

A note on editing in the work of Johanna Billing

by Carole Bertinet

As an editor, I was particularly interested in the work of Johanna Billing. Editing indeed seems very important in her artistic process, in her work's formal perception and meaning. At first, I noticed how the usual language of pop culture, like cinema or the video clip, is turned away, incorporated by the use of the editing technique. For instance, "You Don't Love Me Yet" could be just a video clip if shots that are inserted into the very beginning and the end didn't make a piece of narration appear to completely change the point of view of the work. "Where She Is At?" could be a kind of thriller where an ordinary action (someone standing on a diving board by a lake shore on a sunny afternoon) becomes a pretext for introducing suspense by the expansion of time due to editing.

I really appreciate the way editing introduces a discourse. By her use of close-ups, Johanna Billing shows us the idea of "how to be both part of a group of people and be an individual", the paradox of being together but alone. This is particularly present in "Project for a Revolution", with short close-ups of faces, one individual in motion, no one looking at each other, no clearly defined common space...

There's also a very sensual description of atmospheres coming from the rhythm of the works. This is quite obvious in "Project for a Revolution", which has no soundtrack: the rhythm comes from the sounds (the photocopy machine, the street, the footsteps on the stairs) and the silence. Johanna Billing explains that **"sound is always very important, as equally important as the image, especially in the more silent films, where the silent sound is quite present and sometimes creates even more atmosphere than the image... I guess I like to edit in a rhythmical way, so it almost becomes a bit like music. Or, with its rhythm, the editing can trigger the same emotional effect the way music can, the way music is still almost superior in how it portrays atmospheres and feelings. That is what I am interested in trying out in the editing"**.

This descriptive aspect of her work connects with the editing technique of the documentary, quite close to the way she works: **"It's a lot about making the best set up for something to happen, but then actually creating the atmosphere in the editing. I am very careful never to call the films actual documentaries, since in the editing I always make some kind of fiction. Instead, I think it can be sometimes true to say that it can be a documentary about the atmosphere that was in the actual room while we were filming. While shooting "Project for a Revolution", I thought it would be quite different than how it turned out. I thought, for example, that it would be a much longer film. We filmed a lot of material and I wanted the "silent waiting" to go on for a very long time. But in the editing process, and this is something I often do, I used only the frames that I thought had a certain "nerve" or atmosphere in them. When I edit, I'm not going for the narrative, for keeping a scene as long as it was filmed or sometimes supposed to last. I only use as much of the material as I can before this kind of "atmosphere" that I'm after "disappears from the image". In "Project for a Revolution", which is quite tightly edited with a lot of very short close-ups, each image could not "hold" the atmosphere for longer than you see in the film. So, even though we had filmed enough material to make what I had first thought could be a 20-30 minute film, it ended up being only 3 minutes long, and it could not have been another second longer, because it would have lost its intensity. I have a quite spontaneous and sometimes improvised attitude in the actual shooting situation. It varies a bit and can be different for different films. But in the films that show an activity going on in a room, a film studio, apartment, classroom etc. - something that is a bit "condensed" inside a frame, either of the four walls, or the frame of the camera - then it is very much about getting the activity going and then just trying to capture the atmosphere and what happens in the room. Sometimes I do not have the structure 100% clear in my mind, which images will meet each other in the editing process, but I'm trying to just pick up the different things I like and see happening in front of me. Sometimes though, there are always some parts that are a bit more staged and directed, and also a bit more narrative"**.

This introduction of a kind of fiction creates an ambiguous feeling that is completely assumed and even researched. **"I like putting some more directed "narrative" parts together with other images to somehow create an ambiguous feeling. You cannot be 100% sure of what kind of film you're looking at; while looking you constantly slide between different positions. At first, the video might resemble a fiction film because it has a cinematic quality. Then it turns into a documentary, but suddenly it becomes theatrical and then again changes into something that seems to be a documentation of a performance. You can't really relax and think - ok, I'm watching a film and now I'm going to focus on the plot. I want all these layers to be active all the time. It's like a camera that keeps zooming back and forth, failing to find its focus. It's sometimes hard to make films like that because you frustrate the audience by not serving them something "finished". But maybe the films are also dealing a lot with frustration and the feeling of having lost something, and therefore you are fumbling through the films, even quite**

physically... And this mix is, of course, something that I think is created more in the editing process than in the actual filming process."

Instead of adding fiction to documentary material, it is more like "modelling" it and making it fiction. It suggests and opens a large place to imagination and interpretation. This process could be close to the effect of a jump cut or "wrong cuts" in traditional editing: there's something between two cuts that you can't see but feel. It's like opening a space but without even being able to say where it is. This blurs even more the global narration and suggests the idea of a fold in the editing. The choice of loops underlines this: it's a non-ending story.

This ambiguous feeling also comes from the description of spaces. In traditional editing you have to make the space the truest you can, even if the different shots weren't filmed in the same place. In "Project for a Revolution", it's exactly the opposite: there's no common space between all the protagonists. Editing clouds the issue. And this creates something that's frustrating and uncomfortable.

This presentation of space in the videos could be connected to the way Johanna Billing considers that her works should be shown: "It is very important not to be in a space that's like a cinema space. I think my films need to be shown in open rooms. Since the films are often made as never-ending loops, showing some kind of ongoing activity, you can enter whenever and stay as long as you like. In my installations there aren't always seating possibilities. This is not only a visual choice of how to present a minimal installation in a space but, in a more practical way, about trying to get out of the normal «behaviours» you often have when seeing films in cinemas, or at home on your TV. Just by sitting down, you adjust your expectations; sometimes you could be relaxing, waiting to be served, and expect to follow something from beginning to end. But when you cannot sit down and instead have to walk around in the space, you sometimes get into another more active situation, and you can meet the film in a more corporeal way, and perhaps get into a more physical understanding. For me, this is a very important part of the process, especially since I am trying to work with frustrated situations, situations that don't fully work, that show people at odds with their surrounding, stuck in something (as the loops sometimes underline quite literally). Things and feelings that are difficult to verbalise and sometimes even grasp, but that still lie somewhere deep inside of you. This is particularly apparent because the films have no dialogue. You have to «read» the people in the films in a more physical way and hopefully get into a kind of feeling or atmosphere of frustration - or hope, or anxiety - when walking around the room in which the film is presented. And later on, perhaps you start thinking about these feelings, instead of starting to think right away! But finally, I think this more bodily way of presenting and relating to the films is also interesting because I actually think of the films sometimes more as choreographies than anything else!"