The Restoration Business Part Three: The Quest for the Definitive Version

Grant Lobban

Blood & Thunder?

Although a film may have managed to overcome the many natural and man made obstacles to its survival, it may still be wounded, having suffered cuts.

To most movie-goers, the news that a film has been cut, is usually associated with censorship, but they are much more likely to have been cut or altered by their own producers or distributors, if this was thought to improve its chances of success at the box office. This may have happened before, during, or after its initial release, often resulting in different versions of a particular film.

Scissor-happy?

Nowadays, many consider that films should be treated as works of art, creations of their directors and not to be interfered with by anyone else. However, back in the days of the all-powerful studios and their bosses, it was not uncommon for directors, however distinguished, to be told to cut great chunks out of their films, if it had been decided that there was any risk of boring the audience. Known as the "restless bum factor!", it was either based on the movie moguls business acumen, or by studying the comments made by audiences at special sneak previews. Their reactions often led to cuts, or even new sequences being shot, before the film was released. Scenes were lost, regardless of their original cost and the creative effort put into them. If a director didn't co-operate he risked not being paid, or even worse, another director being employed to make the changes.

Compulsory "Happy endings"

Distributors also had a great influence. After the original road-shows of *Fantasia* (1941), Disney had to cut it down from 126 minutes to 82, before R.K.O. would release it on a double-bill with a western, again fearing audience tedium. Sometimes new "happy endings" were demanded, to help ensure that audiences left the theatre with a high feel-good factor. Even well known classic stories were not safe. Unlike the climax of Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel, the character played by Deborah Kerr, in M.G.M.'s *Quo Vadis* (1951), didn't perish in the Roman arena, tied to the horns of a bull.

An extra song and dance number was deleted from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Although entertaining, it didn't contribute to the progress of the story. The footage was kept safely by M.G.M. and has since been seen in a documentary about the making of the film and used in other musical compilations, including *That's Dancin'* (1985). There has never been any suggestion that this sequence should be put back in the film, as it was never part of the final version and would result in two versions of an otherwise one-off and unique classic.

Similar cuts were made to a later Judy Garland vehicle, *A Star is Born* (1954), when 27 minutes of musical and dramatic scenes were removed. This time, the deed was done in response to audience reaction and critical reviews, after the film had already started its first-run engagements at key cities around America. Before the negative was cut to make the bulk of the release copies, those already in circulation were intercepted and edited on site by studio representatives, sent out with a pair of scissors and a sheet of instructions. All the cut footage was returned to Warner's vault, where it remained separated from the main body of the film and proved hard to find for a later restoration. In this case, as the original version had already been seen by a large number of movie-goers, it can be regarded as a legitimate restoration project. Some other possible restorations, may be considered less justified. Howard Hawks's thriller, *The Big Sleep* (1945), had a long dialogue sequence taken out before its release. Although important to the understanding of the plot, it was removed in order to get on with the interplay between the film's stars, Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Warner executives wanted to reflect the then current public interest in the couple's real-life off screen romance, even if it made the story harder to follow. Again, the original had already been seen outside the studio before the re-think, this time to American forces, before the film's release into normal theatres.

The unkindest cut?

A contender for the greatest amount of footage cut from a film, as it was first delivered by its director, but before release, must be Billy Wilder's *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970), which was to lose almost 90 minutes! It was originally conceived as a true 3-1/2-hour epic, complete with an intermission and 70mm road-show engagements. However, its distributors U.A., believed that the public was tiring of over-long films, following box office disasters like *Dr. Doolittle* (1967) and *Star* (1968). Even David Lean's *Ryan's Daughter*, which followed, wasn't as successful as expected. They said a 2-hour version would do, and they got their way. Originally, the film had four episodes in which Holmes becomes entangled with women. These were cut to two and, as we shall see later, an attempt has recently been made to reconstruct the original, with only limited success.

