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Making the Cut

FEMALE EDITORS AND REPRESENTATION IN THE FILM AND MEDIA INDUSTRY

EXCERPT FROM PLENARY SESSION BY JULIA WRIGHT

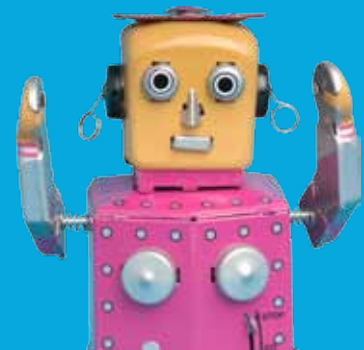
In the past decade, a higher percentage of women have worked as editors than as directors, writers, cinematographers, and executive producers,¹ yet they are rarely represented in histories by film historians and feminist film scholars. The purpose of this paper is not to reveal the “reality” of female editors, but to understand what challenges arise in constructing them as historical subjects. In what frameworks have female editors been permitted or omitted from historicization? What counts as historical knowledge and evidence? It is important to consider the author, and what impact their politics of location have on the historical

knowledge they are presenting. I will also consider what challenges my interviews with female editors have posed in historicizing them from a feminist perspective.

General cinema history books do not historicize editors, but instead celebrate directors who have advanced editing: Edwin Porter and D.W. Griffith; Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov; and Jean-Luc Godard.² Authorship then serves as the dominant historical methodology, which explains the omission of the editor and with good reasons: the editor’s job, if done correctly, is supposed to be unnoticed; crediting an editor with a discernable style pigeonholes their abilities

rather than emphasizing their versatility; and it also risks undermining the creative importance of the director, an understandable job hazard echoed in many interviews with editors.³

Texts created within the film and media industry by editors and trade organizations account for the majority of the historical information about female editors. These texts typically characterize the pre-sound era in Hollywood as a period when the majority of editors were women.



Referred to as “cutters,” they edited film with scissors, and were not seen as a creative force but a set of hands. Men began replacing the ranks of women at approximately the same time that sound technology was introduced in 1927. The narrative arc continues by recognizing a series of “token” female editors, and underscores a brief comeback of a female workforce during World War II.

In response to the increasing employment of non-workers beginning in the early 1990s, industry guilds and societies spearheaded a movement towards legitimatizing and historicizing their own professions (Caldwell 117-118). *The Cutting Edge: The Magic of Movie Editing*, co-produced by the American Cinema Editors Society, the ACE, is as much a documentary as it is a promotional campaign. Actress Kathy Bates narrates the history of editing, highlighting the names of familiar male directors: Porter, Griffith, Eisenstein, Vertov, Godard, and so on. This selective recollection of the general film history situates the editor as the directors’ chief collaborator, and their historical presence is then afforded by way of collaborative authorship as a theoretical approach. Yet this same approach,

while giving historical credit to male editors, diminishes the work of female editors that facilitated many of these celebrated men and moments: Agnès Guillemot edited the majority of Godard’s films in the 1960s and was the only editor to work with both Godard and Truffaut; yet, she is completely omitted from the documentary. James Smith is credited as D.W. Griffith’s editor, but the documentary gives only brief mention of Rose Smith, his wife, despite her own 20-year career as an editor in which she edited 11 Griffith films, including *Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*. Similarly, Dziga Vertov’s wife, Elizaveta Svilova, is credited as his wife and editor, but receives none of the long-overdue star treatment given to the documentary’s male editors. Guillemot’s complete omission may be the result of the documentary’s focus on American editors; however, Rose Smith and Elizaveta Svilova Vertov’s reductive treatment is the result of professional ambiguity—their roles as devoted partners are somehow inseparable from the professional partnerships with their husbands.

This professional discrediting of female editors continues as the documentary glosses over the early film industry, when, as Bates

narrates, “the invisible style of editing kept editors invisible and unappreciated as well. For years they have been the best kept secret of the movies.” No mention is made of a female-gendered workforce, despite photographs overlaid with Bates’ voiceover depicting rooms of women cutters. This history of a pink-collar workforce is co-opted by the ACE, who reinterpret the lack of professional distinction given to female cutters as the editors’ genderless story of origin and their humble beginnings.

