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Lidia has spent a distinguished career, editing mostly documentaries. In Poland the documentary is a refined, carefully constructed and often poetic form. Amongst her collaborations was that with Krzysztof Kieslowski for whom she cut more than a dozen films – mostly before he made the transition to dramatic feature film.



Lidia Zonn (Courtesy of Lidia Zonn)

I was born in Vilnius in 1934. In 1938, a year before Second World War my parents moved to Warsaw. My father was an astronomer. My mother graduated in history. After marrying she did not work professionally, but stayed at home and looked after me and the home. I was an only child. My father came from a German parentage, settled in Russia until the revolution and totally russianised, but traditional family. My mother came from a Jewish family totally russianised. I did not know her family as my grandparents were already dead when I was born.

I was brought up in an atmosphere of Russian culture, my parents even read western children's literature to me translated into Russian. This atmosphere and my mother's personality made a large impact, maybe even a decisive impact on my attitude to life, and in some way to the choice of my career. Even more so when during the Second World War, because my mother was Jewish, she had to go with me into hiding (my father was a German prisoner of war). I could not go to school and only my mother taught me all subjects.

After the war, from the moment I started a normal school I wanted to become a physicist. All my interests centred around, primarily the sciences. I went of course to the cinema to see the most interesting films. I also went to the theatre and the Philharmonia (concert hall). These were however interests of no greater intensity than the average intelligent person. I had no talents in the arts, or a greater awareness of my own surroundings.

When I was in middle school, an inter-school Olympics (competition) in Warsaw in Physics was organised. It was then that I realised that my talents in this direction were limited (even though I had received good marks at school), and to teach in this subject or any other I was not well suited. During this time, in growing doubts as to what direction to go in to choose a career, I happened upon a report on the production of one of René Clair's¹ films, the title of which now escapes me. The report spoke of the work, in the team, that is of the group of people co-working with the director, thus having – as I understood – their own artistic input in the film being made. This was something for me – my own, larger or smaller part, in a large creative project.

I submitted my application to the Lodz Film School and I passed the entry exam. From the start of my studies I accepted the fact that I would never be an independent director, although my concept of the particular responsibilities of the director within the team – being myself the assistant to the second director/film editor – were very vague.

The decision to become an editor became more clear in the third year of my studies, I had to independently edit my school exercises and then I understood how important editing can be in the process of creating a film. At this time Jaroslaw Brzozowski, a documentary maker, came to the school. Now he has almost totally been forgotten. For the younger years he organised something in the form of

an editing workshop, and he engaged me as his assistant. Even then his workshop seemed to me to be outdated: the staging of scenes/situations, the tireless and painfully precise composition of the team, the 'artistry' in lighting. I reassured myself however that editing, especially in a documentary film, has a huge impact in the building of the piece and requires much invention.

After completing my studies in 1959 I worked as an assistant to editors at the Documentary Film Studios (Wytwornia Filmsiv Dokumentalnych) in Warsaw. I arrived at a very fortunate time. Just in these years a young group of editors/directors from our Lodz film school and from the VGIK in Moscow began a 'new wave' in making documentaries. They discarded scenery, commentary, and excessive music, which always so easily dramatised any scene. They decided to base their films on authentic observations and authentic sound. For some years, already in the United States of America, England and France there existed new research in documentaries. Now these new trends reached Poland.

I was fortunate that two director/editors in this group – Wladyslaw Slesicki and Kazimierz Karabasz,² who then worked together, were left without an editor. They offered me the opportunity, as their younger colleague from school, to collaborate with them. Of course I agreed. In the mornings I worked as assistant to an editor and in the afternoons I worked as an independent editor for their films.

All that I learned in my career I think and owe to the directors I worked with. Those from my generation (Slesicki, Karabasz) and younger, mainly Krzysztof Kieslowski.³ All the time they searched for something new, in the subjects they undertook and in the form of those films. And so the editing of their subsequent films was an exploration and search for something new. I am sure I learnt much from foreign films, but this only included specific thoughts/ideas, or fragmentary solutions, which today I do not remember. I do not remember any specific film which introduced any change or new solution to the basic method or ideas in my work. Maybe this is linked with the character of Polish documentaries, which formed their own style, own way of telling stories, differing from such trends as *cinema verite* i.e. *cinema direct*. Only now, working in my chosen career, I sometimes watch films made with a digital camera, edited with long lasting shots (sometimes linked with collage sequences

or video clips). I see totally new subject areas and self-explanatory documentaries, but I could never edit in this sort of fashion.

