



gabriella oldham

# first cut

more conversations  
with film editors

## 9. Honoring Lives

KATE AMEND

- 1984 *Women of Iron*, dir. Scott J. T. Frank
- 1988 *Homesick*, dir. Johanna Demetrakas
- 1989 *Metamorphosis: Man into Woman*, dir. Lisa Leeman
- 1990 *Legends*, dir. Ilana Bar-Din
- 1991 *Danger: Kids at Work*, TV, dir. Lyn Goldfarb
- 1992 *Asylum*, TV, dir. Joan Churchill
- 1992 *The Southern Sex* (short), dir. Christine Fugate
- 1992 *Innocence and Experience: The Making of The Age of Innocence*, TV, dir. Laura Davis
- 1993 *Come the Morning*, dir. Michael O. Sajbel
- 1993 *Skinheads USA: Soldiers of the Race War*, TV, dir. Shari Cookson
- 1996 *Mother Love*, TV, dir. Christine Fugate
- 1997 *The Long Way Home*, dir. Mark Jonathan Harris
- 1998 *Some Nudity Required*, dir. Johanna Demetrakas and Odette Springer
- 1998 *Tobacco Blues*, dir. Christine Fugate
- 1999 *Free a Man to Fight: Women Soldiers of WWII*, dir. Mindy Pomper Johnson
- 1999 *The Girl Next Door*, dir. Christine Fugate

- 2000 *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport*, dir. Mark Jonathan Harris
- 2000 *Ladysmith Black Mambazo: On Tiptoe*, dir. Eric Simonson
- 2001 *Out of Line*, dir. Johanna Demetrakas
- 2002 *Dylan's Run*, dir. Steven Johnson and David M. Rosenthal
- 2003 *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*, TV miniseries, dir. Rory Kennedy
- 2003 *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks*, dir. LisaGay Hamilton
- 2005 *Cowboy del Amor*, dir. Michèle Ohayon
- 2005 *Grief Becomes Me*, dir. Christine Fugate
- 2003–5 *The American Experience*, TV:
- *The Great Transatlantic Cable*, dir. Peter Jones
  - *Bataan Rescue*, dir. Peter Jones
- 2004 *Peace by Peace: Women on the Frontlines*, dir. Lisa Hepner
- 2005 *Pretty Things*, TV, dir. Liz Goldwyn
- 2006 *The World According to Sesame Street*, dir. Linda Goldstein Knowles and Linda Hawkins Costigan
- 2006 *Thin*, dir. Lauren Greenfield
- 2007 *Sisters of Selma: Bearing Witness to Change* (consulting editor), dir. Jayasri Hart
- 2007 *Steal a Pencil for Me*, dir. Michèle Ohayon
- 2007 *Jimmy Carter, Man from Plains*, dir. Jonathan Demme
- 2008 *The Brothers Warner*, dir. Cass Warner
- 2009 *The Girls in the Band* (consulting editor), dir. Judy Chaikin
- 2009 *American Harmony*, dir. Aengus James
- 2010 *One Lucky Elephant*, dir. Lisa Leeman
- 2011 *Crazy Wisdom: The Life and Times of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche*, dir. Johanna Demetrakas
- 2011 *There Was Once . . .*, dir. Gabor Kalman
- 2011 *First Position*, dir. Bess Kargman
- 2012 *Birth Story: Ina May Gaskin and the Farm Midwives*, dir. Sara Lamm and Mary Wigmore

## AWARDS

- 2001 Eddie (ACE) Award, Best Edited Documentary Film, *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport*
- 2004 CINE Golden Eagle Award, Professional Telecast Nonfiction Division: People and Places, for *Peace by Peace: Women on the Frontlines*
- 2004 Peabody Award (shared with Patricia Smith Melton, executive producer; Lisa Hepner, director-producer; and Nisma Zaman, producer), *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks*
- 2005 International Documentary Association Award, Outstanding Documentary Editing
- 2010 Woodstock Film Festival, Best Editing, Documentary, *One Lucky Elephant*

Kate Amend's professional life has been primarily dedicated to portraying the conditions of women in a number of powerful documentary films. From a raw and gripping look at bulimic women, to tracking families ravaged by AIDS around the world, to entering the mind of black actress and activist Beah Richards, to documenting women on the frontlines of war, and even to chronicling the adventures of a cowboy matchmaker, Amend "conducts" the footage that her gifted directors provide to construct riveting stories of women who might otherwise be forgotten and women's issues that are critical to remember. Amend discusses the power of imagery to create mood and emotional response. Citing many examples from her award-winning film *Into the Arms of Strangers*, Amend speaks of how digital editing helped her create visual metaphors and suggest a world of memories through the respectful manipulation of sound and image. Calling documentary editors both scriptwriters and filmmakers, as Oppenheim, Corrao, and Bini did previously, Amend relates her experience on *Strangers* of finding crucial props to help her compensate for sparse material and inadvertently triggering a global response that ultimately led to some of the most heart-wrenching montages in the film.

