

A Search for the Feeling of Being There
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When I was eleven years old and a pupil at an English boarding school something extraordinary was done; we were shown a film, a silent 35mm full length film from the Soviet Union, TURK-SIB, about the building of the tran-Siberian Railway. I was riveted, astounded; here was what I had been looking for and it was simple, all I needed was a movie camera and I could do it myself.

I had been raised on my father's plantation in the Canary Islands. We grew Bananas, Tomatoes, we made cement pipes and pumped irrigation water. Of the more than 200 men and women that worked there I think about three could read and write. They worked with oxen and camels. There were no schools where we lived so I had a wonderful time until it was decided that I should go to school --- in England --- cold, dark, little boys in short pants with chapped knees and chilblains.... eventually I got used to it and in a perverse kind of way, enjoyed it. But how to explain to my schoolmates, where I came from and what life in my Garden of Eden was like?

Turk-Sib was the answer. So three years later with the help of school friends Polly Church and Noel Florence, armed with our detailed scenario which included drawings of each shot, a 16mm Victor camera and an elegant Thailhamer Tripod we made a 14 min. black & white, silent film; CANARY BANANAS, a film I am proud of, that can still tell you all you need to know about growing Bananas but it fell far short of giving you the feeling of being there. It informed you but it didn't involve you.

In 1938 at the ripe old age of 17, I went as photographer-film-maker to the Galapagos Islands as a member of David Lack's expedition to learn more about Darwin's finches. We lived on a "desert island", isolated, not even a radio. I spent most of my time with the Angermeyer brothers who had listened to Hitler and fled; it was a bit like Robinson Crusoe, I loved it. I did what I was supposed to do and filmed the birds and just about everything else that moved but the result gave you no feeling whatever of "being there".

By 1941 we were shooting synch sound. Features had been "talkies" for a decade but it was easier for them, they created their own controlled world in the safe confines of vast studios and here we were making a Documentary on American folk music in the hills of Virginia and Tennessee. Madness! No electricity there. So a truck-load of lead storage batteries and a motor converter from 110 volts DC to 110 volts 60 cycle AC, powering a 35mm optical film recorder and a 35mm film camera. you turned them on and adjusted the DC to get the frequency of the AC up to 60 cycles and when the sound camera and the picture camera stopped hunting you yelled "speed" and then the clap-sticks and the director, Geza Karpthy, murmured "relax" to the petrified musicians. And it was a good two weeks before you got to hear the play-back! It worked but not much spontaneity with that rigmarole to contend with.

This was professional film making, the leading edge. Documentary couldn't go on avoiding the issue by laying music and narration on silent pictures. We were going into the "real world" and systematically destroying the very thing that we

were looking for. Why not make our films in studios like the big boys do? Don't be silly! It wasn't just the technology, it was the attitude of a professionalized industry aping the world of the fiction film -- it still is.

Today, when we have available, superb portable sensitive mini-digital cameras and sound equipment the impact of filming or videoing is just as ridiculous and even more so because it is utterly uncalled for.

I have been filmed by various Television crews and invariably the routine is just as disruptive as ever. Four or five large men come busting into our tiny apartment with tripods, camera, microphones, booms, light-stands... it is politely suggested that you sit "there, no a bit to the left, now turn your head, do you mind if we move the painting on the wall, it's distracting and we can see a reflection of the sound man..." "can you give us a level? just say anything"... and you start to say what you are to say and the sound-man says "cut! I'm picking up the refrigerator, can some one unplug it... thanks , now just take it from the head again..." and perhaps they want a shot of you talking on the street so you are expected to walk "casual like" with cameraman soundman and assistant walking backward in front of you. At last it is over!

In the early sixties I thought we had solved these problems by a set of working rules designed to make it possible for us to get as near as we could to observing our subjects with minimal impact. No lights, no tripod, no microphone boom or pole, never wear headphones (they make you look silly, and or, remote) never more than two people, never ask anyone to do anything and most especially never ask anyone to repeat an action or a line. Allow lots of time, don't shoot all the time, if you miss something, forget it in the hope that something like it will happen again. Get to know your subject if possible in order to generate some kind of mutual respect, if not friendship.

OK these are rules, not laws, and rules can be broken:

This means no interviews, fine I'm sick of interviews but when I filmed Louis Brooks in her very private apartment in Rochester N.Y. it was an interview and that was that!

