

Three Experiments in Cinéma Vérité

by

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The entire work of Jean Renoir is an esthetic of sensuality; not the affirmation of an archaic rule of the senses or of an unrestrained hedonism, but the assurance that all beauty, all wisdom, even all intelligence live only through the testament of the senses. To understand the world is above all to know how to look at it and make it abandon itself to your love under the caress of your eye.

André Bazin

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The two short films I have written about, Filene's and 68 Albany Street, were shot during the semester I was a special student at the M.I.T. Film Section. The three major films discussed were shot during the three semesters I was a candidate for the degree of Master of Science. At the time of the writing of this thesis, one of the major films, Charleen, has been edited, the second, Backyard, has not (due to ac of funds for workprinting), and the other, Space Coast, is partially edited with completion pending on another shooting installment. It was my intention to have shot three films before leaving M.I.T. I am assuming that after graduation, it will be easier to find relatively inexpensive editing facilities to finish old projects than it will be to locate comparably inexpensive equipment to shoot new ones.

The three films are "experiments" in a personal rather than a universal sense, in that I have not really originated new techniques or approaches in any of the experiments, (save perhaps in Space Coast). I was experimenting more for myself in three different shooting approaches available to Cinéma Vérité filmmakers.

In the first film, Charleen, I took exclusive responsibility for all aspects of production from the initial conception of the film idea through the final editing, but I decided it would be best to have a two-person crew and enlisted the help of another graduate student, Michel Negrofonte, as sound recordist. My intention was to shoot intensively for one month in the life of my subject and to edit an entire film from this material, planning no further shooting.

I conceived of the second film, Backyard, as the first installment of a diary film that could be continued indefinitely. I also wanted to devote a greater length of time to this project than I had done with Charleen, allowing what I filmed to unfold and develop more slowly.

Backyard deals largely with my family and therefore created a more intimate filming situation. Consequently, I both shot and recorded my own sound, which was certainly the only realistic approach.

The third film, Space Coast, is, among other things, an experiment in sharing equally in the production of a film with another filmmaker. I have collaborated with Michel Negrofonte, and by the completion of the project we will have shared equally in all aspects of the filming, sound recording, editing and fund raising. Space Coast is also an experiment in finding an alternative to portrait films which concentrate on a single person or family. This film unexpectedly became an experiment in shooting in segments; it will have been shot in three one-month installments over a period of six months.

All three of the major films reflect my desire to return eventually to the South where I will continue to make movies.

The real work I have accomplished at M.I.T. is, of course, the films themselves, and this thesis should only be considered as a footnote to them. I write with the hope that these notes may be of some interest and assistance to future filmmakers in the Master of Science Program who might be planning projects similar to mine. I have included many anecdotes and personal reflections on my experiences in making the films described herein with the hope that something may be learned from what I have viewed as my mistakes and successes. I write conversationally. Borrowings from Bazin aside, this thesis will be short on attempted pronouncements or profundities about the art of filmmaking.

Thesis Supervisor: Richard Leacock

Title: Professor of Cinema

## I. INTRODUCTION

I came to M.I.T. after working for two years on documentaries, first for a television station in Charlotte, North Carolina where I pushed a ponderous floor camera around hoping eventually to swap it for an Auricon and a chance to make a "documentary." After six months I got my chance but was told that a union cameraman would have to shoot it and a station reporter would have to narrate it. The film, which was about old people, was completed and transferred to videotape but for unrevealed reasons was never broadcast. I suspect this was because of internal politics and because of the verite sequences I had managed to work into the film, including a shot in which an old man's naked hindquarters were visible.

Later I worked for WNET's "Bill Moyers' Journal" series. From my humble position as assistant cameraman and assistant editor, I had ample opportunity to observe the frustrations involved in conventional documentary filmmaking: narrator Moyers, an otherwise intelligent and affable man, mangling his stand-up narrations a dozen times in succession, worrying about whether he needed more hair spray, discussing with the producer whether the film needed more "beefing-up with content." (At WNET, films seemed to be considered as cattle, commodities to be fattened up for the video stockyards.)

I also worked on a couple of B movie productions. In one, a low-budget pornographic clinker, I was a grip and had responsibility for some props (whips and other wicked paraphernalia which I shall refrain from discussing in

detail). Again, because of my humble station, I had the opportunity to eavesdrop on the way decisions were made in this branch of the industry: Director. "Things are dragging. We need to write in a scene where a helicopter chases the motorcycle." Producer: "We're over budget already. The crew is threatening to mutiny if they have to eat bologna sandwiches one more time." (Verbatim, I swear it.)

I hate bologna sandwiches.

Somehow this way of making films seemed unsatisfactory. Neither of the pathetic feature films I worked on has ever been released. And in the case of the WNET series, the emphasis seemed to be on the process of release itself--beam it out and forget it. Strive for timeliness (a synonym for disposability akin to the principle behind yesterday's newspaper). There had to be an alternative.

Three films by Richard Leacock (Primary, Happy Mother's Day, and Chiefs), Fred Wiseman's High School, the Maysles' Gimme Shelter and a published interview with Ed Pincus led me to apply to M.I.T. where the emphasis was on Cinéma Vérité , a different kind of filmmaking.

## II. FIRST FILMS: FILENE'S AND 68 Albany Street

My first filming attempt while at M.I.T. was a modest one. I filmed a saleswoman at work in the "Barqain Basement" of Filene's Department Store in downtown Boston.

My general inexperience was nicely complimented by a malfunctioning camera motor which caused flicker and ruined the film. But a rough cutting of the footage gave me a diagnosis of what my main shooting problems were: a sort of television meningitis, a paralyzed and nervous shooting style (or absence of one) which had probably seeped into me during my year of work at the television station. This shooting displays a tendency not to linger long enough to learn what was happening or to develop a feeling for the person or place being filmed. The chaotic setting of the bargain basement doubtlessly contributed to the bad camera work. Things were often happening much faster than I could film them, and the inexperience of my sound recordist caused further problems.

But despite these difficulties, the film was a worthwhile first endeavor. It was obviously wise of me to select a subject that was a subway ride away from M.I.T.'s equipment room. The limited scope of the film also reflected a wise decision.

I loved the saleswoman's patience and sense of humor in dealing with the madness she had to endure--women stripping between the dress racks, gay men asking her advice on negligees, etc.--and I think some of these qualities come across in the footage. It was important that I had been able to single her out from a dozen other saleswomen and that she apparently enjoyed being filmed as much as I had enjoyed filming her. I considered expanding the film and following her home to film her family, but decided against it. The subject matter somehow did not invite further filming. In the last scene, the saleswoman



is reminiscing with a friend about the old days in the basement when everyone enjoyed their work more. "There've been a lot of changes," she says. "All the changes are different now." I let the film end there.

The second project I undertook while at M.I.T. was funded by Draper Laboratory, which stipulated only that I create a film portrait of their 68 Albany Street facility, a former shoe polish factory which had been hastily converted into a laboratory during World War II. Though many a significant research project had been conducted there, the film was to center on the eccentricities of the old structure itself and some of the more interesting people who worked in it.

I was hesitant to undertake a film about a laboratory which had been involved in ICBM guidance work. I was supposedly a late '60's anti-war veteran, having disturbed with distinction in several anti-war theaters. Now I was confronted with a chance to film people whose work, or at least a portion thereof, I abhorred. But curiosity about these people and the world they inhabited outweighed my objections, and I was assured the film would in no way have to be a public relations job for Draper Labs. It was a chance to film where I would not otherwise be able to film. I hoped I could succeed in creating a portrait of a working place that was completing the transition from an M.I.T. machine shop to a multi-faceted research conglomerate, as symbolized in the move the lab was making from the old shoe polish factory to a concrete and glass battleship of a building three blocks away.

