

The Camera as Choreographer in Documentary and Ethnographic Film

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Many dance artists are suspicious of the camera. They expect a polite and restrained instrument that won't interfere with the "real" audience. But the camera is a great audience! It pays closer attention than anyone in a theater seat. It questions, it seeks, and it doesn't blink. Its position and movement shape and warp the universe that will be perceived on the screen. Like a choreographer, the camera defines a space, places subjects in the space, and moves them through that space. The angle of the camera emphasizes some people, movements, and expressions more than others. There are conventions of good camera work, but the results are best when the operator goes beyond skill and feels what is happening. Dance is often about the artist's expression; film and video are entirely about audience empathy, mediated by the filmmaker.

As a documentary filmmaker, I feel that "documentary" is a misnomer. To document suggests mechanical objectivity, an uncaring witness, an abjuration of the filmmaker's craft. Reality-based film, itself an art, requires acuity of observation and rigorous storytelling. Most film and television create synthetic realities out of fictions. The documentary captures actual people and events and tries to represent them in their own terms. It tries to be true. It is an exercise in epistemology, the articulate quest for what is true in a world that is largely illusion, presented in a medium of smoke and mirrors.

A good ethnographic film considers the whole culture. Even when you look at a specific activity, you set it within the social context. Since most music and dance are made within an ethnic community, an affinity group, or a professional company (and often combinations of these), the whole-culture model is particularly appropriate. Matthew Diamond's *Dancemaker*, for example, portrays the functioning of a dance company, as much as it focuses on Paul Taylor and the performance of his work. The preparation, training, and community and social support of the dance company's culture make the performative moment possible. The subtext informs the film. But intention is a lot easier than action.

Few stresses compare to starting a documentary shoot. Conceptualizing, pitching, and planning a film are very cerebral compared to confronting your subject with a camera. Imagine Port of Spain, Trinidad the day I arrived to shoot *Hosay Trinidad*, a film about an Islamic religious observance. Preparing to be director, cameraperson, and eventually editor, I'd read about the ritual, seen videotape from the previous year, and talked with my collaborators (eminent Islamic scholar Peter Chelkowski, who brought a global historical perspective; folklorist Frank Korom, sensitive to the individual personalities and social matrix through which the event became a reality; and two experienced documentary crew members, Guha Shankar and John Terry). But Port of Spain didn't feel, smell, or sound the way I expected. There was no obvious place to start.

There *was* an obvious conclusion, a triumphant performance of drumming and parading the elaborate representations of Hussein's tomb that had been built in the preceding 40 days. And the building of these *hosay* provided an obvious story arc. The film, however, had to explain the event in a larger sense-- what it meant historically, religiously, and personally to the people participating. We weren't sure how to do that.

There was no apparent connection between the story my collaborators had woven and the imagery that surrounded me. Yet in the next few days I had to shoulder my camera and start making a film. What ensued was a marathon conversation amongst the crew. We were an outside eye and sensibility trying to make sense of the overall experience. A parallel conversation went on between us and informants and friends who were inside the tradition. We visited, hung out, and drove around, the camera always at the ready, seeking the telling moments, characters, and activities that would allow us to unveil the story. Our subjects told us how it would be, what to expect, what was going right, and what was going wrong. (Sometimes they questioned us, asking our outside perspective on how their observance related to those in other parts of Islam.) And as the days stretched into weeks, this inside/outside dialectic gave us a clearer idea of what we were participating in, and resolved our ideas about what the film could be.

When the lab sent a report on the first footage, they said "Looks great, but why are these people building a mosque in a garage?" That's when I knew we were on the right track; that was the question the film had to answer. Our concept crystallized one afternoon when we went to talk, on camera, with Albert and Faroza Dookwah, to clarify a few technical and historic points about the construction of the *hosay*. With tears in their eyes, they conveyed that this ritual embodied every aspect of their lives. The eloquence of their expressions, their deep feelings, conveyed more power than their words. At that moment, we realized more profoundly what we were filming, and acquired a scene that could convey it. The form and the content merged.

My current project on Cambodian classical dance presented a different cluster of social and production challenges. My collaborators, Sam-Ang Sam and Chan Moly Sam, belong to the culture and participate in its politics. They make media for the dance community both in Cambodia and America and my assignment is to be true to that tradition and add production value without crossing the grain its aesthetic. In Phnom Penh, we filmed dances in a variety of contexts, some in full costume and some in the more simple but equally elegant practice attire. We set the dances in significant spaces; the palace pavilion, the University of Fine Arts, the National Theater where the court dance was first presented to the general public, and a temple whose stone carvings represented similar dancers from centuries before. By varying the locations, we subliminally suggested that the dance was part of Cambodia's cultural landscape. In contrast, we shot the American dancers in a studio setting, which emphasized that for Cambodian Americans, classical dance occupied a separate, non-integral space in their lives. The tension between the dance experience in Cambodia, and in the United States drives the film.

The stratification of Cambodia society made casual interviewing more problematic than in a hang loose society like Trinidad. Rather than grabbing interviews opportunistically, we approached the elders and dance masters first, and did not talk with the younger dancers until those protocols had been satisfied. And the arc of Khmer speech embodies a formality that does not yield the sound bites upon which Western documentaries are built. The film's emerging style reflects this considered, honorific approach to answering questions in which the substance of statement cannot be separated from opening and closing. The style of the dance, and the style of the society demanded a different approach to film and editing than I was able to use in Trinidad. Articulating those distinctions requires more sensitivity and effort than the mechanics of filmmaking.