Why not ask some one to repeat an action that you missed? It is not a question of morality but just try it. I was filming the editor of the Aberdeen S. Dakota newspaper; while I was reloading my camera, his secretary ran in and told him that Senator McGovern was calling from Washington... It was wonderful so I loaded up and asked her to do it again. Weeks later I was screening rushes in New York and Joyce Chopra and I and some friends saw it! Horrors! It was ridiculous, like some third rate TV soap!

In general, when you are making a film you are in a situation where something you find significant is going on. Usually the people you are filming want to help you get what they think you want to get; often as a way of getting rid of you. And this can be fatal because they are then second-guessing you and can end up destroying the possibility of achieving your aim. I remember Bob Drew and I coming into the lawyer's office when we were making THE CHAIR. He asked what he could do for us, we said, "nothing", put our equipment in a corner and went out for coffee. A little later we came back in and he was back at work doing what had to be done, having decided that we were nuts. We kept our distance and started filming as he picked up his phone...

What am I looking for? I hope to be able to create sequences, that when run together will present aspects of my perception of what took place in the

presence of my camera. To capture spontaneity it must exist and everything you do is liable to destroy it... beware!

Filming is searching for and capturing the ingredients with which to make sequences. You are not going to get "the whole thing", you are lucky to get fragments but they must be captured in such a way that you can edit. If there is dialogue you know that editing is more restricted and you must find ways to deal with this problem without recourse to that dreadful concept: the "cut away". If music is involved the problems are even more complex.

The making of sequences is, for me, at the heart of film making. I had always assumed that you just got the bits of an action and put it together and Bingo! you have a sequence. But there are all kinds of things that you may want to convey with a sequence and it was not until I worked as cameraman on Robert Flaherty's LOUISIANA STORY that I started to learn from him, the complexity of this process. We were a tiny crew, most unprofessional. We shot, day after day, for 14 months more often than not, just the three of us, Mr. & Mrs. Flaherty, she with a Leica, he and I often with two Arriflex 35mm cameras, recently liberated from Hitler's Wehrmacht, and sometimes an assistant. We shot and shot. If something appealed to us, never mind that it wasn't in the script, film it. A beautiful cloud, swallows wheeling through the sky preparing to migrate, a water-lily pad with a drop of water on it in perfect light, a spider completing the building of its web. Often the camera in motion or panning and tilting, no rules except look, look through the camera lens, search.

The first time I ever met Mr. Flaherty was in 1936 just after I had completed the Banana film. He was visiting his daughters, Franny and Monica at our school and he had a 16mm camera on a tripod and he was filming blond Brenda McDermot brushing her hair to dry it in the sunlight. Fine, but he went on and on and on... I decided he must be mad. What on earth could be so complicated about a young woman brushing her hair? In Louisiana I began to learn. Only began. After that job I went back to work with "professionals!" and learned that I had better behave myself or look for another job!

After long days of filming, often starting as early as six in the morning and on, with a long break to avoid the midday light, till twilight, then cleaning cameras, developing test strips, shipping film to the lab... to a well earned well watered drink before bed, Flaherty would sometimes talk about making sequences. Mostly he talked about the making of Moana, how every sequence is a new and different problem. The use of different focal length lenses, the function of the close-up, not so much to reveal detail as to withhold information from the viewer, of the surround or, as he put it "the camera is like a horse with blinders, it can only see what is in front of its nose" and thus increase the visual tension that requires the viewer to search for the resolution of what they are experiencing. Moana, since this experience, has become his masterpiece for me and the version that his daughter Monica has made, with sound is superb.

The next step in my de-professionalization, was when Roger Tilton invited me to shoot, JAZZ DANCE in 1954. Now he, was clearly crazy! Bear in mind that the only synch sound film equipment of acceptable quality was massive. Magnetic recording tape was available; the Reeves 35mm recorder weighed about 70 lbs and was said to be "portable" because it had handles on it. The handiest camera was a Mitchell NC, Ok in a noisy situation but still, massive. Tilton wanted

to make a short film to be shown in theaters (35mm) of an evening at a place on the lower East-side in New York where young people were dancing to live Jazz music. Everyone had told him that it had to be done with the standard equipment described above. Set ups, rehearsals, clap sticks, take one, take two... take 23.... So we got two hand held spring driven 35mm Eymos (The same as we used in combat in WW II) 100ft loads which run just over one minute each and on these cameras the longest you can shoot without rewinding is about 15 seconds. My friend Hugh Bell constantly reloading while I shot and Bob Campbell shot with another camera and a rudimentary synch system close to the musicians.

