The Aesthetics of Emotion: An Editor's Perspective

Rage is red. Rage is an infection in the blood. Rage is highly contagious. We learn these foundational truths within the first few minutes of Danny Boyle and Alex Garland's first zombie flick, ***28 Days Later***, released in 2002. This film is considered by many critics to have revitalized the horror/zombie genre and has since become a cult classic with a dedicated fanbase ("28 Days Later"). Their second zombie flick, ***28 Years Later***, released in 2025, continues the story, expands the franchise's world-building, and transforms it into a generation-spanning saga, with two more films planned (it should be noted that Boyle and Garland were not directly involved as a primary creative team for the film ***28 Weeks Later***). Some films and TV shows become seminal because they change how other films and shows are made and viewed ever after. These seminal properties touch a cultural nerve and become a part of our zeitgeist. ***28 Days Later*** is a seminal film that transcends the limitations of its roots in the classic horror/zombie genre, becoming something entirely new by combining genres and exploring the personal and social ramifications of living through a zombie apocalypse ("28 Days Later - Old School Horror"). Through a detailed scene breakdown and analysis of the film's first two opening scenes, this essay will demonstrate how the filmmakers' explicit use of the elements of cinematic style, specifically editing, manipulates audience expectations and emotions, allowing us to experience the story as the characters do. I argue that it is this visceral emotional experience that makes this film a continued fan favorite, leading to ***28 Years Later*** ("Why 28 Days Later Remains a Modern Zombie Classic").

Cinema has a language that includes vocabulary and syntax. Like any language, the language of the cinematic arts is constantly evolving as culture evolves; there is a continuous feedback loop between the two. Genre is one component of our cinematic vocabulary. As an editor, one of the first things I consider beyond the specifics of an individual story is genre because it helps me understand the tone and mood of the story we are currently telling. To illustrate this, consider a practical editing decision: in a suspenseful horror sequence, choosing to cut away from a character's relieved expression to a looming shadow can heighten tension and anticipation, aligning with genre conventions and enhancing the audience's emotional experience. The famed editor and philosopher Walter Murch, in both his writing and interviews, espouses that an editor's highest priority is to track the emotional arc of the story (Murch 18). When we ask, "What do you want to watch?" or "What are you in the mood for?" as we pick a movie or show to watch on a Saturday afternoon with our loved ones, we are really asking, "What emotions do you want to feel right now?" The answer usually starts with genre. The delineation of a specific genre helps set audience expectations and fuels marketing campaigns, but it also provides filmmakers with a playbook of cinematic conventions to draw from, combine, or subvert to shape their film.

When we look at genre films and premium series content such as horror, science fiction, fantasy, or even soap operas (as my twelve years as an editor on ***Days of our Lives*** bear out), we expect something other than reality, other than realism. We want *escapism*. Especially with horror, this upfront genre label allows us to push the boundaries of our suspension of disbelief to include werewolves, vampires, and zombies, as well as a host of other fantastical and frightening creatures and scenarios, as real, at least while watching the movie. We expect danger, the grotesque, and jump scares! We expect to be horrified and frightened (Bordwell and Thompson 329-330). Within the broad genre of horror, there are subgenres, like zombie films, slasher films, torture porn films, vampire films, monster films, and even comedies like ***Shaun of the Dead*** (2004), a zombie/comedy (ironically, edited by Chris Gill, the editor of ***28 Days Later***). In their book *Film Art: An Introduction* (60-61), Bordwell and Thompson discuss the difference between the emotions a character experiences and those the audience experiences. In a slapstick comedy, like ***Shaun of the Dead***, for example, we might laugh at what scares or hurts our characters (much as we once did with Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd), rather than suffer with them as we usually do in dramas, thrillers, or traditional horror films. An editor must track both the characters' emotions within the film's world and the audience's emotional response to the film. Genre helps us begin to chart the course between the two.

