

**SHOOTING IN THE DARK:
NOTES ON PREPARING TO FILM IN THE FIELD
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I am collaborating with Bill Hanks, Associate Professor of Linguistics and Anthropology at the University of Chicago, on a film essay entitled VIEWS FROM A MAYA ALTAR. I've shot for weeks in a hut ten feet by seven feet. Every twenty hours or so into the shoot I'm absolutely amazed to realize that I haven't exhausted the limitations of this space.

I have the feeling that this project will continue to develop for years, with this hut being the central focus. What an cinematic apprenticeship to the exploration of tiny space this will be! The following notes were written while returning from the field in Yucatan. They represent what I have learned so far about cinematography as I continue to apprentice myself to this space and to the people, animals and events in it.

I'm writing this on a plane over the Gulf of Mexico. A woman stands in the aisle waiting for the bathroom. She wears a white blouse with polka dots. Sun streams through portholes on her left. Creases in the blouse behind her arm channel light to her shoulder. There it links nine polka dots in a semi-circle, and stops dead.

If I were filming now, I would ask myself what I know about her, or her part in the film, such that this fan-like connection might be an **objective correlative to an inner or outer dramatic state**. Maybe she is "hyper-relational" and always reaching out to others; or maybe she is at a crossroads and can't decide which of several paths she should take. So I am in the habit of looking at such interactions between light and what it illumines and asking myself what it means dramatically, if anything, and how might be be

framed by the camera. Sometimes it *doesn't* mean much--it just means that I'm exercising this facility.

I take special care to light documentary scenes to match the **socially embodied subject**. Taking a lighting kit into a Maya woman's kitchen normally lit by daylight, or a cooking fire, or a bare light bulb, might distort the actuality of the lighting she has individually chosen or inherited via her class and culture. I have to remind myself that lighting choices are **not only aesthetic, but social**--that it's possible to betray one or both by imposing too much cinematic "quality".

Once I understand the lighting needs, and accept or enhance them, I turn to the real job: tracking relationships. I want to address how a beginning documentarian might go about preparing to do that. The following suggestions are based on and are limited by my own experience, and are *one* guided tour towards preparing to cinemagraphically track relationships in the field from the understanding, as director Dennis Glenn says, that "preproduction is planned management and production is crisis management"--so we need every tool we can get to exist effectively within the continual crisis that is documentary shooting.

So, here goes:

First, enter an enclosed space. A kitchen, say. Now choose a place within this place and study the space from the physical point of view that the majority of still and movie cameras take towards the World: a thin band transversing the globe at four feet from the earth and ending around five feet nine inches. Most photography and most cinematography take place within this band which tends to be taken for granted, like gravity. I think of it as the Viewosphere.

Now, to counteract the habit of viewing the World from within the boundaries of this Viewosphere, lie down on the floor.

Now look up.

Now sit up.

Now sit on a chair.

Now stand.

Now stand on a chair.

Now stand on the kitchen table.

As an extension of shifting these points of view, practice this: when entering a space, imagine how you yourself look while moving through the space from each of the four corners from one foot high and then from directly over your head. This becomes more natural with practice and helps train your ability to shift point of view and therefore to choose the most appropriate one in the field.

Now, during the preparation of a meal in this kitchen, set up your camera at waist level on a tripod. Pan and follow-focus at that level for a few hours until you're comfortable. Don't rush to move your height (point of view). You need to digest each height before changing levels. This digestion only comes with time.

So come back on a different day and do the same thing a foot higher. Then do it as high as your tripod can extend. Then as low.

Now here is a next step: go to an ethnic store (one in which the majority of the speaking is in a language you don't understand. Negotiate to gain access to this store over the course of a week or two. Hopefully, it will be a confined space (the smaller the better) with a limited repertoire of relational activities that thematically repeat with continuous variations.

