

When the movie business adopted some of the ways of other big industries in 1920s America, women—who had been essential to the industry's early development—were systematically squeezed out of key behind-the-camera roles. Yet, as female producers and directors virtually disappeared for decades, a number of female film editors remained and rose to the top of their profession, sometimes wielding great power and influence. Their example inspired a later generation of women to enter the profession at mid-century, several of whom were critical to revolutionizing filmmaking in the 1960s and 1970s with contributions to such classics as *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Jaws* and *Raging Bull*. Focusing on nine of these women and presenting shorter glimpses of nine others, this book tells their captivating personal stories and examines their professional achievements.

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Front cover: Anne Bauchens, first female film editor both to be nominated for and to win an Academy Award (Paramount Pictures); background © 2016 iStock



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Women Film Editors

WOMEN FILM EDITORS



*Unseen Artists
of American Cinema*

DAVID MEUEL

“Mother Cutter”

Verna Fields Mentors a New Generation of Film Directors in the 1970s

When Steven Spielberg began work on the film version of Peter Benchley’s 1974 novel *Jaws*, just about everything seemed to be going right in his young career. At only 26, he had already earned a reputation as a “comer” among Hollywood’s emerging directing talents. He had received his first professional directing assignment at just 22, helming part of the premiere installment of Rod Serling’s *Night Gallery* television series, a chilling half-hour story called “Eyes” and starring screen legend Joan Crawford. From there he went to other TV directing assignments on popular shows such as *The Name of the Game* and *Columbo*, to the highly praised made-for-TV movie *Duel* (1971) to his first feature film, the well-received neo-noir *The Sugarland Express* (1974)

Once immersed in *Jaws*, however, Spielberg seemed to be drowning in a sea of production problems and delays that seriously tested his mettle and led him to wonder if—after this—he might even have a directing career at all. All totaled, these problems, which inspired disgruntled members of the crew to nickname the film “*Flaws*,”¹ caused the production to take more than 100 days longer than was originally scheduled (159 days instead of 55) and drive the budget up from about \$4 million to about \$9 million. “I thought my career as a filmmaker was over,” Spielberg later recalled. “I heard rumors that I would never work again because no one had ever taken a film 100 days over schedule.”²

Among these problems, perhaps the most frustrating was a notoriously undependable mechanical shark—actually several sharks—named Bruce

(after Spielberg’s lawyer, Bruce Raimer). As the director has many times recalled, instead of working as planned, Bruce often just lay in the water like a “great white floating turd.”³

As a solution, the resourceful Spielberg opted for another approach. Since he couldn’t rely on his mechanical sharks to achieve the frightening effects he desired, he would shoot many scenes that suggested the shark without showing it in its entirety. Sometimes, for example, the shooting is from the shark’s point of view. Other times, yellow barrels the shark drags around are all that indicate its presence. Still other times, all we see is the shark’s dorsal fin.

The suggestions of the shark, of course, likely proved to be more effective than actual shark shots. “The film went from a Japanese Saturday matinee horror flick to more of a Hitchcock the-less-you-see-the-more-you-get thriller,” Spielberg later said.⁴ Another compensation the director made for the absence of a shark was to focus on getting more realistic performances from the actors. “The more fake the shark looked in the water,” he observed, “the more my anxiety told me to heighten the naturalism of the performances.”⁵

While some of the big problems were solved in production, many others remained. One was the musical score, which Spielberg’s long-time collaborator, composer John Williams, addressed with his now-iconic music to indicate the approaching shark. And another, perhaps the most daunting of all, was the challenge of putting all the thousands and thousands of film fragments together in a way that would truly surprise and frighten theater audiences.

That task—the editing—fell to a warm, maternal Jewish woman in her mid-50s who preferred to keep all things casual; worked independently from the pool house in the backyard of her home in Encino, California; and, at the time, was mentoring not only Spielberg but also other rising filmmakers such as George Lucas and Peter Bogdanovich. Her name was Verna Fields (1918–1982), and the young filmmakers who worked with her affectionately called her their “mother cutter.”

