

Notebook Interview

# The Collaborative Editor: Mary Stephen in Conversation with Su Friedrich

From cutting Éric Rohmer's final films to Chinese documentaries, Mary Stephen is an essential artist working in the unsung art of editing.

by Su Friedrich  
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*Mary Stephen. Photo by Jessey Tsang Tsui Shan during the editing of her film *Flowing Stories*.*

In 2018, I created *Edited By*, a website that features the work of 206 women editors. It was motivated by reading a chapter about editing in a film production handbook in which the director of each notably-edited film was mentioned, but not the editor. Unfortunately I wasn't surprised by this lack of recognition, since film scholarship has always privileged the director, but I thought it was time to rectify that. At least half of the editors of those notable films turned out to be women—including the editor of *The Wizard of Oz*, Blanche Sewell. And in the process of discovering the women who shaped so many canonical films, I learned about the remarkable career of Mary Stephen.

Stephen is a Hong Kong-born Chinese-Canadian editor and filmmaker with 52 credits and nine best editing nominations. Based in Paris, France, Stephen started working as assistant to Cécile Décugis (editor to Godard, Truffaut, and Rohmer) and then was Éric Rohmer's regular editor and collaborator from 1992–2010. She edited ten of his films, including *A Tale of Winter* and

*The Lady and the Duke*, until his last film, *The Romance of Astrea and Celadon*. Stephen has also edited numerous award-winning narratives and documentaries from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Turkey, Canada, and South Africa, including Li Yang's *Blind Mountain*, Fan Lixin's *Last Train Home*, Du Haibin's *1428*, Seren Yüce's *Majority*, Hüseyin Karabey's *My Marlon and Brando*, Joan Chen's *Shanghai Strangers*, and Ann Hui's latest film, *Love After Love*.

In a masterclass devoted to Stephen titled "Editing Makes the Film," the DOK Leipzig film festival presented two films—*Odoriko* (2020) and *Nude at Heart* (2021)—as a way for the audience to see how differently a documentary can be handled when edited by two different editors. The films are about Japanese women dancers in strip theaters (who are known as *odoriko*) and were directed by Yoichiro Okutani, who filmed the women over a period of many years. The approach of *Odoriko* could be described as observational; there's virtually no commentary and it's made up largely of long shots of the women going about their business, though once in a while they speak to the camera. For various reasons, Stephen was asked to approach the film anew. The credits on this version, *Nude at Heart*, read "a film by Yoichiro Okutani, in collaboration with Mary Stephen," and when one sees the two films, it's clear that the construction of the second film was almost entirely in her hands. The cutting is drastically different, there's much more information provided about the women's daily lives and, when seen back-to-back, the two films are a remarkable case study in how different a documentary can be when handled by different editors. *Nude at Heart* is just beginning its festival run, and recently won the Kaleidoscope Award at DOC NYC.

Following her masterclass, I spoke with Mary Stephen over Zoom to discuss the beginning of her career, her hand in narrative and documentary filmmaking, collaborating with Rohmer and Hui, and her work on *Nude at Heart*.

**SU FRIEDRICH:** I'm a great admirer of your skills as an editor and I'm happy to have the opportunity to hear about how you make your magic. Before we talk about specific films and filmmakers, I'd like to hear more generally about the kinds of films you work on. Most editors only work in narrative, or in documentary, but you've crossed back and forth between the two genres so many times, as well as your experimental work. Can you talk about your choice to work in both areas and what some of your insights or experiences are about the differences in editing?

**MARY STEPHEN:** Alright, well... we'll start big! [*Laughs.*] When I started in film school, it was mainly experimental kinds of things, and then narrative films, and when I got to France and started working with Éric Rohmer, it was, of course, narrative films. Never did I think that I would get into documentaries, for the simple reason that, somehow, at that time, documentary seemed to be a far more serious and noble kind of undertaking. It also seemed to be quite exclusive. And it was a time when there was a big gap or boundary between fiction and documentary filmmaking. Nowadays, there's much more fusion. So I never really thought about it. How it actually happened was very simple and kind of silly. A French co-production was

looking for an editor for a Chinese documentary, one who could speak Chinese. Which is always the wrong reason, but on the other hand, not so wrong, because they were looking for someone who had some storytelling skills. That's how I started in documentary editing, without any of the codes. I had no idea whether there were actually rules or codes or whatever. But certainly the first time that I edited a documentary I had no idea what I was doing. It has to do with instinctively just going for what is understandable, what is attractive, what I would like to see in terms of very basic storytelling skills.

**FRIEDRICH:** Do you find that people who hire you to edit documentaries do it because you don't follow the rules? I'm somebody who learned that there are rules, and I don't follow them either, but I think some documentary directors really want them to be done exactly by the rules.