I paid great attention to the detail of form. I considered that documentary should be no different from fiction in the care taken in planning each sequence or scene, in the precision of putting together shots or clarity of construction. Although this formal approach in fiction is already involved in the writing of the script and the realisation of the images – editing is only its continuation. Whilst in documentary the editor can only have a limited control of the character of the pictures. The shape and form of his film the editor builds in the editing suite. These decisions I undertook with the directors. Karabasz, Kieslowski and Halladin⁴ with whom I worked most frequently, had a similar feel for the material as I did, similar requirements of the form – we worked on the same wavelength.

On the question of construction the editor, especially in documentary, can have a great influence, both in individual scenes and in structuring the whole film. I am thinking of the ball scene in '*Roku Franka W*'.⁵ I received a very considerable amount of material shot during this event over which the director had little control. Predicting the action or even setting up scenes had virtually no influence in the end on what was shot. But the event unfolds, interesting situations appear, interesting reactions of participants, thus one has to record them. During this ball which lasted many hours the director only instigated two scenes/situations. In the first, he asked Franek to go up to a girl and ask her to dance. In the second, after registering a number of scenes of Franek and his friend, whilst they observe the hall and exchange comments amongst themselves, he took a number of shots of a girl sitting alone, assuming that the two situations would become linked. The rest of the material was a collection of mixed observations of the tables, the dancing, and the orchestra. It was only in the edit suite that we created a scene from these images, creating a continuity, the stages of the ball and a dramatic evolution. The shape of such scenes is as much the work of the editor as the director; both heads and pairs of eyes are necessary.

Between European and American films I see basic differences. American films, with very few exceptions, are characterised by a systemised traditional industry method, keeping to defined and tested rules. This is based, on the one hand on a rapid tempo of narration and

its dynamic and, on the other, on a defined approach to size of shot and editorial changes and an appropriate use of screen space. So the viewer does not lose his place in the action or any changing situation.

The European tradition is based on the individuality of the director. These are films with individual character: Fellini, Godard, Anderson, Bergman, Wenders. Each director creates his own style and approach to his craft/creative method. Working with such a director the editor must be able to identify the director's vision, his way of treating space and time (very often including the manipulation of different time frames), with his method of recounting a story, his rhythm, his style.

The term 'poetic narration' (as is well known), we associate most of all with a lyrical form, is based on moods feelings and reflections. This form consigns to the background the action with its events and active and dynamic needs of its heroes. In Poland, in documentary film, we have given this form of narrative a name – 'stan rzeczy' (state of things). This term has been borrowed from a speech by the Czech director, Ivan Passer, the creator of the unforgettable film '*Intymne oswietlenie*' (*Intimate Lighting*).⁶ Passer said, 'We are not interested in little stories, we are interested in the state of things'.

However, irrespective of the genre and film form, the viewer looks for some kind of development of the story or dramaturgy. If this development does not clearly arise peripatetically or from turning points in the story, then one needs to establish it by other means. The material we use in this poetic form is mood (of the place and situation), expression (I have in mind the example of Fellini's visions) and dialogues expressing the heroes feelings, reflections and, to a minimal degree conflicts that move the story forward.

In the presence of such material the way to develop a story is by applying these moods, expressions and dialogues in the correct measures and intensity. Another important element is the successive introduction of new 'plots', such as the appearance of the woman neighbour in '*The Whales of September*'.⁷ One may treat such introductions as specific turning points on the condition that they don't change anything in the current situation and that they do not move the subject material onto a new track, but only enrich it.

For this kind of storytelling I would not be able to define any principles or rules. The degree of mood intensity and expression in individual

sequences one must simply feel or sense. Fiction films usually have synopses or at least outlines of construction, which contain the basic development of the subject matter. However, only the editing process reveals how much the assumptions of the director are correct. Only in the cutting room can you eliminate that which disturbs the proper gradation, change the order of sequences or, what is enormously important, give the whole film its proper pace. It is my deeply held belief that with such materials the work of the editor requires the highest competence which goes unnoticed by the critics – unlike the thickly cut chase scenes and flashy effect of a James Bond film.

Is the 'workshop' of European films easier or more difficult than the 'workshop' of American films, worked on over many years, passed on from master to master and each time improved upon? In my opinion both 'workshops' are equally hard. Hollywood editing is rather conservative, but so much is required of the editor there. Not only precise control in the 'grading of planes' and the clarity of dialogue and fluency of narrative, but also the consequence and legibility of storytelling, keeping the true character of the protagonist and the reality of characters who are in and out of the story. In European films, of which it is written that they 'describe and examine problems rather than supply dramatic solutions', the evolution of the drama and its crises, very often, does not take into account generally accepted rules. The most detailed basic rules of editing are often broken. To be able to suit the editing to the vision and style of a given director one has first to know the basic rules, because only then can you avoid them or break them, when you understand their purpose. As with the grammar of language, to break the rules or change the meaning of words you have to know the language and feel it, otherwise you create elemental faults and not literature.