In considering films with multiple characters and storylines—and usually no preliminary structure in place to guide their development, Amend offers practical advice for weighing the impact and dramatic qualities of the stories being told and the lives being captured. Again echoing other documentary editors' concern for responsibility to the truth, Amend identifies the need to be authentic to the subjects of the films, especially

when they reveal their polarizing, shocking, and graphically disturbing life choices. By being unafraid to look at these realities, Amend feels that open-minded, compassionate audiences can become one with those who willingly share their vulnerabilities.

*How did you first get into documentary editing?*

The shorthand version of that story is that feminism and the women's movement got me into editing. But let me back up a little and say that I went to Berkeley and San Francisco State and received my master's in humanities in the midseventies, and then realized there wasn't anything much I could do with that degree. I had no concept of the career I wanted anyway because when I was brought up, basically a woman either became a teacher or got married. That was a woman's career path at the time. So I became a teacher. I taught humanities at City College of San Francisco and, given the emerging women's movement, I became more involved in teaching women's studies and reading feminist literature. I also started watching every documentary made by a woman filmmaker and showed them to my classes, even English classes, and assigned essays on the films. I'm sure you're familiar with Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, USA* and Lynne Littman's *Number Our Days*. In 1976, their documentary films had won Academy Awards, which were presented by Lillian Hellman.

*A great feminist author herself.*

Yes. She presented both the short and feature documentary awards that year. Everything for women was coming together at that moment. I was also very interested in women artists and was a big fan of Judy Chicago. Johanna Demetrakas had made the film *Womanhouse*, which was very influential to me. I simply became fascinated with the idea of making feminist films. Luckily, the college I was teaching at had a little film department, and I enrolled in some film classes.

*So you were both student and teacher.*

Exactly. Sometimes I would be in a film class and my own students would be in the same class! I started making little Super 8 films.

*Any particular topic?*

They always had a feminist slant to them. I did a black-and-white short that was a sort of neo-Italian Lina Wertmüller-style feminist fairy tale. Basically *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* Italian style! (*Laughs.*) And

the gist of it was that Snow White went from being oppressed by the dwarfs to being oppressed by the prince!

*Makes sense to me! Did you have seven people playing the dwarfs?*

Well, if you didn't count, you didn't know. Basically a crowd of my friends really got into it. It was hilarious. I think it was when I was cutting that little film together in my apartment, like three o'clock in the morning, I realized that time had just flown by and I was having the most fun. It was a moment when I thought, wow, this is something I would love to do for the rest of my life. Also at that time, I was feeling ready to leave San Francisco and I met a friend through a friend at a dinner party. His name was Jack Leber, an assistant editor working on the TV show, *Dallas*, at Lorimar. I mentioned to him, "Oh, I want to be an editor." He said, "Well, you should just come to Los Angeles. You can get a job." And I did.

*Other than the seven dwarfs film and other films you made for class, did you have any professional training?*

No, but I felt I knew enough to at least be an apprentice or I could sync dailies, which is what I did. I got a job fairly quickly, but unfortunately, it was at a postproduction house that did really horrible low-budget exploitation films that went against every feminist scruple I had?

*It must have been an education in itself that reinforced your beliefs.*

It sure was. I worked mostly with sound editors, I became a sound effects librarian, and then an assistant editor. I got a little taste of Hollywood, and I also got a sense of what I *didn't* want to do.

*Which was?*

These low-budget exploitation films!

*How about high-budget exploitation films? (Laughs.)*

Those too! I left that job the day they asked me to do ADR cue sheets on this horribly violent film with a rape scene. I couldn't even watch the film, it made me furious. I said I couldn't do this anymore because in the evenings, I was also working with Judy Chicago on *The Dinner Party*, which was a major feminist artwork telling the history of women in Western civilization through china painting and needlework. I knew the exploitation business contradicted everything I believed in. After leaving, I worked as an apprentice with Johanna Demetrakas on her film *Right out*

of *History: The Making of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party*, and entered documentary that way.

*Why did you gravitate toward editing of all the things you could do as a filmmaker?*

Well, I didn't enjoy shooting or producing. And you know how there's always a class artist in school? Unfortunately, I was always the worst. A teacher once even told me, "You shouldn't bother to try drawing. You're not good enough."

*How not encouraging—*

I know. But I always loved art and wanted to do something in the arts. I played violin and piano, but I kept searching for something creative to excel at. There was a side of me that always wanted to be a writer and a storyteller, making something dramatic. It just clicked with editing. Telling a story through images.

*Are you equating film editing with the writing process?*

Absolutely. Especially in documentaries, the editor makes a major contribution to the writing of the film. A couple of directors have given me a writing credit or costory credit on their films. I have cut fiction and it is fun, but to me, the real challenge is finding the story in a documentary.