**STEPHEN:** I have a feeling that people who hire me, they don't know the rules either! [*Laughs.*] Like me, that's none of their concern. But I now understand that that is great, and it's maybe why people look for me. Strangely enough.

**FRIEDRICH:** Does working in documentary affect the way you edit narrative?

**STEPHEN:** Yeah, definitely. That's a very interesting question. Shortly after I started editing documentaries, in the beginning—they were all Chinese documentaries, of course—it was probably when I was editing the second documentary, called *Night in China*. It was by Ju Anqi and I was supposed to cut a new version. But at the same time, I had already committed myself to a film in Turkey. The Turkish narrative film, *Gitmek: My Marlon and Brando*, funnily enough was a fiction film, but the director came from human rights documentaries. Logistically, I spent three weeks every month in Istanbul and one week in Paris. During that period I realized how much the two things were nourishing each other. It was really interesting that I was cutting this documentary in Paris, and I would go back to Istanbul and have the inspiration from that documentary cutting to use to cut fiction and vice versa.

**FRIEDRICH:** When I was making the EDITED BY website, I discovered Cécile Decugis—one of the three women (along with Françoise Collin and Agnès Guillemot) who in combination edited 15 films by Godard. That in itself is an astonishing fact, since in all the praise about his inventive film structure, almost nothing is said about the women who contributed so much to that inventiveness. And I learned that Decugis had been your mentor. She had edited nine of films for Éric Rohmer, and then you took over that position and edited ten films of his between 1992 and 2010. I would be curious to hear something about your experience with Decugis, and what you learned from her that played a role in the ways in which you edited for Rohmer.

**STEPHEN:** One of the stories, of course, is that it was because I wanted to stay in France that Rohmer asked me if I would agree to be Cécile's assistant when they started *The Aviator's Wife*, even though by that time I had made two of my own films. He said that Cécile was very tough with her assistants, and that she always makes them cry. I still remember exactly his words. But she never did make me cry, and she was really kind with me, and we became very good friends.

It was the first time that I worked professionally in the editing room, and I learned the very menial, very boring tasks and the patience that an editor has to have. It also was the first time that two women were locked in an editing room and working together, so I learned about this kind of rapport, of the working relationship with two women together. It was very enriching.

The funniest thing is that a few years later I was invited to Hong Kong to talk about the French New Wave. So I went to see Cécile, and I asked her for some information, especially about the jump cuts in *Breathless*. She basically said that she didn't remember this. [*Laughs.*] I asked Rohmer about it, and he said that it was not something very mysterious—apparently he's talking about a scene where the characters walk in front of the window, and that Cécile would say to Godard: *you can't use this, this is overexposed*. And Godard said, *just cut out that piece*. When people talk about the jump cuts in that film they are talking about in the car, but I guess once they start to do it that way they just do it in every scene.

**FRIEDRICH:** I'm sure you've had the experience that sometimes an accident or a problem creates something really interesting.

**STEPHEN:** That is actually what I eventually did with another film. It was a film by Lina Yang—who is becoming very much a sought-after, remarkable woman fiction director in China. It was a film called *Wild Grass of Qingdao*, about an orphanage in Qingdao. One of the things that she threw away, that she didn't think that she could use, was overexposed footage of these kids—because she shot over 12 years in an orphanage. And that is one of the topics I talk about a lot, about thrown-away footage by the directors that I usually pick up. And actually it was completely usable, because these kids become adolescents, and so I used the overexposed footage as flashback. Not only that, not only were they overexposed, but they were in a sort of echoey kind of room, so it was just perfect for that.

**FRIEDRICH:** In the master class at DOK Leipzig, when you were talking about your work with Rohmer, you said, “I collaborated with him,” instead of saying that you were his editor. And in *Nude at Heart* it lists you as the collaborator after we see the director's name. I haven't heard editors refer to themselves as collaborators, but knowing how central the role of the editor is, especially in documentary films, can you talk a little bit about that, about how you see yourself in relation to the director?

**STEPHEN:** Yes, I would say that, in fact, in Rohmer's case, I could be quite classically credited as “editor,” but when I say “collaborator” it's because I also did other things with him, like the music and stuff like that. And also the whole family relationship with Rohmer is that we were there all the time; we're not there just for the filming or for the editing, we're basically nourishing the whole Rohmer house. But in terms of the other ones, when it is with the special mention of “collaboration,” it is a more complex kind of thing, because—especially in documentaries, I'm sure that you've encountered this a lot—editors are asking questions now about when are they co-authors. It's just such a complex question.

