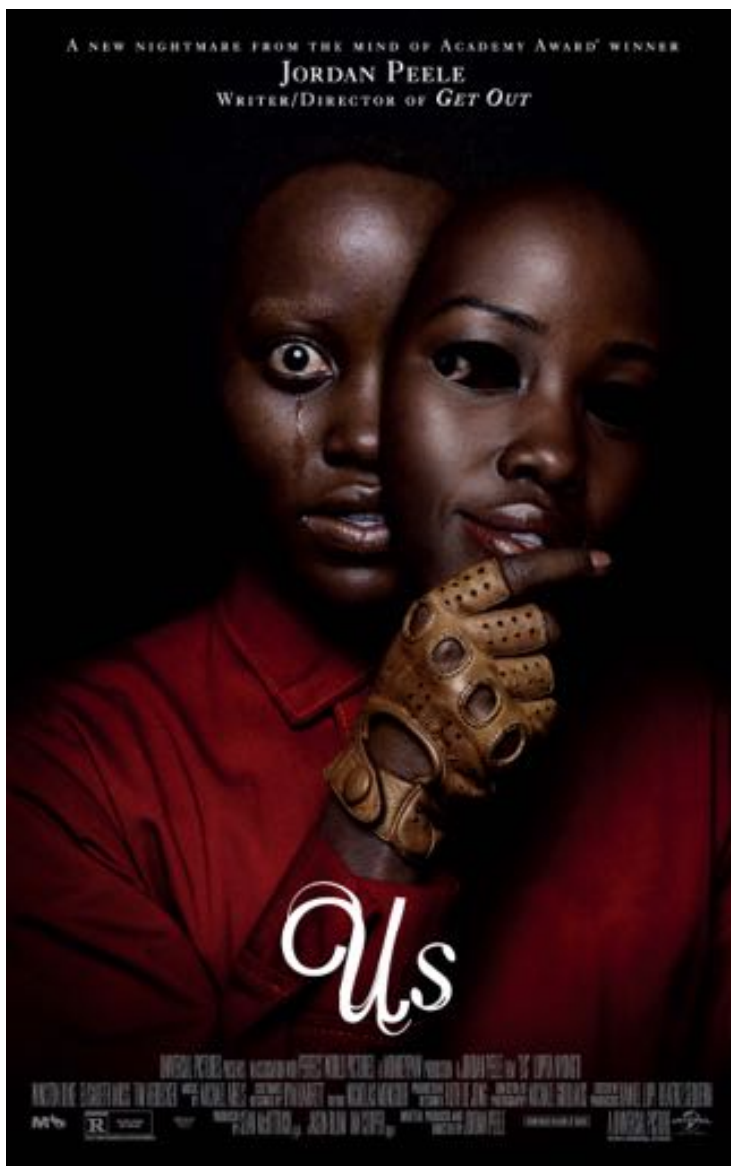


MONSOUR: I'm tempted to give a slightly cheeky answer. I think having a really good short term memory and are pretty bad long term memory helps. (laughs) I can keep track of a ton of variables while working but when I watch a scene a month later I don't feel as jaded as maybe somebody who has a photographic long term memory.

Honestly though, every few weeks or months you just have to bring in new people to sit in a room with you, and if you're slightly neurotic — like a lot of creative people are — just having a new set of eyeballs in the room will jolt you into questioning all of your decisions all over again and seeing it in a new way because you're concerned or thinking about how that person is seeing it. So that's a big part of it. Jordan is a big fan of that too. He was bringing people by that he trusted just to sit and watch it; not to necessarily give notes but really just to experience it and I think it just reinvigorates us all to do that. I also think it helps with your objectivity to watch three other movies over the weekend and it gives you a slightly new context. You have to be careful. You have to curate that stuff well so that you're staying in the zone while working on a project. I try to keep watching things that feel in some way relevant. But it is a weird thing about editors that for some reason that doesn't bother us as much as it does normal people watching the same thing over and over again.

HULLFISH: How long was that first assembly and where did you end up and what were some of the things that changed from that assembly to the final?

MONSOUR: Honestly not that much. Jordan has been waiting to make these films for years and developing them in its head and sharing the ideas with others and the amount of work that went into these by the time we even started editing or they started shooting is really immense and it left a lot less in need of figuring out. I did my best that by the time they were done filming and Jordan was able to come into that edit bay, we were working from a really solid groundwork. I try to build



a full music and sound experience for an editor's cut and I got Manage consent I have on any other so that we could start from somewhere fair probably the closest to the end running time of any editors cut. Also because he's a writer/director so they were able to make decisions while shooting about, "You know what? Let's lose that part of the scene or let's change this line." They weren't locked into the script because Jordan had the ability to tweak it as they went. It was a fairly fluid process. What changed is — it got clearer and clearer and more crystallized as we worked and we found a few structural moves that I don't think I'd call them major in terms of changing the narrative, but they had sort of outsized effects in terms of clarifying or pinpointing or making certain plot revelations or moments of action really land even harder by changing where and what you learn about the characters.

It felt pretty minor, to be honest, and it allowed us to spend a lot of time really in the details of polishing.

HULLFISH: What do you think the difference was in time between your first assembly and the final cut?

MONSOUR: Honestly about 15 minutes.

HULLFISH: Wow, that's great.

MONSOUR: I really believe we could have released the movie at the length of the assembly. I think we ended up at about one fifty-six with credits and we could have released the 2:10 or 2:15 version. I think what we got out of the 10 minutes that we lifted was that it just helped us clarify and strengthen some ideas by kind highlighting them more precisely.

HULLFISH: Nicholas thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate talking to you today.

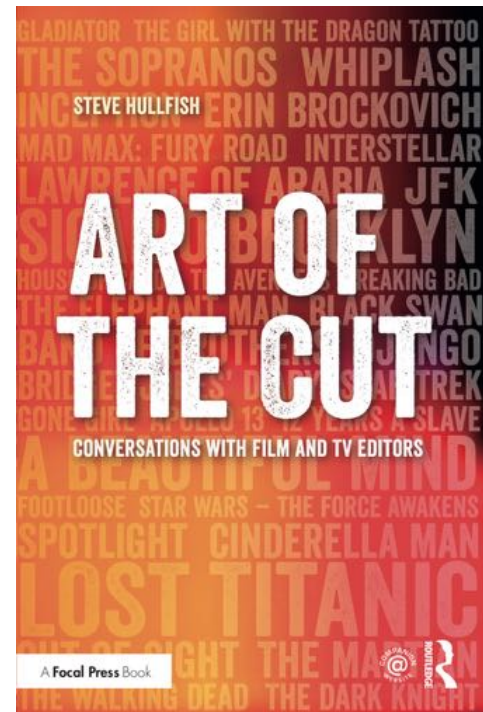
MONSOUR: Thanks, Steve.

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