WOMEN FILM EDITORS

Unseen Artists of American Cinema

DAVID MEUEL

2

"The eyes to me are everything"

Viola Lawrence's 47 Years of Seeing into the Eyes of Actors to Convey the Essence of Characters

On Thursday, August 9, 1962, a brief item appeared on a back page of the show business news publication *Daily Variety*. Wedged in between a listing of "Amusement Stocks" and a blurb announcing that comedian Jimmy Durante would appear that evening at a Quaker Oats sales convention in Denver, the item was about a retirement luncheon held the previous day for a veteran Columbia Pictures film editor. Its first sentence noted that, at the luncheon, the retiree had received a gold lifetime membership card from the film editors' professional association, American Cinema Editors (ACE). And the four sentences that followed, which together contained 67 words—exactly one for every year of the honoree's 67 years of living up until that point—provided a few scant details about a long career.

That, in essence, was how Hollywood said goodbye to Viola Lawrence (1894–1973).

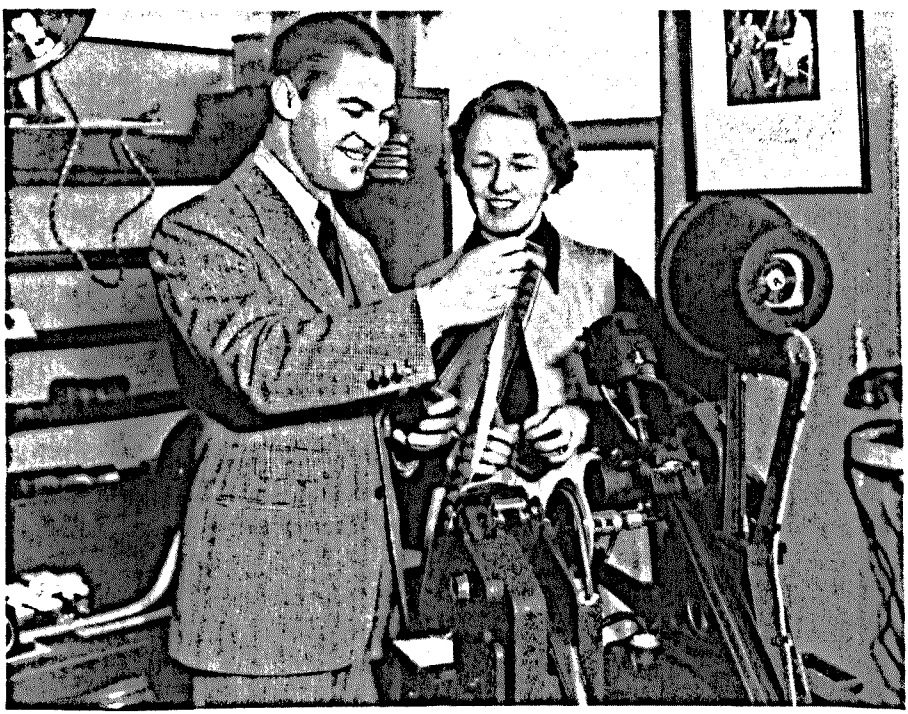
Lawrence—"Vi" to her co-workers and friends—had certainly not been forgotten. About 80 of these people had attended the luncheon, and many of them doubtlessly had glowing things to say about her and her work.

She hadn't become irrelevant, either. Just the year before, she (along with editor Al Clark) had been nominated for a Best Editing Academy Award for their work on director George Sidney's big-budget musical comedy *Pepe*, starring the popular Mexican actor Cantinflas. This honor came only three years after another Oscar nomination (shared with editor Jerome Thoms) for her work on Sidney's 1957 musical *Pal Joey* with Frank

Sinatra. This, in turn, had followed on the heels of a prestigious ACE Critics Award for her contribution to the 1956 biopic *The Eddy Duchin Story* with Tyrone Power. During the previous six years, she had clearly been at the top of her game.

Yet, Lawrence's departure garnered no more fanfare than a long-time rank-and-file employee at a bank or factory might have received. In fact, her ACE lifetime membership card, while gold, didn't even have the pizazz of a corporate-issue gold retirement watch.

At the time, no one—including Lawrence, who would save the *Daily Variety* clipping until she died—felt that she hadn't received her due. Film editing had long been called "the invisible art," and Lawrence, who had begun editing in the 1910s and along the way had cut more than 100 films, had toiled in semi-anonymity for decades. Bright lights and fanfare at this late date would have seemed out of place.



