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Alyssa Logie

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Abstract

Alyssa Logie offers a close analysis of a sequence from Alan Parker’s *Pink Floyd – The Wall* as an example of the importance of editing and creative cinematography in creating an immersive experience for audiences. She explores the different uses of camera movement as creating wide-ranging feelings including clarity, control, freedom, disorientation, and stasis. Logie goes on to discuss the use of non-diegetic elements creating trauma, as well as the expressive uses of editing and framing in creating a sense of disorientation, loss, and becoming numb. Logie’s detailed breakdown of the sequence highlights the powerful techniques used to create entire states of mind in cinema.

Keywords

Alan Parker, Pink Floyd, The Wall, Comfortably Numb, Editing, Cinematography

Becoming “Comfortably Numb” through Cinematography and Editing

By Alyssa Logie

Pink Floyd – The Wall (1982), directed by Alan Parker, is a film which highlights the past’s ability to consume the present. It showcases how the life of Pink, a rock star, becomes completely controlled and consumed by the traumatic events of his childhood. The “*Comfortably Numb*” sequence in the film exceptionally encapsulates this theme of past trauma through the use of editing and cinematography, which is also successful in creating meaning in the scene about how Pink began and completed the construction of his mental “wall”. This wall leads to Pink’s isolation from the world around him and is the reason for him to become comfortably numb. The sequence gives the audience insight into how Pink ended up in such an isolated state.

Pink’s life is completely consumed by his past. The sequence involves a very crucial editing technique that allows the audience to view exactly what has happened in Pink’s past that has had such a haunting effect on his life. The salient technique used in the sequence is the flashback. Much of the sequence is comprised of flashbacks to when Pink was a young child. These flashbacks articulate the film’s overall theme of past trauma and they display, firsthand, the memories that Pink has clung to and how the past is extremely relevant in every aspect of Pink’s present life. The use of flashbacks also creates the meaning that Pink is more aware of his past than his present in his drug-induced state. The flashbacks Pink has are quite vivid and in focus. This can be seen in shot 26 (see Shot Breakdown), for example, when Pink is running alongside the river. He can remember this moment perfectly and in great detail. Then, in shot 85, when the viewer is shown a point of view shot when Pink is being carried down the hallway by the doctors, Pink’s vision is extremely blurred and unfocused. The camera sways from side to side to mimic Pink’s disorientation and his overall disconnect from the present world around him. The sequence shows a great amount of contrast between the flashbacks and the shots set in the present. In flashback shots, Pink is largely in control of the camera’s movement. In shots such as shot 20, the camera follows young Pink’s actions. In this particular shot, Pink bends down to pick up the rat at the rugby field. As he bends down, the camera tilts downwards, and then back up again when he stands up with the rodent. The camera also pans to follow young Pink in shot 22 when he enters his house to show his mother the rat. The camera follows Pink’s movements as he walks towards his mother. The panning of the camera represents Pink’s freedom and mobility as a young child; he has not yet built up the mental wall. He is still open to the idea of love and he is willing to care for this small creature. Contrastingly, the shots from the present time period that highlight Pink are very still. Pink is not in control of the camera’s movements – the people around him are. Control of other people around Pink is seen in chaotic shots such as shot 10, when Pink’s management team and the doctors are frantically scrambling around the room to help him. Stability of the camera can be seen in shot 9 when Pink is lying on the floor. He is no longer free or mobile; he has become stagnant and numb. The present shots of Pink in his drug-induced state are usually close-ups. The use of close-ups adds to Pink’s feeling of being boxed in and unable to break free from the constraints of his mind and past trauma. This

signifies that he has completed the construction of his mental wall – he is entirely shut off from everything around him and does not have the ability to control the camera’s movement. The lyrics also articulate this concept – in shot 71 the song says, “the child has grown, the dream is gone” as Pink is being assisted by the doctors. The freedom of being a child is gone forever. Pink has become comfortably numb.