Set your tripod at waist level and spend approximately several days tracking relationships as people enter the store, look at each other, deliberate, chat, leave. Each entrance and dialogue is a mini-drama with a beginning, uneven development, and varying closures.

In order to "get into" dramas played out in a language I don't know, I find two techniques helpful. The first comes from Bill Hanks' telling me that a Maya shaman works by dilating his body to incorporate his patient's body. I've thought a bit about that practice, and realize that it's a description of something I tended to do when filming, but without name and, therefore, unconsciously. Now I enter a space to film while **consciously imagining my body**

dilating to fill that space. Sounds a bit weird--"hela'an", as the Maya say.. But this imaginative projection allows a better "feel" for how each person in the space--each of "my" extended "organs"--is feeling and functioning. This might be akin to what John Keats called "negative capability"--the ability of a poet to leave the confines of personal space and time and to inhabit another's through projection.

The second technique is to **regulate my breathing to match the breathing of the person I'm focussing on within the dramatic and spatial frames.** This, too, sounds a bit weird, but it does help my ability to anticipate what that person is likely to do, when they are likely to do it, and how to synch their action with anticipatory movement by the camera. The "rightness" of this anticipatory camera movement is of absolute importance because once you commit the documentary camera by moving it or adjusting the focus you are committing the viewer to a point of view which might be *wrong* but will often be made *worse* by an attempt to correct it. And you've got no second takes. We are talking here about walking a performance tightrope in documentary cinematography, with little room for missteps. This ability to anticipate through empathic breathing becomes increasingly accurate as a scene becomes more quiet and the breath of the protagonist becomes slower. In such a scene, the protagonist will tend to initiate a dramatically meaningful movement at one of two places in the breathing cycle: at the peak of the breath intake through constriction, or in the space of non-breath just after having exhaled.

These two techniques help me to see and hear in **actional wholes** and therefore help my psychological and dramaturgical understandings of socially embedded action, especially in situations where I don't know the language and can't use that as a judge of meaning. In two sentences, I'd say that my documentary approach is based on an **active receptivity motivated by empathy. Its camera analogue is Anticipatory Cinematography focussed on the delicate contingencies of the specific that often hide out between plot-points.** For a marvelous discussion on this kind of filmmaking within the tradition of the Plotless Cinema, read "Some Ideas on the Cinema" by the great Cesare Zavattini.

So this first exercise in the store was at waist level.

Now repeat the same exercise about a foot higher.

Then repeat it as high as the tripod can reach.

Then repeat it as low as it can go.

Now use a wide angle lens and repeat at all the above heights.

Now start out a scene on the tripod and attempt to smoothly remove the camera and continue the scene hand-held. Do this transition repeatedly until it becomes smoother.

Now, if your format is Hi8, begin to work with the Steadicam JR (see comments in "Steadicam JR", below).

By the end of this apprenticeship, you should have a feeling for the camera, tripod and for point of view. I would pay the store owner if I were you.

What now? I find it *very* helpful to study still photographs for the lessons they offer on framing. The difference between still photography and the motion picture is that between the time-slice and the continuum. Since photographers do not have the continuum, they give their loyalty to framing. Filmmakers give their loyalty to montage--and montage needs works by balancing the frame with the continuum. So, for framing, you might go to the Columbia College library and leaf through the photography collection paying attention to the framing decisions made by each still photographer. Frame analysis addresses the question of how meaning is made through both **inclusion and exclusion of the world**. For every inclusion, there is a mass of critical exclusions. Said differently, what meanings were created by this photographer within this particular photographic frame by critically cutting off and implying what parts of the world lying outside the frame?

This idea of "frames" can be extended into dramaturgical relationships. "Relational" frames, for example.

For "relational" frames, let's go back into the kitchen and sit ourselves at the kitchen table. You begin to tease your daughter. The relational space will become charged with tension if you accidentally misjudge the emotional frame within which you have

implicit freedom to operate. If you have misjudged the frame, then your teasing will have shifted everybody at the table into an arena constellating a family history that individuals have different and often strong feelings about (see the fabulous Christmas dinner argument near the beginning of Joyce's A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN as one example of such a relational frame shift).

