

FILM AND THE ILLUSION OF EXPERIENCE

by

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Stephani Rae Gordon

April 2010

DEDICATION

For Merlyn, who left his life at sea and moved to the mountains so I could pursue a degree in filmmaking. And for Nanuk and Tucker who spent many hours keeping me company as I edited and wrote. Also, for my parents, who always believed in the value of education and encouraged my love of learning and exploring from an early age.

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ABSTRACT

Documentary filmmakers, especially those in the science and natural history genre, commonly rely on film's capacity to communicate information, but there is also the possibility of utilizing film's ability to communicate experience. As a subjective medium rather than a representation of objective reality, film creates a convincing illusion of experience that can translate into an opportunity for vicarious learning. I examine four documentaries by directors that demonstrate an uncanny ability to communicate an experience through film, and I apply their techniques and methods to my own film on field research on tundra swans in northwestern Alaska. Filming in an empathic mode, embracing subjectivity, and giving precedence to how the film subjects' perceive their world offer the filmmaker the ability to harness the illusion of experience that film can provide.

INTRODUCTION

Film is a versatile communication medium, a veritable multi-tool for fiction and documentaries alike. In addition to conveying information, advocating a position, or simply entertaining, documentaries can make use of film's crucial ability to create the space of an experience. We can make films that allow the audience to feel as if they are there, a very useful quality for engendering a deep and lasting impression, a feeling of connection.

Documentary film entails an inherent truth claim based on viewers' expectation and trust that these images and sounds are a representation of real life. As Michael Rabiger puts it in Directing the Documentary, "What remains central to documentary's spirit [is] the notion that documentaries explore the mysteries of actual people in actual situations."¹ Bordwell and Thompson in Film Art say that labeling a film a documentary "leads us to expect that the persons, places, and events shown to us exist and that the information presented about them will be reliable."² Bill Nichols in Representing Reality, classifies documentary film as one of the "discourses of sobriety," and writes that "the status of documentary film as *evidence from the world* legitimates its usage as a source of knowledge."³

How real is this filmic experience in a documentary, which is based on real life after all? Film scholar Patricia Aufderheide puts it succinctly:

What is a documentary?...A simple answer might be: a movie about real life. And that is precisely the problem; documentaries are *about* real life; they are not real life. They are not even windows onto real life. They are portraits of real life, using real life as their raw material, constructed by artists and technicians who make myriad decisions about what story to tell to whom, and for what purpose.⁴

Film can provide “an illusion of experience,” as Aufderheide aptly refers to it, in reference to Flaherty’s films, and even a nonfiction filmmaker is acting as an artist and author- not a truth purveyor.⁵ The native element of illusion does not diminish the power of the filmic experience, but it is the key to understanding how to use that tool honestly and effectively.

Early filmmakers and viewers alike were excited by what they perceived as the capacity for film to provide an objective visual document. The previously available mediums of drawing and painting were more obviously subjective- an artist’s rendition in the most apparent way. Photography at first seemed to offer a way to make a trustworthy visual record, but people soon realized that photographs could be retouched and modified. A photograph is a single image, capturing a brief moment in time- what French photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bressons would later refer to as “the decisive moment,” a concept he adapted from the writings of a 17th century Cardinal.⁶

When photography led to moving pictures, or film, with thousands of frames in even a short piece, it seemed to resolve these issues. Boleslaw Matuszewski, a Polish filmmaker and employee of the Lumières, wrote in 1898:

Perhaps the cinematograph does not give the whole story, but at least what it gives is unquestionable and of an absolute truth. Ordinary photography allows retouching, which can go as far as transformation, but try retouching in an identical way each shape on the thousands of almost microscopic plates! One can say animated photography has an authentic character and a unique exactness and precision. It is the true eyewitness and infallible.⁷

Matuszewski's statement of film's infallibility may seem naïve in our era of digital editing, but in the early days audiences found the realistic experience offered by film to be both enchanting and unnerving. The Lumière brothers produced short films of staged reality that they called "Actualities." When they first showed *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896), the audience reportedly jumped back in reaction to the illusion of a life-sized steam locomotive moving towards them.⁸ Even today we tend to believe what we see on film, at least to a certain extent, and more so if it is a documentary. Film does in fact provide a visual document, the caveat being that the document is a "subjective construct," as Rabiger puts it.⁹

Scottish filmmaker and founder of the British government's film unit, John Grierson, popularized the term documentary in relation to nonfiction films. He first used the term in 1926 in an essay titled *First Principles of Documentary* where he referred to "the documentary value" of *Moana*, a film by Robert Flaherty about life on a remote Pacific Island.¹⁰ Grierson was clear however, that he was not implying pure and objective documentation, but rather what he perceptively described as "the creative treatment of actuality."