Non-diegetic inserts are another editing technique in the sequence that contributes to the film’s overall theme of past trauma. Non-diegetic inserts are symbolic shots in a film which do not belong to the time and space of the narration. (Borwell and Thompson 259). There are a few shots in this scene that display this rare editing technique. Shot 87 shows Pink being carried down the hall by two men – his hand looks as though it is decaying. The next shot cuts to a non-diegetic insert of maggots. It is obvious that the maggots are not actually present at this time or space in the narration, but they do have significance in the scene and the film as a whole; the discontinuity of the maggots signifies to the audience that Pink is decomposing both physically *and* mentally. The traumatic events of his past have been slowly causing his mind to decay and break down. They have been wearing away at him for a very long time. The fact that the maggots are edited at this exact point in the sequence reveals that Pink is suffering greatly due to his troubled past. They represent the reasons for which Pink decided to shut himself off from the people in his life. It was not a mistake that these two shots were edited together. The sequence also uses “dream-like” shots to articulate traumatic events from Pink’s past and, most importantly, the people who caused the trauma. Shots 63 and 65 both display multiple people from his past who impacted him in a negative way: a soldier who resembles his father who was killed in war, his school teacher, and a doctor. The director’s choice to show these dream-like shots during Pink’s drugged state allows the audience to see just how much these people of the past have impacted his life each and every day – he is not able to properly forge relationships with any others due to these primary trauma-inducing individuals.

Editing conjoins shots in a particular order for a reason. Shots 33 and 34 were purposely edited together to highlight the effects of a mother’s smothering love. In shot 33, young Pink places his sweater over the rat in the box. In shot 34, young Pink is being tucked into bed by his mother. These shots create meaning – even though both the rat and Pink are shown excessive love by another, they are still doomed for a dismal ending. The rat ends up dead, and Pink ends up with a wall built up in his mind. This juxtaposition symbolizes how life can only lead to pain, loss and ultimately, death. It also alludes to the consequence of Pink’s mother’s overbearing love: his demise as an adult. Shot 61 signifies the moment when the construction of Pink’s wall began. He tosses the dead rat into the river and comes to terms with the fact that even love cannot change the fate of death and loss in his life. The use of off-balance shots towards the end of the sequence as Pink is decaying also allude to his internal feelings of disorientation. In shots 119-130, for example, the camera is canted, or tipped, to harsh angles. (Bordwell and Thompson 189). This canting of the camera has a harsh effect and suggests that something is not quite right with Pink – his mind is warped and something serious is occurring in his life. The editing of

these shots has a far quicker rhythm than that of any other shots in the sequence. They are quite jumpy and off-balance. This increase in the shot-to-shot rhythm suggest that there is an extreme lack of control in the situation – Pink cannot stop what is about to happen. In shot 131, Pink finally pulls back the decomposed skin from his face. In the final shot of the sequence, Pink has become a new self. He sits perfectly still in the back seat of the vehicle in a Nazi-like uniform. This extremely still shot following such rapid and chaotic shots creates an extreme contrast. It signifies that Pink has finally completed the construction of his mental wall and has become a new “self”. The recollection of all of the traumatic events in Pink’s past has led up to this final moment. The song “*Comfortably Numb*” has ended, and there is a sound of marching in the background. Pink is completely focused and reincarnated in a sense. All of his pain and suffering in the past has led to this moment; he has been stripped of his previous identity and has become a new “drone-like” version of himself.

The editing and cinematography in the “*Comfortably Numb*” sequence are successful in portraying how past trauma has the ability to consume the entirety of a person’s being. It is able to strip individuals of their identity and forces them to build a mental wall to separate them from the rest of the world. The sequence highlights the contrast between Pink’s fluidity of childhood and the stagnation of his adulthood. It shows how the construction of his mental wall came to be, and how it was finalized. With a focus on the film’s overall theme of past trauma, the editing and cinematography in this critical sequence articulate how Pink came to be such a closed-off individual due to what happened in his childhood. Through cinematography and editing, the audience comes to learn how past trauma caused Pink to become comfortably numb.