Viola Lawrence (pictured here with actor Chester Morris in 1934) edited more than 100 films in a storied career that continued from the 1910s to the 1960s. Along the way, she worked on films by such major directors as Erich von Stroheim, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Orson Welles, and Nicholas Ray (Photofest).

Despite her low profile, however, Lawrence had long since established herself as one of her profession's most accomplished practitioners. In silent films, she had edited at several studios for major directors as different (in temperament and artistic vision) as Henry King and Erich von Stroheim. When sound arrived, she quickly adapted, moving to Columbia (where she would remain for nearly 30 years) and working on films for iconic directors from John Ford and Howard Hawks to Orson Welles and Nicholas Ray. When the traditional screen format gave way to wide-screen CinemaScope in the mid-1950s, she adapted again, doing, what film writer I.S. Mowis has called, "some of her finest work"[1] on films such as *Pal Joey*. All told, she was an editor for 47 years—49 if we count a brief apprenticeship when she learned her craft while working other jobs.

Throughout her career, Lawrence excelled in virtually all facets of her art. In Hawks' *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), for example, she cut busy crowd scenes, intimate conversations, musical interludes, and taut action sequences all with great skill and perceptiveness. In addition, she had a special gift for cutting in ways that suggest more about what is going on *within* characters—that get us, if you will, closer to their essence. "I like the use of close-ups," she once noted. "Most actors do their best work in close-ups.... The greatest emotion for everyone is realized when they look straight into the actor's face, in his or her eyes. The eyes to me are everything."[2] And in films as different as von Stroheim's *Queen Kelly* (1929) and Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950) she delivers on this core belief in a big way, helping to make complex, ambiguous characters startlingly compelling.

Amiable and articulate, Lawrence also prided herself on being a team player who saw her role mainly as providing support to her producers and directors. "Of course, the director is always the final authority," she staunchly affirmed later in life.[3] But, when she wasn't happy with how things were going, she could be opinionated, blunt, and—regardless of who was listening—fearless about speaking her mind. "Crusty" was another word one director's biographer used to describe her.[4]

Sometimes artistic issues would bring out this crustiness. When she began to cut *The Lady from Shanghai* with Orson Welles in 1947, for example, she felt obligated to tell studio head Harry Cohn that, even though the director was Orson Welles, the footage was still a "jumbled mess."[5] She then urged Cohn to order Welles to shoot additional shots, including close-ups, which the director was adamant about not wanting in the film. Ultimately, it was Lawrence who—for better or worse (as some Welles partisans contend)—prevailed, both in getting the additional shots and in having them included in the final cut.

Other times the subject could be an issue that had little to do with specific films. Lawrence was, for example, one of the few women editors from the 1920s to the 1960s who openly criticized the studios' systematic practice of driving—and keeping—women out of her profession. One time, she even went as far as to talk about how badly her husband, fellow editor Frank Lawrence, had treated young female editing assistants in the 1920s. And her outspokenness wasn't limited to this subject, either. She could—and often did—level pointed barbs at just about everything from the film industry's lack of respect for the craft of comedy to what she saw as the inability of Los Angeles area audiences to intelligently assess movie previews.

In the little that has been written about her, Viola Lawrence has usually been characterized as a pioneer—possibly Hollywood's first full-fledged female film editor. She was certainly that, but she was also talented and tenacious enough both to stay in a hard profession that was especially hard on women for the last 40 years of her career and—during all of that time—to thrive. Of the more than 100 films she worked on, many are forgettable, many more are solid studio efforts, and several are genuine masterpieces. Looking at films as superb and diverse as *Queen Kelly*, *Only Angels Have Wings*, and *In a Lonely Place*, for example, we see the work of three of Hollywood's most gifted auteur directors, each in top form. Yet, when we look at these very different films in relation to each other, we also see the distinctive creative element they all share. This, of course, is the person who pieced together the final film draft that, in each case, assured something very special—the outspoken pro people called "Vi."

"Quite naturally, I'm on the woman's side in my profession"

Viola Lawrence and the movies grew up together.

She was born Lilian Viola Mallory in Brooklyn, New York, on December 2, 1894. It was just a year after the first public demonstration of Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope motion picture projection machine was held at the nearby Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences. And it would be another decade before the cramped, often dingy, and usually bustling nickelodeons would dot downtowns not only in Brooklyn but also throughout the United States.

