WOMEN FILM EDITORS

Unseen Artists of American Cinema

DAVID MEUEL

3

"Boy, was I tough"

The Long Reign and Lasting Legacy of MGM's Margaret Booth

In his 1995 book, *Making Movies*, director Sidney Lumet recalls a time in 1964 when Margaret Booth (1898–2002), then MGM's long-time supervising film editor, flew to England to screen three soon-to-be-released films, including Lumet's *The Hill* (1965). Then well into her 60s, and no doubt jetlagged from her long airplane flight, Booth screened all three features one after another, beginning at 8:00 the following morning. At 1:00 sharp that afternoon, she met with Lumet and his editor to inform them they needed to cut two minutes from their picture. When Lumet objected, Booth began naming shots that could be shortened. She didn't speak from notes, either: all of what she said came right off the top of her head. "Her film memory was phenomenal," Lumet recalled. "She named seven or eight moments, always perfect on where the shot occurred, what took place in the shot, how its beginning or end might be trimmed—and she'd seen the picture only once."[1]

As well as impressing Lumet, Booth had clearly ruffled his feathers. Still smarting from this and perhaps other run-ins with her, he told a group of young filmmakers four years later: "When I complete a film for Metro, I have to get blood on the floor to protect it from a lady by the name of Margaret Booth. She was Irving Thalberg's cutter, and to this day she checks every movie made for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and can stop you at any point, call off your mix, and re-edit herself. She *owns* your negative."[2]

Such was the power of Margaret Booth in the 1960s. And such had been her power for decades.

Petite, shy, modest about her achievements, and, according to fellow

editor Dede Allen, "very much a lady-lady," Booth, as Allen also noted, "had tremendous command."[3] In fact, film writer Graham Daseler has gone as far as to call her, "a terror to directors throughout the industry, pouncing on weakly edited scenes like a ravenous jungle cat."[4]

Born in the nineteenth century and living into the twenty-first, her career as a film editor, supervising editor, and later a producer stretched a full seven decades, from 1915 until 1986. During that time, she apprenticed with director D.W. Griffith, perhaps the first person to deeply explore and exploit the possibilities of film editing; edited many of MGM's best films in the 1920s and 1930s; served as a trusted confidante as well as supervising editor for MGM's studio head Louis B. Mayer; and—in the 1970s and 1980s—worked as the supervising editor and then a producer for Ray Stark's film company, Rastar, on such films as *The Way We Were* (1973), *The Goodbye Girl* (1977), and *The Slugger's Wife* (1985). Along the way, she received several industry honors, including a Lifetime Achievement Oscar in 1978, the only film editor to be so honored.[5]

Beginning her film career as an editing assistant for D.W. Griffith in 1915, Margaret Booth (shown here in the 1930s) went on to become one of MGM's top editors before becoming the studio's supervising editor, a post she held for 30 years. Afterwards, she was the supervising editor on films produced by Ray Stark. She retired in 1986 at age 88 (Photofest).

Throughout her career, Booth kept a low profile. Outside of the film industry, few people have ever heard her name. In fact, to this day many film teachers, historians, and scholars know little or nothing about her. Yet, for decades, film producers, directors, and fellow editors both revered and often feared her for what film historian Kevin Brownlow has called "her uncanny perceptiveness" and her "immense power."[6] Within the tight-knit community of film editors, she remains an iconic figure.

Booth's editing style in many ways reflected her low-profile personal style. She was both a key developer and a stalwart champion of the "classic" Hollywood style that sought to make editing seamless, seemingly invisible, drawing as little attention to itself as possible. Yet, in her practical, no-nonsense way, she also preached that editors should be attuned to the rhythms of a film and cut to accommodate the emotion a story is conveying; she saw that there was poetry in editing, too.

A self-described workaholic and perfectionist, Booth was devoted to editing. She never married. She turned down offers to direct. Especially during her early years, she often worked all night for no extra pay just to solve problems that stumped her. And later, when she supervised editors, she exerted an enormous influence over others who were following in her profession. As one of them, Frank Urioste, who would go on to edit such films as *Die Hard* (1988) and *Basic Instinct* (1992), once said, "Margaret would tell us: 'It's your responsibility for the pace of the movie. It's your responsibility to get the best performances out of the actors. It's your responsibility to make it as good as you can.'"[7]

"One doesn't 'hire' her, one is lucky to get her."

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Booth, then 17, had just graduated from Los Angeles High School when a family tragedy occurred that, ironically, launched her in the film business.

