



The Learning Project

by Lincoln Stoller

Tom Hurwitz: Film Maker

Interviewed at his home in New York City. May 17th, 2006

Born: 1947 in New York City

"Albert grunted. 'Do you know what happens to lads who ask too many questions?'

Mort thought for a moment. 'No,' he said eventually, 'what?'

There was silence. Then Albert straightened up and said, 'Damned if I know.

Probably they get answers, and serve 'em right.'"

— Terry Pratchett (*Mort*)

"The presence of those seeking the truth is infinitely to be preferred to the presence of those who think they've found it."

— Terry Pratchett (*Monstrous Regiment*)

"Coming back to where you started is not the same as never leaving."

— Terry Pratchett (*A Hat Full of Sky*)

TH:

What I do is not at all directly relevant to my schooling, that is I never took a film class. I took one film class which I wound up teaching because I'd already done a film by the time I got to be taking that class at Columbia (College). I had a mixed time in school, I certainly hated it as much as I loved it, but I did love it, and I did love the kind of learning that one does in school, and I don't know how else to get it.

I think that my life would be incalculably poorer if I hadn't had a liberal arts education. And as a filmmaker I wouldn't be anywhere nearly as good, even though so much of what I do is involved with the arts, things that are complete nonverbal. And even if they're verbal, my role in them is completely nonverbal, it's intuitive, reflexive.

I'm in the process of moving my office into my home, and I'm getting rid of a lot of stuff that I have from previous years. I have an entire shelf — two shelves, three feet wide — of scripts, which I broke down, scene by scene, into shots and lighting and all the various needs that one has when one shoots a feature. I don't do that anymore — maybe I will again, I love having a big crew — but I find it vastly less interesting than shooting documentaries, which somehow connects better with who I am as a person.

The people I meet are all very different from me, and the films that I make are very relevant, for the most part. They're much better than the films that I would make if I was shooting feature-type films, which tend to get 5 to 10 bad ones before you get one really good film. And that's a ratio that I'm not particularly interested in.



When you (shoot feature films) the people you work with, although they're very, very nice ... delightful often ... they're all the same kind of people that I am. They all know the same things, or less, because they're more focused. If they have broader interest, then they're kind of the normal broad middle-class interests. Somebody will be a jazz fanatic, interested in old tube amplifiers, or somebody will like to read, or... but I won't be in a village in Pakistan. I won't be with a band in Haiti. I won't be with soldiers from Kansas deployed to Afghanistan. I won't be interviewing soldiers who were involved in the torture at (the Iraqi military prison) Abu Grab. I won't be doing a film in a college that's dedicated to putting right-wing evangelical Christians into the government and high positions in the culture, all of which I did in the last 9 months, and more.

I mean it's an incredibly rich life that I'm leading doing documentary films, and it's perfect for me because I have that level of ADD that I like to learn about a lot of different things.

The other part of it is that the work that I do, which used to be more plotted and carefully developed – light by light and layer by layer in terms of space, translating 3-dimensional space in a 2-dimensional frame and making that relevant to the story that's being told, the characters that are being evolved. Looking at the way light plays on shape and form and face and texture. Looking at the way a rectangle moves through space. To go from one thing to another, all of that stuff, which I planned very carefully over a period of 15 years of my life – I'm now working on being improvisational.

A great deal of documentary film is improvisational. The best work that I do is improvisational – catching things as they happen and making them articulate visually – and that can either be in music or dance, or just in the world of society. I found that, better than being excellent, I can be a master. Not only that, but I love it. And I love it because it involves living in the moment, channeling everything I know into a very small moment like an athlete or a performing artist.

When I'm clear and together I can produce things that are really great. And when I'm not I can produce things that are just good! (laughs). And I love that tension... after I've come through the amount of anxiety that it causes me! To do that, the more knowledge I amass the better, the better my improvisation is, the better my moment is – even though it's just the moment, even though the more I completely empty myself and just be there – the better my work is.

The paradox is the more I've prepared, the better I can do that. And part of preparing is education, and part of preparing is being taught, and (part of being taught is) the relationship that one has with a mentor who makes you do things that are not fun – that are work! – and makes you do it even if you don't know why you're doing it. And part of the process is the kind of painful education that can turn kids off – although if you do it well it shouldn't, it should do the opposite – but there is a whole bunch of it that hurts!

What I do every day hurts... hurts. When I work with a camera, especially a heavy one, I'm in pain all the time. Even one of the light ones: I'm hurting. If I do it well I'm hurting all the time. I've learned how to do that. Part of the way I've learned how to do that was by being made to do other things, things that helped me learn how to do that. One of them was sports (and) various disciplines I've done throughout my life. Most of them involved working with a mentor, working with somebody who makes me do things.