28 Days Later represents both a sub-genre (a zombie film is a sub-genre of horror) and blends multiple genres, incorporating elements of post-apocalyptic and dystopian science fiction, thrillers, and the infectious disease genre. By examining genre combinations, we can see how filmmakers often merge genres to great emotional effect, sometimes blending seamlessly, as in Guillermo del Toro's poignant and lyrical ***Pan's Labyrinth*** (2006), and sometimes with comically high-impact, as in Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's ***Everything Everywhere All at Once*** (2022). ***28 Days Later*** uses and builds on the genre conventions of the zombie flick established by early films such as ***The White Zombie*** (1932) and George A. Romero's ***Night of the Living Dead*** (1968), while also subverting them ("28 Days Later – Old School Horror"). The dead in ***28 Days Later*** are not traditional zombies; they are not the dead who have arisen (in fact, Boyle has insisted that ***28 Days Later*** is not a zombie flick at all, although Garland seems to disagree) ("Is 28 Days Later considered a zombie movie?"). Instead, the "zombies" in ***28 Days Later*** are infected with a virulent virus called "Rage." They are not slow and brainless as in early zombie films, but fast-moving and driven, capable of planning and executing actions (as seen in the final scenes of the movie and in ***28 Years Later***). By subverting the audience's expectations with fast-moving infected/zombies, the film becomes more frightening, more realistic. Anyone can become infected, and the infected are themselves victims (and scary fast!) ("Why the 28 Years Later Franchise Has Always Been About More Than Zombies"). In 2002, when the film was released, this represented a possible, but never-before-seen, dystopian future. Another substantial way Boyle and Garland challenge horror/zombie flick genre expectations is through narrative structure by emphasizing character development over plot, which is atypical of the horror genre. ***28 Days Later*** is a character-driven arthouse film with a British Punk vibe and an underlying horror/zombie/infected plot, and this is made clear in the opening segments through shot selection, timing, and pacing ("How '28 Days Later' Changed Zombie Movies Forever").

Beyond genre, the first few minutes of a film or TV show teach us what we need to know about *this particular story* we're watching. We learn not only who the characters are and what we need to know about the plot, but also the unique cinematic language *this* film will use to tell us its story. We learn to read the film we are watching through the filmmaker's intentional use of the elements of cinematic style: mise en scène, cinematography, editing, sound design, lighting, and color (Bordwell and Thompson 315). These elements comprise our parts of speech in the language of cinema. However, only one of these is truly unique and specific to cinema and the moving-image media arts: editing. Mise en scène includes production design, set design, art department, costume design, staging, and much more, and originates from theatre, which has a long and storied history before the advent of movies. Cinematography is, quite simply, motion picture photography. Photography existed long before motion pictures were invented. Designing with sound, music, light, and color had all been practiced before the birth of cinema. Editing, or *montage*, is the only new art form expressly invented for the art of cinema (Murch 2-5). Editing unites the other elements of cinematic style, enhancing their impact and meaning through the juxtaposition of individual, discrete shots, creating a sequence that carries more meaning than its subsequent parts (Bordwell and Thompson 231). It is through editing that we tell an audience where to look, what to pay attention to, and what to feel. As editors, we control the flow of story information, performance, and the narrative's emotional arc.

If we put these ideas all together (which is what editors do!) and apply them to an analysis of the first two opening scenes of ***28 Days Later***, we can see precisely how the filmmakers used the elements of cinematic style to illustrate their story and teach us how to read their film. The most effective way to understand how Danny Boyle and his editor, Chris Gill, control the flow of story information, create meaning, and manipulate our emotions through editing is to break down each scene into its component parts.

28 Days Later begins with what seems like news coverage or stock footage (it isn't; these scenes were expressly created and shot for the film). We see extreme acts of violence and social unrest from all over the world, the Middle East, Europe, and the UK. These images are visually coded as stock footage as they look like real news coverage, and we see video scan lines across the frame. In the first image, a red truck moves through the frame prominently as people run and are attacked. This segment uses a moving camera, in conjunction with fast-moving action within the frame, short-duration shots, fast editing, swish pans, and editing on motion to create a chaotic, distressing scene. We are not sure where we are, what we are looking at, or why. Bits of red move through or dominate the frame repeatedly, utilizing eye-trace to carry the eye across the frame and from shot to shot quickly. Initially, there is no music, just sounds of human violence and suffering from the footage, the occasional news announcer, and the static swishy sound of abrupt channel switching. A woman in a red scarf holding a child weeps, a man is hung and beaten, riot police march on civilians, fire moves through the frame, and red smoke occludes the frame. Blues, yellows, and greens start to appear in opposition to red. The compositional elements within the frame, the mise en scène, cinematography, use of lighting, and color, all together create dynamic diagonal lines in opposition to one another, heightening the tension and conflict within the frame and the tension in the audience. The editing pattern grows tighter, with closer shots and faster-paced editing punctuated by longer, extreme wide shots of panicked people running en masse.