The day was June 16, 1915. Booth's older brother Elmer, who was supporting the family through his work as an actor in D.W. Griffith's films, was killed in an automobile accident. Tod Browning, another Griffith actor who later achieved fame directing such films as 1931's *Dracula* and the 1932 cult masterpiece *Freaks*, was driving Booth and a third actor, George Siegmann, when their car hit a moving train, injuring Browning and Siegmann and instantly killing Booth.

Griffith stepped in, first to deliver a moving eulogy at Elmer's funeral and then to offer financial help to the Booth family by giving young Mar-

garet an entry-level lab job as a film joiner, or "patcher." While Margaret appreciated Griffith's help, she never—throughout her long life—forgave Browning for her brother's death.

As a patcher and then a negative cutter for Griffith, Booth was literally present at the creation of the art of film editing. Primarily, she learned from Griffith, whose innovations in parallel cutting and other editing techniques were pushing the boundaries of the still relatively new art. In addition, she worked with two of Griffith's most trusted hands, the husband and wife cutters Jimmie and Rose Smith, who, along with Griffith, edited the epics *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance* (1916), and other films. But, with virtually no dedicated editing tools to work with, the work, while stimulating, could often be monotonous and wearing. As Booth later recalled: "[I]n the old days we had to cut negative by eye. We matched the print to the negative without any edge numbers. We had to match the action. Sometimes there'd be a tiny pinpoint on the negative, and then you knew you were right. But it was very tedious work. Close-ups of Lillian Gish ... would go on for miles, and they'd be very similar, so we all had to help one another."[8]

By the end of the decade, Booth had moved on from Griffith's company and was working as a cutter for another legendary Hollywood figure, Louis B. Mayer, then an independent producer. At Mayer's company, she met John M. Stahl, a man she considered "a remarkable director,"[9] and became his assistant. "I used to stand by him while he cut, and he used to ask me to come in with him to see his dailies in the projection room," she once said. "This way he taught me the dramatic values of cutting, he taught me about tempo—in fact he taught me how to edit."[10]

In an interview in the 1970s, Booth recalled an incident that helped her earn her "editor's stripes" with Stahl. As much of a perfectionist as Booth, the director made it a practice to shoot many different takes of scenes from different angles and from different distances. As he edited, he routinely discarded film he no longer wanted on the cutting room floor. Then, at night after Stahl had gone home, Booth would often take the discarded film and experiment with it for hours, hoping to improve her skills. One time Stahl had spent a day trying to get a sequence of edits right and finally went home unsuccessful. That night, Booth, working only with his discarded footage, put together what she thought Stahl was looking for. The next morning she told him what she had done and showed it to him. As Booth recalled: "He said, 'I like it. I'll take that.' And he used my cut. So from then on I started to cut for him."[11]

For several years, Booth was content to work as Stahl's assistant.

Then, in April 1924, a business merger occurred that was to change the direction of her career. Marcus Loew, the owner of the Lowe's motion picture theater chain, bought and consolidated Metro Pictures, Samuel Goldwyn's Goldwyn Pictures Corporation, and Mayer's company to create a major new film company named Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Mayer was named head of studio operations, a post he would hold for the next 27 years. And, the following year, he made his brilliant, ambitious protégé, 25-year-old Irving Thalberg, the new company's head of production. Along with most of Mayer's employees, Stahl and Booth joined the new company.

While she continued to work with Stahl, Booth increasingly enjoyed working with many of the other talented directors on board—people such as Clarence Brown, Sam Wood, Robert Z. Leonard, and Fred Niblo. And, three years later, when Stahl left MGM and asked Booth to come with him, she declined. "I didn't want to work for just one man," she later said. "I enjoyed working for everyone.... I feel people get tired of you, and you get tired of them by the time a picture's finished.... MGM was like home to me. I started there so young. I knew everybody there, and never wanted to work any other place."[12]

Booth considered this decision to be a critical one in her career, and, in later years, contrasted her experience with that of fellow female editing pioneer Anne Bauchens, who worked primarily with Cecil B. DeMille for more than 40 years. Bauchens, Booth felt, never got out from under DeMille's imposing shadow, and, despite her talent, remained an obscure, unappreciated figure.