That's the paradox of all of this. I think that we as Americans are infantilized, but I think that our schooling isn't the thing (that's doing it). I mean it might have started the process, but it hasn't finished it. I think that there are huge... forces... in our culture that are malign. I think that education is basically benign. It tries to be benign, even though our leaders, our educators, many of them have done their best to make it harmful. The process itself is benign, whereas the process of television, of mass media, all the things that I do, they're malignant. And they infantilize more.

I think television has single-handedly infantilized Americans, and I think a lot of the way entertainment is delivered to Americans — and the way we've been allowed to become dependent upon entertainment in all kinds of different ways — has turned us into a nation of idiots. I think average Americans don't use their heads at all, they don't think. I mean I love many, many, many people who I've been with all over this country, but they don't think much. And they certainly don't think independently, and nothing has helped them do that. They can be taught in school every day, but every night (the television teaches them) to forget what they're taught in school. And our food turns us into sugar jangled maniacs who can't sit still, and all the other influences on kids' lives, which (happen outside of) school, turn them into ADD rattled little monsters.

And the value system: you can't have a president dedicated to greed and lying without having a nation that, after a while, doesn't take that on as one of its values. I really believe that we learn a lot by example, and our politicians have been teaching us really, really bad examples for a long time. And especially (Ronald) Reagan and (George W.) Bush.

I watched the city under Reagan and the limousines piled up by the theatres, and greed became the guiding light in New York. When Reagan got out (of office) this calmed down to average greedy New York (levels) and people began to write graffiti on the walls again.

Now the clubs are beginning to charge people \$1,000 for an evening. With a couple of bottles that you bring to the table for \$300 each, and you've got to pay \$80 to get in there, and stuff like that. Young adults of the under 30 or 35 age are paying \$1,000 for any evening at a club, to be cool. Welcome to the Bush era. Welcome to cutting taxes.

So anyway, I'm kind of being discursive... but for me, I have profited very much from being steeped in things traditional and classic. Having a classical background to a completely unclassical career has helped me tremendously.

I have two kids who did not have that background, and one kid who has, and what he gets out of any given situation he's involved in, in terms of the range of layers in a painting he stands in front of, or a joke (laughs), or anything in between. If he reads a book, or a commercial, or anything... it's so much deeper than what they see.

LS:

They being the other two?

TH:

The other two. And, you know, one of them was a fine student who studied all things non-white and non-male — majored in non-dead-white males in the University of Michigan — in



the honors program, and is now a teacher (who) has to figure out what Plato said. She has to go find out because she didn't learn. And figure out who Weber is, when she goes to a concert or something like that. We allowed her and her sister to be way too educated by her peers and not enough educated in the traditional way. And they went to public schools and private high schools, but it was our attitude while we were allowing them to be educated. They're not as rich as he's going to be.

LS:

It's the last kid who's more classically trained?

TH:

Yeah. It doesn't mean everything's solved with the youngest one – he'll have his own set of problems – but at least he sees the riches in the world around him, rather than entering the world with a kind of television glow where each thing in history is not related to anything else, or each event that they read in the paper or they see on the television news isn't related to anything historical. It's not like he thinks about (these things) all the time, but if you ask, it's there.

LS:

What's the difference in his experience?

TH:

The kid's learned history. I sent him to a different school, a school that wasn't that different but it had enough... he learned Latin, sang in a choir in an Episcopal church, so he learned church music, both ancient and modern. Doesn't do it anymore, (now he) plays rock and roll, but all that stuff is inside him. That rich stuff, not repressing him and making him more limited, but it makes him bigger because he's got a broader foundation.

To the extent that I had that, when I was a kid, I am deeply grateful. Some of it came from my school, some of it came from my parents and their values. Some of it came from what I went and got myself. But the stuff that helped the most was the stuff that I had to really work for, and I learned how to work.

LS:

When did that start?

TH:

Really young. Really young.

I'm a product of what was called at the time "progressive education". I went to progressive schools in Manhattan. So the good part of (this kind of education) is there, (it's) responsible for the breadth of my knowledge about the world because we learned about the entire world. A very rich kind of understanding of that. And, uh ... I'm not sure I could say what was negative about it, except that I wish that my work habits had been



better. I wish they'd taught me how to work so that I didn't have to go out and force myself to learn.

LS:

Could they have? How could they have? They certainly tried to instill discipline, I imagine.

TH:

No, I don't think so. But that's a good question. I'm not sure.

LS:

I mean even in college they don't teach you.

TH:

No, in college they can't.

LS:

They load work on you.

TH:

They load work on you, and you either do it or you don't, but they don't teach you how to budget your time. (They don't teach you) that if you get the work done in the beginning of the week, then you can look at your draft later on in the week. If you start early enough you can teach kids how to do that, you can't force them to do it, but you can teach them how to do it.