Claims that documentary film, if done correctly, could achieve a pure version of the truth arose again later in the 1950's and 1960's. French filmmaker and theorist André Bazin believed the interpretation of a scene or a film should be left to the viewer, and that filmmakers should use methods that did not manipulate reality.¹¹ While primarily involved in fiction film, he none-the-less believed in film presenting an objective reality. To that end, Bazin was a proponent of wide shots, long focal depths, and using *mise en scène* rather than montage editing to create continuity in a scene- a reaction to the Russian movement based heavily on montage editing.¹² Bazin believed that a filmmaker could, and should, represent reality without influencing or contaminating it. He essentially believed film could be an objective medium.

The direct cinema movement, an American counterpart to the *cinéma vérité* movement in France, was in full force by the early 1960s.¹³ Robert Drew, D.A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, and the Maysles brothers used lighter, more sensitive cameras with synch sound, and could record events in a far less obtrusive- though by no means invisible- manner than was previously possible. Their filmmaking techniques were revolutionary, capturing iconic and yet intimate moments, and the movement continues to influence filmmakers even now, fifty years later.

While much of the camera technique and editing style pioneered by direct cinema are of continued relevance, the underlying philosophy was soon considered to be self-righteous and inherently flawed.¹² Proponents of direct

cinema claimed to be truly capturing reality, and that following their rules (commandments really) was the one true way to make a real documentary film. They, like Bazin, ardently believed in film as an objective medium when in the right hands, an unsupportable flaw in logic.

While direct cinema is often referred to under the popular umbrella term *cinéma vérité*, the movements were distinctly different. The French were proponents of the filmmaker as *agent provocateur* and embraced a highly subjective, interactive philosophy, whereas the American camp espoused an invisible fly-on-the-wall approach. “My goal was to capture real life without intruding,” said Robert Drew, director of *Primary* and one of the founding fathers of the movement.¹⁴ Direct cinema required strict adherence to a specific method of shooting: hand-held camera, no lights, no interviews, and only naturally-occurring sound.

Filmmaker Werner Herzog dismisses *cinéma vérité* as “the cinema of accountants.”¹⁵ Errol Morris complains that the movement “set filmmaking back 20 or 30 years.”¹⁶ He argues against the outspoken claims of achieving cinematic truth through stylistic methods:

The claims of *cinéma vérité* are spurious. . . . Style is not truth. Just because you pick a certain style does not mean that you somehow have solved the Cartesian riddle of what’s out there, that you no longer have to think about anything. You just adopt a methodology. It’s almost like thinking that because the New York Times uses a certain font, that guarantees the truthfulness of every sentence written in the newspaper. That’s total nonsense.¹⁷

Emilio deAntonio rejects it even more fiercely, saying:

Cinéma vérité is first of all a lie, and second of all a childish assumption about the nature of film. *Cinéma vérité* is a joke. Only people without feelings or convictions could even think of making *cinéma vérité*.¹⁸

The irony is that the filmmakers that practiced direct cinema had very strong convictions- about the cinematic truth and objectivity of their methods, and that was the problem.

Film's representation of reality must always be partial and limited- by the simple fact of a rectangular frame, bound unnaturally on four sides. Film likewise is by its nature subjective, in that filmmaking involves a constant stream of decisions. Framing, exposure, length of the lens, focal point, shot placement, juxtaposition, editing, sound mix- and most basic of all, what is included and what is not, in the frame and in the finished piece. The experience is condensed and subject to authorial control at every point. Film is art; it is not reality. It is at most, a representation of reality, or as Grierson called it "a creative treatment of actuality." Rabiger summarizes the impossibility of film as an objective medium this way:

The alluring notion that a camera can ever record anything objectively disintegrates when you confront a few practical considerations. What, for instance, is the "objective" camera position, when inescapably someone must place the camera somewhere? How do you "objectively" decide when to turn the camera on and off? And when viewing the resulting material, how do you spot the "objective truth" that should be used? These are all editorial decisions. They are inextricably bound up with film art's need to take what is lengthy and diffuse in life and make it into a brief and meaningful essence.¹⁹

Given that film is a subjective medium, what tools does the documentary filmmaker have to create a film space that gives the illusion of experience? To begin to answer this question, I examine four nonfiction films that run the gamut in terms of subject matter, treatment style, and time period but which all have in common the uncanny ability to communicate an experience. The films range in topic from Eskimo's lifestyle to Spanish revolutionaries, French school children, and Cartesian monks in a remote part of the Alps. Each film is remarkable in the way it communicates a particular experience. While studying and analyzing the films, I made note of practical techniques and ideological quandaries related to the process of conveying an experience in a documentary.