Unlike many of her fellow female editors who began to learn their craft at a young age and worked primarily in-house at studios, Fields started later, worked freelance most of her career, and took a much more circuitous route to the top of her profession, working—among numerous jobs—as a sound editor for television, a producer of U.S. Government documentaries, and a film teacher. She did not have a long stay at the top, either. In fact, the work she is most famous for took place between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s, just six or seven years. In that time, though,



Nicknamed the “mother cutter” by the young filmmakers she worked with—a group that included Peter Bogdanovich, George Lucas, and Steven Spielberg—Verna Fields was a key figure in the birth of the “New Hollywood” in the 1970s. Here, she is conferring with Spielberg on the set of *Jaws* (1975), the film that brought her an Oscar (Universal Pictures/Photofest).

she played a key role in changing how studio feature films were edited and what the finished products ultimately became. And, in the process, she helped to create the “New Hollywood” that emerged in the 1970s.

Perhaps Fields’ crowning achievement was her contribution to *Jaws*, a film that went—largely because of her contributions—from potential fiasco to critical and box-office hit and (before *Star Wars* surpassed it a few years later) the highest grossing film of all time. While Spielberg, John Williams, the film’s writers and actors, and many, many others have all been widely and enthusiastically praised for their work on the film, the adulation for Fields never seems to cease. The year after *Jaws* premiered, she received both a Best Editing Academy Award and an Eddie Award from the America Cinema Editors (ACE), the film editors’ professional society for her work on the film. More than 25 years later, critic Leonard Maltin was still calling her work “sensational.”⁶ And a full 37 years after-

wards, writer Ian Freer proclaimed, “*Jaws* remains a highpoint in film editing.”⁷

Since so much of the initial popular discussion of *Jaws* focused on the effectiveness of Fields’ editing, she was asked to join Spielberg, the film’s producers, and others on the film’s extensive promotional tour—something unprecedented for an editor. In the process, she became a celebrity in her own right, film editing’s first “rock star.” But, more important, she also served as an articulate ambassador for her profession, helping to make “the invisible art” much more visible to millions of people and, by doing so, to raise its stature considerably.

“About as famous ‘overnight’ as an editor ever gets.”

In his 1980 interview with Fields, film writer Gerald Peary noted—no doubt with tongue in cheek—that *Jaws* had made her “about as famous ‘overnight’ as an editor ever gets.”⁸ The tip-off that Peary was having a bit of fun here of course is the use of quotation marks around the word “overnight.” *Jaws* had indeed made Fields a celebrity, but her rise had been anything but instantaneous. In fact, it had been more than 30 years in the making.

Born Verna Hellman in St. Louis, Missouri, on March 21, 1918, she was the daughter of Selma Schwartz Hellman and Samuel (Sam) Hellman, then a journalist for both the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Later, after Sam had become the managing editor for the *Post-Dispatch*, he moved his family to Hollywood to fulfill an ambition of his own to write for the movies. And, between the 1920s and the late 1940s, he wrote either the scenarios or screenplays for more than 40 films, including 1939’s *Stanley and Livingstone* with Spencer Tracy, 1946’s *My Darling Clementine* with Henry Fonda, and numerous Shirley Temple and Jack Benny vehicles.

Sam also had big plans for Verna, sending her to a fancy Parisian secondary school at the College Feminin de Bouffemont. After graduating, she attended USC, where she earned a bachelor’s degree in journalism.

Verna’s first brush with the film industry came during World War II when she met a young assistant editor named Sam Fields and would hang around the studio to be with him. Seeing this young woman with time on her hands, director Fritz Lang hired her as an apprentice sound editor to work on his 1944 film noir *The Woman in the Window*, and eventually she joined the editor’s union.

In the meantime, she married Sam Fields, quit work, had two sons, and focused on raising them. She might have continued in this role indefinitely, but, in 1954 at the age of 38, Sam died suddenly of a heart attack, leaving Verna with the two young sons to support.