At MGM, Booth became a close ally of Thalberg, a person she once called "the greatest man who was ever in pictures."[13] Thalberg soon assigned her to cut many of the studio's prestige pictures and often asked her to evaluate the work of other editors and recommend changes to films. According to film historian Cari Beauchamp, "He depended on her as much as [he did on] any writer. The two of them would go to a screening and sit next to each other, making plans for how the re-shoot would be done and how it would be edited."[14]

According to numerous accounts, Thalberg was also the first to elevate the name film "cutter" to the more prestigious-sounding "editor," a term that had previously only been used in films for script supervisors. And the first person he awarded the title of film editor to—according to these accounts—was none other than Booth. In fact, Thalberg was so impressed with Booth's ability to get to the essence of problems in films and recommend solutions that he even suggested that she direct, something

only one woman, Dorothy Arzner, was doing for a major Hollywood studio at the time. But, Booth's ambition was always to be the best editor in town, and, as long as she remained at MGM, that was fine with Thalberg.

When sound came into the filmmaking equation in the late 1920s, Booth was assigned to the studio's first part-talkie film, 1929's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. This presented a couple of challenges to Booth and her fellow editors. One was that, with the addition of sound, editors had now lost much of the flexibility they had had with silent film. As Booth explained, with silent film, "you could throw the film around in any way. When you got the sound track, you had to be careful that it was always in sync."[15] The other challenge was the new sound experts, mostly men, who interfered with the editing process. "[S]ound was their background, and they all knew everything," Booth declared with some bitterness years later. "And they didn't know a *damn* thing, but they 'knew everything.'"[16]

Booth quickly mastered sound, however, and during the 1930s was MGM's go-to editor for the studio's prestige releases such as *Dancing Lady* (1933) with Joan Crawford and Clark Gable, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934) with Norma Shearer and Frederic March, *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935) with Gable and Charles Laughton, *Camille* (1936) with Greta Garbo, and *Romeo and Juliet* (1936) with Shearer and Leslie Howard. Although she was passed over for an Academy Award nomination for editing in 1934, the first year an editing award was given, she was nominated the following year for *Mutiny on the Bounty*. She lost out to Warner Brothers editor Ralph Dawson for his work on Warner's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which Booth considered "a terrible picture." In later years she found consolation in the fact that, while she initially didn't think that *Mutiny on the Bounty* was "very good," it is now considered a "classic."[17]

Shortly afterwards, another tragedy struck that, again ironically, launched Booth into a very different phase of her career. On the morning of September 14, 1937, her great colleague and for many the heart and soul of MGM, Irving Thalberg, died of pneumonia at age 37. Soon afterwards, Mayer, in an effort the shore up production in the midst of this enormous loss to the studio, named Booth to the post of MGM's supervising editor, a position she would hold for the next 30 years. For Mayer, who had an instinctive distrust of writers and directors, the move was an excellent political gambit. With Booth, he had a loyal ally and a true professional who could more than hold her own with anyone else at the studio, and, as long as he was at MGM, Booth reported directly to him.

While not as well-known as other, higher-profile MGM department heads such as Douglas Shearer (in sound) and Cedric Gibbons (in art

direction and production design), Booth ran a tight ship committed to maintaining high standards of quality. Always conscious of staying current, she made sure her department adapted to the latest changes in technologies and styles. In addition to supervising the editing, she also offered comments to producers and directors that most considered quite helpful. When looking at the rushes of 1944's *Gaslight*, for example, she pointed out to director George Cukor that the film's star, Ingrid Bergman, was underacting. Agreeing, Cukor sought to get more from Bergman, and the result was both an excellent performance and her first Academy Award win for Best Actress.

Booth's main job, however, was supervising the editors under her, and, according to many of these editors, she took it very seriously. "[She] was a tough taskmaster and used to drag me over the coals every day—but I learned," said Ralph Winters who later won two Academy Awards for editing. And, Winters also noted, he was by no means alone. "Time and again, editors were sent back to their cutting rooms to adjust their work to her liking," he added. "But she was consistent and fair, and appreciated both good work and good effort."[18] Frank Urioste, another MGM editor who later received three Academy Award nominations for his work, was even more emphatic in his assessment. "Maggie was probably the toughest and most feared women at MGM," he once said. "I mean, people would shudder when they heard that she was on the phone or when she'd bust into the editing room. You'd get a call saying to come down to Room F, which was her room. You'd think: 'Oh God, what have I done now?'"[19]

Booth's power also extended well beyond MGM's editing department. "She had her own projection room and saw all the rushes and cuts for every MGM film," Winters said. "She was empowered to make changes and present the editing of sequences to various producers and directors as she saw fit."[20] Many people didn't like this arrangement, but, since Booth reported directly to Mayer, there was little anyone could do about it.