There is one more question to address before delving into the four films: how does this apply to the science and natural history filmmaker? The genre tends to have films that focus on conveying information or delighting with spectacle rather than communicating an experience. Davis Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) with former Vice President Al Gore is an excellent film, and we learn a lot about global warming, but not through experiencing it.²⁰ We do not feel what it is like to be a melting glacier, a drowning polar bear, or an island subsiding inch by inch as sea level rises- which is fine, since that is not the goal of the film. But the possibility is there- a film could instead attempt to embody the experience of global warming, or the experience of what it is like to study the effects of global warming as things begin to change in subtle and not so subtle

ways. Similarly, in the spectacular BBC series *Planet Earth* (2006) viewers are impressed, awed, delighted, and even educated with stunning footage of ecosystems across the planet.²¹ “Blue chip” natural history pieces generally showcase grandeur and do not stoop to conveying the all-too-humble human experience of just being there, standing on the tundra being chewed by mosquitoes or descending into a claustrophobic cave ripe with bat guano.

The illusion of experience film creates can provide, especially in science and natural history films, a vicarious learning experience. As humans, we are hardwired to learn by watching behaviors and consequences occur to other humans. Albert Bandura and other social learning experts say that it is one of the most important ways our behavior patterns develop.²² Evolutionary ecologist Richard Dawkins theorized that vicarious learning was so important it led to the evolution of imagination.²³ The great thing for filmmakers is that vicarious learning is completely transferable to film- social learning experiments have demonstrated that vicarious learning does not require direct observation in real time and space, and that film can provide an effective proxy.²⁴ Besides conveying information, film can convey an experience and both are methods of educating and opening the mind.²⁵

The film watching experience engages both our body and mind, eliciting physical and emotional reactions in spite of the knowledge we have that the events we are watching are not really happening to us. While watching a fast paced action sequence our heart rate increases, our pupils dilate, and our

muscles may even twitch in a kinesthetic response.²⁶ Even something as simple as increasing the speed of cuts can produce a response in our endocrine system akin to fight or flight syndrome.²⁷ Alternately, while watching a peaceful scene- a flock of birds flying across a lake, monks praying in a stone cathedral - we relax into a restful state. Film sound also plays an essential role in mediating our physiological experience of watching a film. The low rumble of the *Tyrannosaurus rex* approaching the jeep in *Jurassic Park* is pitched to signal the primitive part of our brain that danger is approaching, but is still somewhat distant.²⁸ The high-pitched scream of the *T. rex* when it looms suddenly overhead- constructed from a fusion of tiger, elephant, and alligator roars- generates a visceral reaction to intense and immediate danger.²⁹

Given its capacity for a realistic visual and auditory experience, film offers a representation of reality that can be vicarious and visceral and often convincing and enlightening; in other words, a sense of the experience that was captured on film. We must, nonetheless, always remain aware of and acknowledge film's subjectivity and inability to portray a universal, absolute, and incontrovertible truth. The film experience is just that – an experience on film (or video or digital media), but it offers many opportunities for intellectual growth, emotional intensity, and aesthetic gratification. Film is primarily an aesthetic- not an evidentiary- construct.

A QUESTION OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

*Nanook of the North: A Story Of Life and Love
In the Actual Arctic (1922) – Robert J. Flaherty*³⁰

One of the twentieth century's earliest documentary filmmakers, Robert Flaherty experienced life with the Eskimos on a visceral level.³¹ At one point during the field production, Allakariallak (Nanook) suggested they visit a place he knew of further north where they could film a polar bear sow and her cubs. They spent 55 days traveling over sea ice, covering 600 miles round trip, and for all that did not shoot a single frame. Conditions were so adverse they could not procure sufficient seal meat for the sled dogs, two of which starved to death. Flaherty and Nanook were in danger, but they finally made it back to the relative safety of the village. Flaherty emphasizes that his relationship with the Inuk was a key element to his filmmaking process:

In so many travelogues you see, the filmmaker looks down on and never up to his subject. He is always the big man from New York or from London. But I had been dependent on these people, alone with them for months at a time, traveling with them and living with them. They had warmed my feet when they were cold, lit my cigarette when my hands were too numb to do it myself; they had taken care of me on three or four different expeditions over a period of ten years. My work had been built up along with them; I couldn't have done anything without them. In the end it is all a question of human relationships.³²

Flaherty had a definite philosophy on the relationship between himself as a filmmaker and the people he filmed. After his death, his wife Frances dubbed

his methods “the Flaherty Way,” and transformed him into the father of documentary film.³³

Part of the reason Robert Flaherty’s work is considered remarkable is the historical context in which it occurred. He was an American filmmaker – a scientist (a trained geologist) first of all, who became a filmmaker – delivering his first film in 1922. The “story of life and love in the actual Arctic,” as the film’s title promises, took over ten years to complete. This was during an era dominated almost entirely by dramas, comedies, fantasies, and other types of fiction films with fully staged artifice. While Flaherty never promised to deliver an untouched anthropological account in his film (something people seem to forget), his work was a well-received expansion of the possibilities of film that at the time were limited almost solely to dramatic narratives deeply beholden to the stage and novel.

