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Bobbie O'Steen

Film Editing's Greatest Champion

BY SEAN MALIN



The actor Julian Sands spoke recently about how professional performers and their directors “are involved in visual painting.” “Actors,” he said, “are the paint” of a film (or a play), being brushed onto a panel by their artiste-in-chief, the director. The audience for any such work is the canvas, the receptacle of that art. The palette? The stage. But looking further into this metaphor, tricky questions come to light. Where, for example, are the film editors? Certainly their positions must be considered instrumental. After all, are editors not the craftspeople who sculpt the final moving pictures we love so much?

In this metaphor, editors are difficult to place, because without them, any piece of cinematic art cannot exist as an audience finally sees it. For instance, society would begin to consider Picasso’s paintings quite differently if it learned that a second painter sat with him, handed him paint, and suggested that the application of oil in certain parts of *Guernica* was too thick. *Guernica* is known as one individual’s work, but this is almost never the case with film; regardless of the presences of editors, directors are considered the sole authors of their work in many circles. So it is, and has been, with them ever since the *Cahiers du Cinema* began attributing auteur theory to filmmakers in 1950s France. These days, names are used as loglines (“Presented by...”) and selling points; the last names Scorsese and Spielberg are often the sole reasons their tickets sell.

But both Scorsese and Spielberg are famously loyal to their editors, Thelma Schoonmaker, A.C.E., and Michael Kahn, A.C.E. Schoonmaker and Kahn have helped to paint the images of their respective director’s films such that, if the directors can help it, they choose only to work in close partnership with said editors. These collaborations define their joint works regardless of style, content, genre or theme. Consider that Schoonmaker and Scorsese made *Raging Bull* together in 1980, and *The Aviator* in 2004. Kahn and Spielberg made *Schindler’s List*; they also happened to make *The Adventures of Tintin* (2011). So where is the Picasso-like recognition for these artists?

This question occurs so strongly to author Bobbie O’Steen that it has become the theme of her life’s work. A little background: O’Steen attended Stanford University where she studied anthropology, among other subjects, in the humanities. She worked for a time as a story editor, a screenwriter and a film editor. She later married the late Sam O’Steen, one of the most prolific and influential editors in the history of the medium. His resume included *The Graduate* (1967), *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), and *Chinatown* (1974); and he was to Mike Nichols and Roman Polanski what Kahn is to Spielberg. Bobbie often worked in unity with Sam, and spent much of her time behind the scenes of some of the most famous films in history. So deep was their connection to film editing that she assembled interviews with Sam for the



2001 book, *Cut to the Chase*. The O'Steens' investigation into Sam's technique and knowledge led to one of the most verbal, informative studies of film editing in history, one on which the producer Robert Greenhut comments: "If you really want to know how to edit a movie, be advised and read *Cut to the Chase* before you go any further." By pedigree alone, Ms. O'Steen knows what she now talks about.

Bobbie O'Steen's second book, *The Invisible Cut*, has a subtitle that sets into five simple words what she has devoted herself to

discovering: *How Editors Make Movie Magic*. The process is not so simple as the book portends—as the term “magic” implies—how a film becomes an artistic manifestation is an ethereal quasi-science. As O'Steen writes, “[The film editor] shouldn't count frames, or inch backward and forward over the cuts. This is not math or mechanics.” Even in this age of technological wonder, no machine can navigate a story's nuances, choose between a close-up or a medium long shot, or decide on what feels right for a scene's length. In fact, many filmmakers cannot do such things themselves (properly, at least). For these and a myriad of other concerns, a magician is the only solution in the editing room.

What O'Steen's career illuminates is a substantially under-explored element of the editing process, one that is often left out of instruction manuals, guidebooks, and editing symposia. One editor referred to this element—an instinctual understanding of social interaction, dialogue, and film rhythm key to successful editing—in an interview as the “bullshit detector.” She currently hosts “Inside the Cutting Room,” evening events which first celebrate the achievements of master editors before diving into vocal, in-depth discussions and screenings of their film work (on the series title, she remarks, “It's like *Inside the Actors Studio* minus James Lipton”). In sessions with film editors like Tim Squyres, A.C.E. (*Gosford Park*, *Life of Pi*), Nicholas C. Smith, A.C.E. (*Brave* [2012]), and most recently, Andrew Weisblum, A.C.E. (*Black Swan*, *Moonrise Kingdom*), O'Steen and her subjects attempt to narrate the process by which film editors tailor their movies. Clips from several films are culled together, and what emerges is a distinct sense of the editors themselves. Not the directors, screenwriters or producers, but editors working as much from their technical knowledge as from their gut instincts and bullshit detectors.