Getting the timing right – a choice of versions

Equally drastic cuts are sometimes made after a film's release. There

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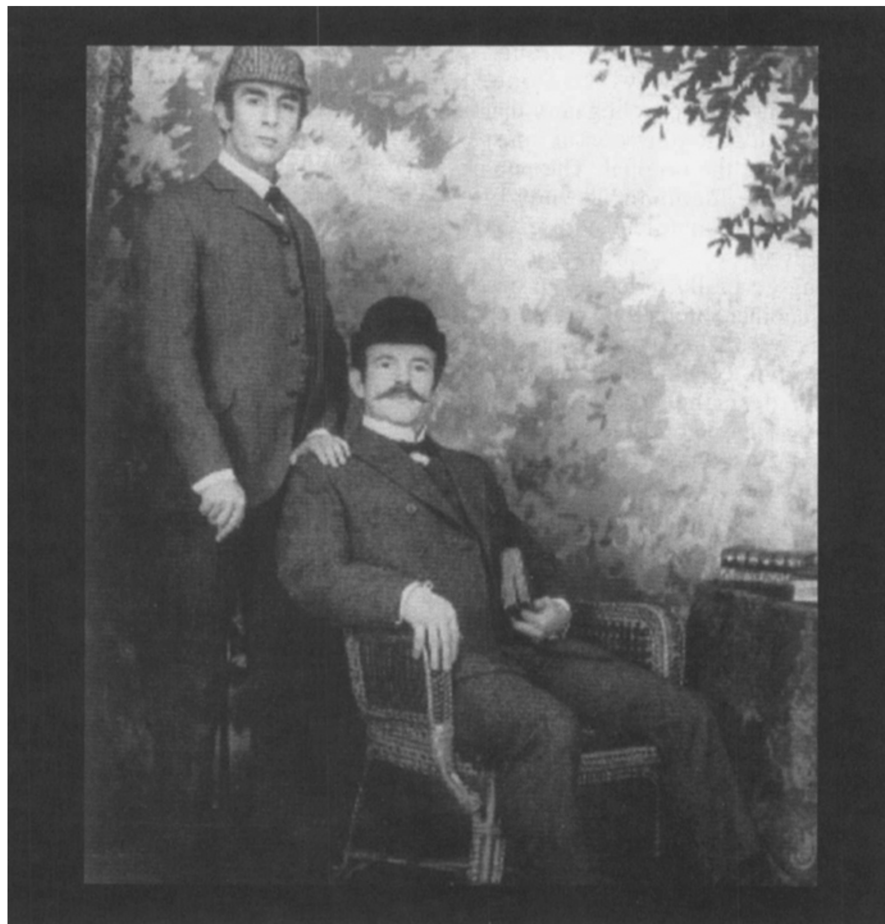
were at least three different versions of the notorious *Cleopatra* (1963) in circulation at the same time, as Fox continued to cut and re-cut their failing epic. Running times ranged from the 4-hour plus of the road-show prints, down to the 2-3⁄4-hours of the last general release version, with Cleopatra's entry into Rome and the Royal Barge sequences severely truncated. Even today, TV stations still have the choice of running times available for broadcast.



"Watson...I must get back on the case of my missing film." Robert Stephens and Colin Blakely in Billy Wilder's The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes.

Foreign versions

As well as the "domestic version", there may also be different foreign versions, either longer or shorter and with a new title. The British film, *The Wicker Man* (1973), had extra scenes added to the American prints, to help spell out the reason why Edward Woodward's character, (an adult male virgin), was the ideal candidate for the final pagan sacrifice. In its efforts to show the longest possible version, the BBC borrowed the extra footage from the director's own U-matic tape copy of a 16mm print. In this case, it was for a special showing in its "Movie Club" slot, aimed at movie buffs. Subsequent showings, including the latest on Channel Four, reverted to the original version. In the search for lost material, foreign prints can be a disappointment. In the past, it was not unusual to export old refurbished domestic prints which although still having the original soundtrack, are often found to have been cut and with sub-titles etched into the emulsion.

Another chance to see...

Back in the days before TV and video, there were few opportunities to see a film again once it had finished its week's run at the cinema. Apart from the limited 16mm non-theatrical market, only a very small number were ever re-shown in theatres. One chance, was the "Sunday, for one day only" bookings. For these, cinemas were usually sent one of the few remaining prints left on the shelf after the film's original release. As long-serving projectionists can confirm, these were often in poor condition and eventually run to destruction. Sometimes, particularly popular films were given a wider re-release, requiring new prints. Some well-remembered classics, like *Gone with the Wind*, returned intact, but others were often shortened by 20 minutes or more, in keeping with their changed status as second features, or to make them fit into double bills. This fact was often acknowledged, with the advertising and small print in the credits stating that it was now an "abridged version" or "re-edited re-issue". If a large number of new prints were required, this usually meant that the original negative or printing masters had to be cut. Occasionally, the major studios sold a film's rights, and handed over the master material, to smaller companies specialising in re-issues. They too, often chose to alter the film in some way, including re-editing and changing the title. A few Technicolor films were re-issued using cheaper inferior 2-colour processes, or even only in black and white. The copy now seen on TV of *Nothing Sacred* (1937), is only the 2-colour (Cinecolor) re-issue, with the Technicolor credit removed and replaced with just, "Photographed in Color".