Flaherty considered himself very much an artist, not a journalist or pure documentarian- *Nanook* after all played on a double-bill with a comedy. He was in fact in the actual arctic and not on a sound stage in New York or California, and his actors were real Inuk that really did live in small villages, hunting and trapping for their sustenance. That said, much of the content of the film was made with re-creations and staged events.³⁴ He asked the Inuk to hunt with spears instead of guns, and assembled a photogenic family for the film. He had Nanook bite a gramophone record for comic effect although many of the Inuk

were technologically quite savvy and often helped repair Flaherty's camera equipment.

Celebrated and praised by many, Robert J. Flaherty's methods and philosophies attract equally voluble criticism. Film scholars have criticized his portrayals of indigenous cultures as romantic, patronizing, unrealistic, or even a form of salvage ethnography.³⁵ He is accused of perpetuating and capitalizing on the concept of the "noble savage." Some of these accusations may have merit, but there is no denying Flaherty's skill as an artist, storyteller, and master of creating a filmic experience.

Patricia Aufderheide summarizes his filmmaking techniques and use of realism to generate a convincing authenticity this way:

Flaherty's camerawork- the product of meticulous visual care and many retakes- and the editor's clever pacing (slow enough to convince viewers they were watching real life, but dramatically shaped) produced high-quality entertainment from compelling raw material. The choice of a realist mode- creating, as it were, the illusion of seen and felt reality through editing, camera angle, and pacing- gave viewers a vivid impression of having virtually experienced something genuine.³⁶

Flaherty's great success was at providing the illusion of experience, the impression that you were not only watching but even participating in, vicariously, in an experience someone else was having...The irony is that the experiences Flaherty is most famous for presenting were often staged!³⁷

The further irony, or perhaps testament to his skill, is that even the native practitioners of the lifestyle and events Flaherty was "documenting" were convinced, or at least drawn in enough, to feel like they were there. Having

developed most of his film on location (using buckets over a fire so the processing chemicals wouldn't freeze), Flaherty showed the first rushes to the Inuk living in the village where he was filming:

When at last I told them I was ready to begin the show, they crammed into my little 15 by 20 hut to the point of suffocation. I started up the little electric light plant, turned out the lights in the room, turned on the switch on the projector. A beam of light shot out, filled the blanket, and the show began. At first they kept looking back at the source of the light in the projector as much as they did at the screen.

I was sure the show would flop, when suddenly someone shouted, "Iviuk! (Walrus!)" There they were- a school of them- lying basking on the beach. In the foreground could be seen Nanook and his crew, harpoon in hand, stalking on their bellies toward them. Suddenly the walrus take alarm; they begin to rumble into the water.

There was one agonizing shriek from the audience, until Nanook leaping to his feet thrust his harpoon. In the tug-of-war that ensued between the walrus now in the water and Nanook and his men holding desperately to the harpoon line, pandemonium broke loose; every last man, woman and child in the room was fighting that walrus, no surer than Nanook was at the time that the walrus would not get away. "Hold him!" they would yell, "hold him!- Hold him!" From that day on there was nothing Nanook and the crew would not do for me.³⁸

While we only have Flaherty's accounts of his filmmaking adventures in the Arctic and no corresponding reports from the Inuk themselves to verify or dispute his description, we do know that he spent over ten years working and filming in that remote region and most likely could not have accomplished what he did without their continued good will and help. Whether considered as an explorer, artist, late-stage imperialist, or documentary filmmaker, Flaherty had his

share of character flaws and philosophical inconsistencies. It is undeniable that he also had great affection for the people he filmed. Flaherty recognized that good filmmaking is first and last dependent on human relationships, and it was on the strength of his relationship with the Inuk that he was able to film them and convincingly evoke an illusion of experience of life in the Arctic.

MEDITATION & SHARPENING AWARENESS

*The Spanish Earth (Tierra de España) (1937) – Joris Ivens*³⁹

This black and white propaganda war film has many of the standard conventions you would expect in a such a film- wide shots of key events and important people, staged sequences with everyday folk, uplifting military band style music and maps showing military strategy. But it also has sequences that feel startlingly real, even seventy-five years later. Young men, villagers turned soldiers, glance up at us as they hike over rough ground shouldering their guns. Distraught women scan their freshly bombed village to assess the damage, young children gripped tightly by the hand. A bomb explodes nearby, shaking the ground and raining down dirt.

While filming his documentary on the Spanish Civil War, director Joris Ivens talked about how he and his small film crew were often in the actual battle zones.⁴⁰ Driving along, they would see planes above, and then people running into the hills. Ivens and his camera crew had to be alert- they were running the same risks as the soldiers. As director, he says it was incredibly important for him to know clearly what he wanted, so as to not put his cameramen at greater risk than needed.

During one incident Ivens recounted, they approached a village that had just been bombed moments earlier. It was empty and there was a vast silence. In

his autobiography, Ivens writes:

We thought the people would come back now. Then we realized they were listening to see if the planes would return and bomb again. Silence between two people may be dramatic, but you should hear the silence of five hundred people after the crash of bombs....

