

Sarah Taylor:

This episode was generously sponsored by Jaxx, a creative house and Annex Pro AVID. Hello and welcome to The Editor's Cut, I'm your host Sarah Taylor. We'd like to point out that the lands we have created this podcast and that many of you may be listening to us from are part of ancestral territory. It is important for all of us to deeply acknowledge that we are on ancestral territory, that has long served as a place where indigenous peoples have lived, met and interacted. We honor, respect, and recognize these nations that have never relinquished their rights or sovereign authority over the lands and waters on which we stand today. We encourage you to reflect on the history of the land, the rich culture, the many contributions and the concerns that impact indigenous individuals and communities. Land acknowledgements are the start to a deeper action.

This episode is the online master series that took place on May 24th, 2020 in conversation with Mary Stephen, CCE. Born in Hong Kong and based in Paris, Mary Stephen has been working in narrative film and documentary for more than 30 years as an editor. Her work has been screened internationally at Venice, Cannes, and the Tribeca Film Festivals. Known for her decades long collaboration with French filmmaker, Eric Rohmer. She has worked in Europe and Asia on numerous award-winning feature, documentaries and fiction, including Tiffany Hsiung's *The Apology*, Lixin Fan's *The Last Train*, Li Yang's *Blind Mountain*, Ann Hui's *Our Time Will Come*, and the upcoming *Love After Love*. This conversation was moderated by Xi Feng.

[show open]

Xi Feng:

My name is Xi Feng. I'm a film editor based in Montreal and it's a great pleasure for me to introduce Mary and moderate this conversation with her. I met Mary in 2009 precisely, and also in the month of May. So 11 years ago, I met Mary when I was freshly out of university. I joined this post-production team of *Last Train Home* as assistant editor and Mary joining in May to cut the film. And I was not at all familiar with like the craft of editing. I was just starting, but she opened the whole door of magic to me in front of my eyes. And I can see because of like the amount of footage in documentary film, it's massive. And I organized all the footage and I couldn't imagine how we can craft a story out of that.

But like seeing Mary crafting some of the scenes amazingly and with such a cinematic touch, it just made me realize how great this craft and how important this process is. Later on, we had a longer personal relationship crossing from Canada, Asia, and in Paris, especially Paris. I met you a few times in Paris and you just always keep inspiring me in many levels. The most fascinating things is like that I always was inspired by you as an Asian Canadian who suddenly become in this like... of stepping in the middle of the French New Wave. Can you tell us a little bit about the story?

Mary Stephen:

It's the story that's already quite often told, but I think that we can tell it again in the context of the... because this is the Asian heritage month. I believe that it's Asian heritage month in Canada and Asia Pacific heritage month in the States. In that context, it was a complete accident that I ended up... I mean, never would I have dreamt that I would end up in the middle of something so unlikely that is the

French New Wave. So I started in Hong Kong and already I was completely fascinated with the French New Wave because when I was 14, 15, we were going to scenic clubs and we saw all the films. We saw the Jules and Jim, L'année dernière à Marienbad, we saw Hiroshima mon amour, and of course 400 Blows, and of course Breathless, and all that.

And so it was completely an eye-opener. And after that, there was only one thing in my head, it was to go to Paris, to go to France. But it wasn't that easy because my family immigrated to Canada and we were in Montreal, I finished university there. I actually went from mathematics to fine arts, to communication arts and specializing in cinema at that time with Charles Gagnon and Father Fisher and all the amazing Jesuit Fathers. And then I decided to go for a year in Paris for an exchange program with the University of Wisconsin. I've never been to Wisconsin, but it was one year in Paris. And by that time, I left and sold everything that I had in Canada. And somehow knew that probably it would be a one-way ticket, but without knowing how or why. And by the time that I got there within the first month I was sitting in the class of Eric Rohmer, he does a class for his students and everybody can sit in.

And it was the only class at that time which was really talking about filmmaking, is all I wanted to do was to make films. And he would take whatever that he was making that year, and he would have a theme whether it's about decor or cinematography or whatever. And he would talk about that in practice, and this year it was about budget. And I mean, there's nothing more...

It may be also a funny story because we were getting favors from, of course, all interview filmmakers from editing rooms and whatever that would let us have the room for cheap and so on. And we ended up in an editing room where these old actors, at that time we thought old, actors were actually dubbing porno films.

And so we were in this middle of this little, little, tiny place. And we were in the editing rooms editing our indie film and the next door is all this sound going on. So he (Eric Rohmer) came to see the process of editing. And then we... I mean, by that time I had gone to his office to ask for a budget and so on, all this is everywhere on the internet, the story. And he invited me for tea every afternoon in his office. The point of this story is, in this context, that at that time I never thought of it as something unusual. I mean, if I looked around at that time, there were no Asians in that milieu of cinema ...

Xi Feng:

Yeah, there were very few Asians in French New Wave movies.

Mary Stephen:

... except a few. Truffaut had this Japanese girl in one of his films whom I met later, actually. And of course there were a lot of Vietnamese working in the makeup department or costumes department, but nothing like today that it's so integrated.

Xi Feng:

By then the representation was also not a theme, right? Like cultural or racial representation.