Unfortunately I do not believe I succeeded in the Draper film, at least not in a way that I value. I was a little overwhelmed by the scope of the project. There were four floors and four hundred people in the 68 Albany Street facility, and finding subjects to film involved an investment in research time that I regretted. The budget was also limited and I was forced to restrict my shooting severely. Partially as a result of this, I had to rely far more on talking-heads than I wanted to, though I did avoid setting up formal interview situations. (I simply allowed the people I filmed to reminisce to the camera or with each other in whatever way they wished.) The fairly low shooting ratio (about 4:1) led me to rely on voice-over as well.

Fundamentally, I didn't want to risk disappointing the people who paid for the film, and therefore adopted a relatively safe and conventional style. I think this was unfortunate. I would like to have taken more risks, but the risks I took were small, almost token ones.

The only moment which even remotely approached some notion of true filmmaking was when quite by chance I caught old Doc Draper, the former head of the lab, walking into his office. Previously, I had spent some time filming him, but had emerged with only the driest anecdotes. Later, some engineers had told me about a clock they had installed in Doc's office. The clock advanced an hour whenever Doc pressed a button under his desk, enabling whoever might be assembled to celebrate some event with a drink, since M.I.T. regulations prohibited drinking during working hours. As Doc was taking off his coat, I began filming and asked him if his clock were still working. He seemed a

little befuddled by my sudden question but took me into his office. He sat down at his desk, indicating the clock on the wall, and when he pressed a button the clock clicked, but did not advance its hand an hour. The device no longer worked. I held the shot of Doc at his desk and it is apparent that he is quite sad. Granted, his sadness is probably equally attributable to the presence of a bearded long-haired cameraman as to the memories of his past, but it is a nice moment nonetheless because that critical edge of unpredictability was operating as I filmed.

I also filmed a woman who had worked in the lab for many years meticulously winding copper wires for tiny electromagnetic motors. She took cheerful pride in her work. One would think she were making croissants in a patisserie when in fact she was making components for missiles that had landed men on the moon and could destroy an entire city. I was fascinated by her, but the scene is somewhat unsuccessful, because I was fascinated by the fact of her rather than by her as a person. Admittedly, this is a difficult distinction to make, but I think that my interest in her was more of a literary than filmic nature. She remains a caricature of an interesting idea.

68 Albany Street remains a collage of interesting surfaces. Making the film allowed me to gain some confidence in shooting, especially in my tracking shots, which I indulged in quite a bit. All of my shooting was generally calmer and more confident than it was in Filene's. The opportunity of shooting in color, having a mix, and answer printing, all at someone else's expense, was valuable. I learned how important good sound is.

Unfortunately, I had to rely upon no fewer than seven different people to record sound during the course of the project, most of whom were extremely inexperienced, some of whom had never taken sound with a Nagra before. Consequently, the sound on the answer print suffers from drop outs and other problems.

68 Albany Street is an acceptable film by conventional standards. There are places where the shooting and sound is flawed, and some of the editing is rough, but it is generally a well thought out, competently conceived film which does a nice job of presenting a portrait of a working place. Though the people who commissioned the film were extremely pleased (enough to order three prints), I am still disappointed. Though I had complete control over the film, I never felt it was mine and I would like another opportunity to film in depth someone at work in M.I.T.'s science and technology wonderland. It is a subject that intrigues me.

### III. CHARLEEN

I have known Charleen Swansea for many years, having grown up in Charlotte, North Carolina where she lives and works. I have long had the idea that I wanted to make a film about her. She somehow seemed a perfect subject for my first major film, i.e. she was someone I knew fairly well, who trusted me and would allow me to film her fairly extensively. Also filming in familiar environs would be an advantage in itself.

#### Access

In Ed Pincus' Biographical Filmmaking class, on the day before my departure for North Carolina to film, we discussed the problems inherent in filming someone like Charleen whose job (teacher in a program which depends on grants and public approval) could be jeopardized by revealing some aspects of her private life (separation from her husband Murray and an affair with a man 37 years younger than she). There were questions as to how much she would guard herself and how personal the film could be. The class discussion turned out to be extremely pertinent.

It also raised the issue of filming people who are public figures. I have had no desire to film famous people, although I have found some films such as Richard Leacock's Stravinsky Portrait and Primary to be fascinating. However, the obstacles involved in filming the famous are generally too great to be worth it. And Ricky's best films were made during an era when there existed a general innocence and

naiveté about filmmaking that simply doesn't exist anymore. As Ricky has often said, there is no way he could make a film like Primary today. Presidential candidates, like everyone else, are too worried about their images. One of Jimmy Carter's aides recently sent him an advisory note stating that Carter needed to stress "style above substance." That seems to sum it up.

Although Charleen is in many ways a very independent person, outspoken and sometimes outrageous, she was not quite in a position to say "public-be-damned." There was no way to establish rules ahead of time as to what I could and could not film. We simply had to trust each other. I had to trust that she would not entirely close off her private life to me and at the same time I had to be sensitive to her position and acknowledge an occasional request for privacy.

### Performances

There was another issue to which I gave a great deal of thought before commencing my project. Charleen is a performer. She is almost always on stage--with her friends, her family, and in her profession. It is her method of getting things done. I have known her long enough to be sure that having a camera around has little effect upon the frequency or intensity of these performances.

A primary concern, then, was not to be overly captivated by these performances and to seek out the more introspective quieter times and instances when she was not in full command of things. With Charleen this would not be

very easy. And indeed, despite my being aware of this aspect, I did not succeed as I should have in capturing more of the non-performance moments.

### The Past in Portraits

A third point I pondered prior to shooting the film was that of Charleen's past, which is an extraordinary one. As a young girl, she decided to run away from home and find "a new father", and she sought out and actually met many extraordinary men, including Einstein and e.e. cummings. She eventually met the poet Ezra Pound and he more or less adopted her. She kept close to Pound's circle of devotees and friends during his last years at St. Elizabeth's mental hospital in Washington, D.C., where he had been incarcerated because of his fascist broadcasts in Italy. Charleen sat in the circle and watched T. S. Eliot and others come and go. She corresponded with Pound for years and still has some 600 letters from him.

All of this was remarkable but I wanted to avoid giving the film anything approaching an historical-biographical slant. The relationship with Pound is important to understanding Charleen, because of the way she has patterned her life after his, convening her own circle of school kids, poets and outcasts in her home. She would have been more than willing to let me film hours of her relating remarkable stories and anecdotes about the Pound Circle, but that is a better task for videotape or even journalism. The film about her life had to be a present-tense biography, and I made this clear to her before I committed myself to the filming. References to Pound's

letters come into the film in two short scenes, and I believe these scenes are justified because she is shown selecting and photocopying the letters she must sell in order to pay for her children's education. In this way the past linked itself nicely to the present and was therefore, I believe, justified. But I intentionally avoided too many references to the past.

### Pre-Production Plans

I intended to follow Charleen through several intensive days of teaching at the outset of the shooting, filming her doing what she did best. I knew that she would choose one or two students to accompany her in a month to South Carolina where she was scheduled to present a student "poetry concert." I thought this preparation for the concert might serve as a thread upon which to hang a story, but was perfectly willing to abandon it if something better came along. Basically I had few preconceptions about what form the film would take, and felt only that Charleen was an interesting woman about whom an interesting film could surely be made.