I did not have so much the feeling of "let me get as much out of life as I can" which I had previously experienced just before going to the [battle] front, but more a feeling of meditation. This had the special effect of sharpening you for the actual work at the front, increasing efficiency and alertness in action- meaning you have less chance of being killed or wounded.⁴¹

Joris Ivens' concept of immersing himself in the experience may seem a bit extreme given that he was documenting a civil war, but his film is undoubtedly more powerful because of it. We experience some of how the Spanish countryside feels during those battles because the camera is in the thick of it. Ivens concept of entering into a meditative state with sharpened awareness is applicable even when filming events less intense than war. Staying focused and clear is critical in any situation to capturing elusive moments of emotional truth that are part of what makes a film feel so real.

Joris Ivens and his crew were on the Republican side of the conflict, and made no attempt to film or represent the alternate viewpoint of the opposing Fascists. On this topic, Ivens explains:

I was often asked, why hadn't we gone to the other side, too, and made an objective film? My only answer was that a documentary filmmaker has to have an opinion on such vital issues as fascism or anti-fascism- he has to have feelings about these issues, if his work is to have any dramatic or emotional or art value.

I am surprised to find that many people automatically assumed that any documentary film would inevitably be objective. Perhaps the term is unsatisfactory, but for me the distinction between the words document and documentary is quite clear. Do we demand objectivity in the evidence presented at a trial? No, the only demand is that each piece of evidence be as full a subjective, truthful, honest presentation of the witness's attitude as an oath on the Bible can produce from him.⁴²

Writer Ernest Hemingway, who worked hand-in-hand with Ivens on *The Spanish Earth*, summarized the task of a writer in a similar way, and it is equally applicable to filmmaking:

A writer's problem does not change. He himself changes, but his problem remains the same. It is always how to write truly and having found what is true to project it in such a way that it becomes part of the experience of the person who reads it.⁴³

While showing two sides of an issue may appear to contribute to the balance or fairness of a piece, there is no such thing as an objective film, given the inescapable subjectivity of the medium.⁴⁴ Even if it were possible, showing two sides is far from adequate in most cases, given that there are many sides to any story of complexity and importance. The task of truly representing all sides of a story is neither realistic nor possible with the medium of film. That is not to say that it is never useful to cover more than one side of an issue, but I agree with Ivens and Hemingway that what usually works best is an honest subjective viewpoint and the sharing of experience. Both Ivens and Hemingway believe in using the power of experience to bring viewers (or readers) alongside in their cause. They recognize the illusion of experience as a highly effective, intuitive

way to convince others of the “truth” of what they themselves feel, believe, and support.

THE SMALL THINGS

*To Be and To Have (Être et avoir) (2002) – Nicolas Philibert*⁴⁵

Être et avoir starts slowly- snowflakes swirl, cows meander, tortoises plod across the floor of an empty schoolroom. Not much happens at first, but it draws you in gradually and watching the film becomes like following a trail of breadcrumbs- there are these moments of startling emotional clarity along the way. This film, which delighted audiences and won numerous awards on the festival circuit, follows a year in the life of a teacher and his students in a one-room French country school.⁴⁶ Nicolas Philibert, the director, comments:

One of the reasons the film reminds you of a fairy tale is the landscape. The snow, the snowstorm with which the film opens. The tall pine trees swaying back and forth like ghosts. And later on, the cornfields where Alizé gets lost. These landscapes are grandiose, but also intimate. In them, we recognize parts of ourselves. They may be in a remote area, but it's still anchored in the world. And it looks out at the world...cinema doesn't have to involve spectacular events and fantastic adventures. You can often base a film on small things.⁴⁷

Philibert does indeed construct the film out of small things- there is no grand action or adventure, just a string of small happenings and the evolution of relationships between the students and their teacher. Some moments happened spontaneously, other scenes were more constructed. Philibert asked the teacher to introduce the concept of infinity to a student, and also to tell them about his retirement the following year.⁴⁸ The homework scene at Julien's house turns into a family tableau when the uncle, mom, dad, and older brother all try to help with a

math problem. In the rural French countryside, it is a mother's task to help with homework, and in this case the whole family gathered around the math problem because the camera was present- they wanted to be in the film. It may not be realistic or representative of what normally happens, but the moment still works. There is something real in their comic confusion about how to solve the math problem and equally real in their desire to be part of the film.