Or, maybe a protagonist "breaks frame" on purpose in order to confront or call attention to what is actually happening now between the persons in the room.. The question for a documentarian is this: how should such an emotional shift, one done purposely and one done accidentally, affect framing and point of view?

No easy answers. Just raising a nettlesome question or two.

So I'll jump out of this and say that when doing documentary work, I feel it important to be as non-intrusive as possible, granting the fact that there is always unalterable and constantly shifting degrees of intrusion present. In order to diminish the intrusion as much as possible, it very important not to film hunkered over the viewfinder in the traditional cinematographer position--one shoulder up, one eye closed, one side of your face screwed up.

Other than a consciously-held attitude of "smallness", here is my solution to that problem assuming I am shooting video: I zoom in on each of what I think will be the critical foci sequentially and note the focus distances of each. Then I raise the top half of the eyepiece so that while filming I judge my framing from a normal sitting distance *without perching over the eyepiece* as I film, pan or tilt. This leaves my eyes free make contact with the person(s) I am filming and therefore to **maintain relational contact**. I can also see what is happening out-of-frame to anticipate entrances, exits and relational shifts.

If I need to pan up to 90 degrees from where I am standing or sitting, and for spatial reasons or not wanting to draw more attention to myself by moving to follow that pan, I can then see and judge the frame from two places within the raised eyepiece--the 45 degree mirror, or the CRT screen. Remember, however, that the scene is *reversed* on the CRT screen; so, if you are radically

panning, suddenly the scene will seem to continue in the opposite direction as your eye shifts from mirror to CRT. Working smoothly with this sudden shift takes practice. If I have time, before each shooting session, along with imaginatively “dilating” myself to fill the space, I warm up by raising the eyepiece, panning and shifting my eyes from the mirror to the CRT screen while continuing the pan and attempting to keep the framing exact.

As the bottom line preparation for all these practices, I recommend that a documentarian buy herself a 25 foot retractable metal tape measure at a hardware store and do daily exercises in estimating distances and verifying them by measurement. When you achieve expertise in estimating distances (it doesn't take long), you can then handhold the camera at waist level, for example, and follow-focus by moving the lens to match the numbers on the lens barrel--you do *not* have to hunker down on the viewfinder.

Which brings us to the next subject, “Handholding the Camera”.

The karate backstance is the best stance I have found for handholding a camera with optimum balance and mobility. It works like this: the forward foot points toward the subject and two-thirds of your weight is on your back foot at right angles to the front foot. The forward foot gives you front-to-back balance, and the back foot gives you side-to-side balance. You pan by swiveling on the balls of your feet, or by moving the back foot. If this doesn't make sense, go to any martial arts dojo and say you are interested in taking classes and would like to see one session. They'll say, “Sure!” and sit you down. Watch feet and balance.

Question whether you want to place the camera on your shoulder not only in terms of the boundaries of the “Viewosphere”, but because the shoulder is so hard and inflexible. Given its height, it also tends to place the documentary cinematographer in the **position of power** vis-a-vis the person filmed--something that *absolutely influences documentary work and will definitely be felt both in the film and in your relationships in the field*. Holding the camera at the level of the hip allows you to suspend it softly within the cushion of your hands and forearms rather than resting high on bones. The point of view is accordingly less cognitively distanced, less omniscient, more “included”.

If zooming is not done with consciousness, a zoom is felt by the viewer as a pointless, chaotic, ungrounded, radical shift of spatial relationships. In general, make it as unapparent as possible. If you want to keep the viewer's attention within the content of the frame rather than let it expand outward to Consciousness of Zooming, then keep the most important part of the original framing in the same relative position at the end of the zoom that it was at its start. This provides a visual anchor while all else is in motion around it. Practice this repeatedly with the electronic zoom controls. Try zoom-ins and zoom-outs while panning, also.