In a recent “Cutting Room” chat, as related by writer Dan Ochiva for the Motion Picture Editors Guild site, Weisblum described cutting *Black Swan*, and specifically, the strategy involved in setting up the failures of Natalie Portman's character, Nina, is to trace the build up of a mental breakdown. This level of discussion is uncommon in the industry, and O'Steen went further: she explored with this acclaimed editor his techniques not only for working with director Darren Aronofsky, but also his similar yet different experiences editing the most recent movie from filmmaker Wes Anderson. In the former's case, Weisblum put together the first cut of the film; afterward, he and Aronofsky watched dailies side by side before fine-tuning the finished project. By contrast, Anderson works with Weisblum throughout his process. Though Anderson's and Aronofsky's editorial needs were particularly divergent, they both relied on Weisblum to craft their finished products, just as they had with films like 2008's *The Wrestler* and 2009's *Fantastic Mr. Fox*.

As Ochiva relates, by speaking actively with Weisblum about his experiences, O’Steen helps to align the editor’s personality and style with diverse work. In that sense, “Inside the Cutting Room” is truly unique in both its biographical and its technical relationships to editors. O’Steen’s own comparison with James Lipton is reasonable—the depth and diligence that Lipton demonstrates on his program have netted him multiple Emmy®-Award nominations. But by contrast, there are perhaps no programs of any kind with such a wide range of exposure to and analysis of the film editors’ work.

Ms. O’Steen’s efforts have not gone unrecognized. In New York City, the prestigious French Institute Alliance Française has opened its doors for these “Cutting Room” events, and its host has also taught graduate workshops that similarly deconstruct the editors’ work at Tisch School of the Arts at NYU. This magazine has published her articles several times over, and she is a perennial panelist at EditFest in New York and Los Angeles. In addition, O’Steen has projects in the works with two world-renowned film companies; while I’m not at liberty to disclose the companies or the projects, their scopes have the capacity to change the public’s relationship to film editing.

Carol Littleton, A.C.E., the Oscar®-nominated editor of *E.T. the Extra Terrestrial* and a subject and friend of Bobbie O’Steen’s, told me that her work brings to light one of the major issues plaguing the form. “People want to know so very, very badly what [editors] do. But it’s so hard to explain what we do and how we do it. So much of it is analytical, and so much of it pure instinct, that I don’t know where one ends and the other begins.” O’Steen’s “Inside the Cutting Room” uses her insider knowledge and sensitivity to the work of editors to expose the techniques, or rather the feelings, and the instincts, behind “making movie magic.” Littleton suggests that what separates Ms. O’Steen from everyone else in the field is her study of anthropology at Stanford. Littleton believes that her friend’s multifaceted background “makes her a bit of an archaeologist,” exposing the actual bones of filmmaking, long hidden from the filmgoing public. “Bobbie really studies film. She does all the research. And she uses any piece of film she can get her hands on ... to get inside the way we work.”

With her events being successful and her friendships with editors deepening in the process, it does not seem overly optimistic to suggest that the editor-as-artist trope is expanding appropriately. Even O’Steen has expressed pleasant surprise at the reactions she manages to get from her growing audience. “Not all of the people at these events are editors,” she related over the phone, “and some of them are just cinephiles. It’s incredibly encouraging to discover that they are informed and curious about what an editor really does to shape a film. During the Q&As we don’t hear, ‘So what was it like to work with Natalie Portman?’ The questions go deeper.”

Bobbie O’Steen’s decades-long work continues to generate both a positive public following and the respect of her collaborators. While Squyres, Schoonmaker, Kahn and Littleton are not yet on their way to the same name-profitability as Spielberg, Scorsese or Aronofsky, the field that this magazine and its parent guild support may experience a shift in values. With the aforementioned projects on the horizon, and the continued growth of “Inside the Cutting Room,” O’Steen is pushing for heightened and appropriate recognition for the experts whose names are too long kept dark. We think we know the Picassos of film—but Bobbie O’Steen wants to shine a light on their partners-in-art. And she might just be doing it. **CE**



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