28 Days Later, Danny Boyle, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2002

This segment goes on long enough to make the audience feel uncomfortable. The images are unpleasant, and we do not want to see them anymore. The recurring red motif that begins in this segment underscores the violence and chaos on-screen and serves as a visual cue to danger and infection throughout the film (“Zombie Apocalypse: The Special Effects Artistry of 28 Days Later”). It establishes the central theme that will be explored later in the film: humanity is inherently conflicted and violent, and there’s no difference between pre- and post-infection, “people killing people” is normal (*28 Days Later*).

As the camera slowly pulls back and we see a bank of monitors with these same images repeating in a loop, we hear a heartbeat and a chimpanzee’s vocalizations, though we have not yet seen him and don’t know exactly what we are hearing. Music starts to come in here, quietly, as well; it is eerie and dissonant. As we continue to pull back, the camera reveals the chimpanzee, an object of experimentation, restrained on a bed with cables attached to his brain in front of the monitors, forced to watch these images just as we have been. As we have been repulsed and repelled by the images of human violence, we now identify and empathize with the victimized chimpanzee. We continue cutting to wider shots that reveal the lab’s scope and geography. The editing pattern becomes slower and more fluid, less jarring, with longer duration shots and slower camera moves. The lab is very dark; the only light comes from the monitors’ images and white spotlights here and there. We start to feel more comfortable and settled as we better understand where we are and what is happening, even if the scene is still unpleasant.

Throughout the following segment, we will see a small red light and other red objects (pliers, a red stool, a red water hose) placed strategically in the frame. Sometimes the red light flashes, sometimes it’s a camera recording light, and at other times it’s a wall-mounted security light. It generally moves through the frame as the camera moves. It becomes important later as the scene reaches its peak.

The camera tracks to another monitor, this time a security camera, as masked people in black come down a hall towards it. As they approach the lab doors, we cut to their faces through the windows, but we only see parts of their faces because they are wearing balaclavas. The filmmakers use canted camera angles through the windows; the window frames figure prominently, and the windows are made of wired safety glass. These are the first humans we've seen, outside of the violent news footage. The windows create a segmented frame; it is as though we are seeing their faces through cages. Are they in a cage, or are we? As they enter the lab, moving from darkness into light, they remove their balaclavas; much of this scene feels like something out of an early German Expressionist film (Bordwell and Thompson 462). There are two men and one woman. Through their dialogue, we understand they are animal rights activists who are there to rescue the chimpanzees. We immediately switch our identification to these humans. We want them to rescue the chimpanzees. The woman, whose face and expressions we see in multiple close-up shots, is emotionally distressed when she finds the chimpanzee we first saw. She is horrified, and so are we. She becomes our empathy character. We feel her upset at the scene before us. She will, of course, in a classic and well-known horror genre trope, become the first human victim of "Rage," our patient zero, the infected "Eve."

28 Days Later, Danny Boyle, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2002

Danny Boyle and Chris Gill chose to intercut the longer-duration, wider shots of the activists entering the lab space, generally with a moving camera, with much shorter-duration, closer shots of the chimpanzees banging on their glass cages and making aggressive vocalizations (the rhythm of their banging will become an aural motif, the rhythm of the infected, as the color red becomes a visual motif, signaling infection and danger). The filmmakers use an interesting stylistic editing technique during this segment. As our characters move through the space, the leader of our group is using a camera to photograph the chimpanzees, their plight, and the lab. He uses a flash as he takes the pictures, and the filmmakers freeze-frame the chimpanzees in aggressive poses just after the flash, then make the edit on the freeze-frame. They do this twice. While most shots of the activists are in moving medium shots, there is one non-moving wide overhead shot that fully establishes the lab's geography, where the activists are, and where the chimpanzees are; we return to this shot several times in the coming moments. On the third use of the camera flash, the filmmakers use the flash peak as a cut point to the wide overhead shot. The emotional effect of this editing style is an ever-increasing tension. There is a psychological dissonance in the types of shots used and the editing rhythm. We are learning the geography of the space, we understand where we are, who our characters are, and why they are where they are. The shots used in the sequence are mostly longer and feature slow camera moves; all of this should make us feel more comfortable because we know what's happening, and there is no visible imminent danger. Yet the unexpected, high-impact cuts steadily increase the tension in the scene. The sound design, music, and the red flashing light that moves through the frame further heighten this building tension. We are watching a horror/zombie flick. We know bad things are going to happen soon. By continually building tension in the scene and delaying "the bad thing," we delay the audience's gratification, thwarting their expectations, which creates suspense and provides greater impact when "the bad thing" finally does happen. This is a convention of the horror genre; it is what gives us the jump scare. As we approach the end of this scene, a series of swish pan cuts, short-duration shots, quick cuts, and jump cuts builds the tension further and heightens the action, culminating in an explosive moment. The “bad thing” finally happens.