I decided to make this film with a sound recordist assisting me but without an assistant cameraperson. I had worked on documentary crews as large as four or five persons, but considering the fact that much of the filming would be done in Charleen's home and that we would be spending most of our time with her and her family, I thought it best to limit the crew to two persons. I briefly considered doing one-person synch-sound, having seen some impressive results from Ed Pincus, Jeff Kreines, Joel



DeMott and Mark Rance, but decided it would be imperative to have another person taking sound in the classroom situations as well as the other group activities. Overall it seemed best to work in the format to which I was most accustomed. (I did shoot and take sound for the Ezra Pound letter sequences.)

### Camera in the Classroom

Shooting in the classroom was extremely difficult. In the first major scene in the film, where Charleen demonstrates to a student different ways of saying "I love you", I encountered many problems. Aside from general first-day nervousness, I was confronted by an all but impossible configuration of desks which created a real obstacle to shooting. The dozen or so students had been allowed to draw their desks into a tight square, Fort Apache style, which made maneuvering among them impossible. (I was later told that this unorthodox arrangement had been instituted by an education specialist who claimed that it made the children feel calmer and more secure. It only succeeded in harassing the cameraman.) I found myself scurrying around the perimeter of the fort, shooting at the long end of my lens and trying to avoid the sound recordist who, after failing to get good sound from any one position outside the square, finally plunked himself down in the middle of it. The use of a radio mike on Charleen in this situation helped immensely, allowing the sound recordist to mike the students separately.

The shooting is shaky in this scene. I made things harder for myself by shooting short takes and, as a result,

have had to patch the scene with cutaways, something I really regret. In fact, were the scene anything less than riveting, I would have dumped it. However, it is riveting. Charleen shines and the scene, despite the lacerating use of cutaways, is a success simply because of the energy and interaction between Charleen and her students.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the students had never seen Charleen or us before that day. They were fascinated by the camera, and there was the predictable mugging as I had feared, but only for the first minute. Charleen completely captivated them and they all but forgot about us. I have very little footage of the students looking at the camera, something of a testament to the way this woman works in the classroom.

I would like to have filmed longer takes in that opening scene and wish that I had worried less about checking my focus. I calmed down in later classroom sequences, shooting in a less choppy manner.

#### Camera in the Car

I filmed a great deal of Charleen driving and I use such scenes to punctuate the film. She seemed to drive a hundred miles a day and we often accompanied her. Her house was almost always filled with visitors, friends, and children from her classes, not to mention friends of her own children. It was a crowded situation, and I suspect that Charleen used driving as something of an escape. The car became her monastery, the only place she could be alone to think. When with her in the car, we deprived her of that

solitude, of course, but she usually talked about whatever was on her mind anyway. We seldom asked her questions, and it was never predictable as to what she would talk about next. Despite the revealing nature of what she would say in these driving monologues, I found I was filming far more than I thought I could use, but I now like the way the car scenes stitch the film together.

### Landscaping

I had originally hoped that the landscape of Charlotte might be worked into the film. Charlotte, like much of America, is being smothered in shopping centers and franchised food establishments, but the city also has inordinately numerous pockets of tree-lined and azalea-blanketed wealthy residential areas. Charlotte has succeeded in hiding its woes better than most cities. The worst slums have been cleared away and relatively inoffensive welfare housing projects have been erected in their place. The juxtaposition of these areas and the way in which one zone can give way to another so suddenly is visually interesting. But Charleen virtually eclipses it all. Her life pace is one of such celerity that landscape plays virtually no role in the film. She is bigger than her surroundings and does not allow a pause during which the camera could find an excuse to reflect on any of the cityscape she moves through. Geography would play a larger part in both Backyard and Space Coast.

## Story Telling on Film

The scene in which Charleen visits her mother's Bible class presented an interesting problem in terms of editing. Charleen's mother tells a long story about her daughter which has a rather bizarre twist to it. Charleen then entertains the ladies with a long story about how a student pulled a knife on her during a class. In both cases there is ostensibly much embellishment to the stories, but actually every fact they relate is somehow essential to their punch lines. It was impossible to edit out much of either story and consequently this scene is somewhat long-winded.

At this point in the editing, I decided that a film about Charleen would have to be one in which her passion for words, self-expression, and storytelling played a large part. The Charleen I had filmed was a Charleen who talked and there was no way to get around it. For all of my abhorrence of narrators in films, I found that in a sense, Charleen was going to narrate this one. I simply accepted the fact.

## Learning to Linger

There is, however, at least one scene in the film where words do fail Charleen. It is a single shot but an important one, in which Jim, her lover, taunts her because of her physical appearance: "How could you have been a cheerleader in high school...? You have no chin!" Charleen spars with him at first and then drops her defenses. Her feelings have been hurt and she has nothing to say.

In this scene there was suddenly, unforeseeably, the kind of emotional edge that breathes quickness into a documentary film. I pan back to Charleen and hold a tight shot of her face. The hurt is evident. But then I pan away again, forcing more of a fleetingness upon the emotion than it deserves. I should have held the shot of Charleen much longer, realizing that her speechlessness was precisely a reason for continuing to film her. As it is I break the shot too quickly. I was too impatient.

### Lighting

I have overlit in this same scene by using 250 watt tungsten BBA's in existing track lighting. It makes the scene far harsher than it had to be. In general, I worried too much about lighting the interiors of Charleen's house, although I always take care to use existing fixtures. Ed Pincus has criticized the lighting of the last scene of the film as having the quality of a second rate porn film, but I like the lighting and find the intense, garish, almost stage-lit quality to be appropriate.

### Bad Stock

The concluding major scene in the film is of Charleen in her bedroom the day after she has cut her wrist while smashing the windows of Jim's house. She is upset and has asked us to talk with her about what has happened.

Earlier in the week, realizing that I was going to run out of film, I had placed an emergency call to an

acquaintance in New York who had some color negative stored in his refrigerator and was willing to sell it at half-price and put it on the next bus for Charlotte. We got the shipment in time and it enabled us to complete the necessary shooting. However, our friend accidentally included a roll of film which he had already shot. He had neglected to process it and accidentally stored it with the unexposed stock. This two-hundred foot spool happened to have been the roll I was shooting as Charleen began to cry. As she cries, the phone rings. I pan over as she picks it up. The caller is none other than her former husband who has heard she has been in the hospital and is calling to see how she is. I continue to film her crying and talking on the phone, but it was all ruined by the double exposure. I was able to lay the sound over another shot of Charleen on the phone, in which her back is toward the camera, cutting the sound to make it fit, but it is a poor substitution, and the scene has lost a lot of its strength. I have learned a lesson about buying second-hand film stock.

#### Direct Involvement

There is at least one instance in which I should have been less worried about separating those on one side of the filming equipment from those on the other side. Generally it did not bother me when Michel was drawn into a conversation or event, as he was on at least five occasions. Three of these scenes were eventually dropped for various reasons, but two of them remain. In one of them, Charleen's father makes an enigmatic reference to turtle doves, and it is apparent that the old man is

talking directly to Michel and not to me. Yet I insisted on framing Michel out of the shot, a bad habit enforced by the artificial standards of commercial documentary filmmaking. In other shots I pan over to include Michel when he is interacting with Charleen. I do not know why I framed him out of this scene.

Several times Charleen asks me a question or addresses me directly. (For example, in the scene after she has taken her cleaning woman to the bus stop, or after she has talked to her husband on the telephone.) And of course the entire final bedroom scene is more a soliloquy for Michel and me than a monologue for herself. In some ways we are the only two people she has left to talk to at the end of the film and I make no attempt to disguise this. She is talking to us to console herself. Though the film is not about our involvement with Charleen in the way Ed Pincus' South by Southwest or Joel DeMott's Demon Lover Diary are works about the filmmaker's involvement with his subject, Michel and I are still peripherally involved with Charleen. While I have not forced this aspect, I have made no attempt to edit it out. I believe this fact also helps justify my use of occasional personal voice-over narration in the film.