Hearing that sound editing jobs on television shows were available, she began to work on such series as *Death Valley Days* and the Saturday morning children's series, *Sky King* and *Fury*. "I'd tell the kids I was the Queen of Saturday Morning," she once quipped.⁹

But, being a single parent working in a demanding industry also brought with it great challenges. "I made special arrangements to be able to come home in the afternoon [of each work day] and make dinner for my kids," she recalled. "When they went to bed, I'd keep on. I built a cutting room in back of the house and I'd stay there until 2:00 a.m."¹⁰

In 1960, Fields met a man who would, perhaps more than anyone else, serve as her professional mentor, a film director, cinematographer, and editor named Irving Lerner. As she noted years later: "Lerner's trust really helped me. He taught me the right way to approach film."¹¹

Perhaps best known today as the director of the low-budget cult noir *Murder by Contract* (1959), Lerner asked Fields to edit an upcoming project for him, a slimmed-down low-budget film version of James T. Farrell's fiction trilogy *Studs Lonigan*. With this experience, Peary observed, "Fields had found her calling."¹²

During the 1960s, Fields—now in her 40s—worked on a wide variety of projects ranging from independent films to major studio films, to television, to U.S. Government documentaries, to teaching. In 1960, she did the sound editing for *The Savage Eye*, a film that has since become a classic of the *cinéma vérité* movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The following year, she worked as the sound editor on Anthony Mann's epic *El Cid*, winning the Motion Pictures Sound Editors' Golden Reel Award for her efforts. With an interest in using film for social reform, she went to work in 1965 for the U.S. Government and President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, making films for the U.S. Information Agency; the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; and the Office of Economic Opportunity. In 1967, she returned to television, editing the feature-length *The Legend of the Boy and Eagle* for the series, *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*. Then, in the late 1960s, she returned to USC, this time to teach editing. In her classes, she met several students who would later become major Hollywood players and valuable professional connections. One of them was John Milius, the future film producer and director as well as the prolific screenwriter who would receive an Academy Award nomination for his

work on the screenplay for Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Two others were film editor Marcia Griffin and the man who for the next decade would be both Marcia's close professional collaborator and her husband, George Lucas.

In 1968, Fields made still another contact that would be of great importance to her later on. In one of her last sound editing assignments, she worked for a young director named Peter Bogdanovich on one of his first film efforts, a low-budget thriller about a deranged sniper called *Targets*. The film, which still has an enthusiastic cult following, is skillful in many respects from its crisp writing to its imaginative camera work. But, according to film historian Bill Warren, even amid so many other good elements, the film's sound editing clearly stands out. Describing the scene in which the sniper, Bobby, starts shooting randomly at freeway drivers from the top of an oil storage tank, Warren writes: "The sound is mono, and brilliantly mixed—the entire sequence of Bobby shooting from the tanks was shot without sound. Verna Fields, then a sound editor, added all the sound effects. The result is seamlessly realistic, from the scrape of the guns on the metal of the tanks, to the crack of the rifles, to the little gasps Bobby makes just before firing."¹³

While pleased with her contribution to *Targets*, however, Fields was increasingly drawn to film editing and, for the next seven years, concentrated on it almost exclusively.

One of her first projects after *Targets* was Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool*, a disturbing *cinéma vérité* piece that explores the social and political unrest during the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. At the time, the film packed a real punch. Calling it "technically brilliant" and praising its "tremendous visual impact," *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby went on to describe it as "a kind of cinematic *Guernica*,"¹⁴ a picture of America in the process of exploding into fragmented bits of hostility, suspicion, fear, and violence.¹⁵ Equally impressed, Roger Ebert ranked *Medium Cool* second on his Ten Best Films of 1969 list and called it "important," "absorbing," and "an almost perfect example of the new movie."¹⁶

Seen decades later, the film's impact is still quite powerful, and one of the main reasons is Fields' strong, confident, and fearless editing that captures those "fragmented bits of hostility, suspicion, fear, and violence" with great skill. We don't simply see the chaos and conflict, we actually feel caught up in it—tossed about, if you will—the editing often jerking our focus from one line of dialogue, action, or scene to another abruptly, unexpectedly, and sometimes harshly. Fields' work represents a major contribution to the overall impact of Wexler's film.

After *Medium Cool*, Fields began perhaps the most fruitful part of her career, working as the “mother cutter” on six films for three of the “young Turks” of a new generation of Hollywood directors: Peter Bogdanovich, George Lucas, and Steven Spielberg.