While Booth was always firm in exerting her power, she could also soften the sting of her criticism with a certain droll delivery. Once, when working with director George Roy Hill, she expressed her displeasure at something she saw by saying: "Mr. Hill, are you telling me you want *that* on a 60-foot screen?"

"I guess I don't, do I?" Hill said.

"No, you don't," she replied.[21]

It's virtually impossible to assess Booth's full impact in her three decades as MGM's supervising editor. If, as many people claim, she did have the final say over every film that MGM produced during that time,

the number of features alone was well over a thousand. Add to that, there's the immense influence she had on the scores of editors who worked under her from the 1930s to the 1960s.

When Booth finally left MGM, she wasn't idle for long. She soon began working for independent producer Ray Stark and his company, Rastar, as a supervising editor and associate producer, and she stayed with him until her retirement in 1986 at the age of 88. Together, they churned out a steady stream of commercial and critical successes such as John Huston's *Fat City* (1972), Sidney Pollock's *The Way We Were* (1973), and Herb Ross' *Funny Lady* (1975) as well as several films based on Neil Simon plays, including *The Sunshine Boys* (1975), *The Goodbye Girl* (1977), *California Suite* (1978), and *Chapter Two* (1979).

"One doesn't 'hire' her, one is lucky to get her," Stark told film writer Ally Acker after Booth's retirement.[22] "[H]er instincts were remarkable even in her later years, when she saved many a film for me," he added shortly after Booth's death. "Margaret was a tough, unsentimental editor who read film like others read a book."[23]

When Booth was working with Stark, the industry honors—recognition that had long eluded her—finally began to come. In a 1977 *Film Comment* magazine poll that asked 100 editors to rank the top practitioners in their field, Booth was ranked number three. At the Academy Awards ceremonies the following year, she received—for her "exceptionally distinguished service to the motion picture industry"[24]—the first Lifetime Achievement Oscar ever given to an editor. Four years later she received the Crystal Award from the organization Women in Film, an honor for women who have helped expand the role of women within the entertainment industry. In 1990, she became one of the first recipients of the American Cinema Editors (ACE) Career Achievement Award. And, on the occasion of her 100th birthday in 1998, the Editors Guild presented her a special award commemorating her long and distinguished career. Other than that competitive Oscar she felt she deserved for her work on *Mutiny on the Bounty*, Booth couldn't have asked for much more.

Margaret Booth died in Los Angeles from complications following a stroke on October 28, 2002, at the time the longest living person ever to win an Academy Award. Among the many who commented on her passing was Roger Mayer (no relation to Louis B. Mayer) who was then president of Turner Entertainment, which owns all of MGM's films through 1986. Booth, he noted, "represented much of what was good about the studio system: the loyalty, the continuity, the knowledge of what went on at a particular studio."[25]

Booth left behind only one close blood relative, a cousin named Marie Cetner. But, she also left behind several generations of film industry producers, directors, and editors who enormously respected her talent, commitment to the editing art, and ability to teach. She could certainly make young editors cringe with fear. As she herself observed in an interview late in her life, "Boy, was I tough."[26] But, she could also inspire them and win their abiding admiration. As Ralph Winters noted: "[S]he was consistent and fair, and appreciated both good work and good effort.... She was not afraid to go to the mat with anyone, and producers and directors alike felt her wrath when she thought that they were going in the wrong direction. She fought hard for what she believed—and she was usually right. But she always protected her editors.... Eventually, I worked my way up to become one of her favorite editors and, more important to me, a close personal friend."[27]

~

Throughout her career, Booth always insisted that, rather than imposing a personal style on a film, an editor's job was to adapt to the style of the film's director. She did, however, develop a personal style that was a combination of several important influences as well her own aesthetic preferences. Then, practicing what she preached, she adapted it to accommodate different directors she worked with.