Works Cited

Bordwell, David, and Kristin Marie Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2013. Print.

Shot Breakdown – “*Comfortably Numb*” Sequence
Pink Floyd – The Wall (1982) – Alan Parker
Alyssa Logie

Abbreviations:

- (ECU) extreme close-up, (CU) close-up, (MCU) medium close-up, (MS) medium shot, (ML) medium long shot, (LS) long shot, (EL) extreme long shot, (scr. R./L.) screen right/left, (OS) off screen, (EM) eye line match, (MOA) match-on-action, (POV) point of view shot, (L) left, (R) right

Characters:

- Pink (P), Pink’s Mother (PM), (M) manager
1. ML of P scr. L, sleeping in a drugged state in a chair in front of a television set in a room which has been trashed. Scr. R, someone begins pounding furiously on the double doors behind him. CUT TO
 2. MS of the double doors. White light begins shining through the two doors which eventually open. A couple of men from P’s management appear in door frame, entering room. Song: “Is there anybody out there?” CUT TO
 3. ML of two men entering and looking around the room with astonishment. CUT TO
 4. ML of P scr. L, still sleeping in a chair, more men entering the room. Man who entered the room first and a doctor begin to try and wake P. “*Comfortably Numb*” by Pink Floyd begins to play. CUT TO
 5. MCU of doctor holding P’s face. Song: “...hello. Is there anybody in there? Just...” CUT TO
 6. MS (high angle) of two doctors lifting P from chair. Song: “...nod if you can hear me...” CUT TO
 7. MS of doctors lifting P. Two men yelling in the background scr. L. CUT TO
 8. MS (high angle) of doctors placing P on the floor, camera pans left to follow the movement. CUT TO
 9. CS of P as his head lies on the floor. Song: “...is there anyone home...” CUT TO
 10. MS of management members scr. L encouraging the doctor scr. R to help P. “...come on, now...” CUT TO
 11. MS of P lying on ground, doctors surrounding him in a circle. CUT TO
 12. Same as 9. Doctor puts oxygen mask on P. Song: “...I hear you’re feeling down...” CUT TO
 13. MS of M scr. L yelling at doctor. CUT TO
 14. MS (high angle) of two doctors lifting P off the floor, camera tilts upwards and follows the movement as the doctors place P back in the chair. Song: “...well, I can ease your pain and get you on your feet again...” CUT TO

15. MS of two management men discussing. Song: "...relax..." CUT TO
16. MS of doctors helping P, camera slowly zooms in on the action. Song: "...I'll need some information first..." CUT TO
17. Same as 15. CUT TO
18. MS of doctor scr. L checking P's eyes. Song: "...just the basic facts, can you show me where it hurts..." CUT TO
19. [flashback] EL of young P running towards the camera in an open field, stops and turns slightly to the R, looking down, football posts in far back ground on the horizon, sun is beaming towards the camera. Song: "...there is no pain you are receding. A distant ship's..." CUT TO
20. [flashback continued] MS of P scr. L, he takes a few steps towards scr. R, camera pans to the L to follow his movement, P stops walking, he kneels down to pick up a rat off of the grass, camera tilts downwards to follow his downward movement, P stands up holding the rat, camera tilts upwards, P turns away from the camera while petting the rat, walks away from the camera. Song: "...smoke on the horizon. You are only coming through in waves. Your lips move but I can't hear what you're saying. When I was a child I had a fever. My hands felt just like two balloons..." CUT TO
21. [flashback continued] ML of PM sitting at a sewing machine in a living room facing scr. L, looking out of the window. CUT TO
22. [flashback continued] MS of P entering the door way of the living room holding the rat, camera follows his movement as he walks towards PM. Camera stops moving when P reaches his mother. Song: "...now I've got that feeling once again..." CUT TO
23. [flashback continued] MS of P and PM (MOA), P shows his mother the rat, PM is frightened and stands up, camera tilts upwards slightly. She motions for him to get rid of the rat. Song: "I can't explain, you would not understand..." CUT TO
24. [flashback continued] ML of P running from the front porch of his house with the rat, camera tilts downwards slightly, P runs towards OS L. Song: "...this is not how I am..." CUT TO
25. [flashback continued] LS of P running through a gate positioned in the background scr. L, P continues running with the rat. CUT TO
26. [flashback continued] LS of P running beside the river with the rat, camera pans to the L quickly, following P's pace. Song: "...I..." CUT TO
27. CS of doctor's hands helping the passed out P. Song: "...have become comfortably numb..." CUT TO
28. [dream] (P's POV in his drugged state) MS of dreamlike version of PM, she appears to grab onto the camera and makes a kissing face. CUT TO
29. Same as 27. CUT TO
30. Same as 28, dreamlike PM moves away from camera. CUT TO
31. [flashback] Same as 25. P approaches a shack. CUT TO