In 1911, the year after D.W. Griffith and much of his stock company left the East Coast to make a short movie in the small, sleepy Southern

California town of Hollywood, 16-year-old Viola Mallory began her film career at American Vitagraph, a studio located in Brooklyn's Flatbush neighborhood. Initially, she worked at $5 a week both as a messenger and as the person who held up silent film title cards for the cameras. Two years later, she began to learn the craft of editing, cutting a short film based on an O. Henry short story. Her teacher was Frank Lawrence (1883–1960), a former nickelodeon projectionist, who in 1903 was hired as Vitagraph's first cutter and had subsequently become head of the studio's editing department. By 1915, Viola was a full-fledged cutter.

In the next few years, two important changes occurred for both Viola and Frank. In 1917, they were lured to Hollywood to work for Carl Laemmle at the Universal Film Manufacturing Company, Frank as the studio's supervising editor. And in 1918, they were married.

Afterwards, Viola and Frank would occasionally partner in the editing room as well. One joint effort was Samuel Goldwyn's first sound film, 1929's *Bulldog Drummond* with Ronald Colman.

More often than not, however, they worked separately. Best known today for editing Howard Hughes' 1930 adventure film *Hell's Angels*, which includes particularly impressive aerial battle scenes, Frank is also credited with creating the famous "Tarzan yell" by running the soundtrack backwards through an editor's Moviola. By the late 1930s, however, he had stopped editing, and little is known about him after that. He died in Los Angeles in July of 1960.

During the 1920s, as the studios were actively discouraging women from becoming editors, Viola was still able to find work with First National, Columbia, Samuel Goldwyn at United Artists, and Gloria Swanson's independent company. During this time, she also made major contributions to several notable films.

One of these is the 1926 Goldwyn-produced western *The Winning of Barbara Worth* with Colman, Gary Cooper, and silent screen heartthrob Vilma Banky. Directed by Henry King, who would later forge a long and highly productive professional relationship at 20th Century-Fox with another female editor, Barbara McLean, this film was an attempt to capitalize on the huge commercial success of two other silent western epics, James Cruze's *The Covered Wagon* (1923) and John Ford's *The Iron Horse* (1924).

A solid effort throughout, *The Winning of Barbara Worth* is probably best known for a beautifully conceived and executed seven-minute action sequence that Lawrence cut near the end of the film. Featuring a bursting dam, a torrent of flood waters, men on horses warning people to evacuate

and seek higher ground, scores of people scrambling to do just that, and many of them being swallowed up by the flood, the sequence works on several levels. First, largely through crosscutting, it gives us a thorough account of the disaster and its impact on numerous people from the hero (Colman) to three little girls, to an old man in a wheelchair, to the crooked businessman whose desire to cut corners has led to the dam burst and disaster. Second, it mixes both long and close shots with great finesse to capture both the large-scale impact of the disaster and a wide range of intimate personal stories also taking place. Finally, the cutting on specific moments in the action and the pacing and flow of shots are pitch perfect. Watching this sequence, we can't help but feel swept away by the experience as well. It's a remarkable assemblage that's thrilling to watch even 90 years after the fact. It's also proof that—at the relatively young age of 31—Lawrence had mastered her trade.

An even more fascinating example of her work during this time was her contribution to Erich von Stroheim's strange, brilliant, and ultimately unfinished 1929 silent film, *Queen Kelly*.

A co-editor on other von Stroheim films such as *Blind Husbands* (1919) and *Foolish Wives* (1922), Lawrence was brought in to the production of *Queen Kelly* when it was in complete disarray. With only about one-third of the originally envisioned five-hour film shot and the film's budget nearly depleted, the film's producer/star, actress Gloria Swanson, and her business partner/lover, financier Joseph Kennedy, had fired the eccentric, difficult director. Desperate to recoup at least part of her considerable financial investment, Swanson then asked several filmmakers (among them producer Irving Thalberg and directors Edmund Goulding, Sam Wood, and Richard Boleslawski) to write various scripts using the existing footage. Eventually, Swanson decided on an ending in which her character commits suicide and assigned Lawrence the unenviable task of organizing the many hours of existing footage to tell a coherent story that could then be completed with a few added "bridge" scenes. Finally, with the help of cinematographer Gregg Toland, Swanson directed these scenes herself, Lawrence did a final edit, and in 1932 the film with the "Swanson ending" (as it came to be called) was released in Europe. With his remaining legal leverage, von Stroheim had managed to stop the film from being exhibited in the U.S. In 1950, however, he allowed the showing of a few scenes in Billy Wilder's film *Sunset Blvd.*, in which he—ironically—co-starred with Swanson.[6]

Despite all this dysfunction and chaos, it's startling how good the first 70 minutes of *Queen Kelly* is. Most of the credit, of course, goes to

von Stroheim, whose ability to convey complex psychological detail and striking visual compositions that eloquently reinforced his themes was years ahead of his time. Yet, Lawrence also deserves credit for shaping the hours of footage she had in ways that convey von Stroheim's distinctive vision to maximum effect.

