Talking in Circles: An Interview with Elida Schogt

By Larissa Fan

Elida Schogt is a Toronto-based filmmaker whose work blends narrative, documentary, experimental and personal filmmaking. Schogt is best-known for her trilogy of Holocaust memory films, short experimental documentaries which explore the intersection of political and personal history, and the role of photography in history and personal memory. The first, Zyklon Portrait, interweaves an examination of the chemical compound used in the gas chambers with family photos, interviews, and lyrical experimental imagery. In The Walnut Tree, Schogt delves into family memories based on photos that were saved when her parents fled from the Nazis. The final film in this trilogy, Silent Song, is a poetic study of archival footage of a young boy playing the accordion in a concentration camp, a musing on the ephemeral nature of history and the human desire to archive.

Larissa Fan interviewed Schogt about her most recent project, ZERO the inside story, a feature-length film that combines narrative, documentary and essay approaches through an investigation into the concept of nothingness. ZERO the inside story premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September and will be broadcast on TVOntario's "The View From Here" in January 2005.

Larissa Fan: How did the idea for this film develop?

Elida Schogt: The idea originated when I saw an article in the paper reviewing two books on the concept of zero—this was around the time of the millennium change from 1999 to 2000— and the reviewer was discussing how one book described zero as the space inside a ring, while the other book described zero as the space outside the ring going on into infinity. I thought this was such an interesting idea that I wanted to make a film about it; so it started out as a really abstract conceptual piece.

LF: The film is a mix of a documentary exploration of the number as a mathematical, cultural and philosophical concept, and then a more personal, narrative thread, so I was curious as to which came first.

ES: Well, it started out as a visual, conceptual piece, but I knew that the metaphor would lend itself to a journey, to some kind of emotional journey, which is what my work tends to be about, so the narrative element evolved from there. The core theme of the film is how the West feared zero because they

Still: Zero

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feared the void. The main character (the narrator) in the film confronts her sense of emptiness, the void within herself, by delving into the concept of zero. The viewer is taken on that journey with her, a journey which is both an intellectual and emotional one.

LF: Your previous works also blend the historical and documentary with really personal elements. How did you come to that way of working?

ES: I don't know if I can say really how I come to it; it's probably more like an approach to how I see things. I think the informational or more objective documentary side is my own curiosity about the world. And then there has to be something from my own personal world to inspire it, so I end up approaching it from these two disparate worlds and seeing what comes from it.

LF: I think it's a really interesting mix, and it seems to be a successful one in terms of audience—the Holocaust memory films have played in a variety of contexts, both at documentary festivals and more experimental or art festivals. This film perhaps falls more on the documentary side, because it doesn't have the experimental visual treatments. I could see the hybrid nature of the work potentially being problematic in terms of finding an audience, because people might not know quite where to put it.

ES: I actually don't think this particular film falls more into documentary. I think it is different from the earlier work because it doesn't have strictly formal experimental elements in the visual treatment, but I think it experiments in the narrative more radically than the previous work. It departs from conventional documentaries in the way that I use narrative, because there's a third-person, fable-like story that unfolds as the film unfolds. People have called it an essay—I think it could be essay-documentary-narrative, those are the three elements.

What's great about the way that the Toronto International Film Festival has programmed this film is that it's in the Visions section. Visions is the program that challenges cinematic conventions, and I think it will find an audience there with people that are interested in different ways of using cinema to express story, ideas, concepts. It's true that the programmers at TIFF didn't want to put it in the documentary category, because it isn't strictly a documentary, and to me that's a good thing. I'm not really positioning it as a documentary in my own distribution strategy. Also, because the film has a TVOntario license, it will be broadcast on television to a wider audience than I could ever get through festival screenings alone.

LF: One of the things that I find really effective with this film and also with the trilogy films, particularly **Zyklon Portrait**, is the way the factual, informational element provides a way into something that is really emotionally difficult. Can you talk a bit about this strategy?

ES: I think part of the strategy is to create a work that speaks to a universal experience. Sometimes people tell extremely personal stories and leave them in a hermetic world, and it becomes just that specific story about that specific person, and I don't find that approach very effective in the

long run. It can be extremely engaging while you're watching the film, but once you leave you don't feel personally connected to the story anymore—you might have been momentarily affected by it, but it doesn't raise questions about yourself or the people around you in the same way as treating things in a more thematic way. That's why I like using larger themes, so that the personal becomes embedded in a larger structure of what goes on in the world.

LF: What was it like shooting in India?

ES: Shooting in India was a huge challenge. I had never been to India before, and no matter how much you read about it, you can't be prepared for what hits you in terms of the visceral experience on all levels: sound, smell, sight, the number of people around you. Everything feels so unfamiliar. My funding hadn't come through in the fall as I had hoped, so I ended going in the spring—which meant that we were shooting at the hottest time possible. It was forty degrees and extremely humid—pre-monsoon weather—and our window of opportunity for shooting was really short because of the haze created by the humidity. So we had to get up at four in the morning to start shooting at five, and by nine it was already too hazy and extremely hot. We would do some shooting mid-afternoon, but only in areas where there was shade. Then we would shoot again in the late afternoon, but night falls early at that time of year, so we would shoot from about four until six. But it went really well, because I gave myself a lot of time. We had a ten-day shoot and I had done a fair bit of research ahead of time. I had a shot list based on a photographic book of Varanasi, which is the city where we filmed, so I really knew what I wanted.