Me? I was all over the place having the time of my life, jumping, dancing shooting right in the midst of everything. What a fabulous night. We shot slow music, fast music and medium, just like buying T-shirts - large - medium - small! I had nothing to do with the editing, but what a job. They used a slow medium and fast selection and they matched the action to the beat. Fantastic! This was more like it. Now, on a big screen in a theater, WOW! you were there, right in the midst of it and it looked like it was in synch... it was in synch! But, you couldn't film a conversation this way. It gave us a taste, a goal. Tilton tells me that he was invited out to Hollywood by the biggies but when he told them that they couldn't do it with their clumsy equipment they told him to get lost and didn't even pay his fare back!

Right after this wonderful experience I got a commission to film a traveling tent theater show in the Midwest, a Toby Show. It was the first film I had made where I had control since Bananas. I wrote, directed, filmed and edited. We used the conventional equipment plus a hand held camera for wild shooting. I had a small and wonderful crew. We worked like dogs and the result may look a bit stilted by today's standards but it achieved a feeling of being there rather than that of a conducted tour.

More and more frustration. All we were asking for was to be free to move and to record image and sound of quality and not be dragging an anchor behind us. It wasn't just me. Morris Engel was making headway in shooting WEDDINGS AND BABIES with Vivica Lyndfors, a clumsy rig but it worked. The Canadian National Film Board had experiments going on. Look at the documentaries they made of the pianist Glen Gould. Remarkable. In New York Leo Hurwitz was shooting with heavy equipment in a hospital emergency room, a bit like trying to light a cigarette with a stick of dynamite but whatever, headway was being made.

My final film before the breakthrough was a report on my friend from college days, Lenny Bernstein on a conducting tour in Israel. Lenny, Felicia, a young friend of theirs, Jean Stein and I left for Israel on the day after WEST SIDE STORY opened on Broadway. I knew I couldn't take the standard truck full of junk so I switched to something the industry looked down on, 16mm, a camera that was quiet (we knew we had to film concerts) that recorded sound on the film optically, therefore low quality, but in synch. We also took the latest 1/4 inch tape deck, about the size of an overnight suitcase, but not synchronous. Well, I still think it a nice film that shows Lenny at his best but we missed absolutely everything that I wanted to have in it. The night when Lenny and Felicia performed practically the whole of West Side Story for their friends, including Teddy Kolleck, in their hotel room. The Camera was in a truck, and so it went, but it cleared my head. Now I knew exactly what we needed and the standards that must be met.

Many disasters later, it was with Bob Drew, an editor on Life Magazine who, after a year at Harvard as a Niemen Fellow, was determined to rescue Television Journalism from the boondocks of the perpetual Interview, the hallmark cigarette of Edward R. Morrow that dominated the medium. Drew had seen The Toby film and followed it up with a brief visit and a drink with me in New York. He saw other works and from firsthand experience as a LIFE reporter, knew what could happen with a good still photographer working with their relatively minute equipment. He was determined and we were with him. We got equipment made to our specifications. We were part of the development. I contributed the idea of synchronizing with a new Bulova watch that was controlled by a tiny tuning-fork (the transistor was already there but the crystal chips were still a long way off). Morris Engel had already used a bigger tuning-fork but ours was a neater solution. D.A. Pennebaker was with us and radically modified the Auricon Camera that we were using (it was quiet!) Mitch Bogdonovitch engineered it all but like so many geniuses he could never do the same thing twice, always the step forward and then again, sometimes the two steps backward.

With Bob Drew, we formed a nucleus gang, Al Maysles, McCartney-Filgate, then Shuker and Lipscomb making films that in general adhered to the list of rules above. With the appearance of PRIMARY, YANKI NO!, ON THE POLE, CRISIS, PETIE & JOHNNIE, MOONEY vs FOWLE, and the rest. We, at least I, thought that we had solved the problems of Documentary film making. But the Industry didn't give a damn. The French intellectual film buffs did for a while but then came Jean Luc Godard and other obscurantists with heavy Marxist hangovers.

It is now thirty years later and the TV industry and the Film Industry haven't really changed. The new equipment has made news gathering more facile and just as dumb. The big boys of Hollywood are happy with the Steady-Cam and, in my view, both are heading for a numbing form of number-crunching disaster called ENTERTAINING THE BILLIONS.