### Camera Shyness

I have had some trouble successfully working Jim into the film. During my first several days of filming, I encouraged Charleen to inform Jim that he shouldn't feel compelled to avoid our filmmaking. I wanted the film to include him too, because he was a part of Charleen's life. I had no more way of knowing than did Charleen that Jim was

involved with another woman. Apparently, the last thing he wanted was to be filmed with Charleen--self-indictment at 24 frames-per-second. Jim stayed away from the house as much as possible, and Charleen did not want us to film many of her evenings with Jim, because she probably felt their relationship was not going well and that she needed time alone with him. All of this made filming the two of them together pretty difficult, but I think Jim appears often enough and in an interesting enough manner to reveal himself. Still it would have been preferable to have filmed more of him.

Charleen's husband Murray appeared for one moment in the very first roll of film I shot. He had come by the house to pick up some possessions and he did not return to the house again the entire duration of our stay. He wanted no part of the filming.

#### Scenes Edited Out

It is interesting to consider briefly some scenes which I have decided to drop from the film. One day Charleen visited her friend, James Dickey, the poet, who lives in Columbia, South Carolina. Dickey and Charleen have known each other for years, both having been associated with Pound. Both have had their marital problems. Dickey was unaware of Charleen's recent separation from her husband and I thought it might be interesting to film them together. Dickey was quite gracious after he overcame his initial surprise at finding me shooting over Charleen's shoulder when he answered the door. And he and Charleen did talk. Some of the talk was even amusing. But whenever it



got gossipy enough or lewd enough to be really interesting, Dickey would turn to me and say in his mellow, malarial voice, "By the way, son, if you film what I'm sayin' I'll slap a lawsuit on you that'll make your head spin." When he delivered this gentle reminder for the third time, coming as it invariably did at the end of a long take, I simply set the camera down and abandoned the idea of filming him. It had been a waste of time, and none of the footage has been included in the film. This could serve as an illustration of the problem alluded to earlier of filming famous people.

Once we accompanied Charleen to the neighborhood spa where she periodically goes to sweat her worries away. We filmed, and the location was delectable. All walls were mirrored and flecked with gold paint, and the floors were carpeted in lime green. There was a sort of playground of chrome-plated contraptions upon which ladies in various stages of unfitness groaned and grimaced. The filmmakers were delighted. But suddenly Charleen became self-conscious about the idea of being filmed. She decided not to change into her tights and instead demonstrated several exercises in her street clothes while making banal conversation with the exercise instructor. If I had felt inclined to, I suppose I could have instigated an argument with Charleen in an attempt to persuade her to stop being so self-conscious, change into her tights, and let us film her. The exchange could have been interesting. But I was feeling fairly unaggressive that day and though I was ready to force process the footage (it was a beautiful dimly lit push two situation) I did not feel I could force the issue. I am

still fairly shy about such matters and exercise a fair degree of restraint as to my involvement in my filming.

In another scene that was eventually dropped, Charleen goes to a neighborhood bar, and, feeling tired after a day of teaching, has a beer, plays a song on the jukebox, and asks a toothless old man to dance with her. I filmed the entire dance in one shot and it had a nice ambiance to it, but in the end I dropped it because it trespassed into that undefinable realm of being a little too cute. Though Charleen will play like this completely without prompting, it was difficult to view the scene without sensing that it was somehow contrived for the camera.

We also filmed Charleen going to visit her friend Marion Cannon, towel heiress and local patron of the arts. I thought the relationship between the two women might be interesting. The setting certainly was: a full-scale reproduction of a French chateau. Marion shares her mansion with a Goyaesque lap dog that repeatedly attacked the stalwart sound recordist. The processed footage of the two women sitting beside a sun-filled window placing stickers on a pile of Mrs. Cannon's most recently published book of poems, was as beautiful as it was boring. Unfortunately they felt constrained to talk about poetry and Marion finally read one of her own poems, prompted by Charleen. We stopped filming, had a gin and tonic, and spent the rest of the afternoon talking about Europe with Marion who was leaving for France the next day.

I also thought that Charleen's interactions with some school board bureaucrats might be interesting, but her

encounters with them always went smoothly and efficiently and we never filmed more than a minute or so of them. A trip with Charleen to cast her vote in the state primary again proved to be without interest.

These scenes all had the possibility of becoming interesting, if something unpredictable had taken place or if the edge of tension brought about by some emotion had surfaced. But these incidents never evolved and the scenes remained empty episodes. Toward the end of our stay, I avoided filming randomly and concentrated on filming her more at home.

#### Sequencing of Scenes

I believe I have been fairly successful in the ordering of my scenes and the subsequent development of the various themes in the film, loosely structured as they are around the preparations for the poetry concert. There was always the risk, in choosing a single event such as the concert, that I would have ended up with a film edited like a clothesline, a single strand of a story with various episodes pinned to it. But I think I avoid this because of the complex way in which certain aspects of some scenes reflect or contradict aspects in other scenes. I believe the scenes are well integrated.

I intend for the viewer to come to know Charleen as a teacher in the first section of the film. This is her prime identity, the one which consumes the most energy and time for her, and the one that is most readily accessible to an outsider. Basically, the film is structured

chronologically. As I got closer to her, and as she became accustomed to me with the camera, scenes from her personal life began to develop: the visit to her father's false tooth factory, the interview with her daughter Ena, arranging a poetry program with Jim, watching television and arguing with Jim. Subsequent scenes are included in which she relates her feelings about being a woman, followed by her observations on the difficulties of living with so many young people, and revelations about her dissatisfaction with teaching, bringing us back again to the day of the poetry concert. In the final scene, we are back in her bedroom, and she is alone with us talking about her split from Jim, about the insensitivity of her children, about her intention to quit teaching and "turn things 360 degrees around." The film itself is back where it started.

#### Editing Within Scenes

I am less happy about the specific editing within certain scenes. I created many problems for myself by cutting shots too soon and consequently missing an important coda, or by thinking I could rely heavily upon cutaways to cover myself. There are places where I have opted to use jump cuts rather than to fake a smooth transition from shot to shot, but I have not forced a jumpcutting style on this film, because it was not shot and conceived in that way. One has to be thinking of how one is going to edit a film, even as one shoots it. Unfortunately I was thinking "standard cutaway", and now I am stuck with standard cutaways. The scenes that especially suffered from this lack of foresight were those of the Bible class and

the first classroom sequence. I have been able to redeem myself from this over-edited style in Backyard and Space Coast.

#### Camerawork: Specific Critique

I felt the opportunity to film creatively arose in only a few situations during the shooting of Charleen. The classroom could have afforded such a chance, but I was hamstrung by the desk obstacle as well as by my method of shooting. I shifted slightly toward the end of the film to longer takes and better integrated camera movement, and I believe that I shot well in three scenes toward the end of the shoot.

The scene which I feel was shot best is that of the aftermath of the concert when the performers rendezvous at a drive-in restaurant. It is fairly uneventful, relatively quiet and subdued, making it a strong contrast to almost every other scene in the film. I believe that I had a feeling for the dynamics of the space (Jim sitting at a different table than Charleen), and I was pleased with the patience I displayed in filming the students helping Charleen to fix her make-up. I was able to utilize sweeping wide-angle pans along with tracking shots. I filmed the performers driving away, and I believe the scene subtly conveys a feeling of breaking up and drifting apart. It was, in fact, the last moment at which everything was holding together for Charleen. Jim did not return home and it was the next day that Charleen learned of his affair with another woman.

