

The Art of Home Movies  
or "To Hell With The Professionalism of Television and Cinema  
Producers" November 30, 1993

By Richard Leacock

Robert Flaherty, who made NANOOK OF THE NORTH in 1921 and then, with his wife Francis, MOANA in 1925, is quoted as having said that films would eventually be made by "amateurs". What did he mean by that? Surely not what the contemporary use of the word would imply: "incompetence". But the opposite word has changed in meaning also, "professional" now means someone who has been certified by an institution as an "expert". Our "industry" (documentary film making) is dominated by such persons, who handle complicated professional equipment with assured competence; soldiers marching off to war. I think Flaherty meant that films would be made by people who loved the art, the act of filming; who loved creating sequences that did justice to their subjects, that conveyed an exquisite sense of seeing and hearing, of being there.

I spent years of my professional life working as a Cameraman, as an Editor and then as a Director-Cameraman-Editor, with cumbersome 35 mm film equipment. In despair at the clumsiness of this system, I helped in developing portable 16mm synchronous sound and film cameras. This change resulted in what came to be known as "direct cinema", a change not only in the manner of filming but also in editing. Then, trying to bring the cost of filming down I tried (not very successfully) to professionalize 8 mm film equipment. Finally, with the introduction of the CCD and its refinement in Video-8, I am working exclusively with Video-Hi-8. Not because I can't get jobs working in the other formats but because I want to work this way. I must work this way.

For me, the act of filming, or, as we are working in video, lets invent a new verb, the act of Videoing is a delight, a pleasure, like singing or sketching with pencil on paper, capturing the essence of places, people, situations, tragedies, comedies... life as we see and hear it around us. Then to go home, not to a studio; home, and edit, creating a bridge to ones friends and yes, people you don't even know who might be interested in this evocation of what was experienced.

Like singing, or sketching, or playing the violin, this habit, this addiction, is demanding. I must practice all the time. If I put down my tiny Sony Camcorder for a week or two I will need time to practice to get back into a harmonious relationship with

it. Years ago I studied the violin; seven years; I could not make the sound I wanted; I gave up. In 1958 I was making a film of Leonard Bernstein on a conducting tour in Israel. I awoke one morning and heard the faintest sound from the room next to mine. It was Isaac Stern playing the Mendelssohn Concerto at half speed with a mute on. I thought to myself, Oh s...t! after all these years he has to do that. You can buy a violin for less than a Camcorder but don't rent a hall for several years... and so with these cameras, it is easy to make a bad picture but, a good one?... practice, look, experiment, they are very sophisticated little beasts!

A great deal of attention has been paid to the technological changes in camera equipment for documentary filming. Very little has been said about the act of making the movie.

Flaherty didn't need a Cameraman. His best work was done by himself, looking through the camera, searching, finding images that delighted him; not standing beside the hired hand asking "did you get that? See that little boy over there? Did you get a close shot..." similarly with editing. He had an editor to do all the clumsy work that goes with using film, splicing, hanging up trims etc. but he was there in the editing-room constantly working on the new material, not after the filming was finished but right there wherever he was working. He learned as he shot and often showed the results to his subjects so that they knew what they were involved in.

It is now five years since I started using Video-8. I work and live with Valerie Lalonde. I carry with me the hang-ups of a life spent filming the other, the "professional" way; she has no such baggage to deal with. We come home, we edit at home, we edit as we go along, shooting, editing, building and shifting in our approach. These are personal acts of artistic judgment which are not to be delegated. In most instances we don't even know what it is that we are after. We are searching for something, one has a rough idea but only that. If you delegate this search to another, there is no sense to it, the essence will probably be lost.

A case in point. I have been associated with many productions of plays and operas in various capacities. As a result I have wanted to search out some core of interest in the process of rehearsal. At a party in London a friend told us that rehearsals of John Webster's THE DUCHESS OF MALFI were to start in a couple of days. We got permission to video from the Cherub Company. We started as they arrived for the first rehearsal, we observed; we never asked anyone to do anything for us; we never told anyone to repeat an action, a phrase. We never interviewed.

We got to know the cast. We helped where we could. We went away, we came again. On and off for the six weeks up till the last rehearsal. We had no idea what it was that we had captured. We doubted that we had a story; perhaps it was all a big mistake. We had accumulated twenty hours of material. We looked. We got very bored; it looked histrionic and false. What worked on the stage didn't seem to work on the screen. Finally we found a thread; the rape and murder, on stage, of the Duchess' maid Cariola. The first time they tried this scene it was ludicrous and left the cast and director laughing, it got better; they worked and worked on the technical details. Better but not much better. Then, the dress rehearsal, it worked! I was videoing front stage. It was horrible! It was believable! They dragged the body off stage and Valerie picked up there; the actress was in shock; shaking her head to get out of it. The two young actors who had just killed her were now comforting her. This was the essence of theater when it works. You know it isn't real but you believe it, you feel it.