Set initially in a fictional Middle European country, *Queen Kelly* is a twisted fairy tale of a likeable but philandering prince (Walter Byron) who falls for an innocent convent girl (Swanson) to the chagrin of a jealous, depraved queen (Seena Owen). This concept was also, as film writer Michael Koller has noted, "a stroke of genius for Stroheim, as it would partially liberate him from his usual obsession with realism and allow his imagination free rein to more effectively concentrate and amplify his themes, creating an intense, stylized world."[7]

In support, Lawrence gives resonance to this "intense, stylized world" in numerous ways.

One of the most interesting is her frequent use of dissolves. Usually employed in older films to signify the passage of time from one scene to the next, dissolves are also (and often) used in *Queen Kelly* to move between items in a room and other images within a scene to heighten intensity and suggest otherworldliness. One excellent example of this technique early in the film is the scene when we are introduced to the queen. It is morning, she sits up in bed—appearing naked except for a cat she holds against her breasts—and finishes off a glass of champagne. Around her we then see several (sometimes conflicting) objects—a photo of the prince; a copy of Boccaccio's book of erotic tales, *Decameron*; a prayer book and rosary; an ashtray filled with cigar butts (yes, apparently the queen smokes cigars); an empty champagne bottle; and sleep medication—dissolving slowly from one to the other in an eerie, dream-like manner. A well as suggesting a hangover and the groggy state of mind that accompanies it, these dissolves also give the scene a more stylized, unreal atmosphere that also suggests this character's escapist, perhaps deluded, and certainly troubled state of mind.

Another way Lawrence helped to give additional resonance to the world of *Queen Kelly* is through her use of expressive, intense close-ups.

While always important to her, Lawrence depended on close-ups even more than usual in *Queen Kelly*, and the impact is often quite powerful. Particularly interesting is the way she used close-ups to show what's occurring with female characters at key moments. One remarkable scene is when the queen first confronts the prince after he's spent the night partying and womanizing. At first, she seethes with jealousy. Then, remembering that

she really has the upper hand in this relationship, she coyly announces that she has a "surprise" for him that evening, one we suspect will put him in his place for good. Here, we see her as insecure, angry, spiteful, and manipulative—sometimes all at once. Another fascinating scene is when Swanson's character, the convent girl, must face the convent's mother superior after she's flirted with the prince. Swanson's close-ups are wonderful, vividly conveying both her young character's point of view when recounting the incident as well as her acceptance of the punishment she receives for her transgression. But Madge Hunt, the actress who plays the mother superior, does a fascinating job of conveying sternness, a calm composure, and great empathy in her close-ups. Apparently seeing an opportunity, Lawrence held on the close-ups of Hunt a bit longer than other editors might have, and the extra emphasis gives both her tiny role and this scene added depth and dimension.

In the early 1930s, Lawrence returned to Columbia, where she remained until her retirement in 1962. Like fellow female editors Margaret Booth at MGM and Barbara McLean at 20th Century–Fox, Lawrence eventually became a supervising editor. Unlike them, however, she continued to juggle both supervisory responsibilities and editing assignments for her entire career, and she received—over the next three decades—editing credit on more than 80 additional films.

During the 1930s, she made important contributions to several notable efforts. In Frank Borzage's Pre-Code romance *Man's Castle* (1933), for example, her cutting was instrumental in highlighting the sensitive acting performances of stars Spencer Tracy and Loretta Young. And in John Ford's social satire/romance *The Whole Town's Talking* (1935) her work played a key role in bringing out sides to actress Jean Arthur that audiences hadn't seen before and, in the process, helping to transform Arthur from a fading ingénue into Columbia's top female star.