In the t-shirt controversy scene, in which Charleen argues with Ena trying to persuade her to change her shirt because it depicts Michelangelo's statue of the nude David, I began filming it very well, using long takes and rapid pans between the various participants in the argument. But suddenly I found myself wedged out and unable to see Jim, because the argument had moved between two of the vehicles parked in the driveway. I jumped up on the back of a pick-up truck and continued to shoot the argument from a high angle. This was an unfortunate decision, though I am not sure what choice I had. The downward angle has the effect of suddenly removing the viewer from an argument that is becoming more and more intense, where I should have been trying to shoot in tighter and at eye level. When Charleen and Ena are left alone to resolve the argument, I elect to come back down to their level and try shooting between the trucks again, but find that I cannot get around Charleen in the tight space available to me. I shot anyway, and it was like shooting down a sewer pipe, yet the shot is interesting. As they argue more seriously, Ena's face emerges now and then from around her mother's head, the back of which is in the foreground of the shot. Ena is like a small moon trying not to be eclipsed by Charleen. This could also stand as a statement about how Charleen and Ena seem to relate most of the time, but it makes a nicer literary analogy than it does a film shot. I would have preferred to have filmed both their faces, because Charleen's anger is very intense at this moment.

Another interesting scene is that of Charleen's encounter with an old man who stands on a street corner, directing traffic and speaking only in rhyme. Charleen came

upon him quite by chance as she was taking one of her student poets home after the concert. I was planning to shoot what film I had left on Charleen's farewell to the student. But suddenly, she made a u-turn, pulled over, and began to talk with this old man. The scene immediately seemed important and I believe I filmed it well from the interior of the car, a somewhat difficult task because I had to lean over Michel in order to shoot out the window. I broke to get out of the car and film, thinking it would be easier, but for some reason my shooting became sloppier. I was swimming and shifting as I filmed Charleen and the man, and though I do not remember for certain, I believe I was attempting to frame Michel out of the shot by shifting until he was blocked by the car's door post. If this was the reason for my shifting, it was a bad one. I obviously should not have worried about his appearance in the shot. It wasn't that important. As the old man moves away from Charleen, I shuffle again, but this time with more purpose, choosing three different angles from which to film him, and holding the last shot steady and well composed. Having filmed him extremely close-up in the car, I now wanted him framed wide-angle, isolated as he was by the traffic that swirled around him.

In passing, the last shot of the film, in which Charleen sits in the classroom singing "Georgia On My Mind", was a random shot with which I finished a magazine. It ran out precisely after the last note in the song.

## Camerawork: General Critique

I feel my camerawork was technically competent throughout the film. Camera moves were generally steady, and exposures were accurately set, with focus being uniformly sharp. There is, of course, more to good camera work than these matters. Generally I did not allow myself good opportunities to shoot really well, that is, really creatively. This has more to do with my attitude in shooting the film than with my technical abilities, and it is integral to what now dissatisfies me about Charleen.

I made a film which centers too much upon Charleen in action. It's a film which stresses movement over stillness, talking over listening, sound over silence. The film had to be weighted in this direction because of Charleen's turbulent, frenetic lifestyle, but my mistake was in not finding enough of the opposite qualities to play against all the exuberance, talk and action.

Quiet moments for the film could have been found with Charleen's children, who are quiet out of default because they seem somewhat overpowered by their dynamic mother. However I filmed almost nothing of the children when they were not with Charleen. I myself was perhaps somewhat overpowered by Charleen. I should have looked elsewhere now and then. I should have peeked around a few more corners.

This is not an apologia. I believe I have made a very good film in Charleen. But it could have been a much better one had I been a little more sensitive in the ways I have described. I have captured larger revelations and



confessions about Charleen as a woman, mother and teacher, but I think I missed some of the smaller revelations, the more subtle moments that would have made the film a truly exceptional one. Emerson, writing about nature, said that "God is in the details." To some degree, I believe I let many of the details slip away in the filming of Charleen.

#### IV. BACKYARD

Three months after shooting Charleen, I embarked on my second major film, which was, in concept and execution, a direct reaction to many aspects of Charleen.

My family has lived in the immediate vicinity of Charlotte for more than five generations. My father is a doctor, as was my grandfather, and at the time I filmed Backyard, my brother was preparing to attend his first year of medical school in New Orleans. I originally hoped to make a film about doctors and the process of becoming a doctor, focusing on my brother and father. This would be the first installment of an effort that could extend to periodic filmings of my brother in medical school, the commencement of his practice, and my father's continuation of his practice.

The other film I wanted to shoot, less ambitious in scope than the doctors film, was a film on the black servants who work for my family and have worked for them as long as I can remember. (One black woman, whose age no one knew for certain, tended to four generations of our family before dying two years ago.) There are now three who work for my family part-time several days a week. One in particular, Clyde Cathey, an old man in his seventies, appealed to me. His passion is beekeeping, and he claims he found his first swarm after having a vision sent to him by the Lord. He was born with twelve fingers and uses them all when he counts.

Lucille Stafford and her husband Melvin do housekeeping and yardwork. Melvin formerly worked in a dry cleaning plant, but awakened one morning to find himself paralyzed from the neck down, apparently due to the chemicals used in the plant. He has never received any compensation or benefits. He was told that he would never walk again, but Lucille, a former hospital aide, helped nurse him back to health. He can now walk and accomplish limited tasks. Lucille asked my father if Melvin might work for him and my father agreed.

I began collecting footage for both films simultaneously, simply following whatever was most interesting from day to day. Sometimes it would be my brother, sometimes it would be Clyde. What gradually occurred was that the two films merged. There was no natural way of separating them. I began filming more of the interactions between my family members and the people who work for them, wary that an ideological moralistic cliché lurked around every corner, and that it would be unforgivably facile to do nothing but make dreary comparisons of the two lifestyles and standards of living. Such comparisons would, of course, be implicit, even obvious, but they could not be the main theme, lest the film become nothing but a dreary sociological tract.

It would have been impossible to have filmed with another person recording sound. One factor was the long stretches of time involved. Whole days were spent lingering around the house waiting for something to happen, and sometimes a day's work would yield only 200 feet of film. I could not have asked anyone to suffer through this with a

Nagra strapped to his back. Therefore I strapped it to my own back and adopted the Sherpa mode of filmmaking. It wasn't as hard to accustom myself to the added burden as I had thought it would be. With a Nagra SN it would have been considerably easier, and I would have opted to use an SN had there been one available.

Another factor was that both my family members and the servants could not have relaxed as much in the presence of a two-person crew which included a stranger. I suppose it was difficult enough for them to adjust to me with my strange notion of home movies for graduate school.

One day early in the filming, my grandmother, who was visiting at the time, sang a song for me. The song was entitled "Stay in Your Own Backyard" and was supposedly sung by a black mammy to her son after he got in trouble for playing with white boys. I asked her to let me film her singing the song, and I decided the film would be about my backyard. I would go beyond the yard now and then when someone left the house, but I would usually linger around to see who came and went. Obviously much of my filming would include Clyde and Melvin, who were responsible for the upkeep of the yard.

I encountered several problems and several recurring themes as I filmed. I very quickly decided that my family members are, individually, not that interesting to film. We are a fairly subdued bunch. Not an awful lot is said at the dinner table. There were no crises pending. Nothing was happening except for my brother's leisurely summer preparations for medical school. Lucille, Clyde, and Melvin

are also pretty quiet. I became more certain than ever that the film would have to evolve out of the interaction among the six major figures: my father, my stepmother Ann, my brother Tom, Melvin, Lucille, and Clyde. The emphasis would have to be more on what was not said than on what was said, more on the absences than the presences, the stillness rather than the action. The calm methodical progression of life around the house dictated this approach. It would be a very quiet film.