Mary Stephen:

So at a certain time... and so it was completely by accident that I was dropped into the middle of this pot, I could go there every afternoon to have tea with Eric Rohmer and he was rehearsing, and I could go and see and so on. And what is more is that I really wanted to stay in Paris. To stay and work and live in Paris, but to do so I needed some money. And he asked me if I would agree or stoop to be his editor's

assistant, and his editor being Cecile Decugis who edited Breathless. I mean, how can you refuse? And so that's how it happens. And it's turned out that this line that I've said many times, he said at the time, "Are you sure? Because Cecile is very nasty to her assistants. And she always makes them cry."

Xi Feng:

But stricter teacher teaches the best students.

Mary Stephen:

But she never. She never made me cry. She consoled me when I cried for something else, but we remained very good friends until the year she passed away, a couple of years ago. So I think that it has to do with luck, chance, and it has to do with grabbing that chance. And it has a lot to do with not thinking of yourself as victim, as a second zone (citizen), "I can't do that because I'm not good enough. I'm Asian and I can't go into mainstream, whatever". That's how it happens.

Xi Feng:

It's fascinating that you talk about that Eric teacher of course of budgets, because I remember watching one of his interview, he was exactly mentioning that. He said like, "Instead of making one big budget, Hollywood films, we could make 10 good cinema with the same amount of money. And it's a bigger contribution to the art of cinema in the history of cinema." And he also had a very special approach of work. Can you also tell us a little bit?

Mary Stephen:

Yeah. The budget was very important to him in the sense that, I remember he borrowed a VHS from me of a Marguerite Duras's film; well, he admired the way that she made films, Duras, but more than anything else, he admired the way that she made films with nothing, with a very small budget. And that was how he operated. He didn't want to rely on... (showing photos) here he is making a Super 8 movie, and here is my offspring. This is in his office and this was when we were still editing in film, of course. He has his crew and cast basically already in place, like a theater troupe kind of thing. And he didn't want to rely on big financiers or big television companies to make those films.

Xi Feng:

I think it will be very interesting to explore this method after this COVID time, to have a reduced crew and to still maintain the production.

Mary Stephen:

The advantage of that too, is that they lived together. They lived in one big house. So, basically it's overlooking the beach, this is "SUMMER'S TALE". And overlooking the beach, so they were able to... because it was in Brittany, the weather was very changing. And so every time that the sun comes out or the light is good, he says, "Okay, let's go." And then they just go. I mean, can you imagine today doing something like that, that is really a lesson to be learned because nowadays for a short film you have like on the credits, there are about 30, 40 people.

Xi Feng:

I guess like people who are influenced by Rohmer. Like Hong San Soo for example, they do films in this manner. They do smaller budgets films, and yet very prolific productions.

Mary Stephen:

Yeah this is his 100th year of birth. So there is in his hometown of Tulle, there are all kinds of festivities that they are actually... One of the thing is that they're inviting... they don't have a lot of budget but they are trying to have a category called the cineastes who are influenced by Rohmer. So there's a lot of cineastes in Japan, in China, in Korea, in the States.

Xi Feng:

Well, after Rohmer passed away, and even before that, you started to edit films with young filmmakers from China, Turkey, and Canada, and France. And many filmmakers refer to you as the godmother of the independent films in these countries. And can you talk to us a little bit about the transition? And I imagine the role, it's such a big shift.

Mary Stephen:

From Rohmer, I mean, later on in this talk, we're going to get a little bit more into certain things about technique and stuff, but it is also related to what we're talking about now, in terms of that when I was working with Rohmer, it was more like it is a way from the cinema, from the industry in any case. Because he would quite often come into the editing room and open the newspaper and say, "Let's see what's happening in the cinema world today." Like he considered himself away from it. I remember that several friends were saying to me, "you'll have to think about the post Rohmer period".

Because he was getting on, he was not going to be eternal. And he was making films until he was 89. At a certain time, I had an offer from China. There was already an offer in Chinese language of a documentary film that I was going to edit in France with a French co-producer.

And that is basically because of the language. And at that time I had never really edited a documentary before. I must talk about this because at that time, and still may be a little bit now, that documentary and fiction films, the two worlds are very separate. Even though that today the filmmakers, directors...even though the boundaries are being a fluid a little bit more-

Xi Feng:

Blurred, yes.

Mary Stephen:

Yeah, blurred. And at that time, the documentary world seemed to be much more serious. I just had the feeling that it was la chasse gardée. It's like a world that we were too frivolous to enter. And so by chance of because I was Chinese, they offered me to cut this film with a Chinese documentary filmmaker that I will not name, but it wasn't a happy experience. And especially since it was my first documentary film. But sometime later, Isabelle Glachant who does a lot of Chinese, French liaison and co-productions, she told me that Li Yang was looking for someone to cut Blind Mountain. And I had liked his Blind Shaft before. But at that very same moment... In fact, everything happened at the same time that year. I was actually talking with a very dear friend of mine, Harry Sutherland, who was producing documentaries at the time in Vancouver. And he told me that he was visiting some Armenian filmmaker

friends and sitting there was a Turkish film director, Huseyin Karabey, who was a human rights documentary director, but who was pitching his first fiction.