To Be and To Have is a film that very much shares the experience of being a young student in a rural classroom learning basic skills in math, grammar, and life from a kind and gentle teacher. Philibert accomplishes this by making good use of the small things - moments, glances, the children's struggles with small problems, a teacher's patient voice. We feel what it is like to be there, and this filmic experience is constructed of moments both found and created. Like his predecessors Jean Rouch with *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960) and other in the French *cinéma vérité* movement, Philibert is not shy about inserting himself into his work or letting the camera's presence add tension or inspiration to certain moments.⁴⁹

Ironically, in spite of Philibert's interventionist methods, the film still offers such a convincing representation of the experience of the children and their teacher that he was taken to court by the teacher, Georges Lopez, who believed he should be considered the co-author of the film.⁵⁰ This was undoubtedly due in part to the film becoming an unexpected commercial success, earning €2 million euros profit. The participants were initially told it would be a small documentary

used primarily for educational purposes and understandably felt betrayed.⁵¹

Unethical production practices aside, one of the underlying issues here is that the film conveyed their experience with such realism and detail – the small things – that the social actors themselves felt it was their personalities, their reality, that was being portrayed and the basis of the commercial profits rather than the artistry of the director.

By the nature of the genre, documentary filmmakers often use as raw material the lives and experiences of people in their films. While the finished film is a highly mediated representation of that life or experience, it can be easy to forget that it not simply a document, a record of reality. It is possible perhaps to make the illusion of experience too complete, and run into ethical issues generated by borrowing too completely from another person's reality. A better practice is to not completely obscure the filmmaker's presence and role in the process but instead acknowledge their influence in a way that is subtle and yet apparent- reveal the brushstrokes and the hand of the artist, so to speak.

Film does more than simply document or record images. A film does not present raw data, but rather a mediated presentation of the real world, a reflection of reality that has been shaped and formed by the filmmaker and the filmmaking process itself. It creates an illusion of experience and no matter how detailed, innocent, or ingenuous that experience feels, it is the product of the decision-making and artistic manipulation that is inherent to filmmaking.

IMMERSION

*Into Great Silence (Die große Stille) (2005) - Philip Gröning*⁵²

The film begins with nearly a minute of almost complete darkness and silence. Gradually there is enough light that we can make out a monk, praying. He has been still the entire time. Several long silent minutes into the film, we hear our first sound- a bell tolling. Then we hear the scrape of leather sandals on stone as the monks walk to their morning prayers. Even in this short span of film time, our ears grow hungry for sound. Gröning ushers us into the monks' world and make us part of their life of silence.

The first human sound comes twenty minutes into the film. A candle flame flickers, filling the screen. The flame is silent, and even after a very minimal soundtrack the mind asks why the flame is so silent. It is startling- perhaps because there is so much stillness with the other silences- the bare trees are still, the stone archways are still, the monks praying are still. The flame dances and moves, and yet it is silent- that is the surprising thing. After some time, with the camera remaining on the candle, we hear the monks begin to chant. The shot then turns into a timelapse of a sublime night sky full of stars. Constellations arc slowly over the remote mountain monastery, and it is a beautiful, peaceful, powerful combination of image and sound.

How did Gröning do it? How does he bring us so completely into this world that is remote from our present reality? The camera is silent in its own way-

seeing and sharing, a mute witness. It portrays what it sees as if from one silent monk's perspective- we see what one person can see, no more no less. It is a privileged view at times- sometimes the camera films from high up in the back of a room while everyone files in, but more often it is at eye level, glancing at something happening down the stone corridor, gazing with fascination at snow swirling, feathers on a window sill, or a hand reaching for an ink well. Sometimes it follows the monks as they walk or write or pray. The camera uses a variety of shots- steady, handheld, close-ups, wide shots, and yet they all feel intimate and real.

The editing style is the other half of the equation for why this film works the way it does. We do not always see and hear the same thing, and somehow that makes the eyes and ears all the more attentive. The visuals are luxurious and luminous, showing the interplay of light and shadow, color and texture- bringing us into this place that is ancient and yet present. There is a sparse quality to the soundtrack that makes each sound feel textured and rich. Gröning uses no words beyond a few title cards; the story is told through film form, patterns, and repetition.

Gröning wanted the filmic experience to be so complete that it would offer the same renewal and peace as the monastery itself.⁵³ He says in an interview:

To go back to the basic concept: It was to go there, go through certain experiences, to have my perception, my senses, altered by what I encounter, use those altered senses, the altered sense of rhythm, of hearing, of seeing as a tool for creating something that really filters this altered perception into the audience, and opens up

the space for them...I didn't want to shoot a film that informs people about a monastery, but a film that transforms into a monastery. The film should become a monastery.⁵⁴

During the film, we know that time passes because the night sky returns periodically. Winter gives way to spring- we know this by the joyous sound of a melting stream and a wild bird singing. We do not learn any names, so in that way the monks stay anonymous, but the camera spends long moments lingering on their faces, and we enjoy the intimacy of accompanying them on their daily routines. The first monk who speaks aloud comes forty-five minutes into the film where it has the effect of shocking our ears. The man is calling out and talking to the barn cats as he feeds them, and we wonder if he is a little crazy. After nearly an hour of experiencing this quiet place, it is unsettling to meet this man who seems to be practically shouting. Gröning has done an amazing job of immersing the viewer as completely as he himself was immersed, although he has achieved this through the art (or artifice) of cinematography, sound, and editing.