OK, anyway... I'm only saying that there's ... there's a certain kind of loving severity in the teaching experience that I find most gratifying. Teachers that I remember, going back, who really gave me a lot, were both severe and loving, even if they didn't show it too much. You could tell that they loved their subject and they loved the work that you did on their subject, whether or not they loved you.

I feel like I've been the best teacher or mentor when I've had that kind of relationship with my student, or the person who's worked with me, and I've taught a lot of people who've been really successful. A lot of people, who are both my competitors and who are making much more money than I am, we've had really great relationships.

LS:

Can you tell me, in a concrete way, some example of when you were learning under the tutelage of a person who was a great teacher, how that manifested its important effect on you?



TM:

Not much in my work. My work I pretty well had to grab on my own, part of it was 'cuz I started kind'a late in my life, to really buckle down to making this career work, and partly because in documentary film there really weren't people at that point, although there were some masters whom I worked with. We didn't have a kind of mentor (relationship)... I just watched the people in my field, I simply watched. They didn't teach me in a concrete way.

I'll tell you about my (James) Joyce professor in Columbia College. It was a kind of Advanced English class. I took it very early because usually if you took a class on one author you would do that in your junior or senior year. But this we were allowed to do as Freshmen: the second half of my Freshman year.

He had a very dry sense of humor. He was incredibly erudite in terms of his knowledge of English literature. He was a really tough grader and he made really tough assignments. You had to work really hard for him, but every time he explicated something it was like an explosion. It was like unlocking a symbol each time. Of course Joyce is filled with symbols, (which are) relevant to all kind of things.

Going to his class was almost a spiritual experience because there was just so much there. He was a guy who was also, I found out later, very active politically, left wing, but you would never have known it in the class. He never brought that in. At the same time there was something about his perspective where, looking back on it, you could have found it. His name was Fred Grab and I have absolutely no idea where he is now. (Fred Grab died in 2002. – Ed.)

My high school English teacher, ... here's an interesting (story) ... I now spend my summers in the house of my High School English teacher, who's dead. I had no idea it was his house when I rented it. I found this out later. I'm renting it from his nephew who lives in Finland and so it's by pure accident that I wound up in this guy's house.

He was, in the 1950's, what you'd call a "bachelor". He was a bachelor English teacher. He had all of the conflict of a person who hasn't full realized, hasn't allowed his inner self, hasn't allowed the sexuality to come out, and a lot of that came in to the intensity of his teaching. We fought like cats and dogs, and he opened all of literature. It was just incredible. I had him for two years. An incredible guy.

There was another guy in High School, a History teacher, who I loved and about half the class hated... hated! You know both of these guys were pretty severe in one way or another. But filled with love for the subject, for knowledge. And I think that to the extent that people learn from me they find that too, that I love what I do, and that I love transferring that to other people.

LS:

Is it why you do film, or is that something that just comes across when you do film?



TH:

That's a good question... Why I do film is partly because it's the job that's the most fun of anything I can think of. The other part is that I really love what comes out the other end. It turns out that I'm lucky enough to work on films that make a difference, a lot of the time, in one way or another.

You had said that you wanted to find out what motivated people, and I've thought about that, and I don't think I can tell you one thing that motivates me, but certainly love motivates me, and also anger motivates me – all my life – and hope motivates me. Love, anger, and hope.

LS:

Are those all clear things to you? Are they works in progress?

TH:

No, they're not clear at all! Hope is something that you – especially as a Christian – it's something that you are always gaining and losing. It's kind of a continual process. If it's not, (then) you're not really "doing" it. You're not really walking the walk.

A lot of American Christianity is about denying this essential process, and instead delivering various kinds of absolute sureness, which doesn't have anything to do with what I believe the real project of Christianity is about, which is absolute uncertainty. So (with regard to) hope, I'm always falling off and getting back on.

Anger is something that always threatens to take over, and I have to be very careful about, because I've got to be very sure that I'm angry at the right thing and not at anything else!

And love is what kind of glues it all together. I always try to keep myself inside of (love). Although it's not like it isn't always there – love is always there – it's just that you have to find it inside of the situation.

And all of those things are not static, they're all continually in relationship, continually animated ... am I speaking too abstractly? (laughs) But they're all kind of moving.

LS:

Well to answer that question, of course you are. But maybe one has to speak these things, even if imperfectly, because that's the terrain where... you know... the treasure lies.

TH:

Yeah.



LS:

I actually don't believe that the words carry half the meaning. In the end it's the context and the equivocations, and the ...

TH:

(laughs)

LS:

uh... hesitations... qualifications, that carry most of the meaning. The words are infinitely elusive.

TH:

I think the actions actually carry the meaning, and all the rest of it is the explanation.

LS:

Can you give me an example – I'm sure you can – of actions where those treasured forces emerged clearly?

TH:

Sure. In a certain sense every time... every time I pick up the camera... all of that stuff is at work. Every time I pick up the camera.