We communicate by telling stories. Narrative is implicit in image making. But merely seeing something doesn't allow you to transmit any of the insight, or even the facts. We remember things through the stories we tell about them. For filmmakers, narrative is critical in two areas: shooting the material, and editing the footage. If you haven't got it on film, it didn't happen as far as the audience is concerned. And if you don't edit the raw material into a structure that can communicate, they won't get it.

While filming is very accurate, it is not objective. It's like having a conversation, dancing a duet, or providing musical accompaniment; it is a kind of romance. What ends up on tape is what actually happened: the chemistry of the moment. The period of shooting has an arc, a start and a finish, and the experience leaves more than memories and feelings. The footage, ideally, holds many stories, many moments of insight and passion, compelling images and the capacity to evoke the sense of what happened. But few people can make sense of raw footage. Doing that requires an explicit narrative to bring out the story implicit in the coverage. The editor writes the story.

I love to shoot; it is joyous and exhilarating. But I approach editing with dread. Editing is a passion, the crowning of thorns, scourging at the pillar, redemption of humankind sort of Biblical passion. As with dance, there is a measure of masochism and discipline, and the results appear effortless. Most viewers do not perceive that a film has been edited.

A well-constructed movie has an unassailable logic. The time in which the events were recorded is synthesized into the rhythm of that logic. Sound bites appear to be conversations, locations shift naturally, relevant images materialize to illustrate what is being said. Editing discovers the story in the footage and tells it in a way that will be comprehensible to a viewer.

Neither a written account nor a performance, film has its own rules of syntax, its own demands, its own organization of concepts and impressions. It takes ideas from the written and cognitive, and physical impressions and emotions from the performative, and reprocesses them into its own kind of experience. In Judy Mitoma's *World Festival of Sacred Music* video, released in 2000 by Catchlight Films, individual filmmakers were given the unconventional credit, "as seen by," acknowledging the media person's role in perceiving and reshaping the historical experience into a repeatable one.

The challenge to a television or series producer is to find forms, formats, and story structures that can be filled with varied content. The subject fits the show; the audience gets novelty within a familiar paradigm. The commercial production model, overseen by a writer/producer, distributes tasks to specialists. The independent filmmaker, particularly in the American tradition, is often a lone wolf, acting as her own producer, cinematographer, and editor. This model describes most people who make dance documentaries and ethnographic films. Their challenge is often to discover, while editing, a form that is harmonious with the content. It is bit like doing a diagramless crossword puzzle.

I began making films with my wife, who was studying animal behavior. Non-human primates can't explain what they are doing, so we abstracted information from what we recorded. Like most filmmakers, I believe that there is a high level of veracity in the recorded image. There is more truth in dance and interaction than in interview or demonstration. In the mid 1960s, people like Ray Birdwhistell undertook micro-analysis of filmed human interaction to parse the invisible and unconscious parts of social communication. Alan Lomax's Choreometrics project took this inquiry to a macro level in what has been the most ambitious and extensive use of a cross-cultural film sample to date.

Lomax postulated that dance had deep cultural resonance at a different level than what the narrative of the dance purported to be or what people said about it-that significant parts of a society were encoded in the way people danced. His team developed a set of easily perceived parameters to "measure" dance on film for any culture. They looked at which body parts are used and how. They noted the synchronicity or lack of it between dancers, the social organization of the group. And they described whether men and women dance at the same time, together or separately, and if they do the same things. Lomax was looking for a language of movement that did not depend on the expertise of the dancer, and was not easily altered by the cultural bias of the cameraperson. By describing dance styles as profiles of these parameters, he developed a lexicon that could compare movement across cultures. He and his associates concluded that movement style was largely consistent within a culture group, and that there were specific clusters of traits that distinguished culture areas from one another. His profiles help explain why you would never mistake an Australian aborigine dance for a sub-Saharan African one, or confuse a Polynesian dance with one of the Inuit.

Lomax profoundly affected ethnographic film. As a connoisseur of camerawork he raged against the trivialization of cultural images, and he believed there was data in the images more important than what an entertainment-based industry made of them. In his quest for footage between 1960 and 1975, he came to know all the world's ethnographic filmmakers, the 50 or so people who created the genre. He badgered filmmakers to attend to the phrasing of speech, song, and dance, and to the spatial deployment of people; he was part of the conversation that defined the genre of ethnographic film. He charged every ethnographic filmmaker to shoot a long, full-body, full-group piece of dance, so that it could be incorporated into and refine his world sample. This didn't happen, but

filmmakers acquired a new respect for music and dance and began using it as a foundation for their work.

John Marshall's 1971 *Bitter Melons*, about the Khwe San in Botswana, is a notable example. Subsequent to his contact with Choreometrics, Marshall structured this 20-minute film around *ju hoasi* songs and dancing games, taking the pace and feel from them and juxtaposing them to similar rhythms and movements in vignettes of Kalahari life. When I filmed *New England Fiddles* and *New England Dances*, I was dealing with people who valued pithy statements, cyclical dances and dance music, virtuoso solos on the fiddle and in step dancing. Even though this was culturally familiar, it took many weeks to find an editing style that worked with their music and dance and felt like they were telling the story. A film on Cambodian dance, which I am cutting now, has an entirely different envelope; the music, movement, and speech follow a different pace and arc. It requires a measure of humility to attend to what other people are doing, instead of what you could do.

Documentary and ethnographic filmmakers may seem like handmaidens to other realities. But caught in the vortex of the passing moment, they snatch what shards they can, and like the Angel of History, forever looking back while being blown forward in time, bring a refraction of what's past into the present. They create a memory that we can examine.