A hapless scientist enters the lab. His white lab coat contrasts with the activist’s black clothing. As the second male activist begins unlocking the cages, he sees the scientist. There is a series of jump cuts hidden in the black in-camera wipes of a tracking shot that runs the length of the chimpanzee cages from the activist to the scientist. The scientist runs to a phone to call security, and the activist gives chase, catches him, and slams him against the wall; jump cuts during this sequence create a jarring, high-impact moment that never lets the eye rest. The chimpanzees are clapping, hooting, and banging against their glass cages. As the scientist begins to explain that the chimps are infected with “Rage,” he stands in front of the wall-mounted red security light; it flashes at his throat. Our activists begin to show doubt and hesitation as we see them in medium close-ups through the distortion of the glass cages, which gives us the sense that something is not what it seems.

28 Days Later, Danny Boyle, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2002

This is the classic horror film trope moment where we are screaming at the characters, “No! Don’t open the cages!” As the activists move to open the cages (despite our desperate protests), the red handles of the pliers they use figure prominently in the frame. The cage door opens, the infected chimpanzee attacks the woman, and the red security light flashes faster, filling the screen and completely dominating it. We learn that in this movie, red means bad things are going to happen. As the attack unfolds, there are quick cuts to the individual activists, the scientist, and the chimps. The cutting pattern mirrors the editing style of the violent footage we've already seen. After the attack, we cut to the chimpanzees on a shot of one of them banging on the glass cage; the rhythm of the infected carries us over into a hard cut to black and the opening title.

This opening scene lasts about five minutes but is an incredibly dense emotional roller coaster ride that follows the classic horror genre's usual conventions. Yet it begins to set up the film's overall editing style: very long, slow-moving, quiet segments in which we delve into the characters' emotions, alternating with high-speed, high-impact, violent segments.

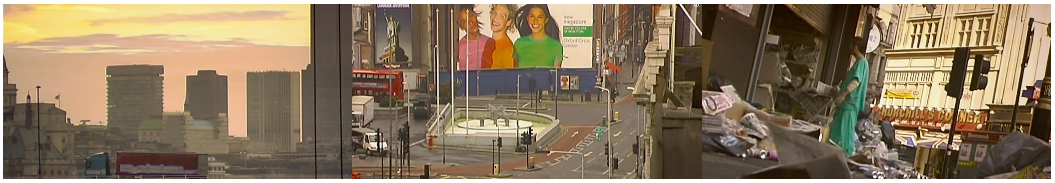
After the film's title silently fades up over black, then fades out, we cut to an extreme close-up of someone's eye as their eyelid flutters, and they awaken. We do not know where we are, or who this person is: it feels like the movie is starting all over again. The frame is segmented, with foreground elements bisecting the image. The image is bathed in a bright white light. We want to make meaning out of what we are seeing. We yearn for more information. We cut from the extreme close-up eye to a wide overhead shot of a nude male lying in a hospital bed, hooked up to machines and IVs. It is as though Jim (we will later learn his name) has been born naked and vulnerable into this new world, and we with him. The shot construction is reminiscent of the first scene, where the chimpanzee lies before the monitors, forced to watch images of violence. Each of these shots lasts long enough to want to see something else, something more, but the pace is slow and unhurried. Our experience of time is expanded through editing. The sound design is quiet and simple, with only ambient room sounds and Jim's breathing and movement. We cut to a series of close-ups of his chest rising and falling, his face, and an over-the-shoulder shot as he gets up. He gets up, goes to the door, looks out the window, and finds a key on the floor. The key is on a red plastic keyring (we scream, "No! Don't open the door!")

28 Days Later, Danny Boyle, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2002

He finds clothes off-camera, wanders the empty hospital, and then the desolate city of London, calling out "hello!" This whole series of shots has a very "happening in real-time" feeling; it is almost painfully slow, with extremely long takes and gradually wider shots. The composition, lighting, and use of color throughout the hospital and city streets are utterly beautiful. Danny Boyle and his Director of Photography, Anthony Dod Mantle, used Canon XL1 digital video cameras for most of the film because they were smaller and more flexible, particularly useful for shooting these scenes of the city, which had to be done very early in the morning and on weekends ("Anthony Dod Mantle, DFF injects the apocalyptic 28 Days Later with a strain of digital video"). Although DV cameras generally do not have the finest resolution or color range, they still managed to use the format to significant effect in these scenes. The beautiful, washed-out watercolor images contrast with the horror of seeing these usually bustling, iconic London spaces completely devoid of humanity, creating emotional dissonance. Through the hospital segment, we often see Jim through distorted reflections or windows. The filmmakers use canted camera angles in conjunction with strong architectural features, lines, and angles. The editing techniques start to draw the eye-trace apart; from shot to shot, we have to work to find Jim. The overall feeling is that the buildings and the city overshadow him, making him feel very small and insignificant, and us with him. We also see strategically placed red objects that heighten the tension and our expectation of “the bad thing’: a red London double-decker bus turned on its side with windows smashed, a red motorcycle, a red cone, red signs, red on a billboard. These objects stand out in stark contrast to the images’ overall watercolor look.