How to get away from the Industries and their demands? Is this a problem that can be solved in part by changing the technology? We, the film makers, depend upon the Industry to be shown, TV or Theaters. In rare instances we have cracked the theater walls. Pennebaker's DON'T LOOK BACK and MONTEREY POP did this and it was wonderful fun and most satisfying. My little short film CHIEFS rode in on Monterey's back. But these were propelled by star attractions and performance. Not something that I want to depend on. Television is relatively easy to satisfy but they want to own what they show, if they give you money for production they want control. Monterey Pop was made for ABC TV and we thought we had a winner. When it was completed we invited the newly appointed president of ABC Barry Diller, to screen it. He came and he sat through it, there was a ponderous silence till he turned and said "This film does not meet industry standards" to which I responded "I didn't know you had any" End of conference. It was the best thing that ever happened to us.

HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY was rejected by its sponsor Curtis Publications, so be it. Others went on the air and that is the biggest bummer of them all. You have worked and worked and made your masterpiece, it goes on the air and, as Kenneth Burke once said "it's like dropping a feather into the Grand Canyon and waiting for the echo!" and that is it, that is the end of your masterpieces life!

Having gone broke with Pennebaker I went to teach at MIT helping to create a new Documentary film school with Ed Pincus. Research! Let's make a cheaper system

that will enable us to make films without having to go begging from the Industry. I was naive. We modified cheap Super-8 film cameras and built a rather sophisticated video system around it which sort-of worked if you had infinite patience. As Jerry Wiesner, President of MIT, said to me "Leacock, you have managed to replicate all the problems of 16mm in 8mm!" He was right.

Finally in the 80's, the CCD was invented and a new chapter began for Video with vastly improved quality and by last year the Mini-Digital camera and editing system was available. I am retired. I live mostly in France where I fell in love with a French lady, Valerie Lalonde who never had anything to do with film or video. We live and work together. I find that my shooting is still inhibited by my professional background. Valerie's is not. This makes for a wonderful mix. She tends to play the obligato and I the continuo which can produce great harmony.

During the last ten years together we worked successfully in High-8 making our final edits on Beta-Digital which was a very expensive final move. We made a video for French TV; a story without a subject, LES OEUFs A LA COQUE DE RICHARD LEACOCK, which I think conveys a feeling of love for what is shown. Some of our films get shown on TV and others don't. Today we shoot and then edit at home on the new Mini-Digital equipment which can go any number of generations without loss. We also have a non-linear digital system, Radius, which takes DV directly through the "fire-wire" and is affordable. We have two cameras, two edit decks and ancillary equipment for about the price of a car in the \$20K bracket. You design your movie to go on a DVD with up to about two hours of quality video and distribute like books to a relatively small, discerning audience of like minded people who are waiting to escape the nightmare of TV, Cable systems and the massive garbage heap of the Web. But as usual some one will find a way to screw it up and Valerie and I will go on making movies for the sheer fun of it and the love of each other's company.

Last night I completed a wonderful sequence. It all started over a year ago when Sarah Caldwell called me from Siberia to say that she was rehearsing a symphonic drama composed by Prokofiev, based on Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin" that had been banned by "the authorities" in 1937. She asked if I could "do something about it" so, armed with the latest mini-digital cameras and aided by my daughter Victoria, Natalia Tsarkova (a graduate student from MIT brought up in Russia) and my long time friend and associate Vincent Blanchet and his superb sound equipment, we went!

We did all the things we were supposed to do and it may work out in the end but is a sticky mess... but, what I completed last night was something that had nothing to do with all the above, we arrived at the symphony hall where the performance was to take place, early. It was barely lit, cleaning ladies with buckets and mops were at work, a lady was playing the huge organ, Bach! I videoed the organ and organist; Victoria videoed one of the cleaning ladies who always had her young son with her; Natalia videoed the other with her mop and pail. Last night I finally got it right! Two minutes and thirty-six seconds of music and visual bliss, concocted from three separate perceptions of an event that had nothing to do with what we were there for.

THAT, is what makes it all worthwhile!

And if only this book, that you are reading, came with a DVD, you could see and hear all the things that this book is trying to convey. Combine text and movies, with no artificial limits on how long or how short a work should be.

Are good books ever written to be read in one sitting? Must they be geared to an audience of millions... absurd!