The major influences on her included Griffith, Stahl, and the German films of the 1920s. Griffith, for example, particularly impressed her with his ability to use editing to build and control the emotional tempo of a film and his practice of using a series of shots from various angles and distances to make scenes more interesting visually.[28] Along with various cutting techniques, Stahl taught her the value of prudence in editing. Fifty years after she had worked with him, for example, she still found it worthwhile to tell people how Stahl taught her to use close-ups sparingly, only when "you want to punctuate something."[29] Finally, she learned from the early German filmmakers the value of editing for smoother continuity, an artistic preference film writer Ronald Bergan finds "more significant" in Booth's development than what she learned from Griffith.[30]

Throughout her career, Booth believed that editing should seem seamless, virtually invisible, and that its main purpose was to advance the narrative. "She hated editing for editing's sake," Ralph Winters recalled, "but if you had to make a bad edit to advance the story, that was fine with her."[31] Frank Urioste also noted how she always put story first, recalling: "She used to say: 'If [you] feel there's a cut at an important spot—whether

it matches or not—cut. And you cut for the emotion, and you can get away with so much by doing that.'"[32]

Although Booth believed that editing should not interfere with the narrative, she also felt that it could enhance the narrative in much the same way that good poetry can elevate language—by finding the right rhythms. "Rhythm counts so much," she said, "the pauses count so much. It's the same as when people speak or dance—you can tell right away when it's wrong. Everything has to be rhythmic."[33] If she were editing a comedy, for example, she sped up the tempo. If the film was a musical, she cut on the downbeats. "Otherwise, you get a jarring cut and it throws things off," she said. "You should not feel the breaks. It's like pauses and breaths that you take on the stage. It has its ups and downs and its pace."[34]

Although Booth could be very firm in her ideas about what constitutes good editing and maintained a fairly traditional style and philosophy throughout her career, she was also quite open to stylistic changes she saw as beneficial. In her 1965 interview with Kevin Brownlow, for example, she talked about one significant change that she very much liked. "They're doing away with fades and dissolves," she said. "I like this much better than the old technique of lap dissolves [when one scene gradually fades into another], which slowed down the pace. There was a time when we made eight- to ten-foot dissolves. We taught the audience for many years to recognize a time lapse through a lap dissolve. Now they're educating them to direct cuts—a new technique brought about by a new generation of directors who can't afford dissolves or fades. And I think that's very good."[35]

The Booth Touch at Work on Mutiny on the Bounty *(1935)*

When asked in her later years to name her favorite personal editing achievements, Booth immediately picked three from MGM in the 1930s. The first is director Victor Fleming's 1933 romantic comedy, *Bombshell*, which gave actress Jean Harlow her nickname, "the Blonde Bombshell." The third is George Cukor's 1936 romantic drama, *Camille*, starring Greta Garbo in one of her best roles. But, it's Booth's second pick that she will probably be best remembered for, director (and sometime actor) Frank Lloyd's 1935 version of the epic sea story, *Mutiny on the Bounty*.

Widely considered one of the great triumphs of mainstream Hollywood studio moviemaking in the 1930s, the film was also a labor of love

for Lloyd, who was captivated by sea stories and who directed several sea films during his 40-year film career. A friend of writers Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall, who had published a fictionalized account of the story in 1932, Lloyd bought the rights to their book and pitched it to MGM. While Thalberg was enthusiastic about the project, Louis Mayer was hesitant, fearing that the absence of parts for any of MGM's popular female stars would hurt the film at the box office. But Thalberg countered, reportedly telling Mayer: "People are fascinated by cruelty, and that's why *Mutiny* will have appeal."[36]

For the time, when most films were made quickly and entirely at the studio, the scope of the production was quite impressive. Filming extended over several months and took place in numerous locations from the MGM studios in Culver City, to San Francisco, Monterey Bay, the Channel Islands, Tahiti, other sites in French Polynesia, and the open seas in the

Starring Clark Gable (third from left) and Charles Laughton (third from right), director Frank Lloyd's version of *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935) is widely considered the best of several film adaptations of this famous tale of cruelty and mutiny on the high seas. Margaret Booth's contribution was masterly editing that has helped keep the film fresh and vital more than 80 years after its initial release (MGM/Photofest).

South Pacific. When in Tahiti, MGM hired more than 2500 locals to work as extras. And for the entire production, more than 3000 period costumes were made, including 600 British navy uniforms. Overall, the budget came to nearly $2 million, the most MGM had spent on a film since its 1925 epic *Ben-Hur*.

When production wrapped, more than 650,000 feet of film had been shot—a huge amount for a movie of this time when 100,000 feet was closer to the norm. Eventually, all this footage would have to be whittled away into the 12,000 feet that became the finished 132-minute film. Lloyd and Thalberg would be closely involved in the process. But the bulk of the work—and with it much of the responsibility for the film's ultimate success or failure—would fall squarely on the shoulders of Margaret Booth.