Texts on editing theory are usually authored by renowned male editors, and reserve a section for what might be described as a vague evolution of the editor-as-artist.⁴ Adopting a masculine pronoun, these descriptions are of an ahistorical subject who encounters various technological innovations that redefine “his” role as an editor, from the birth of cinema to the present day. It is precisely this type of history, in the absence of any historical evidence, where the covert omission of women occurs. Female editors undergo a double invisibility: already invisible to film history by virtue of their “invisible art,” women are then edited out of books that intend to bring

visibility to the editing profession. Consider Rene L. Ash's 1974 book, *The Motion Picture Film Editor*, which consistently refers to the editor as "he," but nonetheless opens with a quote from Cecil B. DeMille on the invaluable role of the film editor—never mind that Anne Bauchens, the first woman to receive an Academy Award in editing, was DeMille's longtime collaborating editor and devoted friend.

Edward Dmytryk and Walter Murch, both well-respected male editors, have written theoretical books that make brief reference to early female editors. In *On Film Editing*, Dmytryk uses a footnote to indicate a discrepancy between the masculine pronouns he prefers using in the main text, and his actual experience. Dmytryk states in a footnote on the second page of his book, that "in the silent days a large portion of cutters with women. At famous Player Lasky, where I worked, all the cutters were women" (original emphasis). Like Rene Ash, Dmytryk's ahistorical male subject has less to do with history than it does with advancing an argument for the editor to be seen as a legitimate artist, submitting to the old double standard that women do arts and crafts, but men make art. Because these

historicizing texts are primarily concerned with legitimizing editors more than reconsidering women, women's compromised professional capital make them less lucrative candidates for "worthy" historical subjects.

In Walter Murch's bestselling book, *In the Blink of An Eye*, the feminine pronoun is deliberately used to describe editors up until the "pre-mechanical era," as a way of recognizing women once made up a majority of editors before the introduction of the Moviola. This subtle periodizing device becomes Murch's way of suggesting that sexist views of women's technical capabilities were the reason for their "disappearance." In interview, Murch remarks, "[editing] was considered to be a woman's job because it was something like knitting, it was something like tapestry, sewing. It was when sound came in that the men began to infiltrate the ranks of the editors, because sound was somehow electrical...it was no longer knitting." One might speculate this to be part of the reason Vertov and Rose are not given recognition for their contributions, since it so closely resembled a "woman's job." Dmytryk offers a similar explanation in his footnote, suggesting

that the advent of sound technology led sexist executives to discharge women from their jobs. However, this explanation too easily puts blame on a few big bad men without enough consideration for larger circumstances. Massive lay-offs by studios began at approximately the same time as the advent of sound. Editor Dede Allen recounts that during the Depression and for several years after, women were openly discouraged from taking jobs from men since they had families to support. Scholar Jane Gaines' recent work on early cinema cites women's presence and forced departure as the result of industry economics that allowed women to thrive as producers, directors, writers, and editors in the industry's unstable formative years, but were pushed out of such roles when the industry began to realize its force as a major business enterprise. Prejudices about women's technical capabilities may have been an argument for explaining women's disappearance, but greater economic stakes and competition for jobs suggests larger industrial and socio-economic reasons for their decrease in employment after 1927.

Of the female editors who remained employed after sound, a handful have been

written about in the pages of *The Editors Guild Magazine*: Anne Bauchens as Cecil B. DeMille's editor; Barbara McLean, chief editor at Fox from 1949 to 1969; and Margaret Booth, supervising editor at MGM from 1939 to 1968. Margaret Booth stands out as being the most celebrated of these women, whose career spanned from 1920 as a cutter for D.W. Griffith, to 1985 working for producer Ray Stark. Booth was exceptionally powerful, and as MGM's supervising editor everything went through her: "Maggie was probably the toughest and most feared woman at MGM. I mean, people would shudder when they heard she was on the phone," recalls editor Frank Urioste (*The Cutting Edge*). It was well-known among editors, producers, and directors that Booth had close professional relationships with Irving Thalberg and Louis B. Mayer, "a fact that some didn't like, but there was nothing they could do about it," remembers editor Ralph E. Winters. Other personal anecdotes suggest Booth had a reputation for being overbearing, though male resentment invariably played some part in this interpretation. For example, editor Elmo Williams had worked with Booth, as well as Bauchens and McClean during his

career. Williams believes it was their superior organizational skills that made women successful, adding, "they were better than the men. At the time, we grudgingly accepted the fact that they were very capable" (Lewis). These reclaimed histories, coming from recent short articles from the *Editors Guild Magazine*, demonstrate the best efforts made by industry-generated texts in crediting women's professionalism in the editing field.

The primary challenge to historicizing female editors has been in giving them credit for their work. Since the early 1990s, research by feminist film scholars has brought attention to important women in early cinema.⁵ However, the study of editors has received little investigation, unlike the lively debates around authorship in feminism that justify the study of women as directors. A consideration for female editors requires us to think about how to best theorize them as historical subjects. Collaborative authorship is problematic for a few reasons: it is not the method editors themselves feel best articulates their talent and contribution; and the collaborative authorship we saw employed in industry texts is less about professional recognition and

more about creating hierarchies along various distinctions—for example, union workers versus pre-union era or non-union workers, and a reverence for film production over television and media.

