



Editing (for) Elizaveta: talking Svilova, Vertov and ‘responsive creativity’ with Karen Pearlman

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Introduction

In the past few years, *Studies in Australasian Cinema* has both witnessed and facilitated rigorous critical scholarship with respect to film production. This illuminating and invigorating aspect of contemporary screen studies necessarily foregrounds an explicitly theoretical awareness in filmmaking and specific production practices. At the same time, this nexus awakens historical figures, production roles, and stylistic developments that offer new, creative and politicised responses to the ways in which film history is documented and understood. Karen Pearlman’s short film *Woman with an Editing Bench*, first exhibited in 2016, celebrates the lesser known and even less acknowledged editing style and oeuvre of Elizaveta Svilova (who edited Vertov’s iconic 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera* and many others), whilst exploring her relationship with Vertov against Stalin’s censorship of cinema in the late 1920s. What follows is an interview with Pearlman, who wrote, directed and edited the film.

Interview

AL: *Woman with an Editing Bench* is a commentary on Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*, and in particular Elizaveta Svilova’s (lesser known or largely unacknowledged) role as editor of that film and many others. What specifically inspired your film?

KP: *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) has been an influential and inspiring film for me over many years because of its quicksilver editing rhythms and phrasing and the ideas the edits catalyse about the flow of work and the world. When I was Head of Screen Studies at AFTRS I often had the opportunity to show it to the film students and would joke – “shouldn’t it be called ‘Woman with an Editing Bench’ since it is the editing that makes it so remarkable and historically significant?” When I later found out that the woman you see onscreen editing the film that you are watching is Dziga Vertov’s wife, editor and lifelong collaborator, further, that she was already a senior editor when he met her and the only one who would work with him because of his wild ideas, I began to feel that this was not a joke, it was a feminist issue, and that inspired me to make my film.

AL: How important a figure would you say Svilova is in the history of film? How do you account for her absence from larger historical narratives, and from the reverence for *Man with a Movie Camera* as a template for cinematographic and editing technique?

KP: I would say pretty unequivocally that without Elizaveta Svilova there would have been no Dziga Vertov, and certainly no *Man with a Movie Camera*. My film is arguing that it was her expertise and lateral thinking - politically, technically and creatively - that made him possible. My research is focused on defining editing as work done within what is called a 'distributed cognitive system' where thinking happens not just in the brain and body of a person, but the collective brains and bodies of collaborators and, indeed, the filmed material itself. Thus, although like many editors and women there are no records of her creative ideas and thoughts we can look at her edits and understand them as her thoughts, her creative contribution. With that idea in mind we have to consider that her importance has been vastly under-recognised.

AL: Would you say *Woman with an Editing Bench* is a historical film? How does it speak to the 1920s/30s Soviet Union? And how would you say it reflects a (re)imagining of the Svilova-Vertov relationship?

KP: I call *Woman with an Editing Bench* a 'stylized biopic', by which I mean I have used style that she herself would have used to make her own films, her editing techniques, to express her thoughts. All of the events that occur within the film actually happened, though not exactly in the way or order we see them onscreen. Most of Vertov's dialogue is taken from the published translations of his diaries. However, like most editors and women, there are no records of Svilova's thoughts. So, by using her editing techniques, the edits, I argue, are her thoughts.

AL: Is editing gendered in some ways? Are there noticeably female ways of editing?

KP: I could not say whether there are or are not noticeably female ways of editing. I doubt it, since editors tend to be chameleon like in their style, matching their rhythms to the rhythms available in the material they are working with. However there are some aspects of editing about which I think we could productively ask questions about gender, particularly since cutters and later editors were almost all women in early cinema and editing is the only area of the film industries where we are even approaching gender parity at the top levels. The questions I would ask would be: has what I call the "responsive creativity" that is required to be an effective editor been pejoratively (as opposed to positively) feminised? Similarly, are the traits that are often associated with editors such as diplomacy, quietness, reclusiveness and problem solving associated with the feminine rather than the masculine? I could go on!

AL: Are editors absent from film and cultural history? Or is it simply that the achievements of women are lesser known? What do you make of well-known editors such as Dede Allen, or Thelma Schoonmaker (who worked with her director husband Michael Powell, and famously collaborated with Scorsese)?