So he said that if Huseyin could get into Rotterdam to pitch his film, then Harry would go with him to help him. And indeed he got selected. And so Harry and the co-producer Sophie (Lorant) called me from Rotterdam and said, "There's a film you have to edit." And at that time I was just getting out of the Rohmer phase, he was slowing down his activities, and I didn't quite know what I was getting into. I was supposed to be advising this film. And at the same time, I had already committed to going to China. When I saw the material, I thought, okay, you can't have just someone to come in once every month and say, "Okay, you do this and do that." You need someone hands-on to do this because the script needed to be changed. So they agreed with the English co-producer Lucinda (Englehart) as well.

And so I was going off to Istanbul for three weeks in a row, and come back for a week to edit another Chinese film. And that was a very eye-opening experience. And so it comes back to something that I really want to talk about in terms of a career change and that kind of thing, is that I think that every time it is a flow. Opportunities come and I think that I like to take things that are a little bit outside of my comfort zone. I am someone who's like basically quite... I'm not an adventurer. It has to be within a certain limit.

[crosstalk 00:18:55] But certainly going to edit in a language that I don't understand and going to a region that I don't understand at all, it was quite fascinating, and really challenging, and very exciting. So that really opened the door to a whole wave of young Turkish, indie filmmakers. That somehow it was also a new experience to be the only one in there who had the most experience. I mean, it's a complete change that I felt like I had the least experience or not that much experience in a very old, traditional French cinema.

Xi Feng:

In different countries they also have different cinema culture and the different industry or working method, I imagine. And the role of the editor will play... are different in those industries. How would you navigate this relationship between those countries?

Mary Stephen:

It's true that the role of the editor is very different. It was very different in Asia and certainly like in Turkey and so on. And certainly in China it has changed a great deal because when I started there, it was why I said the first experience was not a good one, is that they are used to working with editors who are technicians, who are like punching (buttons)-

Xi Feng:

[crosstalk 00:20:26] Yeah.

Mary Stephen:

And so, in fact it's the director who makes all the other choices and then you just punch. Which is not the way that we work in Europe, or I suppose North America. It had to be a sort of change of mindset. It was not so much a change of technique, but you really have to convince them that you can be the

collaborator of a director and that you're not taking their film away from them. You're not becoming the parent of the film. I'm always saying that it's like being a midwife. I'm just here to deliver your baby. The baby is going to look like you, and then once I give you the baby, I will fade away, which is sometimes heartbreaking. But that is the case.

Xi Feng:

I guess also because you worked with a lot of young filmmakers and sometimes first-time filmmakers that happens a lot that they might have this kind of insecurity of handing the film material into a very advanced experienced editor.

Mary Stephen:

Things are changing. I mean, slowly, slowly, things are changing. For the last 15 years, I can see that things are changing in terms of that there's a lot more trust, there's a lot more understanding of what the role of an editor is, and what an editor can bring to a project, whether it is a fiction or documentary. And especially in documentary, like in more developing countries, there is more understanding that you need an experienced editor to at least final shape your film kind of thing.

Xi Feng:

Yeah. We often say that editors are the unsung hero of the film and our work always goes unnoticeable when it's good.

Mary Stephen:

It's changing, it's changing.

On the other hand, we don't need to be so much in the spotlight because I mean, basically it's a work that is very internal and if we are out in the spotlight all the time, we would get distracted. It's like the way that I work is that I have to isolate myself in an editing room and I can't even have somebody beside me.

So in fact, it is very frustrating for trainees or assistants who are trying to learn something in the editing room. And unfortunately I can never accept because just the presence and the vibrations of somebody else in the room, zaps my thoughts.

Xi Feng:

And recently you work a lot in Hong Kong, was Hong Kong indie films. And even with Ann Hui your current film, latest film Our Time Will Come. Can you tell us a little bit about this new journey towards Hong Kong cinema and back to the roots?

Mary Stephen:

The Hong Kong cinema... Actually, I read somewhere that, after an interview, somebody wrote that, "And then Ann Hui brought her back to her birthplace to work as an editor," which is very interesting because in fact, I had been doing quite a few indie films in Hong Kong and China, but mostly in Hong Kong for a while before doing a bigger Ann Hui film. So it comes back to ... I was making some notes about this. When I was talking about documentary and fiction editing, and that we as fiction... that

come from fiction, we didn't feel, I didn't feel legitimate as a serious documentary editor; from my view they (documentary editors) have so much more stuff, so much more substance. And that this is the same. I mean, in the sense that even though you have been working with smaller films and indie films, and so on, then legitimacy comes when you are working with more important, more well known, more experienced director, it's like a stamp of approval, which is okay.

I really admire the way that both Ann Hui and Eric Rohmer do things because they are in a system, they are in an industry, but they are keeping a sort of mindset that is very independent. And when I'm editing with Ann, it's that we're editing where I sleep and what I like to do, I like to edit exactly where I sleep. So there's nobody to disturb us. It's not like in this editing studio where you have all kinds of people and pressure from producers and so on. She is very protective about that. She's very good about that. That she works like an independent person exactly like Eric Rohmer would be working with me. And I admire them both because they are these survivors in this industry. First of all it's called an industry, not in art form, not anything like a... It's an industry.