For Bogdanovich, she edited three films: the popular screwball comedy *What's Up, Doc?* (1972) and the highly praised Depression-era road picture *Paper Moon* (1973) as well as the less critically and commercially successful adaptation of the Henry James novella *Daisy Miller* (1974). With the success of *What's Up, Doc?*, Fields—at age 54—had finally established herself as a go-to editor of feature films for a major studio.

Of the three films she did with Bogdanovich, her work on *Paper Moon* remains the most impressive today. While not especially groundbreaking, it does show her mastery of craft. The timing of her cuts, for example, is especially effective. While the film never seems rushed, the story flows quickly and expeditiously. We never feel that there is a wasted moment. One technique she often uses to move us from one scene to the next is to cut just a few frames before where a more traditional editor might cut. This could be in the middle instead of at the end of an action or just as a line of dialogue is concluding rather than right afterwards. The effect—in addition to keeping things moving briskly—is to give greater flow and unity to what is essentially a fragmented, episodic story. Fields was also wonderful at cutting to reaction shots to show us what characters are feeling (sometimes very complex, conflicting emotions) without dwelling on the actors' faces. A striking example is how her cutting captures young Addie's (Tatum O'Neal) conflicted feelings when she knows she has successfully broken up Moze and Trixie's (Ryan O'Neal and Madeline Kahn) relationship. “Verna was always in favor of making less to be more,” Spielberg once said.¹⁷ And in *Paper Moon*, we definitely see how effective this “less-is-more” editing philosophy can be.

Fields' professional relationship with George Lucas had actually begun well before the 1970s—in 1967 to be exact—when he was her student at USC. She had hired him and another student, Marcia Griffin (who would marry Lucas in 1969), to help her on a documentary she was making for the United States Information Agency. In 1972, their paths crossed again when Lucas was directing his nostalgic look at small-town America in 1962, *American Graffiti*, and Universal asked him to add Fields to the editing team. For the first 10 weeks of post-production, Fields worked with the Lucases as well as sound editor Walter Murch to put together a 165-minute version of the film. After this, Fields left to fulfill another business commitment, and Marcia Lucas spent several months more whittling the film down to

110 minutes. For their efforts, both Fields and Marcia Lucas received a shared Best Editing Academy Award nomination.

While it is always difficult (and frequently impossible) to assess who contributed what to the finished film when several people are involved, Fields' experience both as a sound editor and as an editor in *cinéma vérité* films clearly had an impact on *American Graffiti*. From the first moments of the film, there is something electric about how the visuals and the overlaid rock-and-roll music complement each other, how the cuts between scenes sometimes pop from one visual image to the next, and how the action seems to drive as relentlessly as a Buddy Holly song. Much imitated since its release, there was something new, fresh, and vibrant about *American Graffiti*, and the Fields touch—the same touch she would soon bring to *Jaws*—played a key role in giving the film this freshness and energy. As Gerald Peary has noted, between them, Fields and Marcia Lucas “set the style of cutting for the rest of the 1970s.”¹⁸

In late 1973 and early 1974, Fields worked with yet another young director, Steven Spielberg, co-editing (with Edward M. Abrams) his first major feature film, a darkly humorous and ultimately downbeat piece based on a real-life hostage drama in Texas called *The Sugarland Express*. While a hit with critics and often praised for its taut editing, the film was not a hit with audiences, which, as Spielberg later acknowledged, were now less receptive to downbeat stories than they had been in the late 1960s to films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969).

Despite his disappointment with *The Sugarland Express*'s box-office performance, Spielberg had been greatly impressed with Fields and was happy to work with her again in his next project, an action-horror film named *Jaws*. The rest, as they say, is film history. For four decades, the editing of *Jaws* has constantly been studied and analyzed. And the film is widely considered to be—along with *Citizen Kane*, *Raging Bull*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, and a handful of other classics—one of the best-edited films of all time.