*Can you describe how you find a story, or at least the spine of a storyline, from the mix of footage you get when first starting a documentary?*

One of my early documentaries was called *Metamorphosis: Man into Woman*, directed by Lisa Leeman, about a man undergoing a sex change. Shot over a four-year period, that film had a clear, obvious linear progression and had to be structured chronologically—that is, in shooting order—because the main character Gary/Gabi was changing physically. Her looks would be different from month to month and the film reflected that evolution. But one film where I really felt like the director and I had to find the structure to tell the story was *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks*. The director, LisaGay Hamilton, shot twenty interviews over a year's time with Beah Richards, this incredible African-American poet, political activist, and actress who most people would recognize for her role as Sidney Poitier's mother in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. LisaGay wanted to do something with this footage as a film, but it was basically straightforward interviews with one talking head. The only real *vérité* scene she had with

Beah was her packing up and moving out of her house. When LisaGay and I started working on the film, we knew that we didn't want to do a linear life story. Instead, LisaGay's intention was to share Beah's *mind* with the audience.

*That must have required a very different, even abstract approach to working with the material.*

Definitely.

*What did you think when the director said she wanted to get into Beah's mind, not her linear life?*

I knew it was a great idea. This was a conversation over the phone so I had not seen any footage yet. But it was a very wonderful conversation about not wanting to do a traditional biography. However, it was still just a talking head. So I asked LisaGay, "Well, do you have scenes?" And she said, "Not really!" (*Laughs.*) Then she added, "It's just that I would go over and sit with Beah and I would tape her talking and she just blew my mind. Every time I'd come out of her house, my head was spinning and I was just so energized and inspired by her words." So LisaGay simply said, "I don't want it to be about acting or an actor's life." When I began to look at the footage, I had no idea what to do. The first tape I saw was Beah on an oxygen machine! She had become very ill and in fact had died before I began working on the film, but I didn't know any of that at first. When I saw the tape, all I could think of was, wow, this is going to be off-putting to the audience. But within five minutes, I completely forgot about the oxygen machine. Beah was an incredible speaker and an incredible woman. LisaGay also had a few of Beah's photographs, so we started basically with footage and photographs. Eventually, we gathered a great deal of archival footage, home movies, and film clips to tell the story. We started to build a story that went into Beah's past, but came back to her present condition. So the film did become the story of her life, but also the story of the end of her life and how she was coping with that.

*Is there a written or even unwritten editing rule that if you capture a person's life in a documentary, you must treat it chronologically?*

I think that as long as you set up a particular convention for the film, and the audience feels you are guiding them through the story with a clear vision and goal, it can work. You want people to feel comfortable with whatever you set up from the outset so that they will go where you want

to take them. You don't want to throw in anything that will confuse them during the presentation and essentially take them out of the story. Basically, in *Beah*, I found that the interviews had been conducted in a thematic order, like, "Let's talk about your childhood," "Let's talk about moving to Los Angeles," or, "How did you get to Broadway?" Conducted in that way, the interviews had a natural progression we could follow which became the spine of the film. But in between those sequences, we would present scenes from Beah's present-day life, clips from her films, and excerpts from a 1973 broadcast of Beah's one-woman show in which she performed her poetry.

*Another film you edited, Cowboy del Amor, told the life of Ivan Thompson, a real cowboy in New Mexico who ran a matchmaking business to bring men to Mexico and meet women for possible marriage. There, you told his life story within the larger context of how he helped three men meet the "women of their dreams."*

That film was a very different challenge. The director, Michèle Ohayon, heard Ivan speaking on the radio—NPR, I think—and then had a conversation with him and thought he was a great character for a documentary. When he told her, "I'm going down to Mexico, if you want to come to see what I do," Michèle just went off by herself—not even with a crew—to do scouting, and she ended up shooting Ivan introducing his client, Rick, to prospective brides. And she actually caught Rick meeting Frances—love at first sight!—right on camera. It was incredible how that happened. Michèle hadn't planned to get the heart of the film in her first shoot, but she did and it was a phenomenal job. She filmed that first story on her own. The other two couples were filmed on later trips with a small crew.

*Yes, three matched-up couples appear in the film. Were there other couples you chose not to include?*

No. That was it. Michèle saw three couples, filmed three couples, and the three couples appear in the film! One man and woman met, fell in love, and got married. Another man and woman went on a couple of dates but didn't click. And another much older man and woman married—they were both friends of Ivan's who he felt might hit it off, and they did. Being a feminist, of course, I never felt comfortable with films about matchmakers or mail-order brides. I always felt those people were sleazy. But Michèle is a wonderful director who knows how to pull a lot out of her subjects for their very human side. We also set up the story in a humorous way

because Ivan himself was very funny. He had even written a book about his business called *Cowboy Cupid!* Once we established his business, we went into the more poignant side of the story, about the search for love. We eventually told Ivan's personal story midway through the film, how he got into this business, his own shaky marriage and his children, and eventually we wrapped up with what happened to him and the three couples.