Of all the 1930s films Lawrence worked on, however, perhaps the one that's best remembered today is Howard Hawks' 1939 story of daredevil pilots who fly the mail through the Andes in South America, *Only Angels Have Wings*. Among the film's highlights are its often-gripping flying scenes. And in many of these Lawrence does an outstanding job of putting together shots of actors in cockpit mock-ups, airplane models, and actual planes in flight to create edge-of-your-seat suspense. Among these, perhaps the best is the film's last flying sequence when two characters played by Richard Barthelmess and Thomas Mitchell are in a plane that nosedives, catches fire, manages against the odds to make a crash landing back at the runway, and—just after the two men are evacuated—explodes. Of note,

too, in this sequence are the pacing and the rhythms of the editing. Throughout the flight from beginning to end, each shot is just as long as it needs to be; the cuts all happen very naturally, so naturally that we have to make an effort to notice them because they blend into the action so well. It is traditional Hollywood editing at its best.

In the 1940s, Lawrence continued to edit films for Columbia at a steady clip, sometimes working on four, five, or—as in 1941—even six films a year. Among her best efforts during the decade were Alexander Hall's fantasy-comedy *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941) with Robert Montgomery and Claude Rains and Charles Vidor's musical *Cover Girl* with Rita Hayworth and Gene Kelly (1944). After helping to make Jean Arthur a top star at Columbia, Lawrence's cutting also proved to be a vital component in helping Hayworth become the studio's top star in the 1940s. Seeing this symbiotic relationship with Hayworth, the studio assigned Lawrence to cut all but three of the actress's many films during the 1940s and 1950s.

Although work on most of her 1940s films went routinely, Lawrence also faced some serious challenges in 1947 and 1948 when trying to cut one of the best-known films she ever worked on, Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai*.

As they saw the film's initial rushes, both Columbia's studio head Harry Cohn and his assistant Jack Fier began to doubt whether the film could even be releasable. Their doubts were confirmed when Lawrence told them that the footage was a "jumbled mess." An added concern for all three of them was Hayworth's appearance. With her signature long red hair severely cut back and dyed blond, they felt that their studio's top star looked mousy. Finally, for artistic reasons (perhaps to create a more detached relationship between filmgoers and the film's characters), Welles had seriously limited the number of close-ups he shot, something that particularly rankled Lawrence.

Soon, Cohn ordered extensive reshooting and re-editing, which delayed the film's release for more than a year and caused the project to go over budget by more than 30 percent. In the process, Lawrence cut more than an hour out of Welles' initial edit (which the studio then destroyed). And, when the film was finally released in the U.S., just about everyone considered it a disaster.

One highlight of the film, though, is a shoot-out in a fun house hall of mirrors that has since become an iconic piece of film noir. Taking up a little more than two minutes of the finished version, Welles had originally intended it to be about 20 minutes. As it is, it's absolutely spellbinding, and it begs one to wonder what the much longer version would have been like.

Although Welles enthusiasts have roundly denounced Cohn, Lawrence, and others at Columbia for not understanding the director's overall vision and ruining his film, the situation may have been more complicated. Cohn, who was one of Hollywood's most financially savvy studio heads at the time, may have foreseen (and perhaps rightfully) a box-office failure, an art film that audiences would stay away from in droves. And Lawrence's remark that the film at one point was a "jumbled mess" cannot be immediately discounted, either. She may have been a more conventional cinematic thinker than Welles, but during her career she also worked with von Stroheim, Ray, and other cutting-edge directors and had always treated their work with great respect. Despite Welles' undisputed talent, there may have been problems with his initial cut of the film, and at least some of the concerns of Cohn, Lawrence, and others at Columbia may have been warranted. Since the studio destroyed so much of Welles' initial footage, however, we will probably never have a definitive answer.

The year after her unhappy experience with *The Lady from Shanghai*, Lawrence embarked on a partnership with Humphrey Bogart's newly formed (and, sadly, short-lived) Santana Productions, which distributed through Columbia. Over the next three years, she edited five films for the independent company, two of them (both starring Bogart), 1949's *Knock on Any Door* and 1950's *In a Lonely Place*, for the very talented director Nicholas Ray. A far better artistic fit for Lawrence than Welles, Ray offered her the chance to work on the kind of emotionally complex, deeply affecting stories she excelled at. Her work on the brilliant and emotionally wrenching *In a Lonely Place* could very well be the best of her long career.

Remaining busy throughout the 1950s, Lawrence worked on films ranging from noirs to comedies, to dramas, to musicals that featured a variety of stars from Joan Crawford and Ginger Rogers to Edward G. Robinson and Tyrone Power. She also continued to work on films starring Rita Hayworth, and, as she had done a decade before with Hayworth, she began working on films featuring another up-and-coming female star at Columbia, Kim Novak.