Scientist and philosopher Ken Norris, who made substantial contributions in his lifetime to unraveling scientific mysteries ranging in scope from dolphin communication to the physics of sand dunes, believed in a concept he referred to as "Mountain Time."⁵⁵ The concept applies equally well to documentary filmmaking. Norris proposed that to gather data or observations with any elemental truth to them, it was essential to first slow down and come into accord with the rhythm of natural processes. A person has to be on Mountain Time to

really see and understand what is happening in a forest, a river, any ecosystem or natural place with its own rhythms.

Finding the natural rhythm of a place or a group of people is of equal necessity in the making of a film that conveys an experience. In Gröning's case it was a requirement. The monks made him wait sixteen years after his initial proposal in 1984 before granting permission, and then with the requirements that he come alone, live with them, and use only natural light and sound in the film. He spent a life-changing, mind-altering, soul stretching five months in the monastery, completely isolated and on his own as a one-man film crew. He recounts falling from an eighteen-foot cliff while on his own and landing on his back, unable to feel anything. He thought he had fractured his spine and was likely to die there, staring up at the sky. His first thought was how beautiful the sky was. Once he realized he was not in fact going to die, his second thought was his realization that that he had broken a cable on the camera.⁵⁶

Asked about the importance of film as a medium for his task of conveying the experience of a monastery, Gröning replies it had to do with being able to use the element of time:

I always wanted to do this film because only cinema completely controls the time of the audience, no other medium can do that. It is the medium that comes closest to what religious rituals are. So I had the confidence even in 1984, although no camera in the world could have filmed at night then, that you can transform cinema into a monastery. Because all religion, by structuring time, can open up spaces in the viewer or in the participant. And this is exactly what you can do in a cinema. If you dare to do it.⁵⁷

Gröning makes excellent use of rhythm, timing, color, sound and all of the other malleable characteristics of film that make it possible to communicate an experience. If audience response is any indication, he did succeed on at least some level at making the film itself into a meditative spiritual experience. Some have gone to see it three, eight, even twelve times- sitting through all three hours of the piece each time. Gröning's immersion in the experience himself made this sort of transcendent film experience possible for many others.

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Chasing Birds in Beringia (2010) – Stephani Gordon

In my thesis film, *Chasing Birds in Beringia*, I follow a group of pilot biologists as they capture swans to test them for avian influenza and surgically implant satellite transmitters to learn more about their migration patterns. I use the medium of film to communicate the actual science of their research as well as the experience of working in the remote northwestern corner of Alaska flying small planes to chase wild swans.

While filming, I lived and worked with the field crew, helping them process birds when I was finished with my camera for the day. We zipped our jackets up and hunkered down on the soggy tundra at midnight when it was cold, windy, and, unfortunately, still light enough to keep working. We enjoyed the rare mild days of sun and calm air, a treat for the biologists, swans, and myself alike. I helped haul gear, washed dishes, filmed, got stuck in the mud in my waders, and was generally just one more member of the field crew. If I had approached this subject differently or acted as if my filming was more important than their work, or as if I had been too busy to help with dinner when we were all tired, I would not have had the same kind of access and would not have been able to put the viewer in my own illusion of the field works' experience.. The veterinarian had to trust me; the pilots and biologists had to trust me; as with Flaherty, my filming was based on human relationships.

During postproduction and the editing process, my goal was to present the science in a way that clarified without oversimplifying, as Rabiger exhorts.⁵⁸ I also wanted to create a vicarious experience for people that will never have the chance to visit or work on the tundra. Being unconstrained by any agenda other than my own was a huge boon. Rather than building a film around the framework of a particular agency or organization's mission and self-promotion, I was able to choose shots and assemble sequences with elements of beauty, grit, humor, and empathy. I showed dirt; I showed blood; I showed wild irises and stray feathers and long grass moving in the wind. It was a liberating experience to edit that way, and in my own way I emulated Gröning's efforts to create a film space that felt something like the real place, searching for a natural rhythm and immersing viewers in a rich visual experience. Like Philibert, I relied on the small things, the details of scientific ritual, to evoke the feeling of being there and participating in the learning.

During the twelve years I spent as a field biologist, it was the experience of being out there in the field, in a wild ecosystem, which strengthened my conservation ethic more than any of the data I collected and analyzed. There is room for science and nature films to share more than just the numbers, convey more than a convincing argument, but also communicate the genuine affection that biologists and others have for the diverse and amazing place that is our earth. Another filmmaker, perhaps one who was not a biologist, might have offered a quite different experience: a group of dedicated but isolated people in a

harsh, dangerous environment, foolishly risking their lives and those of their birds for an arcane field of science. This experience was not my reality and my film presents the experience I believe exists among these scientists. Using film to share a filmmaker's interpretation of experience is an intense way to communicate the intellectual and emotional bonds among the subjects and draw the viewer into that world.