*In one scene, you kept in the voice of the director talking with Ivan in his hotel room in Mexico. Isn't the preference in documentary to omit the offscreen voice of the interviewer and let the subject talk to the camera/audience?*

It depends on the film. In this case, I think it was appropriate to keep Michèle's voice in because she begins to address issues that I'm sure many in the audience were eager to hear about. She asked Ivan, "Do you get criticized for your work?" I think that was a skillful way to raise objections to what he's doing without challenging him head-on. And since Ivan could be perceived as exploiting women, it was important to hear a woman ask that question. So we left the question in. What ensued was a very funny scene in which Ivan talks about the criticism he receives. He defended himself hilariously by reading his hate mail! We also kept in scenes where Ivan was obviously addressing Michèle directly. For example, Michèle was filming Ivan and Rick in the hotel late one night after a very long day. He looked at the camera and said, "Do you want to see me get undressed? Because I sure am tired. And if you do, can you put on some music?" At that point, we cut. That scene always gets a big laugh. We kept it in because it added humor and brought the audience into a different space, like breaking the fourth wall. But back to the question—yes, in other films we make every effort to take the director's questions out. And directors will often ask interviewees to incorporate the question into their answer, to speak in complete sentences and so forth. Certainly, if the tone or convention of the film isn't set up properly for what an audience can expect and an outside voice suddenly pops in, it can be jarring and call attention to itself. The danger is always doing anything that may take the audience "out of the film." However, one of the most successful examples of hearing the director speak off-camera occurs in *Harlan County, USA*, when Barbara Kopple has a brilliant exchange with the villain of the film. It comes at a moment of great tension and beautifully cuts through it. It always evokes laughter and applause and is one of the highlights of the film. And may I add that *Harlan County*,

*USA*, edited by Nancy Baker and Mary Lampson, should be required viewing for everyone who cares about filmmaking.

*Thank you for pointing that out.*

Just another thought on the subject. In documentaries, so many exchanges with subjects are on-the-fly that we refer to those interviews as OTF. A subject could be commenting to the director or cinematographer and some of that can be very effective to keep in the film. For example, in *Beah*, the personal exchange between the director, LisaGay, and this incredible woman was important. We wanted LisaGay to have a presence in the film, so that even though she was behind the camera, we often kept in both sides of the conversation. The whole idea was to make the audience feel they were in the room with Beah and that she was directly engaging LisaGay—and the audience—in a dialogue.

*You said some key words there—“make the audience feel.” It seems easier to touch audiences when you deal with subjects who are alive to share their stories. What about more fact-based documentaries, like Transatlantic Cable and Bataan Rescue, which rely on photographs and archival footage?*

Both of those films for *American Experience* on television were scripted and involved actors and re-creations. *Transatlantic Cable* was one of the few films I’ve done where the storytellers were authors and historians rather than participants in a particular event. But even there, you are looking for the best storytelling moments, when to bring that person on camera, when to let the talking play as voiceover, and how to introduce the speaker. Of those two films, *Transatlantic Cable* most strictly dealt with science, engineering, and colorful historical characters, so the film had a different personality, if you will, and a different feeling. *Bataan* was more like *Into the Arms of Strangers*, where we had actual witnesses and participants from a historic event. As you know, for *Into the Arms of Strangers*, we found the actual children—now elderly adults—who went through the experience of the Kindertransport during World War II.

*Even though you had witnesses to those events, wouldn’t most audiences consider Strangers far more emotional than, say, Bataan, despite both being war documentaries?*

*Into the Arms of Strangers* was different from *Bataan*, or even *The Long Way Home*, which dealt with the resettlement of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in Israel, because *Strangers* was a children’s memory

film. From the beginning of working on it, we knew that music and sound design were going to be very important to create this sense of memory—even though the music and sound work came much later in the editing process—and we also knew we didn't want to use realistic sound effects. In *The Long Way Home*, by contrast, the sound effects were completely realistic over the archival footage, and the sound design there was more realistic. But for *Strangers*, the director, Mark Jonathan Harris, knew that we didn't want to hear Nazis marching realistically, for example. We wanted to keep everything very "memory" and evocative of a time and place. One reason for that was practical: we could find no actual footage that depicted the story of the Kindertransport, no footage of the children leaving on the trains. So we had to re-create and manipulate the archival footage we found from the time period. I did not want people to think that the train we were showing in an old film clip was *the train* the children had actually taken. So I slowed down the train clip and stylized it with slow motion and reverberating sound effects. It was all about evoking a memory rather than seeing the actual scenes. In some cases, we did have photographs of the children, which they had carried with them when they moved to England and other places afterward. We definitely relied on these personal family photos to tell the story. When the adults who had been the Kindertransport children were interviewed, you could see in their faces and hear in their tone of voice that they were all still haunted by their experience, even fifty years later. When our crew returned from shooting in England and New York, we watched all the dailies together over a week, and we would just pass boxes of Kleenex around! The interview footage was incredibly moving. Mark was such a good questioner, but also such a sympathetic listener, that the participants gave him everything they could, even though some of them had not talked much about their war experience until then. Because the film was about children, we tried to get as many shots as possible of kids from the period or of images that felt like they could be seen from a child's point of view. You know, low-angle, child POV shots—looking up at Nazi flags, ground-level angles of menacing boots marching or a bunch of balloons decorated with swastikas floating by, which is one of the most chilling images in the film.

