

Career Beginnings, and Editing Techniques: An Interview with Ursula Höf

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May 2016

Ursula Höf received the honorary prize at Filmplus 2016. For our edition 5/2016 we talked with the film editor about the young generation in the editing room and the relations between the sexes.



How did you get into film editing?

Between 1967 and 1970 I pursued theater studies, but then I realized that I wasn't really a theorist and that the professional prospects also held nothing for me.

But I felt great enthusiasm for the New German Cinema, so I asked around, and at some point someone must have told me that there is this profession. I was incredibly lucky and immediately landed a job with a feature film production company. Although they made horrid films, I learned a lot in those editing¹ rooms.

During the thirteen months I worked at this company I did everything: from the first rushes to compositing. I learned in a hard school and it was truly arduous, but afterwards I knew how everything worked. Then I advanced to first assistant —once again I was incredibly lucky and for four years I worked with very great people. And then I had the

¹ “montage” and “editing” are used interchangeably in this piece. We have made it consistent by only referring to the practice as editing.

opportunity to edit on my own—children’s film at first, followed by the initial *Kleines Fernsehspiel*, and so one thing led to another.

Did you make a concrete decision whether you’d rather edit feature films or documentaries?

In the beginning I was not even able to make such a distinction. In my first year I exclusively edited feature films anyway and only when I became assistant editor did I become acquainted with documentaries. However, I eventually took it for granted that you can do both. And will do both.

I was also introduced to this profession with the understanding that there is no distinction between editing for the big screen and for television, no separation between narrative, documentary or experimental films. It always just depended on who one would meet and with whom one could work well. But I didn’t know any female editors — and I’m stressing that on purpose because at the time there were only two or three in all of West Berlin who even sat at the editing table —for whom it was not a given to sometimes do this and sometimes the other.

Still, there are differences between editing a television film and a cinematic documentary....

The focus is different. In a narrative film, be it for the movie theater or for television, I have the scaffolding of the script, of course. And I have the scaffolding of the rushes and the sequencing. I don’t have that in a documentary.

The editing of a documentary is always a bit underestimated, even though it is more elaborate regarding both content and dramaturgy because the film is only created in the editing room. Yet I would not describe the work in those different genres as contrary because the goals are the same. The goals are to create an emotional narrative, to build tension and a dramatic arc and to figure out how to convey something to the audience — how to grab it. And that is the same in a narrative film and a documentary.

At least that should be the editors’ approach. It is not the same, but it is the same goal — although in cinema one can follow a different dramaturgy than in television, where one is always in a battle against the remote control. Of course, one needs to know the difference.

You just mentioned that you had more females then. Do you have an explanation for the fact that there used to be so many more women editors than men?

There are several explanations. First of all, there were fewer men after the war and thus only a few male editors. Furthermore, it is a kind of work that does not take place in

public, and there were quite a few male colleagues who preferred to move along their careers and step into the public.

Most of the women didn't want that — although there were a few but that was rare, and so were the opportunities. And the more the auteur film progressed, the more the women became — to put it pointedly — “servants,” even though that is actually not true for editing because one is also the interpreter. But we — and that is true for all editors — are not those who surge to the front but rather the ones who try to implement ideas and to make the most of the material.

All that mostly takes place in the background. Unfortunately, the fact that there have always been more female than male editors has resulted in a loss of prestige for the profession. We are actually still fighting against that.

Do women edit differently than men?

I notice it again and again in my work: there is a difference between the male and the female gaze. And in working with male directors I have often had the experience that they certainly listened to me when I said, this won't work, we cannot do it this way because we are compromising the character— whether they were female or male characters. And this gaze is important. I believe that I can tell in some cases whether a film was edited by a man or a woman.

In the beginning you mentioned that theory didn't suit you so much; however, you now teach film editing. Have you finally landed, to exaggerate a bit, in theory after all?

When I started to learn and began editing, there was only one book, *The Technique of Film Editing*, by Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar, and to be honest, I read that book only much later. Since then there have been quite a few books written, and I have contributed to that. But everything I know about dramaturgy I have worked out myself.

I had to write all that down myself, I had to conceive it and to vet it myself. My teaching is therefore very practice-oriented. I very rarely give lectures about editing, but editing is something that moves, and therefore one needs to work with examples. In that sense I have only landed in theory to a degree.

Many editors mention that editing has a lot to do with gut feeling. How difficult is it to convey that to students?

Editing always involves a lot of intuition and sense of rhythm, and with experience one also knows how images fit together. Of course, I discuss dramaturgic questions with my students when I supervise their first documentary but sometimes it's just about some very straightforward tricks. When I notice that there are two or three very wonderful and

succinct images, then together we simply have to find the right place for these images so they can make their full effect.

With my many years of experience it is easier for me, of course: I see when an image is in the wrong place, and I also see where it could be. And I work that out together with them, I'm not dictating anything, they have to learn for themselves. I always have the entire film in mind, and the students have to make their way step by step.

You have been working in this profession for many years and you have experienced the development from editing film on the table to digital editing. Did this actually bring along fundamental changes in editing, or was it only a change of systems?