Although giving films a new lease of life, they risked further physical damage and loss of original material. Cut footage was often not reinstated and once separated from the main body of the film, was in constant danger of being further separated and eventually lost altogether. Today, when a new copy is required for broadcast or transfer to video, it is sometimes unknowingly made from its last re-issue version. Attempts to obtain a new print of the original, are often thwarted, when only a cut negative or printing master can be traced. The BBC's latest showing of *Joan of Ark* (1949), with Ingrid Bergman, carried the tell-tale "A Special re-edited re-issue" on the credits. If spotted, this may have spoiled the showing for some viewers, who may have wondered what was missing.

Longer restorations

In the past many films "shrank" with age, in more ways than one. Today, it is now almost obligatory that any new restoration or re-issue must be longer than the original. The publicity people demand a "newly restored print", complete with extra "previously un-seen footage", plus the film being generally tarted up in one form or another, preferably involving the magic word "digital". This has led to the creation of additional versions, variously described as a "Special Edition", a "Director's Cut" or their "Preferred" Version, which now exist alongside the originals. These new editions can have another advantage. In some circumstances, if a film is significantly altered, including the colourization of black and white films, they can be copyrighted again as a "new" film. It's not a new idea to add extra scenes to films. Special longer TV versions were prepared of features, such as *King Kong* (the 1976 remake) and *Airport 77* (1977), increasing their length, to allow for more commercial breaks.

Re-makes

However, special editions have given directors the opportunity to rework their films. For one of the first, back in 1980, Steven Spielberg was able to both cut and add previously unused scenes to his *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), including extending the spaceship finale and adding interiors. This new edition, like Ridley Scott's re-cut *Blade Runner*, are now the ones most often shown. With continuing TV and video showings, more people have now seen these new editions than the originals. Other new editions have been considered less successful. Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves*, returned to the screen within only a few months with 55 minutes added to a film, which many judged to be rather over-long in the first place. Even the much loved *Cinema Paradiso*, was soon back with a similar amount added, but wasn't universally applauded, even by its devotees. As a result, the film is still available for revivals in its original form. Even low-budget "alternative" productions are getting in on the act. During a recent light-hearted TV interview, John Walters, helped to push the release on video of his camp, *Pink Flamingos*, starring the late Divine, by claiming it included fifteen minutes of previously unseen footage, "found in the producer's loft!"

King Kong enjoying getting to grips with Fay Wray again in this advertisement for the film's revival in the 1960s.

What is the definitive version?

All this will make it difficult for scholars of the cinema and historians to decide what should be regarded as the definitive version. Of course, the prime reason for these special re-issues, is to encourage people to pay up and see the film again at the cinema and more importantly, buy a new video, even if they already have a copy of the original. For some critics, the results of many of these restorations just go to show that the reasons for the original cuts may still be valid. Is the Director's Cut always the best? They are sometimes too close to their own films and loath to lose sequences, they may have taken extra care over and spent (too much?) time on. Producers and editors can be more objective. Most of the extra scenes reinstated by David Lean to his Director's Cut of *Lawrence of Arabia*, are of long lingering shots of the desert. These look magnificent on the big cinema screen, particularly in 70mm, but are in danger of slowing up the pace of the film, when the film is seen on TV or video.

When the "ethics" of the restoration business are discussed, some restorers still think that every frame is sacred, and aim to arrive at the longest possible print, even at the risk of "over-restoration" and giving the average viewer a sore-bum again. Others are content to keep for posterity an example of the most popular domestic version, as seen by the greatest number of people at the time of release.