*Is this manipulation of archival images a risky license to take in a documentary?*

We were careful to respect that we were capturing real people's lives and stories, and we didn't want it to feel exploitative at all. But by slowing down and manipulating the footage, it was clear that we were

creating visual metaphors and not documenting actual reality. The intention was always to have the film feel stylized for that reason. Even for the idea of how the children had to pack their suitcases to take the train—all we had to represent that event was a *packing list*. That was the only piece of original material I had to work with. I found it so moving to read what the kids chose to take with them and what their parents sent them along with. I thought this had to be a big moment in the film because it was so poignant. But, again, all I had was this one shot of a piece of paper, the packing list, and the interviews in which the people talked about what they took. So I had an idea: I went out in my garage and found an old suitcase, an old teddy bear, and other childhood objects I had. Then I asked my assistant, Alicia Dwyer, who had a camera, to shoot them for temp shots to mock up the sequence. Then we slowed the film down, made it black-and-white, added music with it, and cut that “packing list” sequence. Everybody liked it, but Deborah Oppenheimer, the producer, said, “Well, we can’t really do that. The objects have to be authentic.” Because she was in touch with the whole Kindertransport community, she began to ask if people still had any of the objects they brought with them. And they did! Deborah gave them her Fedex number and all of these wonderful artifacts started arriving at her house. Including a suitcase and a teddy bear!

*So the toys that comprise the opening montage of the film had really traveled in the Kindertransport. What a beautiful miracle for the film to include them.*

It was an amazing response. Although that was not the original opening planned for the film, we knew once we received all these rich visual artifacts that we could create both the opening sequence and the “packing list” sequence with them.

*It’s also interesting that you felt prompted to visit your garage and create shots with your own props. As a result, you launched a response which so enriched the film.*

I guess I could kind of take credit for that! (*Laughs.*) At times, yes, I will suggest pickup shots that could be useful. The point is, in the archival footage, I didn’t have anything like a teddy bear or a suitcase to go with the shot of the packing list. Perhaps we could have had our researcher, Corrinne Collett, find something equivalent. She was phenomenal in what she found. For example, I would say, “I need a British nurse, 1945,” and she’d come up with an image of a British nurse from

1945! Her first assignment was to find shots of European children from the late thirties and early forties. But we didn't have material to fit the packing list.

*From what you've just described, it seems that an important skill for working with footage is making spontaneous connections. How does one develop that skill?*

It starts with watching the material. I watch all material—or I try to. I will say it gets more and more difficult with directors shooting three hundred and four hundred hours of film, but I do try to watch all of it. In some cases, I've had directors go through and make their own selects. Then we can always go back and look at what they left out if we feel we're missing something. You know, a director whittling the footage down to a hundred hours is very helpful! (*Laughs.*) But if you watch a forty-minute tape of dailies—actually now they're digital cards—but, say, you watch forty minutes of dailies, you *have* to watch the whole thing because you don't know where the gem is going to be. If you fast-forward, you might miss it. So I do sit and watch the footage and check my first reaction to what I see. If I laugh, I make a note of it. If I cry—and I do cry watching dailies—then I know that if it resonates with me, it's going to resonate with an audience. That's what I do to begin, and then I start to build the story or scene and make those connections.

*Even though you might have no idea while watching dailies where you could use a particular shot in the film?*

Exactly. So first is a gut reaction, and I make a note of it, although I usually like to watch and not stop-and-start. But if I've got a transcript or a log, I will underline or make a star next to the shot. I don't like to take a lot of notes. I just want to make sure I know where that spot is in the footage. Also, if there is repetition when you're going through the material, you can see who says something best or which character illustrates an aspect of the story best. That way, you start defining the story and the characters. Here's an example from *The Long Way Home*. In editing that film, I looked at vast amounts of footage shot by the Allies of the liberation of the concentration camps. That was a profoundly disturbing and life-changing experience for me. I searched through this footage many, many times looking for the right images to illustrate the particular stories being told. Mark Jonathan Harris's vision for the opening of the film was not only to convey the incomprehensible shock and horror the soldiers felt, but more importantly, the recognition on the part of the prisoners

that they were being perceived as “inhuman” by their liberators. We were almost ready to lock picture when I went back through the archives one last time, and found one shot that I couldn’t believe I had missed—an image that seemed to embody completely the point of the opening sequence. It was a slow tilt up the body of a naked, emaciated man being sprayed with DDT by one GI while others look on with expressions of disgust and horror. The look on that man’s face is something that still haunts me.