28 Days Later, Danny Boyle, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2002

It is in these segments that we begin to set aside the classic horror conventions and move towards dystopian science fiction. In classic horror, what is scary is often what we do not see, but rather what we imagine, as in the first scene in the lab, where everything is dark, and the editing rhythms are generally very fast. Here, the images are well-lit and beautiful, and the pace is slow. Jim is almost always in the frame, and we are walking through this new, inexplicable world with him, step by step. We experience his mounting frustration and desperation. The sound design throughout the hospital segment consists only of ambient sound. As we enter the city streets, music rises, subtly at first, then builds to a crescendo toward the emotional peak of the scene. Towards the end of the scene, there is a false-flag jump scare: a car alarm goes off when Jim touches an abandoned car. After this point in the scene, the editing becomes much quicker, and time-compression techniques such as “jumping the action” and jump cuts are used. Jim finds a newspaper that explains what has happened and a community board with missing-persons flyers; the music reaches its final crescendo, and the scene fades out on a bloody handprint and the faces of people on the board as Jim walks away.



28 Days Later, Danny Boyle, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2002

We are thirteen minutes into the film, and we are as emotionally confused, unsettled, and distraught as Jim. We will stay with Jim, experiencing the story emotionally through him, for almost the entire film.

Danny Boyle and Alex Garland developed and filmed ***28 Days Later*** amid the mad cow disease and foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks in the UK in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They were still in production when the attacks of 9/11 occurred in the US. In interviews, both filmmakers discuss how current events found their way into the film (“Why the 28 Years Later Franchise Has Always Been About More Than Zombies”). The themes explored in ***28 Days Later***, such as family and the tension between love and violence in human nature, are universal. Yet it is the personal, emotional journey that Jim must make, who he must become to take care of his newfound family in the face of threats from both infected and non-infected alike, that makes this film so unique for its genre, and why it continues to have such pull with audiences. ***28 Days Later*** has had an uncontested cultural impact on the zombie genre; it has spawned an entire cottage industry of zombie films, TV shows, and graphic novels (“28 Days Later”; “How ‘28 Days Later’ Changed Zombie Movies Forever”). ***28 Days Later*** has come full circle in ***28 Years Later***. ***28 Years Later*** is about Love, the antidote to Rage.

Works Cited

"28 Days Later - Old School Horror." *Old School Horror*, oldschoolhorror.com/28-days-later.

"28 Days Later." *Rotten Tomatoes*, rottentomatoes.com/m/28_days_later.

"28 Days Later." *Wikipedia*, wikipedia.org/wiki/28_Days_Later.

"Anthony Dod Mantle, DFF, injects the apocalyptic 28 Days Later with a strain of digital video." *American Cinematographer*, vol. 84, 2002, theasc.com/magazine/july03/sub/index.

"How '28 Days Later' Changed Zombie Movies Forever." *No Film School*, nofilmschool.com/28-days-later-changed-movies.

"Is 28 Days Later considered a zombie movie?" *Syfy*, syfy.com/syfy-wire/alex-garland-confirms-28-days-later-is-a-zombie-movie.

"Why the 28 Years Later Franchise Has Always Been About More Than Zombies." *Time*, time.com/7294568/28-years-later-danny-boyle-interview.

"Zombie Apocalypse: The Special Effects Artistry of 28 Days Later." *Thrill Screen*, thrillscreen.com/behind-the-scenes/zombie-apocalypse-the-special-effects-artistry-of-28-days-later.

28 Days Later. Directed by Danny Boyle, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2002.

Bordwell, David. Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*, 9th Edition. McGraw-Hill, 2010.

Murch, Walter. *In the Blink of an Eye*, 2nd Edition. Silman-James Press, 2001.

Murch, Walter. *Suddenly, Something Clicked*. Faber, 2025.