Zooming-in intensifies what is already visually given. If it is slow zoom-in, you chance a diminishment of your visual and dramatic point because the *goal is already visible at every point throughout the zoom* (unless you have an ultra-slow zoom motor which is so slow that it is only noticeable in retrospect).

Zooming-out intensifies in its withholding and embodies delayed gratification over time. That is, it **gradually reveals a previously cut-off world** (see my comments on including/excluding the world", above) **until coming to rest in a final visual gratification that creates the momentary feeling of a Completely Given World.** It's like singing the eight notes of an octave and spending a lot of time at the seventh note and finally coming to resolution at the octave. The zoom-out is one continual leading-tone; the zoom-stop is the octave.

I find a fluid head or mini-fluid head tripod absolutely necessary to track the dynamics of relations in space. Always warm up the fluid head by pumping the handle several times and rotating the head before use. This equalizes the fluid within the chambers.

I often pan rather radically--which might include moving my entire body up to 180 degrees from where I start at the beginning of the shot. If I placed the tripod in the traditional way (one foot in front toward the first subject), I would then have to navigate around the rear two tripod legs, increasing the possibility of bumping into one of them or just brushing it, which is enough to be picked up by the microphone. So, what works best for me is to have two legs in the front to give maximum ability to move.

Before filming, and in anticipation of the possibility of action in both horizontal 360 degree and vertical 90 degree pan axes, I pan the camera and then adjust the tripod handle to an angle which suits both the anticipated length of the shot in time (a highly placed tripod handle with the minimum amount of fluid head tension can cause very painful shoulder cramps over a one hour continuous shoot) and the physical confines I've inherited. A small adjustment beforehand can make the difference between a miraculous shot and one which is ruined by spasming shoulder muscles or by the handle knocking against a wall at the end of a pan.

Whitebalance is the automatic process tell the video camcorder what is white in a particular scene. This is used by the camcorder as a reference for all the other colors. Manual white balance is not to be overlooked as a creative tool. Manual whitebalance with an array of custom white balance cards (blue-ish to red-ish) of your own making to warm or cool the light of a scene in order to reflect your dramaturgical understanding of the space, culture, class and "emotional coloring" of the person whose relationship to the world and to others it is your job to track cinematographically. In brief: if you want to warm up a location, white balance with a blue-ish card; if you want to cool down a location, white balance with a red-ish card. A fast way to get an experiential handle on this is to perform a series of interior and exterior manual whitebalances with a spectrum of blue-ish-to-red-ish cards. Number the cards and slate them at the head of each take. Then, if you are working in video, connect your camcorder to a monitor via a *long* cord with phono plugs or a RFU unit and study the differences.

I can't stress enough the benefits in hooking up the camcorder to a monitor in order to learn more precisely the results of your movements, focus shifts, color balance experiments, steadicam choreography, etc. A half hour with a field monitor is worth hours in the field.

Garrett Brown, inventor of the original steadicam, has made a steadicam for the Hi8 format distributed by Cinema Products and called the Steadicam JR. Grip the handle of the JR tight with your right hand. A loose grip when tightened (as you eventually must during its use), is one of the few things that jerks the image. After doing a half-hour shoot, you'll abundantly feel why your muscles

need to be trained to really work well and long with the JR. Three muscle locations drawn upon: fingers and forearm, lower bicep at the inner elbow, and upper outer deltoid. Exercises I've found helpful: squeezing a rubber ball, arm curls with a dumbbell (or a typewriter in its case, or a suitcase, etc.), and pretending you are flying with dumbbells or heavy books in your hands.

ADDITIONAL TIPS: *Always count to three* before moving your camera and count to three after having moved your camera before ending the scene. This allows for a beginning point from which to move, and a stopping point from which to cut. Your editor will thank you for it.