Of these films, perhaps the best known today is the musical *Pal Joey* (1957) that featured both Hayworth and Novak vying for the attentions of Frank Sinatra. While the story of a philandering but charming entertainer seems dated today, the film includes some memorable songs (most notably "The Lady Is a Tramp") and was quite well crafted. It received four Academy Award nominations in technical categories, including one for Lawrence and Jerome Thoms for Best Editing.

Three years later, Lawrence (this time with editor Al Clark) received

her second Oscar nomination for the big-budget musical comedy *Pepe*. While not a success with critics or audiences, the film managed to receive seven Academy Award nominations, mostly in technical categories. At the time, Lawrence quipped that *Pepe* may have been her most demanding job ever because she and Clark had to pare down more than 500,000 feet (roughly 100 miles) of exposed film into about 20,000 feet (roughly four miles).[8] Even at this length, however, the sprawling film ran for more than three hours, a running time that probably further dampened its box office appeal.

After her retirement in 1962, Lawrence lived quietly in Los Angeles until her death at age 78 on November 20, 1973. A sister, Edith Bennett of Los Angeles, survived her.

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In addition to her long, extremely productive career, part of what made Viola Lawrence special was that "crusty" character of hers. At a time when most people in the film business worked for studios and made it a point not to criticize those in power, she liked to be the provocateur, saying exactly what was on her mind no matter who heard it. Sometimes, too, she would bow to diplomacy, adding just a pinch of self-deprecating humor along with her barb to make it a little more palatable.

Often, her statements were simply quirky and challenging. Once, for example, she railed against Hollywood's lack of appreciation for the craft of comedy. "I don't understand this preoccupation with drama on the part of people of this industry who should know that comedy is far more difficult," she said. "But fun pictures never come in for Academy honors. Musical comedy, once in a while, yes ... but straight comedy, never! It's the same with cutting. The editor of a comedy doesn't receive his just due."[9] She had no qualms about using her sharp tongue on the hometown audiences, either. "When we try pictures out on a New York or a San Francisco audience, we find them twice as hep, understanding, receptive, and wisely critical," she stated fervently. "It's even smarter for a studio to try pictures first up at Santa Barbara or in San Bernardino—anywhere out of this eccentric town. Hollywood people are too professional, too insular in their tastes."[10]

But she was also outspoken about more serious issues that mattered to her, and one that mattered a great deal was the industry-wide effort to discourage women from becoming film editors. Once, for example, she recalled how her husband Frank, who had taught her to cut in the 1910s, was simply "mean" to female assistants he supervised at Paramount in the

1920s. "He just hated them," she said. "If any of the girls were cutting—if they did get the chance to cut—he'd put them right back as assistants," but he "broke in a lot of boys."[11] And, even near the end of her career, the issue still riled her. "Quite naturally, I'm on the woman's side in my profession," she said at the time. "I don't think there are enough woman cutters.... If you ask me, women have more heart and feeling than men in this work."[12]

Then—no doubt with a slight twinkle in her eye—she added, "Now, listen to my masculine contemporaries yell when they hear this!"[13]

Lawrence's Contribution to In a Lonely Place

As a stylist, Lawrence closely adhered to the classical editing techniques her husband Frank taught her in the early 1910s and people such as D.W. Griffith later refined. She was not a major innovator, and, as her experience with Orson Welles may have illustrated, she could have also been resistant to certain kinds of editorial experimentation.

Yet, as her frequent use of close-ups to reveal the inner states of characters suggests, she clearly brought a humanist's sensibilities to her work. And among her talents was a special ability to bring out the humanity in characters audiences might initially find difficult to like and relate to. Ultimately, she helped to make these characters more nuanced, ambiguous, and intriguing. And, in the process, she also helped to make the actors who played these characters look better in their roles.

When these goals closely meshed with the goals of a gifted director the results could be electric. And in all of Lawrence's films perhaps the foremost example of this talent is her work on Nicholas Ray's film noir masterpiece about a troubled Hollywood screenwriter suspected of murder, *In a Lonely Place*.

In her 2000 essay on the film, writer Fiona Villella called it "one of the finest *noir* melodramas Hollywood ever produced, ... a film in which all elements—performance, story, score, lighting, and editing—work in complete concert to realize the emotional weight of its drama."[14]

It's almost impossible to disagree.