*Knowing the best shots must be especially helpful in building montages.*

Yes. I do try to build a montage by figuring out what’s the beginning image and what’s the final image of a montage. A sequence like a montage can be used to advance the story, so you want to start one place and end up some place else. Montages may also serve as transitions, but they are part of the storytelling, to bridge scenes as well as to punctuate what you just saw and set up what you’re about to see. A montage gives the audience time to reflect and experience a transition, like a chapter or page-turning that says we’re moving on to something else now. Every shot should have a purpose and hopefully every shot is beautiful. I can spend an hour sometimes looking for just the right shot and I won’t know what that is until I see it. Sometimes I will remember, “Oh, there was this shot of whatever that would work over there.” So I’ll comb through the footage until I find one that I think will work. I look for composition, I look for color sometimes. You want to keep things visually cohesive. I really love shots that reveal something *within* them that I can connect to, such as a move starting in one shot that I can carry over to the next. You know, beautiful camera moves. When I was working in film, there was nothing like beautiful camera moves. Sometimes in video . . . well, if it is a good camera person and high-quality video—it’s high-def now—it can be beautiful, but camera moves on video really have to be perfectly shot to hold up on the big screen.

*That’s one challenge of the new technology. Any other challenges?*

In one sense, there’s more democratization because of the technology. It’s not as difficult, expensive, or prohibitive to make a film, so more people can do it—and not everybody is as good at it as others are, so there is definitely that aspect. Also the shooting ratio has definitely changed. When I was cutting film, I would be given maybe forty or fifty hours of material and I thought that was a lot. But I could pretty much memorize the footage and readily access something I was looking for. Now editing

on Avid, for example, you're much more reliant on a good assistant and the technology to organize all the footage properly so it's easy to search and access. If a project with four hundred hours is not organized well from the outset, it's a recipe for disaster.

*But just because there's ten times the footage doesn't mean there's ten times better material, does it?*

No, that's the trouble. You had to be much more disciplined shooting film because it was so expensive.

*Has the new technology impacted other aspects of editing for you?*

Well, I'm talking about the "dark ages" now, when I used to cut in film. (*Laughs.*) Back then, I never made a dissolve. It was almost like a badge of honor, you know?

*Why?*

We had this expression: "If you can't solve it, dissolve it." (*Laughs.*) So we always wanted to solve a problem editorially *without* using a dissolve.

*Don't you sometimes need dissolves for transitions?*

Many of us just didn't use them. It was sort of a purist *vérité* approach. I only wanted to make cuts that worked, and if I needed transitions in the story, I'd make a transition visually, like to a wide shot or an establishing shot or some poetic shot that would signify the end of one scene or the beginning of the next. But I tried to do it all without the "crutch" of the dissolve.

*How about fade-outs?*

I don't like to use a lot of them, only when it's extremely crucial to the story. Otherwise, they can take you out of the story. If you use a fade-out, there has to be a need for a definite pause—it's a statement that something has just ended. Back in the "dark ages," to indicate that's what you wanted, you'd mark the film with a grease pencil because you couldn't see the effect while you were editing. You had to send it to the lab. Then if you didn't like it, it was expensive to change, so not using fades or dissolves was also certainly a practical decision. For a long time, even when I was cutting nonlinear, I wouldn't use dissolves. It wasn't until I got into the historical or memory films that used a lot of archival footage that I began manipulating and slowing the film down, dissolving one image into

another. The technology finally allowed that, you could see it. You could try it out, design it yourself, play around with it.

*What about “the rule” of dissolves?*

Well, that rule sort of went away! (*Laughs.*) Although I know some people who still adhere to it! Now, though, I just think of a dissolve as another color in your palette, another tool for visual storytelling. And sometimes even necessary.

*Does the new technology facilitate working with music while editing?*

Yes, that’s an evolution too because you didn’t have the range of possibilities of trying music. Now you can just put in a CD and try it. When working in film, it was more cumbersome and expensive to transfer music. But still, the real work is in searching for the right feeling, so I listen to a lot of music to find what resonates with the film I’m cutting. I have worked with some composers whose work I love, such as Lee Holdridge, Miriam Cutler, and Joseph Julian Gonzalez, so I will often use their scores from other films to temp with. Also, I’m always happy when I can cut with jazz or classical music. In *Into the Arms of Strangers*, I temped with Berg, Webern, and even a Viennese waltz.

*Is it tricky to watch a film with music that you cut to but that will not be in the final film?*

Yes, it’s dangerous to fall in love with your temp score. In *Beah*, I used a Bessie Smith song to underscore the sequence of Beah packing up her house to move back to Mississippi. It worked perfectly, we loved it, and we wanted to keep it. We learned that it would be very expensive to license that song. But we were blessed because our angel, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, who scored the entire film, performed a song for that sequence that not only transcended the temp track, but also elevated and deepened the moment. I have to say that the two days of working with Bernice in the music recording sessions is one of the highlights of my professional life. I felt privileged to be a witness to her brilliance and I was so grateful that our film had inspired her to create such powerful music. But again, in terms of cutting to music, I find that it helps to temp with the music of a composer we think we may ultimately work with, although obviously you can’t always do that. Basically I’m searching for a mood or vibe—I never want to use anything too familiar or recognizable, but something

that has the emotion, feeling, and pacing that I want—music that will underscore the story I’m trying to impart. Then I have to trust that the composers will do something even better. Sometimes they will compose a score so completely different from what I have temped with, and if it works, I’m thrilled.

*And if it doesn’t work?*

The best composers are very open to working with you and the director to achieve the best sound for the film.