Take along shower curtain liner, rubber bands and black electricians's masking tape to use to diffuse harsh lighting conditions. Cut up the shower liner as needed and drape it or wrap it around a D-cell maglite flashlight, for instance. The rubber band will secure it around a cool light source (such as a flashlight), and the black masking tape will not melt if you have to secure it around or in front of a hot source.

If sufficient electricity is a problem, you can save on amperage by completely *unwinding* all your extension cords. Wound cords eat amps. You can also save by using short extension cords.

DROPOUT ON HI8 TAPES: Dropout tends to happen at the head of a tape and within the first few minutes. When I place a new tape into the camcorder, I fastforward it at least 15 seconds, stop, and then begin taping.

CLOTHES: At an Army-Navy store I buy black (winter) or green (summer) paratrooper pants because of the large pockets on the legs and the ties at the ankles which prevent "critters" from crawling up your legs and making friends with your parts. *New* batteries and cassettes slip into the left leg pockets, *used* slip into the right. Left-to-right. Start-to-finish. I buy ranger vests for its marvelous pockets, too. White cards go in the broad pocket across the shoulders. Total price for everything: \$70. Now, at a sports supply store buy basketball kneepads (or at a construction supply store buy floor varnishing kneepads--price: \$6), or make them out of

thick rubber and thread them with a band of elastic (as wide as possible so the circulation in back of your knees isn't cut off) which comes around your knee from the back and ties over the rubber in the front. These are invaluable. You can hunker down on rocks or concrete or glass and they won't ruin the shot, or your knees. Wear them *under* your clothes (you want to make yourself appear as normal as possible).

TOOLS: *don't* bring tools to the field in *boxes*. Pack everything into 8 oz., quart and gallon size ziplock clear plastic bags because they collapse and configure to the limited and constantly shifting space you have. Take small amounts of tools. Take a battery powered soldering iron. You can never bring enough extension cords.

BOOKS: I especially like two books on cinematography, MASTERS OF LIGHT: CONVERSATIONS WITH CINEMATOGRAPHERS, and A MAN WITH A CAMERA by Nestor Almendros. In terms of essays on cinematography, I commend Eisenstein's to your attention, especially "The Unexpected", "The Cinematic Principle and the Ideogram", "The Filmic Fourth Dimension", "Methods of Montage", "Film Language", and "The Short Fiction Scenario".

AIRPORTS: energy is your currency when shooting. The stress generated by trying to solve a sudden (usually Customs) problem while doing a countdown to the plane taking off without you is, for me, the equivalent of two full days of exhausting shooting with nothing to show for it. I am indeed getting old because gone are the days of thinking it romantic to bang on the just-closed door of a plane. So, for flights in the US, I arrive 3 hours early; for flights originating in foreign countries, I arrive 5 hours early. If this means losing a day of shooting by having to arrive in a city the night before in order to be at the airport 5 hours early, I do it, and gladly.

A final thought: when you make your reservation in the US for foreign air travel, call the regional office of the airline and explain that you are doing a film and are bringing equipment and that you would like two things: their foreign airport office notified of your arrival so that, upon representing yourself (get the name of the counter manager for that day and time), you can arrive early to

bypass the often horrible lines which endanger your flight because of the complications that always seem to glum on to lots of equipment. Have the US regional office fax a letter to the head of their overseas office (at the airport you'll be using to return--get *that* person's name and number, too.), stating who you are, what you are doing, when you will return. Upon your arrival, introduce yourself to that person (they usually won't be around), or to the assistant--get *that* name, too)

A week before, reconfirm everything by telephone.

When you arrive, the people who have assured you that everything's perfectly arranged, etc., will not be there, and it's news to everyone else, and early check-in is absolutely possible, etc., etc.. Don't despair. The ammunition you have is this: the Names of the people you dealt with (generally supervisors of the people you are currently dealing with), and Official-looking Correspondence. Wave both like magic wands. Watch doors open.

Good luck.

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