Ironically, though, *Jaws* would also be the last film Fields ever edited. In 1976, she received an offer to become the vice president for feature production at Universal Studios—a position that, at the time, made her one of the most powerful women in Hollywood—and she accepted. Serving in this role for the next six years, she remained—in an industry where people can quickly turn against each other—highly and widely respected. As producer-director Joel Schumacher said of her work at Universal for a July 1982 *Los Angeles Times* newspaper article: “In the record business, you have Berry Gordy and Ahmet Ertegun. They're executives who actually

made records. In the movie business, as an executive who's worked with film, you have only Verna. She saves Universal a fortune every day."¹⁹

This praise came on the heels of another recognition Fields received the previous year from the organization Women in Film. It was the prestigious Crystal Award, which is presented to "outstanding women who, through their endurance and the excellence of their work, have helped to expand the role of women within the entertainment industry."²⁰ To date, Fields is—along with Margaret Booth, Dede Allen, and Anne V. Coates—one of only four film editors to receive this award.

Fields doubtlessly would have continued at Universal, but in 1982 she discovered that she had cancer, and she died on November 30 of that year in Encino. She was survived by her two sons, one of whom, Richard, had followed her and her husband, Sam, into the film editing profession.

In appreciation of her contributions to both Universal and the film industry, the studio posthumously accorded Fields another rare honor. It named a major company facility the Verna Fields Building. Today, it stands on the Universal lot just across from another building named for a film industry luminary—Alfred Hitchcock.

Like many of her fellow female film editors, Fields tended to shy away from criticizing the film industry for the lack of opportunity women had in the editing, directing, producing, and executive ranks during her career. Instead, she preferred to lead by example. When asked to comment on the success of *Jaws* late in her life, she simply suggested how tickled she was when "people discovered that it was a woman who edited *Jaws*."²¹ The implication of course is that, if a woman could do such a fine job of editing an action-horror film such as *Jaws*, then other women could certainly do well editing similar films. She took a similar approach once she became that rare creature for 1976, a female film industry executive. Instead of complaining about the lack of women in comparable positions, she focused on proving that, if this woman deserved such a job, then others did, too.

"A near-matchless legacy"—Fields' Work on *Jaws*

In the editing profession Fields was a true original, the rare person who thought differently and soon changed the way other people thought about and approached their art.

In many respects, she was a creature of her time and the sum of her experiences. She came of age as a film editor in the 1960s when younger editors actively challenged the rules of the classical Hollywood editing style established back in the 1910s. The edgy new kind of cutting she saw

in the French New Wave films of the late 1950s and 1960s doubtlessly influenced her. And her years of experience first as a sound editor and then as a film editor on *cinéma vérité* films such as *The Savage Eye* and *Medium Cool* affected her future work as well.

But there was also—and perhaps primarily—her witty, iconoclastic, and ultimately radical personality. While she respected the primacy of the director in all filmmaking matters, she saw her role as adding "out-of-the-box" creative value in the editing phase (and sometimes in the production phase) of the director's film. In this process of thinking differently to better tell the story, she broke traditional rules. We see frequent examples of this practice in Fields' later work from her abrupt, often harsh and unsettling cutting in *Medium Cool* to her exuberant cutting and juxtaposition of sound and visuals in *American Graffiti*, to her numerous contributions to *Jaws*. By doing this, she brought additional freshness and vitality to these films, and she helped extend and enrich the editor's art.

Of Fields' achievements, the one that's discussed and praised most often of course is her work on *Jaws*.