Based on Dorothy B. Hughes' 1947 mystery novel *In a Lonely Place*, the film both builds on the original story and departs from it in a variety of ways to express and explore many of the preoccupations of its director, Ray, and its star, Humphrey Bogart. In the film's angry, isolated, and occasionally violent main character, screenwriter Dixon Steele (Bogart), both director and actor saw a man very much like themselves, and together

Troubled lovers Laurel (Gloria Grahame) and Dix (Humphrey Bogart) share a tense moment in Nicholas Ray's film noir masterpiece *In a Lonely Place* (1950). Later in her career, Lawrence proved herself adept at taking on new kinds of films such as noir and the lavish color musicals of the late 1950s and early 1960s such as *Pal Joey* (1957) (Columbia Pictures/Photofest).

they chose to dig deep into Steele's dark soul. The deep personal connection between artists and story didn't stop there, either. To play Steele's love interest and potential salvation, aspiring actress Laurel Gray, they initially considered Bogart's real-life wife, Lauren Bacall. Then, when they learned that Warner Brothers, where Bacall was under contract, wouldn't allow her to play the part, they turned to Ray's real-life wife, Gloria Grahame. It's a film, as director (and avid Ray fan) Curtis Hanson has noted, that's "so heartfelt, so emotional, so revealing that it seems as though both the actor and the director are standing naked before the audience."[15]

Although Ray and Bogart played lead roles in this creative process, several other people had to be both in synch with their aims and capable of achieving them for the film to succeed as well as it does. Among these people are its co-star, Grahame; its screenwriter, Andrew Solt; its cinematographer, Burnett Guffey; the composer of its dark, unsettling musical score, George Antheil; and of course its editor, Viola Lawrence.

On the film, Lawrence contributed in several ways.

Her talent in cutting action scenes, for example, is clearly in evidence in the emotionally charged sequence after the film's beach party scene, when Steele, feeling betrayed, leaves in a rage and Laurel follows. He gets in his car, she quickly hops in, he drives fast and recklessly until he almost causes an accident with another car. Steele then stops. The other driver (a young man) also stops and jumps out to start an argument. In turn, Steele jumps out of his car and attacks the other man. Finally, just as he is about to hit the man with a rock, Laurel yells at him to stop. To amplify Steele's out-of-control state of mind and Laurel's increasing anxiety and fear, the cuts are quick but very carefully chosen, moving back and forth between shots of the car driving on both sides of the road, the actors' emotionally charged faces, a speedometer approaching 70 miles per hour, and other distressing images. In its entirety, the sequence excellently conveys a sense of crazed recklessness and unpredictability. We in the audience are, in a sense, seated right in Laurel's place, and, like her, we see firsthand how terrifying Dixon Steele can be.

Lawrence also does a fine job of conveying some of the film's more expressionistic moments. One, for example, is a nightmare Laurel has late in the story shown through super-imposed dissolves of the chief murder investigator, Captain Lochner (Carl Benton Reid) and her masseuse Martha (Ruth Gillette) both warning her about how dangerous Steele is and then a super-imposed image of Steele beating the driver of that other car. Particularly effective is how all these images are positioned in relation to the sleeping Laurel, looking down from virtually the same high, imposing angle—the first two characters with commanding, authoritative expressions and then Steele hitting with rage in his eyes. In fact, the image of Steele is positioned as if he were hitting her.

Yet, by far Lawrence's most important contribution to the film is her handling of the many close-ups and close two-shots, particularly of Steele and Laurel. Both Bogart and Grahame were superb actors at conveying various states of mind with their faces, Ray obviously appreciated this about them, and, according to accounts of the filming, he frequently pushed the camera in on them to get more of what they were conveying about their characters.[16] It was Lawrence's job to bring out the very wide range of emotions the two characters feel without showing too much, a difficult feat in a film as delicately nuanced as this one. And it is amazing how well she balances the emotions of a character both with the rhythms of a particular conversation and with a film's need for economy. As viewers, we always feel that we get just enough, never too much or too little.

One wonderful example of Lawrence's using a close-up very effectively is her handling of the film's first image: a popular noir shot of a driver's eyes in a car's rearview mirror. This is such a strong image here, Steele's dark and lonely face set against the dark city night, that it doesn't need to be emphasized too much. So, Lawrence uses it as a background to the film's first credits, which introduce Bogart, the film's telling title, and Grahame. Then, as the remaining credits are shown, she cuts to a medium shot of Steele from the back driving alone in the car. Along with George Antheil's sad, unsettling score, many of the essentials of this story are established before we even get to the director's credit. It's economical without ever sacrificing emotion for economy.