So they are survivors in that format, and at the same time she is even more because she is a woman. And the more I know about, the more that I have navigated in the Hong Kong cinema, the Chinese cinema, that kind of thing, and Hong Kong commercial cinema thing, the more I think what amazing thing that she has done. How any woman is still standing after 50 years in this thing? I mean-

Xi Feng:

A very extremely tough position for a woman to stand in Asian culture I find. In a culture of male dominant world and culture.

Mary Stephen:

Yes, working with her was really... I mean, somehow it legitimized my working in Hong Kong cinema, but she would be the first to say that she didn't start by working with me.

Ann is very supportive of the younger filmmakers.

Xi Feng:

And she's one of the most unique cinema authors in Hong Kong cinema.

Mary Stephen:

Yes, absolutely.

Xi Feng:

In China, in Hong Kong cinema industry, I feel like there was like a big portion of commercial films and they're just like smaller voices for... smaller portion for the cinema d'auteur as we say, and she's one of them and she insist, and you can see that stamina coming from her and her films.

Mary Stephen:

There's something to say here about the fact that... you would notice if you see her filmography... that she works with all the top people in every category except me (laugh). I mean, I'm sort of the non-top person. And so basically she has the choice of doing that. But she also likes to work with whoever that

she wants to work with. The thing is that, why I say that it's not false modesty, it is the reality of the industry. I'm not a, how do you say, like in the old days when you tried to get finance a film, you have to bring in a bankable star. So there are bankable technicians as well and I'm not one of them. She pulls her weight to say, like, "I want to work with Mary." And why is it that? The thing is that, I think it is the same as working with any director, actually. Is that the more they have substance, the more they're experienced, the more they are good, the more they want you to surprise them.

Not that they want you to surprise them...the more they know you will surprise them. You will bring them something that they haven't thought of, otherwise what's the use?

Xi Feng:

So they're seeking for collaboration, but they're not just-

Mary Stephen:

Yeah, exactly.

Xi Feng:

... picking a technician.

Mary Stephen:

Yeah, exactly. So again, it comes back to the very first point, don't think of yourself as a victim or a second best, or as not commercial enough or whatever, or a woman or Asian or whatever. Just that if you are there... like I am in the office of Eric Rohmer, I'm in the editing room with Ann Hui, I know that I'm there because I have something to give.

Xi Feng:

Do you think with all these choices you have certain guidelines to make the career choices or with who you work with and with the project you work on? How do you make those choices?

Mary Stephen:

Well, I think that I'm in a lucky place, I'm in a good place that I can choose. It was not always the case, of course, but when it was not the case I was protected by Eric Rohmer. But even so, I've made some choices that are purely to get money on the table. Basically, I choose projects not just because it's an exciting project. And it's certainly not because it's going to be an award-winning project or that is going to be a very high-profile project, but I choose them for people. Really, it's for the subject and for the person that I will be working with and the people that I will be working with. Because I think that quite early already I realized that I'm not an easy person. I mean, that in the sense that I don't... I see quite a few friends colleagues who are much better than me in terms of getting along with people and I can't (laugh). I'm not very good at saying things to... and if I feel that somebody doesn't have any respect, I can't work with that person.

Xi Feng:

'cos it's like an intimate relationship working with a director in a production.

Mary Stephen:

And quite often I've said that you don't choose an editor for... quite often that people may choose me for the wrong reasons. They may think that I have connections with certain people, with certain producers, or with certain festivals or so on, or that I speak Chinese. That is not the reason I would choose a project. And certainly not the reason that I would choose my career path. And in a way I do have a very strange career in the sense that it's very indie, it is very respected. People wonder why I'm not on some big commercial projects or high-profile projects. But basically, I cannot work with big egos and I tend to shy away from that. And I think that I have much more satisfaction in nurturing new talent. And I like to work with first and second films. And for me, it's much more satisfying to be working with younger people or people with whom I have a good chemistry than just choosing a project that I know will go on the Oscars list.

Xi Feng:

And I think it's a common attitude with the French film industry that is this disregard of superficial elements in filmmaking.

Mary Stephen:

Some people might think of it this stupid.

Xi Feng:

Why?

Mary Stephen:

Why did I not take this or that, or that? I suppose I'm not a... How do you say, a "careerist".

Xi Feng:

Probably the satisfaction always comes from within like the sincerity or an authenticity we have with our-

Mary Stephen:

I think that you need that in order to give something. Oh, in any case, I do.

Xi Feng:

Yeah. Filmmaking is such an intimate way of working as well. In any creation we have to kind of pour ourselves out highly. So it could be exhausting if the energy is not right with the other party.

Mary Stephen:

I do regret some choices, (laugh) "but why didn't I take this? Otherwise I would be up there now on the stage." No, no, I'm just joking.

Xi Feng:

... (that's probably why) you choose Paris...

Mary Stephen:

Yes, okay. It can be worse.

Xi Feng:

What I learned from working with you is that I realized editing is such tremendous craft that are also very subtle and mysterious. Because sometime in my early career, I was never able to ask the precise question about pacing, everything seems very large or very specific. So it goes into like one project, every project, and where every theme might be different. So it's very hard to understand this magic. And as you said you often work alone?