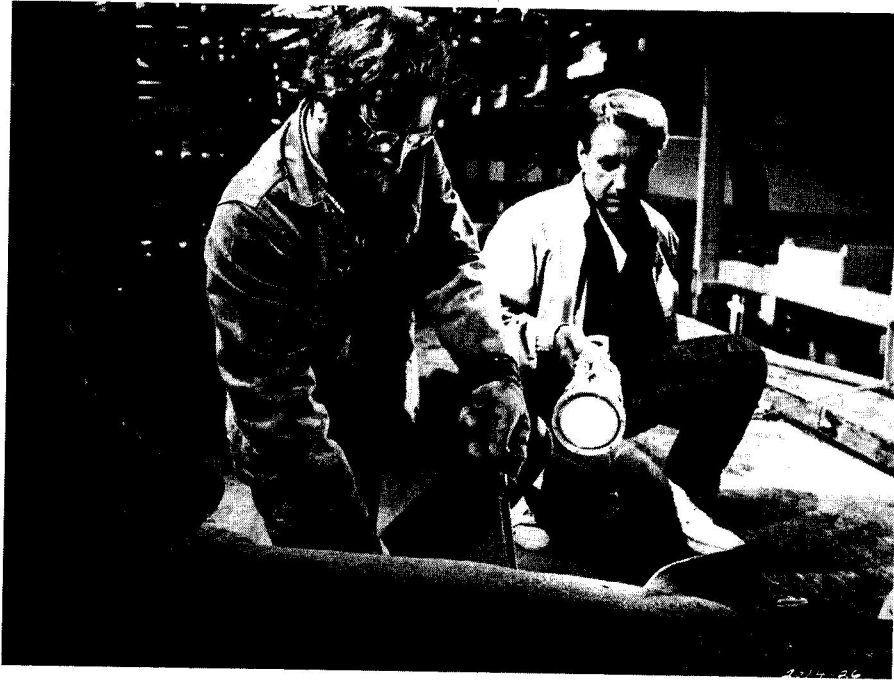
Over the years, numerous people have even gone so far as credit her with saving the film and perhaps even the young Spielberg's career. While intriguing, such claims are also highly speculative. Spielberg, as we have seen during his long and storied career, has repeatedly found ingenious solutions to major script, production, and editing problems. The script, which the film's writers revised and revised throughout the production, and John Williams' simple, brilliant musical theme were critical as well. And undoubtedly many others helped in both large and small ways.

But, while it may be overreaching to say that Fields singlehandedly saved the film, she did make an indispensable contribution that led to the film's powerful initial impact and lasting appeal. Without her, the film might still have been a success, but it probably would not have been as special as it is.

Specifically, how did Fields help enrich the finished product? Let's look at several of her key contributions.

First, there was the unusual timing of her edits.

Typically, editors will cut to a rhythm or flow in order to give a film a certain pace, usually one that feels right and natural to them. Ever the iconoclast, however, Fields toyed with this tried-and-true editing practice. As she told her audience at a lecture she gave at the American Film Institute in 1975: "There's a feeling of movement in telling a story and there is a



Hooper (Richard Dreyfuss) and Chief Brody (Roy Scheider) inspect the insides of a dead shark to prove that another shark—the one that has been terrorizing the coastal town of Amity—is still alive, well, and out there in 1975's *Jaws*. Many people, including director Steven Spielberg, consider Fields' editing on *Jaws* as critical to the film's success (Universal Pictures/Photofest).

flow. A cut that is off-rhythm will be disturbing and you will feel it, unless you want it to be like that. On *Jaws*, each time I wanted to cut I didn't, so that it would have an anticipatory feeling—and it worked."²² In other words, by cutting "off-rhythm," as Fields put it, she helped to ratchet up suspense and audience anxiety, two key storytelling objectives.

Film writer Craig Bloomfield also believes that this off-rhythm cutting did quite a bit more. "[Fields] gave [*Jaws*] rhythm, shape, mystery," he noted. "The prolonged tension was her doing. Her cuts helped sculpt the narrative for greater emotional resonance, giving extra urgency to the characters' motivations."²³

Second, Fields did a masterly job of structuring specific scenes to give them a distinctiveness and resonance usually lacking in action or horror films.

Of these, one of the most riveting is the film's first sequence, which mixes dark humor with horror to transform a potentially cliché-filled