I am delighted with the resulting thirty minute film, REHEARSAL: THE KILLING OF CARIOLA. We were able to make it because we both had cameras and we have VHS editing equipment at home which suffices for off-line edits. The out of pocket costs, travel, tape etc. were around \$2000. that is, up to the point where you get serious and go On-Line. A friend in Canada made a film of rehearsals of a play using 16mm and a conventional crew, they too, shot 20 hours of film which made a 40 minute film. The below the line costs were \$100,000.

Before I went to Video I would get funding for a film at about five year intervals. Now we are making two, three or four movies a year. We can afford the unheard of luxury of starting a project and aborting it! In the heyday of LIFE magazine they would shoot about three stories and publish two. Film is too expensive for such frivolity, every single story must be completed. If it isn't there, put it there! Make it work! Distort it, do what you must but make it work! That is the code of television today, everywhere.

The assumptions of professional film making are bizarre. You must have a "subject". Well in a sense, yes. When Piazzetta sketched his wife, his daughter... one day in the late 18th century, he had a subject, but would it have persuaded the producer of a major TV network that it would grab the undivided attention of a portion of his 15,000,000 potential viewers? And besides, this producer only deals in one hour slots. (Like the psychiatrists hour it is actually less, say four 13 minute segments)

So, OK, you have a "subject". You film, or video; slowly it dawns on you that it is the wrong subject; that something else that's going on there is far more interesting, or often, there is something aside from the main subject that is fascinating but not relevant... what do you do?

Recently I have been the subject of some TV specials. It is ludicrous! We live in a small space. Suddenly we are invaded, the crew have arrived, four large men with their equipment. Lights are set up for no reason that I can tell except that otherwise one of the crew would be out of a job. Tripods, microphone-boom, a microphone enclosed in a great furry capsule to protect it from hurricane winds, furniture is moved, sit here, sit there, turn this way turn that way, now talk This is madness but it goes on the air and I suppose millions of people see it and forget it. I have no idea what happens when people see these shows and I don't think the people that make them, know.

Artistic prostitution is OK by me... sometimes, that is. If you know what you are up to and have another agenda. But not all the time. These problems that I am complaining about are not new. Flaherty had his problems raising money from Revillon Freres for NANOOK and Paramount was not pleased with MOANA. It was years before he got another commission. Today we can do pretty much what we want, when we want and where we want. However we will pay a price for our freedom. They (TV) probably won't show what we make. For the time being that is a problem. I think that our films, all sorts of odd lengths on all kinds of "subjects" should be available like books, to be played not by millions but by a modest audience of hundreds, maybe thousands and very occasionally, hundreds of thousands. Again I recall Flaherty saying "we should be able to see what we want to, where we want to, when we want to; at a reasonable price." Technologically we are close to being able to achieve this goal and make a reasonable living out of supplying what we want to show.

During the last five years, working in video, we have made;

LES OEUFS A LA COQUE DE RICHARD LEACOCK 84 min & 58 min.

REHEARSAL: THE KILLING OF CORIALA 30 min

"GOTT SEI DANK" A VISIT WITH HELGA FEDDERSEN 30 min

LES VACANCES DE MONSIEUR LEACOCK 23 min

KREN - PARKING 3 min A portrait of an art work.

FELIX ET JOSEPHINE 33 min. A fiction based in reality.

HOORAY! WE'RE FIFTY! 1943-1993. 30 min My Harvard 50th reunion.

A CELEBRATION OF ST. SILAS 34 min Preparation for and celebration of an Anglican Mass

As far as actual shooting and editing goes I adore this new way. I would never go back to film. The camera is a gem; with a really good microphone attached (it will cost about as much as the camera) you can obtain superb sound, far better than the dreadful optical tracks on 16 mm prints. The new image stabilizing device in the camera is astoundingly effective. (The Steady Cam, used in the industry is a 19th century solution, the image stabilizer is a 21st century solution) Editing on film is an absurdity, every time you change something you destroy what you had! On Oeufs a la Coque we made 16 different edits before we settled on one. We can make new edits as time demands. This can be fun! And, there is nothing that limits what I have been saying to the documentary. You can make any kind of film you like this way. The tools are here. The road is open, just go out and make it!