

WHAT I LEARNED IN A HUT:
NOTES ON SHOOTING IN THE DARK IN THE FIELD

by Peter Thompson

I have recently completed a ten-year collaboration with noted anthropologist William F. Hanks, Professor of Linguistics and Anthropology at Northwestern University, on the cinematic essay entitled THE APPRENTICE . I shot for weeks in a hut ten feet by seven feet. Every twenty hours or so into the shoot I was absolutely amazed to realize that I hadn't exhausted the limitations of this space. What an cinematic apprenticeship to the exploration of tiny space this was! 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 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 or digital video, 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 a good library and leaf through the photography collection paying attention to the framing decisions made by each still photographer.

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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.