32. [flashback continued] ML (low angle) of P from inside the shack as he opens the door and enters. CUT TO
33. [flashback continued] MS of P scr. R, facing scr. L as he places the rat into a box filled with hay. P takes off his sweater vest and places it on top of the rat. CUT TO
34. [flashback] Young P lying in bed looking sick and frightened, PM is tucking him in; camera is zooming in on P quickly. CUT TO
35. [flashback continued] MS of a doctor scr. R pointing towards scr. L. CUT TO
36. [flashback continued] CS of P lying in bed, camera is unsteady. CUT TO
37. [flashback continued] ML of P's bedroom, P lying in bed scr. R. PM turns off the light, her and the doctor exit through door scr. L. P tries to sit up, PM comes back in the room and tells him to lay back down. She shuts the door. Song: "...I..." CUT TO
38. [flashback continued] MS of P lying in bed, looking OS L. CUT TO
39. MS of doctor scr. L slapping P's face attempting to wake him. Song: "...have become comfortably numb..." CUT TO
40. CU of needle held by doctor being prepared. CUT TO
41. Man scr. L facing scr. R, bends down to sanitize P's arm. Camera pans slightly to the R and downwards to follow his movement. CUT TO
42. [flashback] MS of P lying in bed, PM unbuttons his pajama top. P looks OS R. Song: "...okay..." CUT TO
43. [dream] MS (P's POV in his drugged state) of doctor from P's childhood holding a needle "...just a little pinprick..." CUT TO
44. MS (high angle) of doctor scr. L putting needle into P's arm scr. R. Song: "...there'll be no more..." CUT TO
45. CU of the needle being pulled from P's arm, camera pans upward to P's screaming face. Song: "...ahhhhh..." CUT TO
46. MS of men moving about the room, M looks at P with fear. CUT TO
47. CU of P's face with his eyes closed. Song: "...but you may..."
48. ECU of maggots. Song: "...feel..." CUT TO
49. Same as 47. Song: "...a little..." CUT TO
50. Same as 48. Camera zooms extremely fast. Song: "...sick..." CUT TO
51. Same as 47.
52. [flashback] MCU of young P being helped by doctors, looking scared. Song: "...can you stand up..." CUT TO
53. Same as 47. CUT TO
54. M and another man talking scr. L. Song: "...I do believe it's working..." CUT TO
55. CU of P's face, doctor scr. L attempting to wake him by slapping his cheeks, P seems a little responsive. Song: "...good. That'll keep you going through the show..." CUT TO
56. [dream] MS (P's POV in his drugged state) of a soldier entering from scr. L to the centre of the shot holding a dead rat by its tail. CUT TO
57. Same as 55. Song: "...come on it's time to go..." CUT TO