I do a lot of work with first and second films with really new filmmakers, young filmmakers, and a lot of these young filmmakers, they've been filming for like 5 years, 10 years, whatever—you know? And I don't have the heart to fight for a co-author credit. I think that the question is complex, and they should have invented another term. On the other hand, editing, just “editing,” just “editor” is very misleading, because one of the first experiences I had is in China, the editors are, like... you can have someone just punching buttons. How do you distinguish between an editor who's actually writing the film, and something else? When you see in the documentary “in collaboration with,” it's that I am given the freedom to more or less write the film, with the blessing of the director. But that is something that I hope that we will be able to work out for future generations, it is very complicated.



*Photo by Lina Yang during the editing of her film Wild Grass of Qingdao.*

**FRIEDRICH:** I watched *Odoriko* and then *Nude at Heart*, which were shown together at DOK Leipzig. While watching the first, I had many questions about it. Not just about the structure, but I also felt that so many things were left unsaid about the experiences of the women we were observing. The second version, the one I call “your” film, was entirely different. Not only did it answer all the questions I had, but it did a much better job of creating specific characters. My experience watching the two films became the perfect example of a pet theory of mine, which is that the vast majority of documentary films are in fact made by the editor, not the director. Huge amounts of raw footage can be built up in a hundred ways, so it takes a great editor to wrestle that footage into a sensible and engaging story, which I think you did magnificently. Can you describe how you negotiated with the director to create this entirely different film and more to the point, now you see the differences between them?

**STEPHEN:** Now that's very interesting, because that is why we chose both films in DOK Leipzig—it's a very unique situation, and it's a fascinating process. The director himself wanted very much to work with me since the very beginning, but for at least three years I couldn't. I coached him for different [industry] venues, different [workshop] things like Busan, and Yamagata Documentary Dojo, and so I knew the project very well, but I still couldn't do anything with it. He kept on editing, and sometimes with some help, and most of the time alone. So he had his own thing, he had his own vision.

When I got on board it was after the lockdown, and I could [work on it], my plans changed. I asked him to send me a selection of the material, along with the whole collection. I was astounded to see these very intimate conversations with these women, which touched me a great deal. Rasha [Salti], the [ARTE] commissioning editor, said that it would have been completely different if it had been edited by a man. When we saw the film in progress, what he was doing, that he was almost finished with... well, it was basically *Odoriko*. We only saw that kind of almost fantasy-like sort of thing. [For my *Nude at Heart*] I chose what touched me most, and what moved me most were really the woman-to-woman kinds of things. What touched me was mostly the women's stories. And so I really think that the difference between the two films is that... I wouldn't say as simplistically as the female gaze and the male gaze, but whatever touched me, were more that kind of thing. What also touched me was this guy, this director's presence in these rooms, and I wanted to highlight this in little ways.

**FRIEDRICH:** That was fantastic, because the whole time I was watching *Odoriko*, I kept thinking: he's there in that room, but nobody's acknowledging it. We're never experiencing it. There's the lady in your version, she goes like, *Woah, you're there!* And I just thought: "Thank you. Thank you. Yes. Somebody is in the room with them."

**STEPHEN:** Also I absolutely wanted to put in the scene when he explained to Rena [Itsuki], *I wanted to shoot this not just because of an exotic profession, but through this I wanted to film womanhood*. And of course, Rena right away said, *that's not how you go about it*. The thing is, I dared to do all that simply because those are the selections that they gave me. [laughs] And maybe he didn't dare, maybe there's some sort of reserve there. I think there was also something else. There was a very respectful relationship—it's especially true in Japan, but in most of Asia—that I had been his, more or less, mentor in these two other places. It's not the director-editor relationship, but he kept that kind of mentor relationship going. But he would say something, if he really didn't agree with something he would say so. But what he didn't agree with usually did not have to do with the content.

**FRIEDRICH:** I'd like to ask you about your work with a great Chinese director of narrative films—Ann Hui—alongside your work with two great Chinese directors of documentary films—Du Haibin and Lixin Fan. So let's start with your work—or your collaboration—with Hui.

**STEPHEN:** Ann is somebody that I met something like 40 years ago. We both started as youngsters. [Laughs.] We never collaborated together until a few years ago on a short segment

of a film, a collective omnibus film that's just been released, called *Septet: The Story of Hong Kong*, a Johnnie To production. And then I cut *Our Time Will Come* and then the last one, *Love After Love*. It's actually quite straightforward: she asked me. [Laughs.] Since we have known each other for a long time, it was really fun working together.