Secondly, you not only have to understand but also feel the director's vision. Otherwise the editor becomes a mechanical manufacturer of his wishes. I often ask myself in relation to the changes in modern films the following question: Are there any editorial rules which exist regardless of either the particular director's style or the evolution of language and the changing tastes of film-makers and audiences? In my experience the most important thing is construction. Regardless of the individuality of the director the film and its specific scenes have to have some point of entry, development and exit. This point of exit, supported by the editing, must be clear so

that the audience has no doubts, that in the case of each scene, its 'Theme' and 'Temperature'⁸ are suitably complete so that you can go on to the next. In respect of the whole film that it is indeed the end: there must never be two or three endings.

The next question is the ability in film to work with and control the perception of distance/space, especially if you want the audience to be able to imagine it. I have in mind the way the action unfolds and the positive accentuating of distance/space, even as we are moving elsewhere. To precis this – it may not interest us, e.g. to know the location where the young hero of '*Les Quatre-Cents Coups*'⁹ opens his heart to the psychologist/lawyer/prosecutor but the audience must become aware at once that the next scene takes place elsewhere. One other problem of distance is distance between characters. They stand close together, far apart, in the same location or different locations (e.g. a conversation between kitchen and living room), on the same side of the road, across the road, facing one another or with their backs to each other.

The third challenge is the ability to link all the connections. Some directors prefer a greater continuity between shots, others like sharp breaks. Some prefer voices to run across cuts, others observe pauses and silence to achieve a change of thought.

Notwithstanding individual tastes and temperaments only a great experience and feeling allows for successful integration of material that represents action in space, controlling the risks inherent in the collapsing of time often found in modern forms of narrative. After cutting one can clearly see the difference between an amateur and professional.

I see rather dramatic differences between film editing and editing on computer in that on film one cuts by feel, both sound and picture, thus more subtly and freely than on the computer where each operation has to be calculated.

If film-making survives as an art form, the role of the editor will remain. No director can be without an editor. Not in the sense of technical help, but as a 'censor' of materials that have been realised, for which the editor is indispensable. Milos Forman¹⁰ writes in his memoirs that you would give your soul to the devil in return for the eyes of an editor.

I had no particular habits or rituals or a set daily routine. In recent years I have spent more time on didactics and more rarely on editing. So the organisation of my school activities, editing time and free time looks very different now, therefore I must refer to times past. The editing of a documentary film requires different organisational skills to the editing of a fiction film. In fiction the editing material arrives daily and each day must be made ready for screening – that is the first stage of editing. In the second stage begins the precise editing of the proposed sequence.

In documentary making it is different – each film requires, depending on the subject, a different timescale for the shoot and assessment of the editing schedule in relation to the shoot. '*Szpital* (*Hospital*)¹¹ by Krzysztof Kieslowski) was realised during two severe/busy rounds of duty in the orthopaedic department. 'The Year of Frank W', as I already mentioned took a year, most other films a number of months all with breaks waiting for a specific shooting situation, e.g. army enrolment, the hero's birthday, the last firing of raw material in a steel works about to close. Therefore the editing of documentaries such as the ones I dealt with would often happen at the same time and the work would be very stressful and time consuming with long hours including Saturdays and Sundays. Interspersed with snatched free time to catch up on private and family matters. Therefore the life style was totally dictated by work although the intensity of work varied.

I am convinced that to carry out this kind of work one must have a vocation. I have in mind three important qualities: firstly – imagination, which reflects the imagination of a chess player, which allows the mind to place things in order and perceives what those things will be in relation to one another and in relation to the whole. You edit a film in your head. Work on the table purely confirms in reality your thoughts.

Secondly, feeling the rhythm of sequences and scenes of the whole story. I cannot define what this rhythm depends upon, but a good editor has no problem in recognising a good rhythm from a bad one. This does not depend on the length of thought/ideas. Some images can last a few minutes in length – some longer – but it is their worth, length of feeling, expression, the moment has a finite length. It is the relationship of this moment to other pieces, sections of film. They do not have to have a specific time limit but they have to correlate.

Thirdly, the ability to undertake so called 'masculine' decisions. You can improve a scene countless times, sometimes slight variations, but at some point you have to say stop, either because it is good or that it can be no better. The editor like the director cannot constantly waiver. To lose one's own opinion does not help the director but rather hinders him.