In that way also I would say that my approach is unlike a typical documentary in the direct cinema, fly-on-the-wall tradition. The shoot was highly structured and planned ahead of time. For example, I knew already that I was using a staircase metaphor and that Varanasi has what's called "Ghats," which are the steps that lead to the holy river, the Ganges River, and I knew that the city was built around these steps. So that was going to be central to creating the imagery there. In other cases, though, there were unexpected things that happened. We came upon these men by the side of the road that were selling these really strange bubbles—they look like soap bubbles, but they're really made of plastic. I had already filmed a woman in Toronto blowing bubbles, and on a metaphoric level it just seemed perfect in a film about ideas of nothingness, so we caught that on the fly. There were a lot of other moments like that. So it was a combination of being really planned and also allowing for spontaneity.

LF: Were there things that came up that way in the editing, connections that emerged that you hadn't planned for?

ES: Most of the editing was about structuring the piece and finding the narrative arc, and how to pace the narrative. From my perspective the editing became about writing the voice-over, writing and re-writing. It was a combination of working with Sarah Peddie, who was doing the picture, and then me going home and doing countless rewrites. So the images would inform the writing, and then the writing would inform the images, and this went back and forth over many months.

LF: How much of the narrative was in place when you started editing?

ES: I knew that it was a journey to find the origins of the number zero, and that there would be an emotional core to the piece, but I didn't know how that would unfold in terms of the actual written text. So the images informed the text. I couldn't really write about India before going there, because it is a journey that unfolds for the narrator upon the discovery of things in India, so there was no voice-over for about the last half of the film when we started editing.

LF: This is your first longer work—was the experience substantially different than working on a short, and what was the motivation for doing a longer piece?

ES: I was definitely concerned about making a longer film because my tendency is to want to be concise and to distil information, so I worried about how my ideas would sustain themselves over a longer period. But the reason that I wanted to do a longer piece was that I felt in the short work I wasn't able to take people to a place and keep them there long enough to really develop

the ideas. So, this piece is satisfying in that I feel I'm able to do that. Also, coming back to what we were talking about before in terms of programming, I didn't want to have to worry about how it would be affected by its placement in relationship to other films in a program, which is always a concern with shorts. Sometimes shorts programs are really carefully considered and put together, and other times that is not the case.

LF: How did you find the collaborative process, since your other films have been much more solo efforts?

ES: It was great working with Sarah Peddie, the editor, on this project. She was able to draw out things that I intended but was still grappling with. She worked faster than I could have on my own, not just because of her technical expertise, but also because creatively she was able to anticipate things and see where I was intending to go, when I was still mired in the subject matter. So it felt extremely collaborative. I can't say in many cases if an edit was her decision or my decision; it became our decision.

Creating the soundscape was another really collaborative process. Mike Filippov was the sound recordist in India and he began working on the sound design when the picture editing was still underway. The soundscape evolved as the picture and voice-over were re-worked. The sound design sometimes affected the pacing of picture cuts, while picture changes informed the sound. In the end, the sound design is a really rich and integral part of the film.

LF: You're finishing on 35mm. What did you shoot on?

ES: Most of the film was shot on Super 16, some on 16, and a bit on Super 8. I had hoped from the beginning to blow-up to 35mm because the piece is conceived as a film rather than a video. The duration of a lot of the shots is really long, and sky and landscape is really important, and it just wouldn't hold up on video. The other reason is that I felt limited in regular 16mm with the sound. Because zero is a circular concept, and the screen is so flat and so rectangular, I wanted to have something sculptural or three-dimensional happening. Working with Surround Sound I think is going to provide that.

LF: The concept of zero is really fascinating, I didn't think that I would find a mathematical concept so interesting...

ES: Even though zero is now integral to our everyday life—it almost runs us with all the zeroes and ones in computers—in many ways, we're a very linear culture. We think of the world and ourselves in a finite, linear way, with a beginning and an end. But when you start to think about the cycles of life, the cycles of the seasons, the cycles of the planets, you start to see life differently. That idea of life as cyclical, and the individual as just a small part of that larger cycle, is not part of a Western way of thinking but is really present in Eastern religions and philosophies.

LF: The mathematician that you interview brings in the cultural and philosophical components of numbers which, when you're studying mathematics, is not something that is ever introduced.

ES: It's true that mathematics is often a very dry and abstract subject that's not linked to everyday life. I'm lucky to have worked with Trueman MacHenry. He is a mathematician who very much connects his field with culture and philosophy.

LF: It's too bad that math isn't taught that way in school; I might have found it more accessible...

ES: Well, I don't think that any subject matter should be as isolated as we make it. Which actually brings me back to the hybrid nature of my films, which we were discussing initially. If you look at documentaries as just being about fact and fiction just being about fiction, I think that's really limiting. When we start to link different subjects and different approaches, we can see things more holistically.

LF: And that brings us back to the start of our interview, which I think is a good place to stop, now that we've completed a nice circle...

FILMOGRAPHY

ZERO THE INSIDE STORY 52 min., 35mm, colour, 2004
SILENT SONG 6 min., 16mm, B&W, 2001
THE WALNUT TREE 11 min., 16mm, colour, 2000
ZYKLON PORTRAIT 13 min., 16mm, colour, 1999

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