

while walking without watching your step.....

Notes on Spontaneous Cinematography

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THE VERB FOR WHAT ONE DOES WITH A MOVIE CAMERA

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IT IS NOT a matter of aiming and firing.....“Truth flies off again, uninjured.”

? fishing

Hunting in my experience—and by hunting I simply mean being out on the land—is a state of mind. All of one’s faculties are brought to bear in an effort to become fully incorporated into the landscape. It is more than listening for animals or watching for hoofprints or a shift in the weather. It is more than an analysis of what one senses. To hunt... means to release yourself from rational images of what something “means” and to be concerned only that it “is.” And then to recognize that things exist only insofar as they can be related to other things. These relationships—fresh drops of moisture on top of rocks at a river crossing and a raven’s distant voice—become patterns. The patterns are always in motion...

• Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (1986)

IT IS a matter of using one's eyes and ears to respond to unfolding patterns and developments in the situation, and of moving the point of view to account for some several forces just now beginning to be examined from one instant to the next.

To capture spontaneity it must exist and everything you do is liable to destroy it
... beware!

• Richard Leacock, “A Search for the Feeling of Being There” (1997)

finding and selecting

Suppose that your intention is to frame and register a spontaneous observation. In this circumstance you have no script or “grocery list” to furnish cues... How do you decide when to turn the camera on? Where?

1. Turn it off. Never employ the viewfinder to figure out what you’re looking for. Listen. Roam around the place, using your body eyes and ears to identify and survey available vantage points before you ever pick up the camera. Look for recurring patterns of action that might establish a rhythm for the scene, and inspect the dynamic behavior of the space for clues about how you might trace and diagram its flow with the camera... Whenever in the middle of a take you sense that you’re losing the thread of what’s happening, take your eye away from the viewfinder (after turning off camera, thank you) and set the instrument aside. Make your attention stray from the “context”. Make your eyes wander from the subject. Find a new vantage point.

2. Anticipating and preselecting.

How many times has somebody giving unintelligible directions to a place assured you that “you can’t miss it”?

How do you know what you are looking for? In order to keep your attention trained out there in the landscape and moving on to the next perception, it’s essential to have some one or several “search images,” or

else the diagram of a simple sequence in mind. The hardest and most important discipline is waiting intently and attentively for the moment when something clicks. When that moment does occur, you can't miss it. Frequently such a moment has just passed just when you detect that you just missed recording it, yet don't succumb to suffering a delusion that you would have captured it if you had only left the camera running.

- 3. Establishing shot(s)?** It's a good idea to apprehend what would be a general purpose "establishing shot". Traditionally this is a static frame that takes in the "whole" scene (TV news crews like to embellish it with a slow zoom), but you might have better sense to coax our curiosity with a periscopic move that lets the space unfold, or an articulated probe which traces invisible lines of force, or an approach that discloses the experiential sense of entering this place.
- 4. Point of view.** Discover/invent/develop **as many of these as possible.** Keep in mind that each vantage point wants to be attributed to some sentient entity that lives and breathes and assumes a presence in the scene. "Subjective" and "objective" views are explicit conventions in film (without regard to what might be going on in anyone's mind), and cutting on a look (as Jean-Luc Godard has observed) is almost the very definition of montage. Don't hesitate to entertain the viewpoint of a paperweight, or of a fly crawling on the ceiling (especially if you also manage to get a picture of the fly), or of an "eye which would be among things" that Dziga Vertov strived to exercise.

composing

Knowing just how long one can make a scene last is already montage, just as thinking about transitions is part of the problem of shooting.

- Jean-Luc Godard, "Montage mon bon souci" (1956)

Early in its history the cinema discovered the possibility of *calling* attention to persons and parts of persons and objects; but it is equally a possibility of the medium not to call attention to them but, rather, to let the world happen, to let its parts draw attention to themselves according to their natural weight. This possibility is less explored than its opposite.

- Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (1971)

- 5. The camera is not your garden hose.** It is usually a good idea to avoid the meandering point of view that results from not knowing what you're looking for (revert to rule **1. turn the camera off**).

However, if it is your intention to represent what a garden hose can "see," do remember to record a view of the hose's reaction. Images of noisy sound sources—such as an electric fan or that pile driver in the lot next door—in the event that you cannot silence them, may similarly be valuable to collect.

- 6. Periscopic perception.** Dispel any preconception that a camera's movement might somehow replicate the dynamics of human vision. A zoom, for example, is an optical maneuver that natural eyes do not perform. Try it. Our eyes are fitted with prime lenses, of fixed focal length. Rather than adjusting the field of view by zooming in or out, we vary our perspective by moving our bodies in the world. In a second unnatural test, pretend that your head is a camera mounted to a tripod, and try making your eyes perform a smooth pan. With human visual acuity limited to about 1/60th of a degree (which amounts to 0.07 inches at 20 feet), our eyes construct the image of a whole scene a bit at a time, by moving themselves in their sockets through a succession of rapid jumps and fixations.

Compared with human vision that is surrounded by the scene, regard a video camera as more of a framing device. Surveying and composing space with a camera is like trying to accumulate an impression of the whole situation while you are holed up in a submarine looking through a periscope.

7. Sequence. Spontaneous cinema strives to let the world reveal itself and to permit discovery on the part of viewers. Cultivate an approach to in-camera composition that specifies context, condenses time, and supplies essential punctuation points within single continuous takes or *very short* sequences. Rather than regard the clip as one of various ingredients in a recipe whose flavor will be imparted by the cumulative effect of single-note ingredients that are introduced in a linear series, the challenge is to achieve fully developed self-contained sequences in continuous takes.

8. Space is the time you need to go to someone else*. Every camera move links two distinct framings—two discrete samples of space, two different perspectives on the situation. Think of it as the trajectory which expresses the sparsest terms of the spatial and temporal relationship between these framings. Whenever the several framings are joined by cuts rather than moves, this essential relationship is deleted from the representation (not to suggest that cutting is undesirable or avoidable, but only to note that—for maneuvers of a camera—timing is everything).

The predominant directions in human experience align with the horizontal and vertical axes of earth and sky. When you are linking two positions with a camera move, consider that a compound vertical-horizontal path turning a 90° corner may render the space between framings more intelligible to viewers than a shortest-path diagonal.

Beginnings and endings of segments (the “punctuation points”) *typically* occur during intervals where the camera is still rather than moving.

4. Point of view (again). Every time you turn the camera off, you’ll need to proceed to a different vista in preparation for turning it on again (unless you’re employing jump cuts or stop motion techniques to contrive magic).

8. Frame, focus, wait...

9. Make no false moves. The move wants to be decisive, even if its motive is uncertain. The move fails if it confesses hesitation, imprecision, or wavering attention on the part of the cinematographer. Never start panning or tilting until you’ve already determined where the camera’s gaze will come to rest. Execute the move with aplomb and a tidy landing, then continue to breathe gently as you adjust focus, exposure, and focal length. That instant of perfect composure when you would snap a still picture and be done is precisely when this motion picture part begins. Pause and steady the camera’s gaze to let the scene unfold until you know precisely where you intend to transfer the gaze next.

* Jean-Luc Godard, 1980 TV interview with Dick Cavett.