

It was six years ago that I begin my studies in editing at Film Academy Vienna. The editing process, which takes place in the evening twilight of a film's production, is where the moving images and recorded audio are woven into that which can ultimately be called the film. Though we also speak of "cutting" a film, this isn't the most precise term—after all, the thought processes involved here have more to do with putting together than with taking apart. And it's precisely such putting together that is so amazing about this art form: thoughts are arranged one after the other and can evoke extremely complex perceptions when taken as a whole. It's a very young art, hardly 120 years old—and though it's related to literature in many ways, we experience it on an entirely different level due to its pre-linguistic nature. This is why editing also lends itself to manipulation or even propagandistic use in the wrong hands, and such use is something that we should always oppose. In the best case, however, it enables the viewer to experience a realm of thought that not only provides space for autonomous empathy but also encourages it.

My choice of this degree programme was owed to two factors, the first of which was a yearning for images. In my parents' home, television was something to be enjoyed only in small doses. And to a child, things that are rare are obviously that much more desirable—which is why I spent that much more time watching television as a teenager. I always wanted to know how those images that could hold me captive in front of a box for so many hours were made. How could images and sounds be arranged in such a way that they'd persuade a human being to consume them for hours on end? The second factor was my enthusiasm for the artistic process. Because I'd mostly played with Legos instead of watching television, I'd been able to repeatedly experience that magical thing we now often refer to as "flow": a pleasurable, oblivious state where you're totally immersed in the material surrounding you, no longer consciously thinking but instead just taking the right steps as a matter of course, as if guided by a higher power. It's a wondrous state of being, impossible to bring about wilfully and that much more magical for its not being readily available.

In the editing process, you can experience this self-forgotten state quite often if the conditions are right. You have the finished material in front of you, and by limiting yourself to it, you train a mental muscle situated somewhere between logic and free association. The possibilities are unlimited in number but limited in quality. One can let a shot run longer, cut it short, delete it, or put it in another place. And the same goes for sound. With this limited toolbox and the simultaneously unlimited abundance of ideas to be conveyed, you hit upon striking combinations again and again—combinations that are easily executed with the click of a mouse but extremely multi-layered in their complexity.

Alongside the two classic genres of feature film and documentary, there also exists a third species of film that has developed under the radar—and for me, this has turned out to be the most promising one from an artistic perspective. During my fourth semester at the Film Academy, I discovered a little elective that was entitled simply "Essayfilm". The films we screened in that course had very little in common with the many we'd watched elsewhere in our studies. They contained highly personal images that had frequently been filmed by the directors themselves, diary-like impressions of their creators' outer worlds that, in turn, portrayed complex inner worlds—overlaid most of the time with the voice of the director him or herself as a narrator, a thinker, a dreamer. Films that defied classic narrative structures but also couldn't be described as experimental films or video art; they were in a sort of limbo between literature and film. Gathering together the images for an essay film is a meandering process, a process of finding one's theme with the camera, without the ability to plan, without any organisation. The film's theme only really emerges when editing the material, in a slow process extending over many months during which the film ultimately finds its language.

It was inspirational to realise how films can also be created in such a soft way, with the usual brittle structures dissolved and their creators always able to completely rethink their form and content.

In 1984, the filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky wrote: “In my opinion, the tendency that is most perilous for the cinema of the future lies in the endeavour of true and exact reproduction in one’s work of that which was written on paper, the transfer of preconceived and often purely speculative constructions to the screen. Filmically creative work, even just by its very nature, requires that one take pleasure in direct observation of the lively and changeable world, which is constantly in motion.” As film editors, we attempt to approach a film’s intrinsic poetic truth, to probe the material for those ideas glistening in the dark. The limits that our material imposes are so clear that one’s freedom within the bounds of the existing images and sounds ends up being enormous. Not only the images themselves speak, but also—and far beyond them—the images’ ordering, their rhythm, their beginnings and ends. And accompanied by the tracks left by the recorded sounds, we press onward—creating structures where there were none before, discovering previously blocked views into our souls, and thereby perhaps also coming to understand just a little bit more about what art really means.