When I was 22 years old I found myself as chairman of a peace rally. Jane Fonda was speaking at the rally, along with several (members of the) Black Panthers. It was being held in the town of Oceanside, California, which sits at the gate of the biggest Marine Corps base on the West coast.

A significant quantity of the audience were Marines, a significant quantity of the people heckling, or lining the peace march that had come in to this rally were also Marines. It's in the middle of the Vietnam War.

The police sergeant, who I had been working with to make this all peaceful, came to me and told me that we would have to vacate the stadium where this was being held, with three or four thousand people sitting out there. We'd have to leave so that they could search it because there was a bomb threat.

I knew that would be a disaster, and he knew that that would be a disaster, and he was ordered by his superiors – I'm sure – to get us scared and get us out of there. To take this bomb threat and use it in the best way possible.

I kind of paused, and I emptied myself... I did that thing that, for some reason or other, has always worked with me all my life, which was to kind of empty myself at that point. And I looked at him and I said "Look, if I can get everybody in the bowl to search their own seats" – they were concrete seats, it wasn't like there could be things hidden under



bleachers – “if I could get them to search their own seat, then would you let us stay?” And he said, “Let me see. We’ll see what happens.”

So when this band that was playing was done I went out and made a little speech. I told everybody what to look for and how to look for it, and everybody looked for the bomb, and nobody found the bomb. And it was done in absolute silence, with absolute discipline in this crowd, and with total seriousness.

And when it was over there was this moment of complete elation. The whole place had turned into an entirely different group of people who were connected, and who were careful and disciplined and filled with affection for one another. And there was this huge cheer and it was done. And I knew at this point that this was something that I would be proud of all my life. And I am. It’s just one of these moments. That’s an example of the confluence of all of those things, of anger, hope and love.

I spent a lot of time in church as a kid but I certainly had rejected it at that point, so my (sense of) hope didn’t have a name, but that’s what was working there. That’s just a kind of obvious example of what happens. It happens a lot, actually.

The entire process of making the last film that I made: “God’s Next Army”, which I made with my partner, is a very elongated example of that same unification of those things. You’re under trial at every moment.

LS:

What’s the inspiration behind that movie, was it yours?

TH:

Yeah, it began as mine, and then it passed through Jed, my partner – the perfect partnership. I wanted to make a film about fundamentalism: why people become fundamentalists. I posed a film about Christian, Moslem, and Jewish fundamentalism, three monotheisms. Three studies.

We did some work on it, did some research, got a grant, spent some money, and could not get funded for either the Jewish or the Moslem parts of it. By this time we’d found a Rabbi who was fundamentalist, part of a settlement in Gaza that was about to be kicked out, and we would have been able to be with him during the expulsion of the Jewish settlers from Gaza. It would have been an incredible film, but nobody bought it. People we’d done lots of other project for – our normal clients – nobody was interested... or they were scared.

We hadn’t gone as far on the Moslem film. That would have been about a group of women preachers. Women who preach to women in Cairo (Egypt), but we couldn’t get anybody interested in that.

The film that was bought was a film about Patrick Henry College. My partner found the article about Patrick Henry. He kind of channeled my first inspiration into reality. Which, as we began to film, became much more in the news. There’s been a big article in the New Yorker (magazine) about it.



I'll give you an example, OK? My inspiration was to make a film about fundamentalism. Everybody's concerned about the fundamentalisms, but for me, I had studied economics, I'd had a kind of good humanities background in economics, and I'd learned a little bit about development in the third world. In the 1970's I traveled in the third world, especially in Africa, and I took a look at what urbanization was doing to people in various places. And I saw that this was the drama in the lives of people, that this was going to be happening throughout the world.

Then there was the rise of these nationalistic fundamentalisms which, for me, were connected to the urbanization. Connected to the big kind of upheavals that were happening with peoples' lives in the end of the 20th century.

So the next film that we're going to try to do is another one of these big projects about the American Dream, and the closing of the America Dream, a kind of closing of the American Frontier, and why that is contributing to the level of absolutist, nationalist, fascist kind of movements that are swinging back and forth across the United States. To see if there's some connection between the two.

All of this has to do with... goes right back to the way I was educated and the kind of stuff that I learned. You know, you learn it in school and you learn it out of school.

What's the most important? I can't say, but if I didn't read the books in school, if I wasn't forced to think about things that were uncomfortable to think about — reading Hobbs or something like that boring, uncomfortable stuff — I don't think that what I learned by myself, in my student activism, would have been so deep.

Columbia, when I was there, was the greatest place in the world to be, I'm convinced: the greatest place to be. But it was great because what was going on in the classroom was incredible, and what was going on outside of the classroom was incredible. I was very lucky, but the two went hand in hand. To say that the teaching process is all destructive I think misses something, even though partly it is (laughs).