Early on, I noted that none of my family members seemed to spend much time around the house. My father usually arose at dawn to make early rounds at the hospital, not returning until evening. My brother went off to work and spent his remaining time with friends, usually only dropping by to eat or to change clothes. Ann constantly ran errands. Someone was always departing; no one ever seemed to stay. This cannot be unique to my family. I am certain it is an American institution; the driveway as pit stop. Lucille and Clyde also came and went and at times there were as many as six cars (including my own) parked in the driveway. The cars were like dinghies moored around the house for making excursions, coming and going with supplies and news of the world. At first I found this to be fascinating and filmed a great deal of it, culminating in a single three minute shot of father and brother leaving for their respective jobs at different hospitals in their different cars. Later I decided the entrances and exits were not as interesting as I had thought, and I turned my attention to the chores of Lucille, Clyde and Melvin, filming them extensively as they worked around the house.

I became more and more interested in nuance and implication rather than the outright declarative approach Charleen took. I liked the idea that Backyard had no storyline, no narrative, no suspense, and yet I realized it would be necessary to convey the quiet, barely perceptible tension I felt existed, the quality that would give an edge to the way the film evolved.

I found I had to overcome a basic camera shyness of the reverse sort: my reluctance to film my family. My father offered encouragement, believing a film about the study and practice of medicine could be valuable and quite interesting. Everyone cooperated completely. Still I found myself maintaining a distance from my family as I filmed. There are few close-up shots in the beginning of the film, and much of my footage is of profiles or backs of heads. Often, in a crowded kitchen there is an excuse for this but generally I cannot disguise the difficulty I was having in filming. Throughout the film, there is attention given to space and distance--the size of the large lawn Melvin must mow, the length of the driveway down which my father drives to work. Without losing my interest in these spaces and distances, I gradually overcame my shyness and filmed as I wanted to.

I soon became interested in expanding the idea of the backyard. Clyde also works for a neighbor whose property is adjacent to ours. I executed a tracking shot from one yard to the other to film him riding a lawn mower in our neighbor's yard. Later that month, this neighbor's daughter was married at the country club which is just around the corner from our house. Clyde dressed up in spats and

stickpin to attend and I filmed him. I also followed Ann in a long walking shot as she cut through another neighbor's yard to get to the wedding. And I rode back from the wedding with Clyde, the neighbor's cleaning woman, and the father of the bride, in the father's private golf cart, shooting from the portico of the country club to his back door in one long shot. The father, jubilant, turned to me at one point during the ride to comment: "We'll take you straight home, son. You live right in our backyard." Unsolicited, this was a perfect statement of the premise of the film.

Backyard was shot in a different fashion from Charleen. The slow pacing of events invited less frenetic camerawork, and I found that I could study the details I had missed in Charleen. My shots are long enough to take things in: In a kitchen scene my brother enters, fondly pokes Lucille in the ribs, and sits down to read the paper. I pan over to where Lucille is preparing breakfast for my brother. She peels peaches methodically. I pan back to my brother who is still reading the paper. He sets the paper down and then mechanically siphons off four spoonfuls of peaches in unbelievably rapid succession, before resuming his reading. I end the shot. Not one word has been exchanged. This type of interaction is what I wanted to film most.

In viewing the footage of Clyde and Lucille and Melvin at work, I realized that most of it is as tedious as is their work itself, and I will use less of it than I had anticipated. There is a trick to conveying tedium through the medium of film. In literature a succinct passage could

describe the difficulty of sweeping a long driveway, but to film the sweeping in one take, as I did, does not necessarily succeed. There must be small anomalies to the process--someone stumbles, a particular twig won't yield to the rake. Or a gesture conveying sudden emotion must be recorded--a smile, a muttered obscenity, a sigh. However, in most cases the work I filmed went very methodically and was executed without display of emotion. Consequently, I will limit my use of these scenes in the film.

One scene I will keep is that of Melvin cranking up the large riding mower. It takes him a dozen attempts to start the monster. The difficulty he has with his arms does not help him, of course, and he has to catch his breath as he sits on the mower while it idles. He then throws it into gear and, in almost cartoon-like fashion, zips out the driveway. I filmed this in one continuous shot and like the fact that it is a self-contained scene, one which has a mundane beginning, becomes somewhat tense and emotional through the middle, has a denouement of exhaustion, and then has a coda that is almost comical.

In another somewhat more complicated scene, I film a neighbor who has left his house as if going to work, but instead has come to my father's backyard where, attired in a blue business suit, he has chosen a spot obscured by shrubs and vines to stake out his own house to see if he can catch some boys who have attempted to break in. He sits for several hours and confers in whispers with Ann who periodically checks on him. Again, I filmed in long takes during which nothing happened but the waiting. The boys did not return that day. As is true everywhere, crime has



become a neighborhood problem. On another occasion, I filmed a formation of police helicopters flying directly over our house, presumably looking for a fugitive.

In another sequence my father is at the country club checking his standing in a golf tournament. He finds that he has placed in his category and I film him as he inspects the various prizes, but he cannot find anything he particularly wants. There is a dinner for the participants that night at the club, but my father is called to the hospital and has to leave. I decide to stay behind.

Outside the club a young black man strides across the circular drive to lower the flag. As he begins to tug on the rope, I tilt up to the top of the pole and notice that there is no flag. He has noticed this at the same time. "Where's the flag?" I ask. He smiles and, somewhat embarrassed, says, "Don't know. Someone must've got it already." He walks away and I stay at the pole, holding a wide shot of the distant clubhouse. He crosses paths with a member, dressed for dinner. The member goes in the front door, the black man in the side door. Both doors shut at the same time. I end the shot. In shots like this, the patience to wait yielded a dividend. It was something I wanted to experiment with more and more.

That evening I filmed some of the festivities, but found them to be uninteresting. I decided to poke around in the kitchen where the dinner was being prepared. The lighting was harsh, the surroundings all tile and stainless steel which contrasted with the subdued, muted poshness of tapestries and oriental rugs in the dining room. In one

tracking shot that lasts for two minutes I go from cook to cook, dishwasher to dishwasher. The last dishwasher, who is mopping up the floor, is openly hostile to my presence. I pan away from him to the head chef, a Frenchman, who has just come up to find out who I am. I hold a tight shot of him. He looks at me and in a heavy accent, obviously wanting me to leave, says, "Do you find any dirt?" I cut the shot. To have sought permission to shoot behind the scenes in this case would, I think, have been a mistake. It was easiest to take the initiative and simply do it. I took this attitude more and more as I filmed.

In Backyard, I also hoped to take a new approach in editing. Shooting in long takes would make editing more of a matter of assemblage than complicated fine cutting. I spent many months editing Charleen because of the short shot approach, and I wanted to avoid this in Backyard and later in Space Coast.

Backyard is an experiment in still other ways. I was experimenting in working with a non-linear and non-narrative construction. There is no story, not even the theme of my brother's departure for medical school, to control the course of the film. The geography of the backyard was a more unifying factor than was any other single element, yet I have tried not to use it as a mold into which I had to force whatever I filmed.

Furthermore, this film doesn't strive to dramatically develop or reveal personality the way Charleen did. One certainly will not feel that one "knows" my father, brother, Ann, Lucille, Clyde or Melvin at the end of the

film. But at the same time, I believe I have accomplished more than sketchy illustrations. I believe that through juxtaposition and undercutting of the scenes, and through depiction of subtle tensions felt, little affections displayed, the film conveys and evokes some interesting and potentially even powerful feelings. I like the fact that there is almost no dialogue in the film. It is mostly people working alone.

I liked working alone on this film and would like to resume my original plan at some time and film my brother as he progresses through medical school. I also may wish to continue to film people around our house, taking a different slant on the filming in future installments, perhaps even filming myself with my family, placing the camera on a table or giving it to my brother. Direct self-involvement in the film was not meant to be this time. Even though I filmed with fondness and affection, I kept things at a distance in most of the footage of my family, which is probably revealing in its own way of our relationship.