The effects of the censors

Censorship has had its effect on surviving material. Films reflect the standards and rules in place at the time they were made. As time has passed, standards have generally become more relaxed, so later cuts were seldom necessary, unless required for a change of category. Exceptions were a few films made in the early 1930s. One of these was *King Kong* (1933). Although the Industry's own "Hays Office" issued

its first Production Code in 1930, it was tightened up in 1934, when the independent and very strict Catholic Legion of Decency was founded and started to issue its own classifications. This meant that the film had to be cut in 1938 for the first of its many re-issues. Twenty-nine cuts were ordered, amounting to a loss of three minutes, and some other scenes were printed darker, to make Kong's violent behaviour less graphic. Most of the cuts were put back for its re-release during the 1950s, but it was not until the late 1960s, that the last remaining acts of sex and violence were restored. These included, Kong pulling off Fay Wray's dress, chewing the heads off hapless natives and crushing others under his giant foot. Although "lost" by the studio, the now legendary cuts were still known to exist, doing the rounds in the world of collectors, mostly on 16mm. Poor quality footage was acquired and incorporated into the "Complete! Uncut" 1960s cinema revival in the U.S. Dupe negative from this was later added to the Library of Congress Archive's negative. Later, in 1989, a collector came up with a can of 35mm nitrate film, labelled "King Kong fragments", and this was found to include much better quality examples of the censored scenes. These became the basis of a restoration project for the Turner Entertainment Company. The rights to *King Kong* outside America belong to the BBC, who also only had a censored copy. They looked at the newly restored print, but found that the overall picture and sound quality was inferior to its own master copy. This was made up from a number of the best remaining British prints, all made from a less worn and possibly earlier duplicate negative. However, the Corporation did eventually purchase a copy of the American restoration, just to get hold of the missing shots. These have now been incorporated into their existing print, so the BBC now has one of the best existing copies of the complete film.

The publicity for the restoration of *Spartacus* (1960), made much of the inclusion of the bath house scene, with Laurence Olivier telling Tony Curtis of his liking for both "oysters and snails", indicating his versatile sexual preferences. This was originally removed, not so much because it may have shocked audiences in the 1960s with its daring, but the studio was more worried that movie-goers wouldn't understand what on earth he was on about.

Self-censorship and social mores

Studios themselves, occasionally exercise retrospective self-censorship, to match changing social attitudes. Critical viewers may have noticed a marked drop in the picture quality during the Beethoven's "Pastorale" sequence in Disney's *Fantasia*, featuring the mythical, half-man, half-horse, centaurs. This is because the image was enlarged and re-framed to eliminate the black centaurs. These were drawn in the late 1930s, and conformed to the American Negro "Sambo" stereotype, which is now considered offensive. The last time they appeared, was in the first full-length re-issue, in 1956, although they could still be spotted briefly later in some of the trailers. For *Fantasia's* next outing, Disney may choose to bring the black centaurs back into view, by using today's computer techniques, to make the drawings less demeaning.

Destructive tendencies

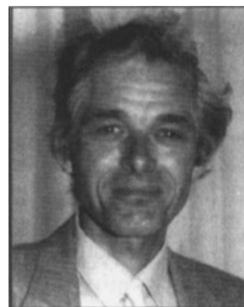
Its not unheard of for attempts to be made to deliberately destroy whole films. M.G.M. purchased the rights and the camera negative of the British Victorian thriller, *Gaslight* (Thorold Dickinson, 1939), in order to eliminate a possible rival to its own glossy remake of 1943, starring Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer. However prints survived, one being used to make copies for a release in the U.S. under the title *Angel Street*. As M.G.M. found, it is easier to lose films by neglect and mistreatment, rather than by wilful destruction. This has not stopped others from trying over the years. They range from repressive Governments, to rich and famous actors and actresses, attempting to hide their early embarrassing film appearances, by buying up the negative and all the prints they can find. One memorable case being the 1940s Hollywood star, Hedy Lamarr and her millionaire husband's efforts to suppress an earlier European film, *Extase* (1933), in which she appeared nude.

Get it right

It's possible to get into trouble by showing the wrong version. During a consumer rights programme, a company was put in the dock for selling videos of a so-called "full-length" version of Leni Riefenstahl's account of the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936 (*Olympiache Spiele*). It later proved not to be the case, only the longest version available from the supplier of the print. It was admitted that the marketing people often know little about the films they promote, having to rely on others to provide a complete print.

The publicity surrounding the more commercial restorations, some actually little more than just cleaning the negative and making a few new prints, has at least raised the profile of the whole business of film restoration. The repair, re-construction and conservation of films, has always been a constant and never-ending task going on behind the scenes at archives, libraries and laboratories around the world.

THE AUTHOR



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Grant is an enthusiastic "technical" historian of the cinema, and is well known for his major contributions to to the BKSTS Wallcharts. He has also written many articles for *Image Technology* and *Cinema Technology* over the years. His recent series on drive-in movies led to correspondence from all parts of the world.