Looking at the finished film, it's impossible not to be impressed by its vitality and verve even more than 80 years after its release. At 132 minutes, it's much longer than the vast majority of films made at the time, but there's never the sense that it drags. Physical movement seems to be constant, but, since constant movement easily becomes monotonous, slower, quieter scenes are sprinkled through the proceedings with great care. The pacing, or "tempo," as Booth would say, has many of the elements of a rousing symphony with slower, change-of-pace interludes. The narrative movement, however, is constant throughout. Not one split second seems to be unnecessary to propelling the action—whether physical or psychological—forward.

In addition to providing the film with its near-perfect pacing, Booth uses editing throughout to suggest, reinforce, and sometimes enhance meaning in the story. One way she does this is in her ingenious use of reaction shots in numerous scenes. This is a common technique to cut to get the responses of other characters to a development in the story, of course. But Booth does this with excellent results repeatedly. In scene after scene, for example, we see the reactions of various characters to Bligh's various actions, and, as we do, we can sense the collective anger mounting and feel all the more that something's got to give.

As an example of Booth's work in individual scenes, especially to reinforce meaning, let's look closely at the first four scenes of the film. Together, they make up the film's first major unit, or sequence, and take up just 17 minutes. They also demonstrate Booth's ability to take Lloyd and cinematographer Arthur Edeson's mountain of raw footage and sculpt it into a finished work of art.

The film begins with movement. We see the figure of a man walking along a wet city street and stopping to say, "All's well." Instantly, he is

upstaged by a group of men tromping past him with an emphatic sense of urgency. The men stop, and one of them peers through the window of a pub. Immediately, they are recognized as a "press gang," a group ordered essentially to kidnap ordinary Englishmen and force, or "press," them into naval service. Within seconds, six men are told that they are now in the navy, will be serving on a ship bound for the South Seas, and won't return for at least two years. The wife of one young man, Tommy Ellison (Eddie Quillan), pleads desperately for her husband to be spared, but of course he isn't. The lives of these six—as well as the lives of their loved ones—are upended, perhaps forever.

To modern audiences, the treatment of ordinary people here is cruel and shocking. But, the almost casual tone of the scene—reinforced by the fast-paced editing—suggests both the callousness of the system and the tenuous nature of these people's lives: In a split second a good, decent man can be separated from his loving wife and child and forced into virtual servitude for at least two years.

Rather than cutting to the next scene, the upper-class home of Midshipman Roger Byam (Franchot Tone) and his family, Booth employs a quick dissolve between the two scenes, suggesting a strong connection or juxtaposition between them. We get the point immediately. As opposed to young Tommy Ellison who is forcibly taken from his family, young Roger Byam enters in his new tailor-made uniform brimming over with romantic ideas of the sea and adventure. Well-born, well-educated, and well-connected, the exuberant Byam has signed on to go to Tahiti to compile a dictionary of the Tahitian language. For him so far, this has been nothing but dreams and joyous anticipation. As opposed to the first scene, there are fewer cuts here, suggesting a more relaxed, leisurely tone and, of course, less disruption.

Next, the action shifts to Portsmouth Harbor just before the *Bounty* sets sail. All is hustle and bustle, and this is reinforced in brisk cutting between short personal exchanges. Within moments we are introduced to the drunken ship's doctor with his peg leg, the nervous ship's cook, first officer Fletcher Christian (Clark Gable), and several of the other characters who will play key roles in the story. Then, Captain Bligh (Charles Laughton) comes on board and orders the decks cleared for the ship's departure. He also takes great pride in learning that the *Bounty* will participate in a "flogging of the fleet," a practice in which men from several ships administer lashes to a seaman for a serious offense. Then, when he hears that the seaman about to be flogged has already been whipped to death, he orders the flogging anyway. The men—we see in numerous reaction shots—are

appalled. The young, naïve Byam even faints. After the flogging has been administered, Bligh gives the order to set sail.

During these initial parts of the scene, the pacing of the editing is usually fast, but it often slows when Bligh is in the action, which suggests a couple of things. First, it underscores Bligh's manner of always putting a damper on whatever is happening no matter how pleasant or harmless it is. And second, it tells us that, by nature, Bligh clashes with the natural rhythms of the lives of the other characters. Again, the editing subtly reinforces the central conflict in the story between Bligh and his crew.

