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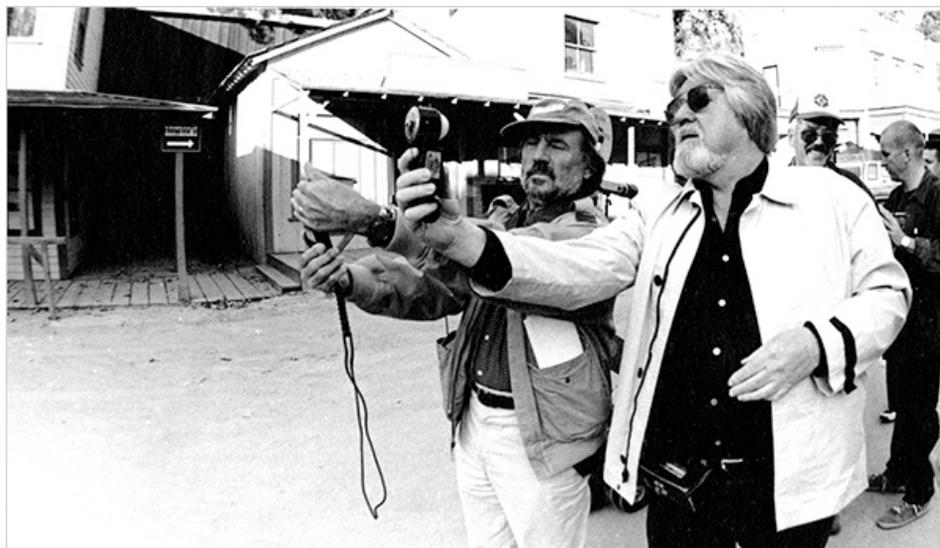
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TELEVISION

Filming a Friendship, Founded on Film



Tamas Mack/ITVS

Vilmos Zsigmond, left, and Laszlo Kovacs last year during the production of the documentary about them.

By MATT ZOLLER SEITZ
Published: November 13, 2009

VILMOS ZSIGMOND and [Laszlo Kovacs](#), whose cinematography would help change the look of American movies in the late 1960s and 1970s, first met in 1953 on a Budapest street corner near the Academy of Drama and Film, where both men were enrolled as cinematography students. Three years afterward — on Nov. 11, 1956, a week after Soviet troops poured into the city to crush the Hungarian uprising — they ran into each other again on the same corner.

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“The Russian tanks were going up and down the street,” recalled Mr. Zsigmond, 79, in a recent phone interview to promote the documentary “No Subtitles Necessary: Laszlo & Vilmos,” an account of their long friendship that will be broadcast

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Image from the film smuggled out of Hungary in 1956 by Vilmos Zsigmond and Laszlo Kovacs, subjects of a documentary.

Nov. 17 on “Independent Lens” on [PBS](#). “I said, ‘Laszlo, you know the Arriflex camera, you have it up in the film school in college.’ He said, ‘Yes, that’s where I have it.’ He knew what we were about to do.”

Mr. Kovacs got the camera and some 35-millimeter film stock. The two men roamed Budapest, surreptitiously recording over an hour’s worth of film of the crackdown, then smuggled the undeveloped negatives out of the country via rail to Vienna, jumping off the train 10 miles from the Austrian border and finishing the journey on foot. Their imagery joined the collective record of that grim period, appearing in newsreels, TV reports and documentaries throughout the next half-century.

After the revolution the men moved to Hollywood, paid their dues shooting low-budget horror, action and biker films, then graduated to higher-profile assignments, eventually collaborating with some of the most influential directors of the 1970s, including [Robert Altman](#) and [Steven Spielberg](#). Their association lasted until 2007, when Mr. Kovacs died of pancreatic cancer.

Mr. Kovacs, whose filmography included “Easy Rider,” “Five Easy Pieces” and “Frances,” had a style simpler and more forceful than Mr. Zsigmond’s, whose work on movies like “McCabe and Mrs. Miller,” “Deliverance” and “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” (for which he won an Academy Award), was more lush and impressionistic. But their artistry came from a similar, shared place. “The whole story, you could write a book about it,” Mr. Zsigmond said, laughing.

The director of “No Subtitles Necessary,” the cinematographer James Chressanthis, who studied under both men in the 1980s, thought so too.

“The story about them during the revolution” were widespread in Hollywood, he said. “But you always heard different pieces of it, different versions of it. Beyond the fact that they were great cinematographers, there was this whole back story that hadn’t been definitively told.”

During the 1986 production of “The Witches of Eastwick” — which Mr. Zsigmond photographed, with Mr. Chressanthis serving as his assistant — Mr. Kovacs stopped by for a visit. “When I saw them together, I realized that this was a remarkable story that people needed to hear,” Mr. Chressanthis said. “But 20 years intervened.”

The one-two punch of Altman’s death in 2006 and the onset of health problems for Mr. Kovacs ultimately spurred Mr. Chressanthis and his co-producers to bring the two men together again — this time in front of a camera — and have them tell their tale.

The result is a movie about a friendship between men who shared certain unusual, difficult experiences, and how those experiences shaped their art.

Mr. Zsigmond described his and Mr. Kovacs’s feel for light and shadow — which they developed together on earlier, low-budget efforts, productions on which one man often served as the other’s assistant — as “poetic realism.”

“It came out of being a couple of guys who had to leave Hungary in a hurry so they didn’t get killed,” he said. “It came out of coming to America and shooting all these

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movies that were all very low-budget — we called them ‘no-budget movies’ — with very small crews and very small lights. Laszlo and I figured out pretty quick that if you shoot something at the right time of day, it’s going to look gorgeous without any additional light, and that if you do need additional light, you try to make the light look real, not ‘lit.’ I hate movies where the light looks phony.”

Mr. Kovacs’s battlefield-tested resourcefulness and affection for his adopted country’s landscapes informed the look of [Dennis Hopper](#)’s 1969 counterculture smash “Easy Rider.” The film was distinguished by trippy lens flares, mournful firelight and tight close-ups of motorcycle riders and their machines, which Mr. Kovacs captured while being towed in the back of a sandbag-stuffed trailer. The whole feature was shot with a camera on loan from Mr. Zsigmond.

Even after the men had risen to the upper echelons of their industry, they continued to act and think like low-budget filmmakers. The documentary’s anecdotes include an account of how Mr. Zsigmond “flashed,” or briefly exposed, the negative of Altman’s “McCabe and Mrs. Miller” to create that movie’s decayed-boozy visuals, and how Mr. Kovacs, while shooting [Bob Rafelson](#)’s “Five Easy Pieces,” constructed a much-needed camera brace out of a termite-riddled branch he’d found in the woods near the set.

One can see traces of the men’s idiosyncratic personalities showing up more vividly in Jerry Schatzberg’s 1973 feature “Scarecrow,” a road film about the deep friendship between hobos played by [Al Pacino](#) and [Gene Hackman](#). Mr. Zsigmond says the film’s warm light and embracing widescreen images of American landscapes were inspired by his early years with Mr. Kovacs, when they were adrift in a beautiful but forbidding new land.

“When we came to America, we had to stay together just to survive,” Mr. Zsigmond said. “It was like being brothers, that’s what it was.”

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