CONCLUSION

Bill Nichols talks about four modes of documentary in his classic treatise on non-fiction film, Representing Reality: expository, observational, interactive, and reflexive.⁵⁹ Nichols states that the terms are of his own invention, but that “filmmakers themselves recognize these as distinct approaches to representations of reality,” and asserts that they describe “the dominant organizational categories around which most texts are structured.”⁶⁰ Although Nichols would place some of the films I discuss in the expository bin, that mode has the primary goal of communicating information rather than an experience, which is a key distinction. The observational mode comes closer to including films that communicate an experience, but in Nichols scheme it requires being objective and detached rather than allowing the filmmaker to harness the inherently subjectivity of the medium. The interactive mode requires the filmmaker to actively catalyze events rather than simply being there and keeping pace with the natural rhythms. In the reflexive mode, the filmmaker is such a part of the film it becomes primarily his or her story.

I need there to be a fifth mode, or at least a mode modifier, to encompass the type of filmmaking that embraces subjectivity and communicates as fully as possible the experience of the subject being filmed. The filmmaker takes the viewer into the world being filmed, with no pretensions of objectivity but the subjectivity is from the place, the people, and the events. It involves letting the

voices of the characters dominate over the filmmaker's ego. What I have in mind is something that could be called the Empathic Mode. This mode enables the filmmaker to enter more fully into the reality he or she is recording, and to translate that reality into a vicarious experience for the audience.

Asked how his style evolved, Albert Maysles, who helped create the direct cinema movement but did not subscribe to the concept of objective fly-on-the-wall filmmaking, explains:

. . . nor do I think that the fly-on-the-wall approach is at all useful, because the fly on the wall is an instrument without a mind or a heart to control it. But then, of course, people say, 'Well sure, the mind and the heart already are getting into something very subjective and you're getting away from representing reality.' But the way I use the instrument, the way I use my emotions... is to get closer, to get closer to the truth rather than distant from it. And I think, perhaps, the determining factor is I empathize with the people I film.⁶¹

Susan Froemke, longtime collaborator at Maysles Films, describes their approach this way "We are always trying to keep our own personas out. What can really trip you up is going down with some agenda and thinking you're going to do this kind of a film and not seeing what is really there."⁶² In terms of using film to communicate an experience, Albert Maysles says that it is documentary's "divine right or responsibility...to film people's experiences."⁶³ It is what he values above all else, and describes his priorities this way:

I have an interest completely different from Hollywood's way of doing things. I'm not at all interested in what's called high production value. It's the bane of my existence. To me, of course the high value is not what makes it expensive, but the high value

comes in capturing another person's experience as directly and as interestingly as possible.⁶⁴

In Imagining Reality, filmmaker Kevin McDonald and co-author Mark Cousins write that films, even documentaries, "do what all art does: they give form to the chaos of life and make it meaningful."⁶⁵ Unlike reality, films have a beginning, middle, and end, a storyline, a theme, a unifying principle. We frame our shots, and juxtapose them in time and space using editing. The images we see are presented in a four-by-three or sixteen-by-nine elongated rectangle, which has little to do with the sphere of reality that exists around us, and everything to do with commercial practicalities.⁶⁶

Being able to provide a vicarious experience, an illusion of experience, is a significant part of what makes film magic, what gives it the inherent ability to captivate, entertain, teach, and make us smile or cry. We enjoy that experience, and we enjoy the knowledge we gain. As human beings, we are drawn to having a multitude of experiences and to learn from them - both our own and those of others.

One of the pioneers in the earliest years of film, French filmmaker Georges Méliès decided he was no longer satisfied with recreating scenes in his studio in Paris.⁶⁷ He wanted to film the real ocean- nothing else would do. Méliès traveled with all of his gear down to the sea, undertaking his task when there was a storm raging in order to get the tumultuous shots he desired.

Unable to change out film reels in the midst of salt spray and high winds, he shot twenty meters of film at a time, hauled everything back across the rugged coastline to a studio in town, changed out the film, and then hiked out back out to the sea, again and again- obsessed with his efforts to really capture the essence of the sea. His strenuous efforts yielded fifteen shots of the stormy sea. When he showed the footage back in Paris, people absolutely loved it. They had never seen anything like it! It was 1896. "The ones who were familiar with the sea exclaimed, 'That's it, exactly!' and the ones who had never seen the sea felt they were standing on its shore," Méliès reports after the successful showing.⁶⁸

Film has the power to bring people to the edge of a stormy sea, still their thoughts with the quiet of a monastery, open their minds and hearts like children in a one-room school, and feel the uncertainty of civil war or the exuberant success of hauling a walrus onto the ice to feed a village. The illusion of experience offered by film gives us a way to communicate more than just images and information but arms the filmmaker with a way to offer vicarious learning, an opportunity to which humans are instinctively drawn.

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