Then, as soon as Bligh orders the ship to prepare to sail, we see one of the film's most dramatic editing flourishes. The next two and a half minutes consist of no fewer than 60 cuts, an average of one cut for every two and a half seconds, and including many, many cuts that are only a split second apart. In the action, the film cuts back and forth from officers giving orders to men pulling ropes, other men climbing the rigging and untying the sails, the sails unfurling and filling with wind, the men racing down the rigging. The film also cuts to shots of people reacting to the ship's departure such as Ellison's wife, who is hopeful of her husband's safe return, and Byam's wise uncle, who is visibly concerned. It's a magnificent statement, communicating through a stunning variety of visuals and rapid-fire tempo both the excitement and adventure an exotic sea voyage must have meant for people in the 18th century and the complex feelings of loved ones left behind. As the sails fill with wind, we in the audience share in the sense of uplift. Going against this rapid succession of exciting action images, however, is the longest single shot of the segment: a full 13 seconds in which a shocked and disillusioned Byam shares his horror about what he has just seen—Bligh's order to flog the dead sailor. Once again, an action of Bligh's undercuts an otherwise exuberant, life-affirming moment.

As soon as the *Bounty* sails majestically out of Portsmouth, the screen fades to black for just a moment, suggesting not only a passage of time but also that something ominous may lie ahead. Then from black it fades into the next scene in Bligh's cabin. In stark contrast to the busy crowd/action scene we have just watched, this is a simple conversation between two men, Bligh and Christian, which spells out their relationship. While Bligh has a high regard for Christian, Christian has little respect for Bligh. This infuriates Bligh, but Christian agrees to carry out his orders. Neither loses his temper or raises his voice during their exchange, but the issues that divide the two men have become crystal clear and the eventual battle lines are drawn. The editing is slower here, underscoring Bligh's power

over the usually more jovial and good-natured Christian. As Christian leaves Bligh's cabin after the exchange, the film again fades to black, again to suggest—along with the passage of time—a continuing ominous mood.

Overall, these four scenes show excellent filmmaking on various levels. The writing is sharp and crisp, introducing numerous distinctive characters and setting up all the film's key conflicts with great clarity and economy. The actors, even those in small character roles, are all in full command of their characters. The shooting, especially during the scene on board the ship, is vivid and dynamic. And the editing follows suit—finding the right rhythms for this story and, whenever possible, cutting between shots and linking between scenes to support and enrich the narrative.

For much of the story, Booth follows a similar editing strategy, but when appropriate, she sometimes deviates dramatically and with great effect.

One example of this occurs about midway through the film. The *Bounty* has arrived in Tahiti, Christian and Byam have enjoyed a wonderful day with two Tahitian women, and Bligh has ordered Christian to return to the ship. At this point, Christian is passionately drawn not only to the Tahitian woman Maimiti (Mamo Clark), with whom he has spent the day, but also to the gentle, very humane, and extremely pleasant Tahitian community, way of life, and values—all of which stand in stark contrast to Bligh's constant cruelty. He knows he must return to the *Bounty* and Bligh, but he can't resist having a little more time to savor life on the island.

Here, Booth (no doubt with input from Lloyd and perhaps others) engineers another beautifully edited segment, this one slower in tempo than most of the rest of the film. It lasts about three and a half minutes, and, in a radical departure from this largely dialogue-driven film, we hear no dialogue the entire time.

Christian has just bid farewell to the Tahitian chieftain, Maimiti, and Byam, and heads back to a longboat waiting to take him back to the ship. Maimiti, not wanting to see him go, follows him. He nears the shore, sees men from the ship waiting for him in the longboat, and looks at this with dread. Then he notices nearby Tahitians dancing and singing, looks over, and smiles gently and perhaps even longingly. He also notices Maimiti. We see back-and-forth close-ups of the two. He goes to her and, as they kiss once, a shot of a cresting ocean wave is superimposed over them, suggesting perhaps that they are being swept up in an unstoppable natural force. They kiss again and the scene slowly dissolves to palm trees. The

camera pans down the trees, and again we see the dancers. It is later now, and they are in shadow. Then the image dissolves to a sunset as Christian and Maimiti, now in silhouette, look at it. With utmost grace, she slips to the ground. He follows her. Again they kiss, and the image dissolves again to the dancers. They are dancing at night now, each holding a small torch and suggesting that Christian and Maimiti have indeed lit a fire of their own. The image dissolves back to Maimiti, who smiles and then caresses Christian's head in a moment of sexual afterglow. This image fades out and fades in to morning as the sun rises. The two lovers walk together to the shore, kiss, and then Christian starts swimming back to the ship. Without his knowing, Maimiti follows him, and, just as he reaches the ship, surprises him. They share one last kiss before he climbs aboard. Once on board, he sees her and waves at her as she swims back. She returns the wave.