Mary Stephen:

Right.

Xi Feng:

It makes the process even more mysterious sometimes. So we want to know more about your concept of editing and what's are the important points that you think about. Because sometimes with the same material, different editors obviously come out with different solutions, and different pacing. And within a few frames or a few adjustments, it could entirely change the scene.

Mary Stephen:

Yes. I see that ... just trying to look sideways into the chats that there are many friends who are here and so many editors, wonderful to see from everywhere from England, from India, from everywhere. The magic, okay. It comes back to... it always like this is the third point about legitimacy. It's interesting, because it goes back to the fact that I went to Communication Arts at Loyola in Concordia. At that time we were not a film school, we were a communication arts department. And so we had different things like photography whatever, whatever, radio, and that kind of stuff. And I chose film but it was not at all like a film school structure like today that you learn editing, you learn the three-act structure and you learn the whatever, 360, 180 rule whatever.

I never went through those. We had to make a few films and basically that's it. And so when I was then propelled into this editor role by Eric Rohmer as an assistant editor, and then when Cecile retired, I became his editor. So I never went through that process of learning formally about editing.

Everything, well, happened because we were just putting his images together and stuff. So everything was learned intuitively. And that's what I mean by magic, especially after the Eric Rohmer years, when I went into cutting films with indie filmmakers, some of them... especially with the first films, first and second films, you have this massive material that sometimes there's a rough cut, but the magic is not there. And that I come in and I'm supposed to be this experienced editor and I'm supposed to make it happen.

In fact, I had always had a problem with legitimacy that I never went through that legitimate process of being the trained editor kind of thing. So the only way to deal with it is... sort of an emotional intuitive way of shutting myself with the material, looking at it, feeling it and really feeling where the magic might be. And I'm always saying that I think that there's a Tinkerbell somewhere in the editing room and all of a sudden she would spread some of those magic dust and something would happen that I had never thought of. And sometimes today, when I look at films that I've edited, "How did I think of that?" Not sure that it would happen the second time. Magic really is a big point.

That is why you have to trust in your intuitions. And after that, when I started to... People asked me to start doing classes or do talks and so on, then I started to have to formulate my thoughts. And that's when I started to think that, okay, maybe the way that I work is that I try to make a scene more surprising. I try to start it or somehow work it around so that the audience is not expecting me to cut it this way or to cut it here or so on. I mean, very recently I've seen, I don't know whether he's still here, a rough cut from a project that we are coaching right now, for Venice. We were going back and forth on this cut and then all of a sudden that I got another cut and I said to him, the director, who's also an editor. "Wow." I gave a little bit of advice or a little bit of suggestion and he can actually cut it on a cut point that I didn't expect. And that's really delightful. People like what I do also for the same thing. And I look for it to cut it a different way, to make it... the sin, I think, is when a scene is flat.

Xi Feng:

Very easy to cut a scene flat. I think-

Mary Stephen:

Actually, there's nothing wrong with it. The rough cut by my assistant in Turkey, there's nothing wrong with it whatsoever. It's all the information is there, all the dramaturgy is there. But somehow I think that everybody can just keep working at a scene to find another way in, another way to make it more surprising.

Another thing that I like to do very much to install a kind of magic, to install more of a dramatic structure is prologues, in documentaries as well as fiction films. I think that when you get into a film, like me as a regular audience as well, when you have a strong opening of a film, you get hooked. And I think that the opening, it doesn't have to be something that is completely connected with the film. It doesn't have to be chronological. It can be something quite abstract, but as long as you get the... It's like giving you a key to the film, but you don't know which door it's going to open.

Xi Feng:

I guess like with editing you can really change one character's intention by changing the cuts, in different bits of emotion.

Mary Stephen:

The structure of the film, yes. Things like that can change... It doesn't change the story, but it certainly changes the development of the character, which is important.

Xi Feng:

For studying intrigue, and pacing, and jump cuts.

Mary Stephen:

The thing about jump cuts is that it's not something that is a learnable. It's really a learning process. I mean, it's really a process of experimenting with different... of doing it a lot, a lot, a lot and then you realize that it works or it doesn't work and so on. I like to do jump cuts but only if it really does work. There have been many times that people have asked me how to learn to do jump cuts and there's no way, I don't think so. It comes to sort of we're going to tie it in with a little bit of what I quite often say to young filmmakers or young film editors is that, "How do you train to be an editor?" Of course there are software to learn and so on, but software, nowadays you can learn "guide for dummies, how to do this, and that" or online, there's not much to it.

Xi Feng:

You can cut a YouTube video or something.

Mary Stephen:

And I quite often say that when we come to emotional editing, when we're trying to edit emotions, that editors we are like actors in the sense that we can only give what we know. I mean, of course you don't have... to be able to express terror, you don't have to experience terror yourself because there's empathy as well. A human being has empathy and you can work on that. But I think that it is important to live a life, it's important to experience emotions.

And so you have this reserve of emotions that you know how it feels to do this or that. And that here you might draw out more of this emotion. Everything is linked with life. I think that you cannot be just a blank page.