KP: I think editors are both conspicuously absent from film and cultural history except in rare cases like Schoonmaker and Murch (who writes about editing, too). I have argued that we need to stop saying that good editing is invisible because it makes editors and women invisible. Good editing is not invisible. What you see is movement – movement of story, movement of emotion and movement of image and sound. That movement is shaped, even choreographed, by editing. That not many people know the principles of shaping this movement, and that those who do know those principles, editors, know them implicitly rather than explicitly, does not mean that there are not principles that can be productively articulated. Many of my publications both past and forthcoming are focused on articulating these principles in ways that I hope may be useful to editors and to scholars so that we can excise the ‘invisible’ mythology.

AL: Tell us about the aesthetics of *Woman with an Editing Bench*. There are sharp cuts (reels, feet, faces), moments of repetitive motion (baking, industrial labour), of overlapping and flickering, and moments of fluidity and mimicry in the changes (superimposition of sieved flour, figures and falling acetate). What is the visual relationship between *Woman* and *Man*?

KP: What can I say? When I accepted the Australian Screen Editors Guild ‘Best Editing in a Short Drama’ last year, I had to accept it on behalf of Elizaveta Svilova. I studied her editing techniques frame by frame and deployed them in my film. I am not only taking stuff from *Man* there are also direct references to technique in *Kino-Eye* (1924) and *Enthusiasm* (1931) all of which she cut.

AL: To this end, what is the significance of the final scene in *Woman with an Editing Bench*, as Svilova carries Vertov in her arms down the laneway, following his fall from the window?

KP: The last image of the film is the first image I came up with in thinking about how to tell some of Svilova’s story. In the late 1930s when Vertov was not allowed to make films any more, Svilova was still trusted and allowed to work. She literally supported him financially until his death in 1954. She also supported him publically, at some personal risk, while others were denouncing him, and she supported him creatively, getting work for him whenever she could. When he died, she retired from editing and spent the last 20 years of her life being Vertov’s widow. She helped to smuggle his archives out of the Soviet Union so that in an almost literal sense without her there would be no Vertov, at least none in the consciousness of film historians outside of the Soviet Union. So, of course, the last image is a metaphor, and it is also, in a way, a magic realist moment, where she walks into her own subjective imagination. But most of all for me it is an image of something that has no image otherwise, of the work of Svilova and countless other women, who efface themselves or are effaced even while carrying the burdens of their creative husbands.

AL: Is film editing itself a historical artefact (the bench, reel, the cutting and splicing) given the changes in technology in contemporary production? Or is the performance and practice of the editor relatively consistent over time?

KP: I suspect the performance and practice of the editor is remarkably consistent, although, of course, the tools change. Anyway, I can say it feels the same to me. I have cut on 16mm and on many digital (and tape!) platforms and the same principles apply: watching, sorting, remembering, selecting and composing. One still has to respond to the material and the people who generated it, diplomatically shaping structure and flow into the optimal form the material, context and media afford. [In this context, Karen has usefully offered the link to a research communication video she made with an editor in LA who runs a channel called ‘This Guy Edits’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqIIHi5F3-o-Ed>]

AL: You’ve mentioned previously that most cultural products are edited, and that editing is cognitive. Can you elaborate on these perspectives?

KP: I am a member of the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image (SCSMI) and am very pleased to be being published in their journal this year: <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/projections/11/2/proj110205.xml> This article is responding to some of the theories that have been proposed at SCSMI conferences in the last few years, and writes up some small parts of my ongoing research into editing and cognition. I am particularly focused, and collaborating with Prof. John Sutton here at MQ (Macquarie University – Ed), on developing ideas about editing as an instance of distributed cognition. More on this to come!

More information

Woman with an Editing Bench was an official selection of the CinefestOz Film Festival, 2016, one of Australia’s major competitive film festivals. *Woman* won the national Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) Award for Best Short Fiction, and the Australian Screen Editors’ Guild Award for Best Editing in a Short. Karen Pearlman writes, directs and edits screen productions and she writes about screen culture and creative processes. Karen is a director of the multi-award winning Physical TV Company, through which she has developed, produced, directed or edited acclaimed short films, online and mobile productions and the short feature *Thursday’s Fictions*. Her 2014 documentary ... *the dancer from the dance* was a finalist for an Australian Dance Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dance on Screen, and an ATOM Award finalist for Best Arts Documentary. Her publications include the book *Cutting Rhythms, Intuitive Film Editing*, Focal Press/Taylor & Francis and contributions to the edited volumes *Documentary Editing and Extended Mind*, Palgrave MacMillan, and *Body Show/s: Australian Viewings of Live Performance*, Rodopi. For more on the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image go to: <http://scsmi-online.org/>.

Notes on contributors

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