As the relationship between Steele and Laurel begins to unravel later in the film, the close-ups and close two-shots of the couple become more frequent, more complicated, and more revealing. Often, they betray the words the two lovers are sharing with one another.

When Steele tells Laurel that they should get married, for example, we see two very revealing close-ups of her that amply convey her surprise, fear, dread, and hope that she can somehow talk her way out of this situation. A moment later we see Steele sitting on a sofa looking at her as she is off-camera with growing fear and insecurity of his own. Then just a few moments later, when she goes to the kitchen to check the coffee, we see that she realizes that she cannot get out of this bind—that she has to say "yes" to marriage. Throughout, we get just enough facial expression to clearly tell us what's occurring inside the two characters but never too much. It moves beautifully.

The film's last scene is another excellent blending of emotion and economy. The mutual fear and distrust has now hit a feverish pitch. Laurel definitely wants to run away from Steele. He finds out that she is planning to fly to New York, becomes enraged, forces her to her bed, and starts choking her. The phone rings, snapping him out of his rage. He goes to answer the phone—tired, now defeated—and hears the "good news" that he is innocent of the murder the police had suspected him of. Captain Lochner wants to apologize to Laurel as well. Steele calls her to the phone. She is now exhausted, too, but also senses that, finally, she may now be free of Steele.

When Lochner apologizes, we see a close-shot on Laurel. "Yesterday, this would have all meant so much to us," she says.

Then, the film cuts to a medium shot on Steele standing at her front door. He listens as we hear Laurel off camera finish her thought. "Now, it doesn't matter," she says. "It doesn't matter at all."

This line becomes Steele's cue to leave for good, and we see his reaction and acknowledgement. The film cuts to him walking down the stairs and through the apartment's courtyard, then back to Laurel who says her goodbye so quietly only she can hear it, then finally to Steele by himself in long shot at the edge the courtyard. Just as the film's titles came up over his lonely image at the film's beginning, the words "The End" come up on him, alone once again.

In her essay on *In a Lonely Place*, Fiona Villella called this last scene "a brilliantly swift and economic succession of shots [that] bring the film to closure."[17]

Again, it's almost impossible to disagree. While Ray obviously contributed a great deal to the editing process here, Lawrence's understanding of both Ray's objectives and the complex and often disturbing human emotions at the core of this film is quite remarkable. It's fun to imagine her working with Ray again on such emotionally charged films as his very moving *On Dangerous Ground* (1951) or his now-iconic *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). But, it's also fruitless to speculate. Suffice it to say that, on this film, their talents and artistic sensibilities complemented each other extremely well.

Much More Than a Pioneer

It has been easy for people—as many have done—to view Viola Lawrence as merely a film industry pioneer, a competent editor of standard Hollywood fare, a good corporate soldier for Columbia Pictures, and little more.

It has also been simplistic and terribly unfair.

While often described as a pioneer, Lawrence was also a survivor when fellow trailblazers, including many women, left the industry in the face of growing sexism, increased competition for jobs, and changing times. In addition to surviving, she thrived, editing more than 80 films during her nearly 30 years at Columbia alone, where, for much of that time, she also served as the studio's supervising editor. She began in film when nickelodeons were still popular, and she finally retired after a six-year run in which she received two Academy Award nominations and an ACE Critics Award for her work on major big-budget studio releases.

As these last details suggest, she was also more than merely a competent editor of standard Hollywood fare. Her work on great films for directors such as von Stroheim, Hawks, and Ray is a testament to her skills as

well as theirs. And her work on fine films by top directors such as Henry King, Frank Borzage, John Ford, and George Sidney is further evidence that her work was excellent far more often than it was merely competent.

Finally, while she was certainly a loyal studio employee, she was also a person who didn't shy away from controversy, even when her remarks took the film industry to task. Her early and consistent criticism of the treatment of women editors, for example, is certainly proof of her sense of fair play and her courage.

It is ironic that this film editor who so passionately believed in the power of close-ups to bring audiences closer to the essence of on-screen characters—to see, if you will, more deeply into their souls—has received so little critical attention, so few probing close-ups of her or her work. Considering both her prodigious output for nearly half a century and the high quality of much of that work, she deserves *much* more than the ACE gold lifetime membership card she received at her retirement luncheon that August day in 1962.

Women Film Editors

Unseen Artists of American Cinema

David Meuel

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