You have to experience pain and so on, to be able to perfect or to improve your craft. Quite often I say that also in terms of technicality, to listen to a lot of music. And I think that that helps a lot with jump cuts because it's really rhythmic and musical. To read a lot of poetry because poetry is really the condensation of... basically, poetry is editing. You're trying to express a lot in terms of description of a scene or communicating emotions by just a few words. I'm thinking of Chinese poetry, of course. So, that is editing really. That is storytelling in terms of editing, the ellipses and so on, it's all in poetry.

And the third thing is going to train your visuals, your eye. Look at paintings, look at buildings, the space, how a body moves in space. Just stare outside your window and look at how a body moves through space. Somehow it will help with your editing. I think that those things are very important.

Xi Feng:

And you also work a lot with music and sound-

Mary Stephen:

I don't even dare to play the "CHINA ME" clip because we don't hear anything. I like to work with a very minimalist music. I think it's quite often that I work with sound designers who are working with sounds as if it's music, and that in documentaries I work with narration as well. I know that a lot of documentary... that there's a lot of debate in documentaries about whether we put narration, voiceover and so on. But I think there's a way to do it so that these words of narration, you just treat them like elements in a piece of music and you put them in places where it has to be in counterpoint with the music. The little bit of moving here, a little bit of moving there and so on.

So everything becomes a minimalist kind of a work. It's like lacework, it's really a lot of very detailed work. And I think that is something that perhaps today we're not used to. I mean, it comes to the notion of a fast world. Are we talking about a fast world where being fast is synonymous of being good when you are thinking about, you know, I'm working hours on this... I moved a little bit here so that this word comes between the two beats and that kind of thing. And people would say who the hell is going to notice that? And I guarantee you that they may not know what hit them, but they notice that. They feel that, they don't notice it but they feel it. Sometimes I read about being fast. I remember some jokes... my Turkish director who brought his rough-cut, a young editor, to Paris to see me do the next cut, who's a very nice guy. This young guy said to his director, "Mary would never be able to work here (in Turkey) because she's so slow."

Xi Feng:

A good editing do take time and now we in the industry we have a culture of like doing everything pretty super fast.

Mary Stephen:

Yes. Yes. I think that we are trained to live super fast as well. So editing is a slow process. There's no way that you can do it fast. Especially when we think of documentary editing, it just takes years, right? I mean, I think a lot of my friends here can tell you.

And quite often it is necessary to put it aside, let it rest, and then come back to it. And the point is now, since we are living in a fast world, we're living in a fast financial world and that the money has to be fast in everything, documentary editing, there's never enough time. I mean, I'm always giving extra time because like I would say, okay, you have this budget, but obviously I think a lot of my documentary colleagues do the same thing, obviously before and after you have all this chunk of free time that you're giving to the film.

What is the solution? And it comes back really now to full circle to the Eric Rohmer system. He had his own company. He made a smaller company who would be self-sufficient, who would be able to finance their own films because he has his whole crew, the closest circle, the closest friends are those who are, "We can pick up a camera and go."

He has this circle of actors who has their friends as well. And we are willing to do that. And we can shoot minimalist films that don't need big crews, and we don't need to a lot of actors. So it comes back to this whole system of independence. And this is not impossible. I mean, now we are entering maybe post-pandemic or whatever.

Our world has to come back to this. And I know that there are some participants there who has an animation studio who are actually capable of making films on their own. If they don't get the whole financial package because they have their whole structure, the structure is in place. And that's the whole thing. I think that we have to get back to the system where the human structure is in place, because everything's up here.

Xi Feng:

Maybe there's too much emphasis on technology, and speed, and productivity these days, because good cinema really takes time and soul to make.

Mary Stephen:

Perhaps the last point that I wanted to make before the question is that a lot of younger filmmakers, they are quite often asking me, "Can this film go to this and that festival?" Quite often my thought is, why don't you make a good film first. Concentrate on making a good film before the marketing bit. And that there's this, when we were chatting the other day, we were saying that the whole system between European cinema, Asian cinema, and North American cinema, is that like North American audiences will not tolerate or will not accept a certain pace of our way in Europe to do art-house cinema, or Asian cinema.

But there's a thing about training your audience. I always talk about certain friends that I have from Canada or elsewhere, who never in the old days, who never went to an exhibition, had nothing to do with arts and so on. And by and by, through the years they start going, they start reading. They're going to cinema all the time, seeing art-house films that they would never have gone to see 20 years ago. So you can train audiences. I mean, we were trained. So-

Xi Feng:

Sometime I feel like in North America, and especially there is an assumption that the audience don't know, so you have to explain a lot to them, but in European cinema normally, it's like we assume that the audience are intelligent.

Mary Stephen:

We'll open to the questions, I'll just tell one funny anecdote is that when Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin came out, I was in China. I was in Hangzhou with my whole family and we are big, big Hou Hsiao-Hsien fans. So we went immediately en masse to the cinema, to the neighborhood cinema including "lao wai" (the foreigner) my daughter's boyfriend, who's a Western guy. We were like seven or eight people, and we wanted to go see The Assassin. And the girl at the ticket counter just looked at us and said, "No, no, you don't. You don't want to see this." We said, "We do, we do, we do." She said, "No, no, no, no, no. The Transformer is over there. It's much better for you." And I got really mad at her. I said, "No, no, don't tell me what I want to see."