But it's a completely different system, because while she doesn't make overtly, heavily commercial films, she does work in the mainstream system, which has to do with stars and with a certain way of doing things, and so on. But when we edit, we keep a sort of indie approach. Of course, she flies me to Hong Kong to edit the films, but I don't work in edit suites in big post-production houses, I work in my bedroom. [laughs] I want the editing machine next to my bed, basically. It's always been like that. So we rent a studio for me, where I sleep, and we set up the desk just next to it. I like to either work until very, very late at night, or in the middle of night, get up and do something. So she keeps this system, and she keeps the rhythm of coming in every few days to see what I've been up to. So it's just her and me, just like *Éric Rohmer* and me.

**FRIEDRICH:** What editing software do you use?

STEPHEN: You really want to know? [Laughs.]

**FRIEDRICH:** Of course!

**STEPHEN:** I'm still using Final Cut 7. [Laughs.]

**FRIEDRICH:** Yes! Oh, my God. [Shouts in delight.] I'm screaming because that is the perfect software. I'll never forgive Apple for changing it into something useless. Teaching, we had to start using Premiere, which I think is *ugh!* Friends say things like, *oh, DaVinci Resolve is really good*. I'm now editing something on Final Cut 7 on a tower that's from 2010, and every day I think: *Please don't break. Please don't die, please.*

**STEPHEN:** *Nude at Heart* was edited on Final Cut 7. We had to go to the production offices to look in their equipment for what could take Final Cut 7. It's exactly like you said: for the reason that it is fast and simple to use. It's been years that I've been trying to switch to something else, and I still don't know what.

**FRIEDRICH:** Lixin Fan's *Last Train Home* is one of the most powerful documentaries I've ever seen. The images are haunting, the structure is flawless, and considering that it's a story about such a massive subject—the annual migration of 130 million Chinese factory workers going back to their hometowns for a short visit at the New Year—it was remarkable how that was conveyed so effectively. You spoke in the master class about asking the director if he wanted a “fiction” and that he said yes, and you then showed a crucial scene from the film to illustrate that idea. Can you describe that again, and talk a bit more about how it all came together, and what sorts of choices you had to make?

**STEPHEN:** I don't exactly remember how I met Lixin Fan. One day his Canadian producers called, and basically he had been filming this story. He had been making a rough cut assembly in Montreal with an assistant. It's kind of like the *Nude at Heart* story: he started his cut, but the difference is that he didn't have the time to finish, because I had already been on board. I think that question was posed to the producers after I saw his first cut: *is it a fiction feel that you want?* And they said yes. I could see it that way. Of course, I was sticking to the reality of the thing. But I would be dividing the film more or less into chapters in terms of the seasons and so on. I needed things to do the storytelling in a really narrative kind of way. I would take things from another time, it was starting to be that kind of recomposing—although it follows a certain logic. It wasn't betraying, it wouldn't be telling another story. It really became that kind of technique, or that kind of strategy.

**FRIEDRICH:** Can you talk a little about your collaboration with Du Haibin?

**STEPHEN:** I had known Du Haibin before because he had a film in Venice called *Umbrella*, and that he was cutting it himself until the moment that it was going on-screen. And everybody was horrified and said: *somebody has to come in and recut this film*. So that's what happened, that's how I knew him. And then we consecutively worked on three films together. But when they got me to recut *Umbrella*, my condition was that the director doesn't come into the editing room. It turned out very well, because he was happy discovering what I would do with this material. He kept saying that I cut more than 30 or 40 minutes, but he didn't know where—not only that, he said, *but you put in all kinds of new material*. He couldn't understand how that could happen. We [later] made another French co-production, *A Young Patriot*. It's a very different type of storytelling, of Chinese documentary. *Last Train Home* had been so successful, I remember somebody told me a distributor in the U.S. was saying that on the one hand it's wonderful because it put Chinese documentaries on the map, but on the other hand, there's a problem here because all the cinemas and the programmers, they're looking for *Last Train Home 2*. They don't want to accept anything that has another structure, another way of telling the story. Sometimes I don't even like the word “storytelling.” The more that I get into documentaries, watching documentaries, the more that I'm worried or annoyed that sometimes it's just feeding us stories that have a certain structure, and that have to go a certain way, and so on and so on. Whereas films like what Du Haibin does has to do with a mood, or these little glimpses of life. There's certainly no three-act structure there.

**FRIEDRICH:** I could talk all day long with you, but I'm sure you're busy. Thank you for taking as much time as you have, and for your innumerable contributions to the art of cinema. Work like yours is why I made *Edited By*—I'm continually amazed by the craft of editing.

**STEPHEN:** It's huge work, too—the website is amazing. Thank you for all these intelligent questions and for your enthusiasm.

<https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/the-collaborative-editor-mary-stephen-in-conversation-with-su-friedrich>