58. Same as 56. Soldier exits shot scr. R. CUT TO
59. LS of P running alongside river to shack, camera pans to the R to follow action. P opens door. Song: "...There is no pain, you are receding..." CUT TO
60. MS of P in shack scr. R facing rat in the box scr. L. Removes sweater vest from rat and pokes it with a piece of wood twice to find out it is dead. Camera seems unsteady. Song: "...a distant ship, smoke on the horizon..." CUT TO
61. ML of P scr. R exiting shack and walking towards river scr. L holding the dead rat by its tail. Camera pans left to follow movement. P extends his arm with the rat out over the water. Song: "...You are only coming through in waves..." CUT TO
62. LS of P from across the river throwing the rat into the river. Song: "...your lips move..." CUT TO
63. [dream] MS of soldier holding dead rat by its tail walking towards scr. L, camera pans L and tilts downwards to follow action. Appears to be on an old battlefield. Song: "...but I can't hear what you're..." CUT TO
64. Same as 62. P puts his sweater vest back on and walks slowly towards scr. L. Song: "...saying. When I..." CUT TO
65. [dream] MS of P's school teacher walking towards scr. L in the apparent battlefield, camera pans L and tilts downwards to follow his movement. Camera pans back to the right to show another man from P's past walking towards scr. L, camera pans L to follow him. Camera pans to the R again to reveal a few more soldiers heading in the same direction. Song: "...was a child I caught a fleeting glimpse out of the corner of my eye..." CUT TO
66. CU of P's face scr. R still in a daze, men begin struggling to take his shirt off. Song: "...I turned to look..." CUT TO
67. MS (high angle) of three men behind P struggling to take his shirt off. Song: "...but it was gone..." CUT TO
68. MS of black man scr. R facing scr. L struggling with P. M in background scr. L looking very flustered by the commotion. Song: "...I cannot put my..." CUT TO
69. Same as 67. Song: "...finger on it..." CUT TO
70. Same as 68. Song: "...now..." CUT TO
71. MS (low angle) of men struggling with P. Song: "...the child is grown, the dream is..." CUT TO
72. MS of man facing scr. L. Song: "...gone..." CUT TO
73. Same as 68. CUT TO
74. MS (low angle) of M scr. L extending his arm downwards to P as other men are bustling around scr. R. Song: "...I..." CUT TO
75. MS of M walking towards other man with his arm extending outwards. Song: "...I..." CUT TO
76. MS of M scr. L arguing with other man scr. R. Song: "...I..." CUT TO

77. MS (low angle) of M scr. L. facing scr. R. Men bustling around scr. L with P, lifting him. Song: "...have become..." CUT TO
78. MS of M scr. L. Song: "...comfortably..." CUT TO
79. ML (low angle) of men carrying P towards scr. R. Camera pans slightly to the R to follow action. Song: "...numb..." CUT TO
80. ML (from behind and low angle) of men carrying P towards the door. CUT TO
81. MS (low angle) of manger struggling with a telephone. CUT TO
82. MCU (tracking shot, camera positioned in lower L corner tilted up towards R corner) of P as he is being carried down a hallway by two men. CUT TO
83. MS (P's POV and low angle) of ceiling in the hallway. P's disoriented POV is seen through the camera's swaying and unsteady movement. CUT TO
84. Same as 82. CUT TO
85. MS (P's POV) of hallway, his vision is blurry, the camera continues to sway. CUT TO
86. Same as 82. CUT TO
87. MS (jump cut and low angle) to P's hand looking as if it is decaying. Tracking shot of two men continuing to carry P down the hallway. CUT TO
88. ECU of maggots. CUT TO
89. Same as 87. CUT TO
90. Same as 83. CUT TO
91. MS (low angle) of two men carrying P. Camera is tracking in front of them to follow their movement down the hallway. CUT TO
92. MS (P's POV) of the ceiling, camera pans down to a door. P's vision is still blurred. CUT TO
93. CU of P's hands continuing to decay as the men are carrying him. Camera tracks their movement still. CUT TO
94. CU (P's POV) of the double doors opening as they go through them. Camera moves through the door to simulate this. CUT TO
95. LS (extremely high angle) of the three men entering the stairwell through the door. CUT TO
96. ML (low angle) of the men bringing P to the stairs. The shot is blurred and disorientating. CUT TO
97. CU (MOA) of the men's feet approaching the first step. Blurriness continues. CUT TO
98. MS (low angle) of men carrying P downstairs. Camera is off-kilter and disorientating. CUT TO
99. ML (low angle) from beside the stairwell of the men carrying P downstairs. Camera is unstable and blurred. CUT TO
100. LS of men walking down the stairs scr. R. CUT TO
101. MS (MOA) of men walking down the stairs. CUT TO
102. ML of men walking down the stairs. CUT TO
103. MS of men walking downstairs towards scr. R. CUT TO