*When you screen a film before it gets scored, do you remove the temp music and let everyone see the silent cut?*

No. When I screen for feedback, it’s with filmmakers and colleagues who understand how to look at a rough cut. They know it’s temp track and they know how to give feedback accordingly. There was a time when *everyone* I knew was using the soundtrack of *Babel* as temp music! (Laughs.)

*Is there an inner musical rhythm to your cutting?*

There is. Sort of like one-two-three, one-two-three.

*Do you always waltz through a film?* (Laughs.)

Well . . . it depends on what beat you’re going for. Sometimes you cut all the shots the same length and sometimes you don’t. Sometimes you cut to music on the beat, but even when there is no music, all the shots seem to follow a certain rhythm.

*Almost as if each shot turns out to be, say, three seconds long in a montage?*

Yes, but it also depends on the visual. If you have a nice slow pan, that one shot might be enough. You might not even need any more shots. Or maybe like one slow pan and three short shots, if that’s what the scene needs. You feel like you’re conducting the film in a way because you’re balancing so many elements: sight, sound, story, emotion, information. You want everything to resonate at the same time and contribute to the audience’s understanding and experience.

*The act of conducting must really come into play when you work on films with multiple storylines such as *Thin*, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*, and *The**

World According to Sesame Street. *How do you keep the various strands straight?*

Each of those films was a little different. In *Pandemic*, for example, we cut the individual stories first, so I started country by country on five continents.

*Was that because the footage was coming in from different countries at different times?*

No, it was just the most sensible approach because each story was like a portrait of the AIDS crisis in each country. In fact, HBO ended up screening that film as five half-hours. So after we did the feature, we broke the film down into each story and it worked very well as a series. That was the only multiple-story film I've worked on that didn't have a lot of intercutting between stories. We stayed with one story for a good chunk of time and we all came up with that structure in the editing room. Rory Kennedy, the producer, had been in the field capturing these five stories, and then we worked with writer Mark Bailey to develop the structure of the feature film. Each of the individual stories had a three-act structure and could actually exist as a short film. In assembling the feature film, we intercut the five stories accordingly—exposition, conflict, and resolution. In the feature version, we naturally shortened, tightened, and eliminated some scenes, but the essence and integrity of each story remained intact.

*You also had stories in different countries in the Sesame Street film.*

In that case, we used the Bangladesh story as the spine or through-line of the film, and intercut it with sequences such as the origins of *Sesame Street*, the introduction of an HIV-positive Muppet in South Africa's *Sesame Street*, and the effort to bring Serbs and Albanians together in a coproduction, among others. By contrast, with *Thin*, which is about women struggling with eating disorders, we focused on four characters: Shelley, Alisa, Polly, and Brittany. The idea was to have one character come in and hopefully complete the treatment program and exit. The director, Lauren Greenfield, wasn't exactly sure who else she was going to find who would complete the program, so she had filmed more characters who we dropped. It is tricky to do a film with multiple characters since both major and minor characters emerge and evolve during the course of the film, and you know the audience will connect with some more than others, so you structure the film as major and minor as well. For example, in *Thin*, we followed four major young women who became the story's focus. However, other

people who recurred throughout the film—particularly staff members, therapists, and a couple of other patients—played minor roles.

*How does editing help an audience keep track of multiple characters?*

I always look for a diversity of characters and make sure each one is clearly differentiated from the other. In films with multiple characters, you don't want the audience to become confused and mix them up, so I try to introduce each character with a memorable scene that has personal significance for that character. A couple of examples come to mind. In *Into the Arms of Strangers*, Lory Cahn was a vivid storyteller and related many significant childhood experiences. But we chose to introduce her with the story she told about how at seven years old, she was window-shopping with her father who bought her a very expensive suit that she admired. The gist of the story was that she was her father's pride and joy and he could deny her nothing. We learn later that when her father put her on the Kindertransport and was saying goodbye to her, his impending loss was so unbearable that he pulled her out of the window of the moving train. Consequently, she was sent with her family to six concentration camps. The core of Lory's story is her relationship with her father, which becomes memorable for the audience. A good example from *Thin* was Polly, who we introduced immediately as the rebel who explains how to "bend" the rules; later, she's the person who was kicked out for her behavior. Brittany is introduced through her relationship with her mother, whose behavior has clearly contributed to her eating disorder. Sometimes in a documentary, it might not be easy to like all the characters, but they still should be people the audience can engage with.

*I imagine that some characters drop out along the way based on the strength of their storylines—not only through editorial decisions, but sometimes because of circumstances during the shooting.*

That does happen. The strongest characters and storylines in *Thin* emerged over the course of shooting, and some characters were dropped during filming while another couple of characters were dropped after our first rough cut—which was four hours. The friendship that developed between Polly and another patient, Shelley, was crucial to the first two acts. When Polly left at the end of act 2, there was a big void to fill—both in the film and in the lives of the women in the clinic. Although filming continued on and off for several months, and a lot more happened at the clinic after Polly left, we ultimately collapsed the months with a "time passing" sequence and then resolved each of the other three characters'

stories in act 3. Shelley was the only one who successfully completed the program and was discharged. Brittany and Alisa left because their health insurance coverage ran out. It always makes me sad to talk about Polly because, although she did have some professional success as a photographer, and through the film became active in helping other women with eating disorders, she continued to struggle with her demons and committed suicide a couple of years after the film was released.