Regarding how I choose which film to work on, amongst the Warsaw Documentary Film makers there was an un-written agreement between directors and editors. Sometimes one had to part for various reasons – conflict, illness – but then a director could not just go up to any other editor. The current editor would have to confirm to his colleague that indeed the work had been stopped. The habit of normal working practice was that each editor works with a specific director and therefore worked on whatever project the director had.

It is difficult to talk about the 'script' in relation to documentary, where the material is the source of the structure. As a rule I would get to know the script before and during the filming. Sometimes I was able to suggest some helpful ideas or sequences. In a number of films I was on the location to get to know the characters and their situation. Thereafter I would try to work with the given material as if I knew nothing more than what was in front of me, using that as my guide.

Throughout the thirty years of my professional life I had the same room and cutting table – not just the type of table but the same one. It was a Polish table constructed on the same principles as the German Kostareff table. With one track for picture and one for sound – a horizontal table with pedals. In the seventies in Poland there appeared far more modern tables: KEM and Steenbeck originals, but constructed to their design by Polish engineers. I preferred my old table (today it is no more!) for three reasons. It held synchronisation very accurately; it stopped exactly where I wanted it to and it had a very faithful sound reproduction. I could establish the precise difference in the silences between words.

Until the invention of 'Scotch' (*tape joins*) I used a lot of blank frames (*filler?*), sticking it between ideas. Dede Allen speaks of this same method. The 'blank' enables you to place a number of variants

of each scene without the loss of any frames. I have to stress that each time you redo a cement splice you lose two frames.

Most of the time in documentaries is spent on notes, describing ideas, writing down dialogue and from them establishing a correct sequence. However one does not have to edit a lot of material each day. The tempo increases however once decisions have been made regarding construction of scenes and the overall shape of the film. Therefore the editing is not rushed. Speed does not count for as much as in fiction.

Each documentary film requires a different approach to the material. Sometimes there are very few good ideas, then the choice is stark. Then one has the problem of how to create a good scene. More often there is far too much good material. Then one has to choose very carefully, stage by stage, to be sure one has chosen the best. The construction of the scenes as well as the film is not fully decided upon until the editing is finished. So the whole time one has to be aware of the excluded material.

I am convinced that in documentary films (more so than in fiction) sound plays an important role. It can strengthen a particular scene but it can also destroy a scene, especially if it is incorrectly used. That is why I insisted on applying the sound and background music myself to all films that I edited, even if it is specially composed for the film. On the whole I decide with the director the type of music and in which places it should be used.

In any profession, not only the film world, there are few brilliant personalities. Editing does not seem to be a specific profession. If it differs in any way from the skills of an artistic operator, it is that the operator can show his particular skills in a particular film, and his vision even if the editing skills are weak and badly set. On the other hand the editor is tightly controlled by the material he is given to work with. This includes fictional film as well as documentary. Only if the editor is given good interesting material can he expand and develop his own mark. There are few brilliant editors, even fewer brilliant films, because not every film of a brilliant director is a success. That is why I feel there are so few good editors. Some do not have the opportunity to show their skills. Another important factor is that film critics and theorists do not understand the role of the

film editor. They cannot see him on the screen and therefore cannot establish his input in their critique. (But that is a subject outside the framework of this interview.)

Notes

1. **René Clair (1898–1981)** – Most renowned for his films of the 1920s and 1930s – e.g. *'The Italian Straw Hat'*, 1927, and *'À Nous la liberté'* (1931).
2. **Wladyslaw Slesicki and Kazimierz Karabasz** The former made *'In Desert and Wilderness'*, 1973. The latter was born in 1930 and has become a renowned documentary maker and teacher.
3. **Krzysztof Kieslowski** – As far as I can tell Lidia worked with him fifteen times over a period of twelve years starting with *'From the City of Lodz'* (1968) up until *'Railway Station'*, 1980.
4. **Halladin** – Director of the same generation as Kieslowski.
5. **Roku Franka W** – Karabasz, 1968.
6. **Intimate Lighting** – Ivan Passer, 1966.
7. **'The Whales of September'** – I am sure Lidia means *'The Whales of August'*, (1987), Lindsay Anderson, where Ann Sothorn as 'Trisha' disturbs the equilibrium of the central characters played by Bette Davis and Lillian Gish.
8. **Temperature** – Emotion?
9. **Les Quatre-Cents Coups** – François Truffaut, 1959.
10. **Milos Forman's memoirs** – *'Turnaround – a memoir'*, written with Jan Novak, 1993.
11. **Hospital** – Kieslowski, 1976.