These things are mutually dependent, of course. Films also began to look different when the 16mm camera was introduced. Today trick images are used much more frequently — in the past they had been very time-consuming and needed to be created on the animation table and brought into the copy lab; it took a long time until one could see the results. Today one can see everything right away, if the computer is fast enough. Naturally such things have changed greatly. But there is also a change in viewing habits.

When I watch TV movies that I edited in the 1970s today, I notice that one used to allow for much more time. For example, we showed a person leaving the room and then entering the next room. That is not done at all any more.

The transitions are completely different today, simply because the viewer knows: when someone leaves he will arrive somewhere. I might as well let him arrive immediately.

That is a question of viewing habits and not just a technical question. If one shows car wheels spinning today, one does it in order to show speed, but not to create a transition.

So the faster cuts came with the advent of the computer?

No, the faster cuts — or the shorter images, if you want to put it that way— did not just emerge with the computer. When I was still an assistant, I worked with a female editor who was very proud when she made cuts of just two or three frames² — in a jiffy, and it really looked great, even if one could see the splice and the scotch tape.

So that already existed then, but the general viewing habits were different. However, there are always fashions and waves. When MTV and video clips emerged, one naturally tried to cut as fast as possible but at the same time there were always counter movements, especially from students, who said, “We don't want all that, we want to narrate in depth.”

² Note from the translator: The German text was, “die war ganz stolz, wenn sie so zwei, drei Felderschnitte machte.” Filmmakers we queried weren't familiar with the term and guessed that it might imply short cuts.

PART TWO:



Does it make a difference in the way students handle the material if they are no longer trained at the editing table but have only ever known digital editing?

Definitely. The editing table forces you to view the material at its real tempo. The computer provides the opportunity to quickly scroll through. Now that we can no longer work at the editing table I try to explain to the students that the most important thing is to view the material from A to Z once or repeatedly at its real speed.

Our learning objective is also to train the visual memory. It's of no use if you just click around and think, ah, didn't I just see something there, and then you keep scrolling forever, but in the quick run-through you don't find anything. It's also about the tempo of the material, about how the movements fit together. I sometimes have to force my students to look at it calmly instead of clicking around.

The students who still had a chance to work at the table really developed a different relationship to the material than those who only exclusively work at the computer. Just being able to touch the material already makes a difference. You realize: if I make a cut now, it has meaning. Today you have to try to convey that notion in different ways for the computer.

Furthermore, the abundance of the material one has to view has increased significantly.

Luckily, we still shoot on film and thus are able to limit the amount of material. But it has become a bad habit to just keep the camera pointed. It all has to be viewed nevertheless. And with so much material the editing time increases immensely but that is often not calculated, neither by the students nor by the “principal” [the person who assigns the work].

We try to convey to the students already before the shoot that they need excellent preparation in order to choose the right thing and then to find it. When we will eventually shoot completely digitally, this will become a giant problem.

Is editing under threat because less and less time is allocated for it and the pressure increases more and more?

I think the divide increases. It is not for nothing that time-consuming documentaries are more frequently made with the help of film subsidies now. Those are not pure TV productions. And then one can calculate the editing time differently.

For my long documentaries we had between fifteen and seventeen weeks, and we did need that time. But television now increasingly asks for film subsidies, and the filmmakers also say, we need funding from other sources than television, otherwise we cannot work as elaborately. I think that the stations will start producing less of their own material or they will limit themselves even more to short reportage or magazine programs. And that I also find sad for the editors.

Because the opportunities keep shrinking for young people, they will end up at television exclusively, or at image film-productions — they are lacking the “in-between” that our generation had. And the young often have a harder time to enter the profession. I think that’s a terrible shame.

How does the gender distribution look among the young? Is there a balance between male and female editors today?

My observation is that with the introduction of digital editing systems men started entering the profession in larger numbers again. I can see that among my students. Sometimes far too few women apply for the apprenticeship slots. That’s why it is very important to me that women won’t be pushed out of the profession.

Generally, it is also important to me that there are not only more female directors, but that there is also a balanced relationship between genders in the other crafts. Preferably we should have both genders represented in training and profession so we won’t lose the female gaze. However, I’m under the impression that men receive more attention now,

because when you look at who gets the awards it's more often men even though more women are working in our profession.

Of course, the women are not worse, it is more a question of attention, meaning: whom would you rather listen to? I remember that when I started out there were some really great female colleagues, they were open and adventurous, they had an incredible artistic sense and they created unbelievable things but the only editor anybody talked about was Peter Przygodda. Editing is mostly invisible anyway, and then once again you rather look at the men than at the women. This phenomenon bothers me.

Translation by Claudia Steinberg for the "Edited by" website at <http://womenfilmeditors.princeton.edu/>

Interview mit Ursula Höf by Cornelis Hähnel at KameraMann.de

Part One:

<https://www.kameramann.de/branche/anfaenge-und-montagetechniken-interview-mit-ursula-hoef-12/>

Part Two:

<https://www.kameramann.de/branche/material-und-nachwuchs-interview-mit-ursula-hoef-22/>