Here, the film depends heavily on some editing resources that are not used (or used far more sparingly) in the rest of the film. Perhaps the most obvious are the symbols of the ocean wave and then the dancers holding fiery torches to represent the passion between Christian and Maimiti. Obviously, sex could only be implied in Hollywood films at the time, and symbols were often used. The challenge was in how to use them, and here it is done deftly, giving us just enough to communicate the point but not too much as to seem clichéd or heavy-handed. Another editing resource is the frequent use of dissolves and fades (a few quite long) between the various scenes and images. During the three and a half minutes, there are ten of them, many more than we see in any comparable time span in any other part of the film. In addition to indicating a passage of time, they also hint at—as one scene softly flows into the next—a gentleness of feeling and a sense of connectedness (perhaps communion) Christian feels both with Maimiti and with the people and life he has found on Tahiti. In all, it is a beautifully orchestrated interlude that stands out as one of the few happy times Christian has during the story, and throughout the editing has subtly and quite effectively reinforced and enriched its meaning.

An additional factoid that helps one to appreciate the accomplishment here of Booth and MGM's technical personnel all the more is that, while scenes from the film were shot in Tahiti, most of the film's actors, including Clark Gable, did not make the long trip there for filming. Doubles were used in long shots, and in many scenes existing footage of Tahiti was shown behind the actors using "rear-projection" techniques. For years, filmmakers, even in technically advanced Hollywood, routinely had

problems making rear-projection look believable. Even in the 1960s, such masters as Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford had great difficulties with it, respectively, in 1963's *The Birds* and 1964's *Cheyenne Autumn*. In *Mutiny on the Bounty*'s Tahiti scenes, however, it's almost impossible to imagine—especially on a first viewing—that Clark Gable was not there. Making the illusion work depended both on MGM's cinematography and technical teams as well as on Booth's expert editing.

Released in November of 1935, *Mutiny on the Bounty* was an enormous commercial and critical hit. On its initial run, it made nearly $4.5 million, more than twice its production budget, and was the biggest Hollywood hit of the year. Heading into the Academy Awards in early 1936, it also received eight nominations, including one for editing, and ultimately won in the Best Picture category.

In the decades since *Mutiny*'s initial release, film writers have generally remained positive in their appraisals of the film. Pauline Kael has written, "[F]or the kind of big budget, studio-controlled romantic adventure that this is, it's very well done."[37] And Adrien Turner has called the film, "an exotic and gripping piece of Hollywood mythology, made with all the technical skill and gloss one associates with Irving Thalberg's MGM."[38]

A good deal of that "technical skill" of course came from Margaret Booth, whose pitch-perfect editing has played an essential role in keeping the film fresh and gripping today.

A Passion for Perfection

Filmmaking has come a long way since Margaret Booth worked with film legends such as Griffith and Thalberg, ruled MGM's editing department with her firm hand, and supervised films for Ray Stark, but her enormous influence remains. Although she could irritate producers, directors, and others with her curt manner, strong opinions, and insistence that they change films to suit her requirements, her "uncanny perceptiveness," as Kevin Brownlow called it, was rarely seriously challenged. She understood the complicated art of film editing as well as anyone, and, when it came to standing her ground, she was fearless. Instead of digging in and fighting with her, nearly everyone—sooner or later—resigned themselves to the fact that it was simply better to listen and learn from her. In addition to teaching editors and (often) directors, she instilled in many of them her own passion for perfection. She constantly drove people to delve more

deeply into the editing process and, by doing so, produce better work and feel proud about doing it. In fact, when we consider the enormous number of films that had to go through Booth before they could be released and the scores of editors whose work had to meet her exacting standards before it was declared done, one fact of film industry life becomes abundantly clear—without Margaret Booth, American films today would, in all likelihood, not be held to the same exacting standards that they are.

Women Film Editors

Unseen Artists of American Cinema

David Meuel

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina

ISBN (print) 978-1-4766-6294-7
ISBN (ebook) 978-1-4766-2520-1

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING DATA ARE AVAILABLE

British Library cataloguing data are available

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

Manufactured in the United States of America

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640
www.mcfarlandpub.com