## V. SPACE COAST

My discussion of this film will be somewhat limited due to the fact that we have not finished shooting it yet. I believe it will be most valuable to discuss the film in terms of its broad intent, with specific references to developments and realizations about my shooting. I will avoid specific references to editing, sequencing, or structuring, all of which must by necessity be left undetermined at this time.

The idea for a film about the Cape Canaveral area came through discussions of alternatives to portrait films, or films dealing with a single family. I had been excited about what I had filmed in Backyard and felt that I had conveyed what a neighborhood and the backyard itself were like, and what the dynamics of the people living and working, coming and going in such a space were. I had wondered if it would be possible to do this on the scale of an entire community.

I have always been fascinated by the space program. When I was young I designed, built and launched small rockets carrying a host of crickets, worms, toads, and even hamsters, few of whom survived the ordeal. I had visited the Cape twice and had become interested in the people who actually live at the Cape--the plumbers, insurance salesmen, bartenders, go-go dancers, and school children. I wondered to what extent, if any, the space program affected those who worked in the neighboring communities.

My partner in this project, Michel Negroponete, had also become interested in portrait alternatives and had wanted to do a film on a community whose existence had been suddenly and radically changed by some outside force. A town in South Dakota which had been inexplicably invaded by thousands of skunks was a perfect example of this. We decided that it might be a long time before the skunks regrouped for another attack and that Cape Canaveral was our best bet. There, the space program had dwindled to almost nothing, the rocket gantries were rusting and being sold for scrap, and unemployment in the county was the highest in the nation. We had no desire to make a film for the purpose of conveying demographic or sociological information, but these facts did affect our preconceptions of the Cape and led us to believe that there might be some interesting people to film there. Knowing no one in the Cape area and having only the names of two people mentioned in a magazine article, we decided to take a research trip to the Cape. We stayed for four days, met many people who offered their cooperation, and found our first film subject, a wire service stringer named Mary Bubb. We returned to Florida two months later and lived with Mary Bubb for three weeks, filming her activities around the house, concentrating on her efforts to drum up news for stories. We also filmed a great deal of her father, Ted, an elderly gentleman who had recently moved from Massachusetts to live with her. Filming in this situation was difficult and required a tremendous amount of patience, because little was happening in Mary's life. The departure of the space program had left her fairly idle. We would spend eight hours at a time with her and sometimes shoot less

than ten minutes of film. After three rather frustrating weeks of shooting Mary, we felt happy about what we had filmed, but were more determined than ever that the film not be about one person. Mary's low-key sedentary lifestyle was not terrifically filmable.

We then met two people who overwhelmed us with their intensity and vitality, especially after filming the fatigued, monotonal life of Mary. We immediately recognized that Willy Womack, small time construction company owner, and Papa John Murphy, motorcycle gang president and self-styled Biblical scholar, would serve as counterpoints to Mary. Mary did not know either Papa John or Willy and neither of them knew her. Even though a fourth person, Marty Caidin, knew Mary, Willy, and Papa John, we decided not to worry about forcing connections.

We also felt it was unnecessary to search for ways in which our subjects tied into the space program. Mary's tie was obvious and it was enough. The other people we filmed had no direct tie to the program. We purposely avoided filming the engineers and military people who are directly involved with the Kennedy Space Center, even though everyone from Lee Schirer, the Center's Director, on down, offered to help us. We were also given as much access to the launch facilities as was feasible, touring a blockhouse and filming Mary talking to engineers prior to the launching of a missile. But as in 68 Albany Street, these situations were mostly uninteresting and we tried to avoid them. Aside from Mary's segments of the film, there are, then, practically no visual or spoken references to the space program.

The program, then, was not to serve directly as a unifying factor, nor was a common friendship among the people of the film, many of whom did not even know of the existences of the others.

A conventional ploy to draw the film together would have been to find people representative of various segments or strata of the population, and thereby offer a "representative portrait of the community." Such representation is usually completely false, meaningless, and predictably boring. Willy, Papa John, Mary and Marty are all representative of no particular group. Each is too eccentric, each is a nonconformist. It became evident to us after meeting dozens of people that this sort of non-conformity and eccentricity is somewhat common in the Canaveral area, in the way it is in certain other population pockets around the country such as Las Vegas. One could speculate that the Cape had attracted a variety of interesting people with somewhat unconventional lifestyles, and that many had lingered on after the space program had died. But again, we are not trying to force this observation on the film. We did not want to merely present a gallery of eccentrics. We lived long enough with each of these seemingly off-beat people to find out that in fact the day-to-day aspects of their lives are much the same as our own.

We became very interested in intra-family relationships, especially in Papa John's. His whole family is scattered among the various units of the shabby apartment complex his father owns. We found we had to restrain ourselves from the outset and not attempt to film

all the members of the family. We concentrated on Papa John, his wife, his daughter and his granddaughter. The threat of diffuseness was a problem from the beginning of our filming of Papa John, and we tried to be fairly rigorous about how much we filmed. It may still pose a problem in the final editing.

Almost in direct contradiction to these fears about a film that rambles in trying to include too much, we have stayed committed to the idea of filming brief one or two minute vignettes which will emerge here and there in the film, and then disappear altogether, having no ostensible connection to any of the action or other persons in the film. There is a skateboarder we are particularly fascinated with who will probably appear in one of these vignettes. Others might include a young woman selling carnations on the causeway and not having much luck at it, a single shot of a lawn with a dozen sprinklers watering away at dusk, a poodle peering out at us through a window, an argument in a parking lot, and a shot at night of a wind-blown palm tree illuminated by an anti-crime light.

I believe the shooting I have done in Space Coast is a marked improvement over my work in Charleen. Comparisons with Backyard are perhaps not as valuable, since the one-person filming/recording method and the low-key subject matter created an entirely different situation. But the comparison with Charleen is valid. I believe I have successfully dealt with the over-anxious, action-oriented style that dominated Filene's and resurfaced periodically in Charleen.



In Space Coast my best camerawork was of Papa John's family. In the scene in which he and his wife wax a Harley Davidson one night in their living room, I sensed a very quiet and beautiful moment, in some ways unlike anything we had encountered before, and I tried to match my shooting to the mood that prevailed, panning gently yet decisively between Papa John and his wife Jewel, as they polish the parts of the motorcycle. They squabble occasionally as they work, but they are mostly quiet and intent on what they are doing. I try to shoot in a quiet manner, holding shots of Papa John's face or of a part of the motorcycle long enough for the viewer to study it; I allow the movements of the two people to cue my camera movements. Papa John shifts his position and I shift from shooting him to shooting Jewel. In retrospect I feel that I was reacting with things as they flowed, something I did less often in Charleen.

Another scene which pleased me was that in which Animal, a biker, shows Papa John some guns. Jewel is seated at the desk and their daughter Diane occasionally peers into the study. I use the four of them as coordinates, shooting in long takes of two to three minutes each. There is a tenseness to the scene, a tenseness which guns always introduce, and I was strongly aware of this. I hate guns, but I was fascinated with Papa John's command of and passion for them.

I used more close-ups and zooms in this sequence than at other times during Space Coast, feeling the detail was necessary here. In one series of camera moves, I pan from a tight shot of Diane who is standing in the doorway looking over Papa John's shoulder to a .44 magnum which Animal is

holding. The magnum passes from Animal to Papa John and I follow the gun, still holding a tight shot. I tilt up from the pistol to Papa John's face as he peers down at it; he pulls back the hammer and I pull back from him for a wide shot; the barrel revolves and I pan across the room to Jewel who is looking on with what is less than enthusiasm. Again, I felt as if I were locked into the flow of events and nuances during this scene and I am happy with the resulting footage.