*It must be very difficult to present the problem of bulimia in film because of these tragic outcomes. But the presentation seemed even more intense by actually filming two of the women purging in the bathroom. What is the impact on an audience when you compel them to see such emotionally raw moments?*

Hopefully, they have new awareness, understanding, compassion.

*I suppose some audience members are curious about it, while others are extremely uncomfortable seeing such a private act depicted so graphically.*

The women allowed it to be filmed. I don't know if it was a cry for help, but all the women who agreed to be in the film wanted people to understand that this is an illness which they are powerless against. We had an earlier scene with Polly purging. Then toward the end, we saw Alisa, who had gone through treatment—we thought successfully—and was at home with her kids, go into her bathroom and purge. But it was important to see. This graphic aspect reminds me of another film I cut, *The Girl Next Door*. It's a feminist film of a woman who starts out in the porn industry. Although she is actually enthusiastic about it at first, she gets completely beaten down by it. We had a graphic scene of her going in for breast implants and having liposuction, and the audience freaked out when they saw it, it was so horrible. But Christine Fugate and I wanted it in the film because we were making a statement about this form of self-mutilation. It made a point. It was a choice to include that scene and let it play as realistically as possible. In both cases, the graphic scenes not only contributed to the story, but they underscored important themes we were exploring. Both scenes are similar in that they involve women's body images and are related to identity, self-loathing, and self-worth. So I think it was legitimate to present this reality.

*One could say the same about images of war.*

Definitely. *The Long Way Home* contained many terrible images from the Nazi concentration camps. Those images are always shocking and

horrific, but there is a danger that audiences who have seen them before can become desensitized. We tried to look for images that were not familiar, and we were told by many knowledgeable viewers that they had never seen some of the archival footage we used. Also, an important direction of Mark's was to find close-ups of faces—both still images and live action footage. We lingered on these intense close-ups as a powerful exploration and reminder of the humanity of the victims—people who had endured an unimaginable dehumanizing ordeal.

*Given the harsh realities that documentaries often capture, I understand the need to "see" representations of those realities, however painful. In some way, though, that potential to "cut to the quick" reminds me, stream-of-consciously, of a line in the film Jimmy Carter: Man from Plains, in which Carter comments on his experience of being interviewed by a Middle Eastern journalist and worrying that he will be misrepresented in the final cut of that interview. He bluntly said, "The editing always hurts." Did that comment strike a chord with you as an editor?*

*(Laughs.)* In a way. I think I left that in because I thought it was a touch of humor and irony.

*But he has a point.*

He definitely does. In editing a documentary, you are given a real trust and you should not violate that trust. It is easy to do cheap shots in editing, where someone says something but then you choose to cut to an image that contradicts or misinterprets it. That is exploitative and offensive. I think of the film I did about skinheads and a band of kids who hung out with this obnoxious, loathsome human being, who was the *hero* of the film, so to speak, the main character. Of course, when he saw the film, he really liked it! Sometimes we think people are not going to like their portrayal on the screen and then they do. I remember cutting the film at my house when a furnace man came by to do some repairs and he said, "What's that you're cutting? A Ku Klux Klan rally?" All this noise was blaring out of my house for a few months! But the film was about how this man was manipulating these young boys and we tried to portray the boys as sympathetic and how kids can fall under the spell of such a person. That was the point of the story and we had to present it in an honest and truthful way.

*Interestingly, you said you tried to portray the boys as sympathetic. In a way, weren't you actually slanting the film toward that side? Or did you*

*feel you were still being impartial to both sides, even though the main character was probably reprehensible to most of the audience?*

We didn't censor him at all. We just let him say everything that came out of his mouth that contributed to the story. The purpose of the film was to take a look at this subculture and how it developed and was promoted. I suppose if one already embraced this man's doctrine, the film would not change that perspective. But the audience saw the film for our purpose and point of view. It was clear in how we presented the material. But the film really looked at issues of class and race. The boys were mostly disenfranchised, impoverished white youth who came from dysfunctional and/or abusive family situations. They found a home of sorts with this father figure who was able to exert his influence over them and indoctrinate them with his hateful views. Fortunately, the film ended with his arrest. We were quite pleased. (*Laughs.*)

*With such polarizing characters and controversial subjects, editing a documentary is clearly a huge responsibility.*

It is a responsibility to be honest and truthful. I believe in the integrity of documentaries and in the editorial process, and I want to maintain the integrity of the characters and their situations and not manipulate them. Of course, we have to condense the stories, but we still have to maintain and present their true essence. You owe it to the audiences because they know when they are being manipulated. And you owe it to the people who have entrusted you with the stories of their lives.