episode into something that explores multiple perspectives in a fresh and unique way. This actually begins when we see the Universal logo and we hear, of all things, underwater sounds (definitely a bit of dark humor). Then, as the credits are first shown over black we hear the first ominous notes of John Williams' "shark" theme. This continues as we next see underwater "roaming" shots, presumably the shark's point of view, as more credits are shown. Then, as we see the editor's credit, the film abruptly cuts to a beach at night. Just as the shark is roaming beneath the water's surface, the camera's eye roams leisurely across a group of young people—perhaps college students—around a bonfire, talking, listening to music, drinking, smoking cigarettes and pot, and making out. The camera stops for a second to show a young man in a medium-close shot with a cigarette and a beer. He is in a roaming mood, too, and his eyes have now spotted a young woman, Chrissie (Susan Backlinie), sitting a few feet away from the group. They make eye contact, and the pursuit is on. Chrissie runs along the beach and then into the ocean, taking her clothes off one piece at a time. He follows but is too drunk and ultimately hapless. As she enjoys the water, he fumbles around on the beach. Now, the film cuts back to the kind of underwater shots we saw earlier accompanied by the ominous shark music. The scenes then cut back and forth between Chrissie on the surface and the point of view from underwater as the shark closes in on her. On the surface (at her eye level), we see her reaction to first contact with the shark—disbelief, fear, and horror. At one point she clings to a buoy for dear life and pleads with God to spare her. Then, in the middle of her flailing and screaming, the film cuts back briefly to her other pursuer, the drunken young man who now lies unconscious on the safe, peaceful beach just before sunrise. Quickly, the action returns to the attack, Chrissie screaming and going down for the last time. Another cut back to the young man asleep on the beach. Then a final cut to the buoy calmly floating in the now utterly peaceful pre-dawn sea.

This sequence, just five minutes from beginning to end (including credits), is laid out with great skill and care. Certainly, the pairing of the Universal logo with underwater sounds is a clever, funny, and very fitting initial touch. Next, the abrupt cut between the first underwater point-of-view shots and the young people around the beach bonfire hints at a strong connection between the two, which, of course, we will soon see in some very careful crosscutting. Seconds later, a new juxtaposition emerges—one between the young man and Chrissie. Once she is in the water, still another juxtaposition emerges—one between Chrissie and the shark. Meanwhile, while it is no longer as prominent, the juxtaposition between

Chrissie and the young man continues. In fact, one of the most effective cuts in the sequence is between Chrissie flailing and screaming in horror and the young man sleeping peacefully on the beach. Not only does this shift in point of view give us a short but necessary break from the killing that's in progress, but it also, as writer Ian Freer has noted, "intensifies the attack when we return to it."²⁴ Finally, we see the final juxtaposition between the young man, who sleeps peacefully on the beach, and the ocean beside him, now as serene as he is. In the end, this young man whose attraction to her had inspired Chrissie to go into the water has—ironically—been saved by his own drunken ineptitude. Overall, this is a wonderful sequence, one that sets up both the story and the mixed tone of horror and dark humor that will be prominent throughout the film.

Third, Fields made brilliant use of new editing techniques to increase suspense and keep audiences on edge.

One of the most famous is the use of a late-1960s innovation Fields herself named the "wipe by cut," which can be employed when a character is filmed from a distance using a telephoto lens. The effect is to hide a cut by showing a shot of a figure that passes between the camera and a character, creating the impression of an old-time movie "wipe" to hide a cut, be less distracting for a viewer, and give a scene greater continuity.

The scene when Fields and Spielberg use this to great effect is before the second shark attack (Alex Kintner's death) as Chief Brody (Roy Scheider) sits in the crowd on the beach looking out for any potential danger. Here, as various people go by him, the "wipe by cuts" block Brody's (and our) view of the water and anything that might be going on in it. As audience members sharing Brody's point of view in this scene, we experience both his frustration at having his views blocked and his anxiety that he (and we) might also be missing something important. Again, it's a superbly orchestrated scene, one that keeps viewers on edge throughout.

Fourth, Fields did something that at first seems impossible: although we don't even see the shark in all its glory until well into the film, she nevertheless managed to make it a well-rounded character throughout.

As film writer Susan Korda has noted: "What is fascinating in *Jaws* is that the shark has a personality, the shark has an intelligence, indeed sometimes I think the shark has a sense of humor, morbid as it might be. And that was all achieved in the first two acts of the film before you see the shark. So the cutting was very essential for that."²⁵ Again, John Williams' music and Steven Spielberg's decision to shoot more from the shark's point of view helped fill out this characterization. Yet, it was Fields' cutting that brought this well-rounded (but often invisible) character to life.

Fifth, Fields managed to surprise us constantly in ways that never seem to grow old.