And then of course we did go and see The Assassin with a whole cinema full of people who were talking on the phone saying (loudly), "I'm in the cinema now."

Okay, shall I just read out one question?

Xi Feng:

Oh, there are-

Mary Stephen:

Oh yeah. I think that we already treated that a little bit. "Do you feel that European and Asian cinemas are similar in pace and flow?" Not necessarily. So, there's a difference between a European cinema and Asian cinema, but both have the similarity or the advantage of being rooted in something more spiritual. I always say that not for nothing, that in France, your last year of high school, you have to pass philosophy before you can graduate from high school. That changes a man, and a woman. And in Asia there's this whole culture on thought and Buddhist and Taoist thoughts and so on. I mean, it just changes the pace and the flow of everything.

Xi Feng:

You have a question, "How do I impress young directors or producers when they complain that you're slow?"

Mary Stephen:

Well, most of the time I'm in a good place. They can't complain, I'd say, "I quit." Most of the time it's a favor I'm doing them anyway. They know that if they come to me, is that they know that. And most of the times now I say ahead of time that I'm very slow. So don't come to me if you want something fast. And I always say that it's not a matter of trying to find the best editor for your film; it's a marriage, it's finding the best partner for your film. Like I said, I need to be by myself, but some editors love to do this ping pong with the directors. And that's very enriching. With some (directors) I do this ping pong thing, but only when there is a big trust that has been installed.

Xi Feng:

"Do you have a working relationship with screenwriter?"

Mary Stephen:

Screenwriters? I don't particularly, but in fact, in the sense that editing has a lot to do with screenwriting and quite often now that since I'm involved a lot with indie films in that... so I'm basically also involved in the production or trying to associate-produce some indie films because it's the only way that they will come on my table, is if I find them partners who can maybe find financing and so on. And so to do that, then I found like from about 10 years ago, I started getting into the screenwriting stage because... that was (illustrated in) one of the clips that we didn't show is "MAJORITY"... but I can put that in the bin (that I will distribute to participants). MAJORITY is that Turkish film that won the first film award, the Lion of the Future in Venice. When they came to me, actually they had a rough cut. They had the winter scenes of the boy who's become a man, a young man. And they have 12 pages of summer scenes of the boy in his childhood. And it has to do with his father who's a sort of fascist character and how he grew up to be just like his father.

I remember that at that time, actually it was Cameron Bailey who put me on this film because he saw the rough cut and he thought that it might be worth my while to look into it. And I became very good friends with the team and the director, actually. And they said, just before they were going to shoot the summer scenes, I looked at the winter scenes of the man, and I said, "You only need one strong scene

for the beginning as a prologue, to install the dynamics of this family, of the young boy terrified of his father, of his wife who is very submissive, of the Kurdish maid who's like the underdog in this whole situation."

So we installed that scene. And of course the producers were very happy because they were off two weeks of, they didn't have to shoot for two weeks and it saved a lot of money. And so that's the kind of thing that it has to... it's all mixed up with screenwriting. So I do a lot of script consultancy as well.

Xi Feng:

Yeah. Sometimes the editing, I feel like the script has certain problem that goes beyond shooting and then it's for us to solve those problems, it would be better to get earlier into the process.

Mary Stephen:

Right. Yeah. Also that's the point, is that we can't do miracles. If it's not shot properly, I mean, if there's not something there, there's no way that we can... And one of the things that I don't agree with and that it's really a phenomenon of today's filmmaking of digital filmmaking is everywhere I hear BOPA (in Chinese)...

Xi Feng:

Pickup shooting.

Mary Stephen:

... makeup shooting, right?

Xi Feng:

Pickup shooting.

Mary Stephen:

Pickup shooting. We don't BOPA. I mean, certainly in "film" filmmaking, you don't have the time and money to go and pick up all these things.

And now with the digital, everybody is going to do the pickup shooting so they don't think ahead of time.

Xi Feng:

Good question relating to this point and from [inaudible 00:59:41], "How do you deal with the phenomenon now like of overshooting too many rushes do you still watch it all?"

Mary Stephen:

No. Hi [inaudible 00:59:51]. Let's say in documentaries, no. In fiction, yes. In fiction, in fact, I watch all the rushes in every little detail, every little expression, because there are ways to combine the different things.

In documentaries, I don't, for the simple reason that I ask the director first to give me a selection of his/her characters and situations, and by that selection, I also get to know what he or she is censoring from me.

And I always ask them to provide me with a whole set of rushes so that by what they're not showing me, I mean, around what they are showing me, I can figure out what they are not showing me. But no, I mean, I know that sometimes documentaries have a thousand hours. No, I don't watch them all because the directors, usually they have even eliminated certain characters that are useless.

Xi Feng:

"Would it be, for instance, if you were working with the director, like David Fincher who shot 99 shots for every take?"

Mary Stephen:

Obviously I'm not working with David Fincher. I do not have the time and patience to work with David Fincher. No, I mean, it's okay. If people don't want to work with me it's okay. I mean, like I said, it's just a marriage. You can find another partner.