In order for feminist film theory to broaden its study of historical subjects beyond the director, there needs to be a paradigm shift away from authorship and textual analysis and a move toward analyzing industry practices and cultures of film and media production. A feminist approach to history has many advantages: it can critique historical assumptions, investigate the politics of epistemologies, and advance more complex arguments for the various "whys" regarding historical phenomena, notably why there were so many female editors in the early years and why they "disappeared."

There is also the issue of how to reconcile a feminist approach to history when the historical subject negates the feminist label. In my interviews with female editors currently working in the film and media industry, there is a strong resistance to gender representation and any association with feminism.⁶ Seeing feminism as outdated and too political,

they opted for a post-feminist viewpoint that emphasizes individual responsibility in negotiating their professional interactions. For these women, being a feminist meant not being “a team player,” and being perceived as difficult to work with. Yet I would argue this post-, anti-feminist attitude couches the shortcomings of the industry’s flexible labor market in which most work is freelance and temporary, requiring editors to maintain a strong social network to secure future employment. In this context, editors feel they have little agency to address sexism directly, and instead “perform” against undesirable gender stereotypes that questioned their professionalism: women described dressing more “masculine” in baggy slacks and t-shirts to avoid unwanted attention or being seen as too concerned with their appearance; they refused to file justifiable sexual harassment claims; and in the case of one editor I interviewed, she never wears her wedding ring or mentions she has children, and at one point after her pregnancy, Fed-Exed her breast milk home to a caretaker in order to avoid taking time off work, since being a mother is seen as a liability by employers. This postfeminist individualism

is then a fallacy since women feel they have little choice but to conform to other peoples’ standards.

Essentialist views of feminists as well as women’s professionalism perpetuate unfair industry practices that, in depoliticizing the workplace and diminishing the female editor’s agency, keep sexism from being addressed. Decrying sexism isn’t enough—to properly contextualize such problems we would have to consider the consequences of the industry’s flexible economics that stifle employee sustainability. In work environments defined by intense competition and frequent exploitation, old social hierarchies come back into play and women are again marginalized. If feminist history is about critiquing and changing the past and present, then refocusing beyond a gender-based analysis that considers economic conditions and labor practices can reveal the specific bind in which female editors find themselves—in 1927, and especially today.

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Notes

1. Martha M. Lauzen, “The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes and On-Screen Employment of Women in the Top 250 Films of 2007,” Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, San Diego State University, 2008. Interviews, books by editors, trade magazine articles, and recent academic research by Ally Acker and Jane Gaines have consistently affirmed that women made up the majority of the editors in the film industry until the middle to late 1920s. Martha M. Lauzen’s “Celluloid Ceiling” research series is an annual survey tracking the percentage of women employed in various job sectors of the industry. The most recent survey from 2007 confirms that of the male and female editors employed in the top 250 films each year for the past 10 years, women have always been a minority but have maintained consistently higher numbers than directors, writers, executive producers, and cinematographers; only producers maintained a comparatively higher percentage of women in their sector than editors.
2. Books researched for this project include David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003; David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 8th ed., Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008; David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 4th ed., New York: W.W. Norton, 2004; and Pam Cook, *The Cinema Book*, 3rd ed., London : BFI, 2007.
3. Vincent LoBrutto, *Selected Takes: Film Editors on Editing*, New York: Praeger, 1991; Gabriella Oldham, *First Cut: Conversations with Film Editors*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. In these published collections of interviews, editors freely

theorize their approaches to post-production work. However, if there is any ambiguity about who is in charge, they are always firm in crediting the director, and in some cases the producer, with the ultimate vision of a film. Editors are necessarily there to articulate the director's storytelling.

4. Books of this genre include Rene L. Ash, *The Motion Picture Editor*, Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1974; Edward Dmytryk, *On Film Editing: An Introduction to the Art of Film Construction*, Boston: Focal Press, 1984; Walter Murch, *In the Blinking of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing*, 2nd ed., Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2001.
5. Refer to Jane Gaines' bibliography in: "Of Cabbages and Authors," *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, edited by Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
6. The four female editors interviewed for this project present a diverse cross section of the profession: an assistant editor for a scripted television drama, doing freelance work on her off-time; an editor specializing in documentary films, and currently directing her own documentary; an editor who specializes in non-fiction and promotional material; and an award-winning editor of commercials and music videos.

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