Certainly one of the biggest stunners in the film is when we first see the shark in all its glory, prompting Brody to utter his famous line: "We're going to need a bigger boat." Until this moment, we have repeatedly been set up for a shark interaction by the point-of-view underwater shots accompanied by the shark's theme music. Rather than doing this again before the shark's big entrance, Fields does the opposite—employing no visual or musical build-up at all. Brody is simply doing the unpleasant job of throwing smelly bait out to sea to lure the shark, and with absolutely no warning it appears—enormous, ferocious, terrifying. As Brody jumps back in shock, so do we—every time we see the film.

Another much-talked-moment is when Hooper (Richard Dreyfuss), diving down to the wreckage of Ben Gardner's boat, sees Ben's disembodied head pop up right in front of him. The scene was Spielberg's brainstorm. "Yet," as Freer notes, "it is the editorial skill that garners the scare. The length the shot is held before the head jumps out. The slow build of John Williams' music ... fools us.... And the literal scream ... forms part of the soundtrack. Still you can know all that, know that it is coming, and it still gets you every time."²⁶

In summing up Fields' contribution to the film, Bloomfield wrote, "*Jaws*' visceral impact was of course due to the strength and toil of its collaboration, but Fields' judicious cutting was instrumental in maintaining its flow.... Her work on *Jaws* holds its own today and leaves a near-matchless legacy."²⁷

Even for those who find the film over-rated, it's almost impossible to disagree with this last statement. *Jaws* may not be one of the most profound films ever made, but it could very well be one of the best edited. Fields did fine work on a number of films, but her work on this one clearly puts her in the company of the film industry's greatest editors.

A "Mother Cutter" for Editors, Too

While every notable female film editor who began her career in the silent or classical eras was a positive role model to all (particularly the women) who've followed in the profession, Fields holds a special place among them. Barbara McLean was enormously creative at working within constraints and solving specific problems. Margaret Booth was a skilled and powerful executive. Dede Allen was an editing innovator who literally

by DAVID
MEUEL

changed the way people approached and made films. And Fields was all of the above. In addition, she was that rarest of editors, male or female: a household name who brings attention and recognition to a profession that has always been under-appreciated—the editing “rock star.” Today, the only editors who even come close in this category are Thelma Schoonmaker (mostly for her work with Martin Scorsese) and Michael Kahn (mostly for his work with Steven Spielberg).

Viewed in this light, Fields was not only the “mother cutter” to a trio of emerging film directors in the early 1970s but also a “mother cutter” to all those, male as well as female, who followed—and continue to follow—her into the editing profession. In her work with Peter Bogdanovich, George Lucas, and Steven Spielberg, she helped to forge a dominant new editing style that led to the revitalization of U.S. studio filmmaking in the 1970s and the emergence of the “New Hollywood.” Her influence has been pervasive and lasting, and, while most of today’s film editors might be hesitant to call Fields their “mother cutter,” a bit of her professional DNA resides somewhere within each of them.

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Making the Most of Her Moments

The Ever-Adaptable and Always Adventurous Anne V. Coates

There is a moment early on in David Lean’s great film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) that gives nearly every first-time viewer a tremendous jolt. The main character, T. E. Lawrence (Peter O’Toole), is chatting in a stately government room in Cairo with a world-weary British diplomat named Dryden (Claude Rains). Lawrence, a young British Army officer, has just been assigned to go to Arabia and make contact with an important Arab leader, Prince Faisal. He is excited and talks about the “fun” he will have on this adventure. Dryden cautions him, saying that the desert is a hostile “furnace” where only Bedouins and gods have fun and that Lawrence is neither. As they talk, Dryden selects a cigar and puts it in his mouth. Lawrence strikes a match, lights the cigar for Dryden, and then—as the picture cuts to a close shot on the match—lets it burn down a bit as he watches in fascination. After a long, curious pause, he blows it out. Then—from this intimate shot—the image suddenly (almost shockingly) cuts to another light: the sun beginning to rise amid the vast, starkly beautiful expanse of the Arabian Desert.

When seen in a theater on a 70-millimeter screen, the experience is nothing less than mesmerizing. It is one of those moments that nearly everyone, even decades after seeing the film, remembers. Steven Spielberg has said that the moment “blew me away.”¹ And film writer Ian Jefferys has called it both “the most famous of edits” and “one of the most recognizable and celebrated cuts in the history of cinema.”²

Ironically, this “most famous of edits” wasn’t supposed to be a cut.