Xi Feng:

So you will not work with someone who overshoots like in that kind of matter.

Mary Stephen:

No, no. There are certain situations where you overshoot because of certain problems. But I need to see that the filmmaker is thinking. He's not overshooting because he doesn't know what to do. Sometimes the overshoot is that because, especially in documentaries, there's something valuable, something interesting that's happening, but he or she doesn't know that it doesn't come into this film. And quite often I would say like with Du Haibin, it happens a lot. But let's put it in another film, this is another film. And that we can make another film completely on this other theme.

Xi Feng:

We have a question from Xiao Xiao, "How much sound editing do you do in your editing process? Which part of the sound work do you do? And to which extent you would say, okay, I'll leave it to the sound editor?"

Mary Stephen:

I do a lot of sound work. In fact, I mean, I'd lay all the suggestions, sometimes a director like Eric Rohmer would go out and record every little single little bird that he hears to put here and there. But I do a lot of suggestions. And because I can't see... like especially in North America, it's also separated. You have the

sound editor, you have the dialogue editor, you have a music editor. I don't see how you can edit a film, (how) you can have the vision of a film, without having a global vision of everything. Especially in sound, I use a lot of sound editing for my work and that's quite a lot of times it propels the action, it creates an emotion, it sets the pace.

And quite oftentimes, when I say that, if you have two cuts, two scenes, two shots that don't cut together, put a sound on the cut. I have a stock of favorite sounds. And I talk about it a lot-

Xi Feng:

I actually learned that trick from you.

Mary Stephen:

Yeah, a motorcycle in the night, especially far away. A Crow, crows are very useful, a dog... And you put it on the cut. And I guarantee you that that cut will pass.

Xi Feng:

Yeah, now it's more demanding too for editors to do sound work.

Mary Stephen:

You have to do that. How do you know the length of the shot if you don't do the sound work? Yeah.

Yes I do have a dream project, but it's not an editing project. It's the writing project or directing project. Yeah. But I don't want to direct a feature film anymore. I mean, we didn't talk about my filmmaking part, it's just that having edited so many feature films for the last years, especially the last little while with the indie filmmakers, it's just so much pain, but I would like to continue making short films. Yes.

Sherman is asking whether Eric Rohmer only used natural light for his films. No, not to only because in his last films, he was shooting in studio. So there was a lot of "real", real lights, but quite often he did go for a naturalistic feel. Yeah, for sure.

"How do you use natural sound as an editing motivation?" Yes, definitely. A lot of sounds as natural sounds, but enhanced natural sounds. We don't have the time to show "CHINA ME", but we will try to see what we can do in terms of clips that are private. In terms of explaining these things that I have a very good sound designer here, an indie sound designer Pierre Carrasco. And I like his work because he would, he would... this shot of electric wires on a highway and then I hear this sound. And in fact, he's making these electrical sounds so that when the car is driving by, you hear zzzzzz, like this kind of sound because it's a very emotional scene and there's a poetry going on and so on.

And then when the car is on the highway, there's this hum of sounds and it just brings a completely different emotional soundscape.

Xi Feng:

I think we have time for a last question. "Why do you make movies? Who do you want your audience to be?"

Mary Stephen:

Who do I want my audience to be? Anyone who wants to watch. I think that should be the thought of every young filmmaker. Like what we said before, don't go and make a film that you think will, that you need to get into Cannes or something like that. Make a film for one person. But if you can touch one person, is enough, and then you will touch 10,000.

Xi Feng:

Or do you think you should make... When we cut the film, should we think a lot about the audience or not really?

Mary Stephen:

It depends because you know, you may have an order. It might be a television documentary. Even television documentaries that I tried to push the boundary, you need to think about what the order was. Whether it's an indie film, whether it's for a cinema, whether it's for Arte or whatever. Yeah you have to think about the framework, the context, and then you push the boundary. It's like what I said about you have a scene, you can cut a scene that is classic, that is normal, that is okay. Everything is fine. And then you push the boundary.

Xi Feng:

Thank you very much. I think our time is here. Such a pleasure to talk to you as always.

Mary Stephen:

See you all.

Xi Feng:

See you all.

Sarah Taylor:

Thank you so much for joining us today. And a thank you goes to Mary and Xi. Special thanks goes to Jane MacRae. This episode was edited by Jason Pinosa.

The main title sound design was created by Jane Tattersall, additional ADR recording by Andrea Rusch. Original music provided by Chad Blain. This episode was mixed and mastered by Tony Bao. The CCE has been supporting Indspire - an organization that provides funding and scholarships to Indigenous post secondary students. We have a permanent portal on our website at cceditors.ca or you can donate directly at indspire.ca. The CCE is taking steps to build a more equitable ecosystem within our industry and we encourage our members to participate in any way they can.

If you've enjoyed this podcast, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts and tell your friends to tune in. 'Til next time I'm your host Sarah Taylor.

[Outtro]

The CCE is a non-profit organization with the goal of bettering the art and science of picture editing. If you wish to become a CCE member please visit our website www.cceditors.ca. Join our great community of Canadian editors for more related info.