

MOVIES

The ‘Invisible Art’: A Woman’s Touch Behind the Scenes

Kim Roberts, Kate Amend and Other Female Film Editors

By JOHN ANDERSON MAY 25, 2012

THAT the Cannes Film Festival chose not to include any work by female directors in its competition this year created a mini-scandal. But it obscured a couple of other points about the state of women in film. For instance, only 2 of the 22 features in question were shot by female cinematographers. On the other hand, a full third of the movies were cut by female editors.

Mostly, this reflects what has always been true.

The “invisible art” of film editing — assembling sometimes chaotic heaps of footage into a coherent, narrative whole — has been practiced by women as long as there has been a cutting-room floor. Early on, women were hired to edit because it was considered menial labor, “something like sewing,” said Kim Roberts, an Emmy-winning editor who has worked on feature documentaries (“Food Inc.,” “Waiting for Superman”).

The editor Kate Amend (“The Long Way Home”) said she once heard Dorothy Arzner, the pioneering female filmmaker, speak. “She talked about cutting the bullfight scene in ‘Blood and Sand,’ the one with Rudolph Valentino,” Ms. Amend said. “She did it with a magnifying glass, holding the film up to the light.”

Long before Final Cut Pro and before the now-archaic Steenbeck editing table (a riot of spindles and rollers), the work was primitive and unappreciated. That helps

explain how women got in the door. But it doesn't explain their success, relative though it may be.

Available statistics can be misleading; not everyone practicing a film craft is a member of a professional organization. But according to the Motion Picture Editors Guild, 1,500 of its 7,300 active members (or 21 percent) are women. And a spokeswoman for American Cinema Editors, which will host its annual educational convention, Editfest, in the coming months (New York, June 8 and 9; Los Angeles, Aug. 3 and 4), said a third of its 650 members are women, as are 6 of the 14 members of its board of directors.

By contrast, the American Society of Cinematographers has 333 members and 8 are women. And though the Directors Guild of America reports a 25 percent female membership, it issued a telling report last year: of 2,600 episodes of scripted television made for the 2010-11 season, 77 percent had been directed by Caucasian males.

The editing room is where women have thrived, even if it has meant splicing, dicing and realizing the visions of directors who have been overwhelmingly male. In a 40-year career, the English editor Anne V. Coates has been nominated for the Academy Award five times, and won for "Lawrence of Arabia." Carol Littleton has cut the likes of "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial" and "The Big Chill," as well as the current "Darling Companion."

Thelma Schoonmaker, a seven-time Oscar nominee, is synonymous with the work of Martin Scorsese (including "Raging Bull" and "Goodfellas"). And over a more than 50-year career, Dede Allen, who died in 2010, edited "Bonnie and Clyde," "Serpico," "Dog Day Afternoon" and "The Missouri Breaks," all films that might be described, however glibly, as "boy movies."

Asked why so many women go into editing, Mary Jo Markey, who regularly works for J. J. Abrams, put it plainly: "A lot of women go into editing because women go into editing." People come out of film school wanting to be directors, she said, and the odds of that are long. "It makes sense to me," she added, "that women would see what a viable option editing is, and it's one that women are succeeding in."

There are other considerations, too.

“There’s a lot of joking among editors about our willingness to be alone in a room with a computer, not seeing the sunlight,” said Ms. Roberts, who is married with children. “But there’s something in my personality that wanted something more secure, where I didn’t have to hustle and I could have a family and go home and have dinner with them every night.”

Mary Lampson, whose credits include Barbara Kopple’s Oscar-winning documentary “Harlan County U.S.A.,” left editing to have children, then returned to it.

“Here’s what I think,” she said. “Many good editors are sort of introverted, shy people, observers of life. They’re very funny. They’re ironic. And all those traits are what you need to be a good editor. I don’t think women have a monopoly on those traits, of course. But women tend to be more like that than men.”

Whether there’s a gender-based gift for editing is something female editors are reluctant to address. “I’d like to think my being female contributes to my sensitivities and strengths in storytelling, but it feels ridiculous to say that,” said Alyse Ardell Spiegel (“Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory,” “Unraveled”), one of the younger women in the documentary editing field. “You have to be a good listener and interpreter.”

If there is a female stronghold in film, it’s in documentaries: Not only are there more female filmmakers in nonfiction, but many of the “gatekeepers” are also women, including Sheila Nevins at HBO, Diane Weyermann at Participant Media (“An Inconvenient Truth”), Molly Thompson of A&E and Claire Aguilar at ITVS (“Independent Lens” on PBS).

Ms. Roberts described the documentary world she entered after college as a “matriarchy.” The gender breakdown of that world can’t be divorced from its subordinate position in popular culture. This affects editing. And editors. Penelope Falk, an editor in New York (“Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work”), said that when she was being mentored by Jonathan Oppenheim, he told her she couldn’t have an ego.

“Of course, I have an ego,” Ms. Falk said, “but there’s not a lot of money in docs.

It's not glamorous. No one's getting rich. And that's another reason it tends to be very female. It sounds sexist, I know; I'm sounding reductive, but there's more pressure on men to make money. Although I know it's shifting: I want to make money, too."

"It's more cultural than biological," she concluded. "But what you do in the edit room, I don't think it's gender-based."

Could there be a biological bias? Citing the work of the researcher Simon Baron-Cohen, Dr. Michael Mills, an associate professor of psychology at Loyola-Marymount University, said that at first blush, editing would seem to be a male-oriented occupation: it involves working alone for long stretches, and "systematizing" (the male preference) over "empathizing" (the female preference).

But, "to be a good film editor," he said, "you need to select the best takes, and women are better at reading and interpreting facial expressions of emotions than are men. My guess is that perhaps high levels of both systematizing and empathizing are characteristic of the best film editors."

Editors like Ms. Markey would agree.

"Empathy is one of the most important things I bring," she said. "Making the action work depends on your investment in the characters. I won't say this about all women, but I do think I was raised like a lot of women in my generation, not so much to be seen and not heard, but encouraged to be observers. And I do think it creates a quality where you look at people and think about what they're thinking and experiencing, and that's kind of what I do when I'm cutting."

(Ms. Markey added that she felt lucky working for someone like Mr. Abrams. "There were three women cutting 'Alias' and three men cutting 'Felicity,'" she said, referring to two contrasting Abrams series. "Hollywood would have turned it around.")

Dana Glauberman, who edited "Up in the Air" for Jason Reitman and will start on his new film, "Labor Day," next month, said, "It's easy to say we, as women, are a stronger talent at it, simply because people think we are more nurturing than men

are, we are more sensitive than men are.” Obviously, there are many talented male editors, she said, “some of whom I’ve learned a great deal from.”

The veteran documentary editor Mona Davis took a more casual attitude to the whole debate.

“It’s all conjecture on all our parts,” she said. “But what’s struck me now, at least in documentaries, is that my generation, and I’m in my mid-50s, we’re the last generation in which a preponderance of women will go into editing. I know so many documentaries now directed by women, shot by women D.P.’s,” or directors of photography. “When I was coming up, there were like two.”

Correction: June 10, 2012

A picture on May 27 with an article about female film editors was published in error. The photograph was of a scene from the 1998 drama “The Long Way Home,” starring Jack Lemmon and Sarah Paulson. It was not a scene from a 1997 documentary by the same name edited by Kate Amend, one of the editors featured in the article and also shown in an accompanying picture.

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