- 104.ECU of worms crawling in mud, camera zooming in slowly. CUT TO
- 105.ML (low angle) of men walking down hallway, camera is tracking the movement from behind. CUT TO
- 106.MS of the ceiling, camera pans downwards to a head on shot of the men carrying P, who's face is now completely decaying. Camera tracks and follows their movement as they are walking towards the camera. CUT TO
- 107.Same as 106. Camera jumps abruptly from side to side creating disorientation. CUT TO
- 108.MS (high angle) of the men's feet walking. Camera is unsteady, it tilts upwards to show P's decaying face. CUT TO
- 109.MS (low angle) of the ceiling. CUT TO
- 110.MS of the men's feet, camera tilts upwards to show the men from behind walking. CUT TO
- 111.ML of the men walking, camera tilts upwards to the ceiling. CUT TO
- 112.MS (low angle) from in front of the men carrying P who's entire body is decomposing. Camera is tracking backwards as they walk. CUT TO
- 113.LS of the men entering (in silhouette) an extremely dark room through an archway which is being lit from behind scr. R. Men walk towards the camera. CUT TO
- 114.ML (low angle) of a black car, being lit from behind. CUT TO
- 115.ML of men walking towards the car from scr. R. CUT TO
- 116.LS (high angle) of men entering car. CUT TO
- 117.MS from inside the car of man shutting the car door. CUT TO
- 118.CU of the front of the car, focusing on one of the headlights. Car starts, and drives out of the frame scr. L. CUT TO
- 119.MS (straight on) of P in the back seat completely decomposing and tearing at his skin. CUT TO
- 120.CU (low angle) of P tearing the skin from his face. Camera is off-kilter. CUT TO
- 121.CU (straight on) of P tearing the skin from his face. Camera is off-kilter. CUT TO
- 122.Same as 120.
- 123.MS of P freaking out in the backseat. Camera sways from L to R. CUT TO
- 124.MS (MOA) zoomed in of P freaking out in the backseat. CUT TO
- 125.LS of the streets outside going past, camera is swaying quickly and extremely unstable. CUT TO
- 126.Same as 123. CUT TO
- 127.CU of P tearing the skin from his face. Camera jumps quickly from side to side. CUT TO
- 128.ECU of P tearing the skin from his face. CUT TO
- 129.CU of P tearing the skin from his face. CUT TO
- 130.CU of P removing decomposed skin from his face and then grabbing his face with his hands. CUT TO
- 131.CU of P's normal face finally revealed as he is stroking his face from top to bottom. CUT TO

132.MS of P removing the decomposed skin from his arms. CUT TO

133.MS (P's POV) from the backseat looking out the front window of the car. Comfortably Numb has ended, and there is the sound of marching in the background. CUT TO

134.ML (low angle) of P sitting in the backseat wearing an army-like uniform scr. R, he is completely still and staring ahead with a blank expression. The sound of marching is heard in the background.