I am also pleased with several scenes I shot of Mary Bubb, notably those of her and her father watching television, a ritual which they often conducted simultaneously in separate rooms of the house. One evening as I was filming Ted, I came to feel strongly the distance that existed between Mary and her father. I started a tracking shot that went from Ted's well-lit bedroom where he was watching "Happy Days" through a corridor and into the dark living room where Mary sat watching a war movie.

In another scene Ted sits at the table looking at the camera for perhaps 15 seconds without saying anything. Then suddenly he begins to talk about Mary's losing her job as a result of the decline of the space brogan. Mary, who can be seen over his shoulder doing her interminable typing in her bedroom, suddenly gets up and comes into the room, trailed by her poodle. She walks past Ted and out of the frame. Ted falls silent. The telephone rings and Ted makes a comment about how the phone always rings when she is around. Mary strides back into the shot past Ted, saying nothing, and goes into her bedroom again, still followed by the poodle.

This static shot conveys the boredom and stagnation that sometimes dominates life around Mary's home.

Mary in motion required a different style of shooting, and she only began to be animated prior to and during missile launches, two of which I filmed. I shot the first one, a daytime launch, in an animated fashion compatible with the interaction of the various reporters assembled. At the night launch, on the other hand, I used more static shooting, including much of the surrounding darkness in the shot. It was cold and rainy and there were less than a dozen reporters and onlookers present. The scene was a little depressing, and Mary could not even summon her usual enthusiasm. I believe I was affected by this melancholy and shot accordingly. I filmed Mary's trip to the beauty parlor in much the same way.

Other shooting I thought I did well was that of Diane and her daughter Jennifer. Of the several scenes I shot, the strongest was of Diane's efforts to secure food stamps over the telephone, followed by her frustrated attempts to talk to her parents. I liked the way I worked Diane's daughter into these sequences. But I regret that I shot so much of the latter scene from a high angle. This positioning contributes to the distance between myself and the people I was filming.

The slap fight between Papa John and Diane was difficult to film; however, I believe I shot it well. There wasn't much room to maneuver as the slapping competition escalated, but I knew I wanted to stay in tight in order to

capture the intensity of their blows. From a distance it would have seemed far more like play than it actually was.

Filming Marty and Willy has not evolved as far as filming Mary and the Murphys, perhaps because how well one shoots is partially a function of how well one knows the dispositions and habits of the people being filmed. It is also a matter of both parties becoming accustomed to each other. Mary and papa John had a total of six weeks to become comfortable with our filming. But thus far we have spent only several days each with Willy and Marty. I do feel that the scene of Willy and his son putting on their clown outfits is very strong. I obviously sensed an echo of their father/son relationship and tried to work it into my shooting. I do the same thing with Willy and his secretary in the office as he dictates his business through a tangle of telephone calls. I believe this scene is very successful. I chose to stay with wide shots and to make only simple pans back and forth. I believe this enhances a feeling for the methodical and humorous way in which Willy handled his business, his sons, and his employees.

My filming of Marty, science fiction writer and member of the Confederate Air Force, was less exciting to me than was the work I did with our other subjects. We filmed Marty making a movie with his friends and the resulting footage is somewhat chaotic. I think this reflected the fact that I did not know the people involved and had no real feeling for the situation. It was more "coverage" than filming, though the scene has some moments that are well shot and may prove to be revealing if we do more filming of Marty.

I loved filming from the air and feel everything was competently shot, but again there was little chance to pick up anything truly interesting about the people involved. The flying scenes were filmed more for the sheer visual enjoyment they provide.

The making of Space Coast has been a pleasure. It is what making a film should be. We walked into the Cape area knowing no one and now we have many good friends there. Though filming Mary was difficult, sometimes depressing, and always tiring, we developed a fondness for her and she a fondness for us. At night we would experiment with various dishes from her "cookbook for men." Michel baked pompano, I made a key lime pie.

Papa John virtually adopted us, setting us up with accommodations in one of his father's neighboring apartment units and providing us with unlimited access to his 1968 Cadillac. (The fact that the radiator emptied its contents every five miles did not diminish the fact of his generosity.)

Willy took us everywhere he went and wanted us to film any and everything we wished. His friends became our friends.

Marty, initially impossible to contact because he'd either be in the air somewhere over the Cape or asleep and refusing to take any phone calls, treated us royally when we finally did meet him. He took us up in his plane (at considerable expense) and delighted in doing so. His manic

energy fed us and it was through him that we located Papa John and Willy.

One incentive for undertaking this project was to be absent from the Cambridge area during the miserable months of January, February and March. We assumed that if the winter continued to get worse, our film would get longer. We looked forward to some time in the sun. But we became so totally absorbed in the film that in seven weeks we spent perhaps a total of two mornings on the beach. Most of the time we were either in Mary's dreary living room, in Papa's stuffy little study arguing the Bible or watching "Star Trek", or with Willy in his dingy office. We hardly ever saw the sun in Florida because even our spare time was spent with the people we were filming. We simply enjoyed ourselves and enjoyed being with them, whether it was at a wrestling match or at a bar or riding on the back of one of Papa John's motorcycles.

Michel, half jokingly, commented as we flew back to Boston, "I don't know why we're going back. I've got more friends back there than I do in Cambridge. I just counted."

I suppose it's too much to hope for, but making all films should be as enjoyable as this one has been.

## VI. TECHNICAL APPENDIX

Filene's (6 minutes; uncompleted; black and white; 16mm, synch sound)

Filmed and Edited by Ross McElwee  
Sound by John Taylor  
Equipment: Eclair ACL, Nagra IV  
Production Time: three days  
Film Stock: Kodak Tri-X Reversal

68 Albany Street (24 minutes; color, 16mm, synch sound)

Filmed and Edited by Ross McElwee  
Sound by members of the M.I.T. Film Section  
Equipment: Eclair ACL, Bach Auricon, CP-16, Nagra IV  
Production Time: periodic shooting over three months  
Film Stock: Kodak ECN 7247 (Color Negative)  
Total Footage Shot: approx. 4000 feet  
Lab Work: Du Art Labs, New York  
Editing Time: sporadically over nine months

Charleen (1 hour; color; 16mm, synch sound)

Filmed and Edited by Ross McElwee  
Sound by Michel Negroponte  
Equipment: Eclair ACL, Nagra IV  
Production Time: one month  
Film Stock: Kodak ECN 7247 (Color Negative)  
Total Footage Shot: 17,000 feet  
Lab Work: Du Art Labs, New York  
Editing Time: approx. three months over one year

Backyard (color; 16mm synch sound; presently unedited)

Filmed, Recorded and Edited by Ross McElwee  
Equipment: Eclair ACL, Nagra IV  
Production Time: two months  
Film Stock: Kodak EF 7242 (Reversal), Kodak ECO 7252  
(Reversal); purchased at discount from  
Raw Stock Center, New York  
Total Footage Shot: 9,000 feet  
Lab Work: Du Art Labs, New York (processing only)

Space Coast (color; 16mm, synch sound, projected length:  
90 minutes)

Filmed, Recorded and Edited by Ross McElwee and Michel  
Negroponte

Equipment: Eclair ACL, Nagra IV

Production Time: three months over ten months

Film Stock: Kodak ECN 7247 (Color Negative)

Total Estimated Footage: 35,000 feet

Lab Work: Du Art Labs, New York

Anyone interested in viewing any of the films discussed in  
this thesis should contact the Film Section of the  
Department of Architecture, Building E-21-10 (253-1607).