

"Space Coast": Notes

by

Michel Christopher Negroponte

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Signature of Author _____

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Certified by _____

Richard Leacock, Professor of Cinema
Thesis Supervisor

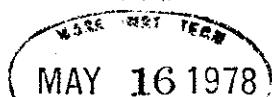
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N. John Habraken, Professor of Architecture
Head of the Department
Chairperson, Departmental Graduate Committee

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What matters is the action, not the target. Of course, one needs general ideas, but they must be so deep-rooted, so profound, that one hardly knows one has them. You have to start in a certain direction, and keep to it, but in the way the migratory birds follow a line instinctively, without knowledge.

Jean Renoir

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I have written about "Space Coast", a documentary film that my partner, Ross McElwee, and I shot on Cape Canaveral, Florida. The project evolved from a desire to find alternatives to films that concentrate on a single family or on a single event. Consequently, "Space Coast" is about three families that live on the Cape.

"Space Coast" is not a definitive portrait of Cape Canaveral or of the space program. For the most part, the arrival of the space program in the 1960's and its sudden phase-out a decade later remains a subordinate issue in the film. Instead, we chose to focus on the everyday lives of these unique families.

I have described in some detail "Charleen" and "Chitlin", two films I worked on before making "Space Coast"; both these films influenced, to varying degrees, what we chose to do in Florida. The remainder of the thesis is devoted to describing the different stages of "Space Coast", including our pre-production work and our four trips to the Cape. Since the editing of the film is not yet completed, I chose to comment briefly on that particular phase of the project. Interspersed among the many anecdotes in this thesis are some thoughts on what motivated us to make "Space Coast"; but the decision-making process that accompanies such a film project is intuitive by nature, and even in retrospect, it is a hard thing to decipher.

Thesis Supervisor: _____

Title: Professor of Cinema

I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an abridged chronicle of the making of "Space Coast", a documentary film about three families living on Cape Canaveral, Florida. Ordinarily, describing the details of such an undertaking is not difficult, but since it was over a year ago that my partner, Ross McElwee, and I initiated the project, an accurate account of some of those details taxes my memory. When I started writing, I was reminded of Francois Truffaut's formula that any film should be easily recapitulated in one word. I invested a great deal of time scanning my Webster's Dictionary for that word, excited by the possibility of presenting a very short thesis. I soon realized that what Truffaut had prescribed was appealing in theory but difficult to accomplish. I gave up. Failing to find any short-cuts, I chose to start this thesis with "Charleen", a film that Ross and I had worked together on before "Space Coast".

I met Ross on his first day at M.I.T. Being new to the graduate film program, he was floundering to interpret the hieroglyphics of his registration material, and I sensed that his struggle warranted some assistance. After providing the necessary detective work to guide him through his first day, Ross mentioned his plans to make a film about Charleen Whistnut, a woman he had befriended years earlier in his home-town of Charlotte, North Carolina. A few months later, maybe in an effort to repay me, he invited me to travel to Charlotte as sound recordist on his project.

Charleen, a woman in her mid-forties, is considered by Charlotteans to be their local eccentric. At a young age, she decided to locate a new "father". After being dismissed by Einstein and e.e. cummings, she was accepted by Ezra Pound, who was at the time incarcerated at St. Elizabeth's, a mental institution

in Washington, D.C. Though undoubtedly her past had been fascinating, Ross' film was to be a present-tense documentary concentrating on Charleen's non-stop itinerary. She guided us through a whirlwind tour of her various roles as a mother of two children, a teacher of poetry in the schools, and a publisher of a small press. We were inundated with things to film and mustered up all of our energy to keep up with her schedule that took us everywhere from gloomy classrooms to her father's surreal false-tooth factory. Charleen's open cooperation facilitated the task, and we returned to Cambridge that spring with what promised to be an exciting and revealing documentary.

While Ross set to work editing his film, I pondered schemes to pad my bank account so that it could withstand the pressure of my embarking on a film project. Independent filmmakers have gone to all lengths to raise money for their films; I've heard about ploys that range from the legitimate, such as playing the stock market, to the outright baroque, like self-inflicted bodily harm with an insurance policy to make it worthwhile. Being less flamboyant by nature, I quickly dismissed those schemes and opted for a much more conservative one. I spent the next six months sequestered in a dark editing room with Professor Charles Nesson and Eric Saltzman cutting a series of filmed re-enactments of criminal and civil trials. These teaching films, though beautifully made, were the antithesis of what interested me in filmmaking. They had to stress content over style because of a necessity to convey information. Coming to terms with the legal jargon I heard all day provided moments of interest but I was constantly distracted by the urge to make my own film. The experience of making "Charleen" sparked a desire to branch out and increase the scope of the next project. Ross and I decided we wanted to film many people, rather than one person, and incorporate these portraits into a single movie. The notion of a community that had been dras-

tically changed by some external force became an attractive way to provide a subtle unifying factor for those individual film portraits, and after listing ad infinitum possible film topics, the idea of Cape Canaveral surfaced.

In the 1960's, Cape Canaveral developed rapidly with the commencement of the space program. But following some impressive pyrotechnics over the Cape, national interest waned and the program lost its momentum. With the space-related activity on the Cape severely reduced, the local unemployment rate rose to become one of the highest in the nation. Our hunch was that the complex history of the Cape, and the precipitous changes that befell the local population, would provide an interesting backdrop for our film, but in no way be its focus. Obviously there would be innumerable socio-political implications to be drawn from such a phenomenon, but that would not be our intention. We hoped the space program itself would provide only a thread to tie the film together. We assumed that the engineers and media people, who had moved in like gypsy tribes to camp for the duration of the program, had long since left; hence our film would focus on the people who remained behind, people who had been only indirectly associated with N.A.S.A.'s activity on the Cape.

We attempted to do some library research for our project, but this did little more than stir up old recollections. In my elementary school days, I remember anxiously anticipating each launch because the ritual that accompanied them provided a diversion to an otherwise strict academic routine. Each classroom was provided with a television set around which we gathered before launch time. The longer the lift-off was delayed, the happier we were and the more our teachers bemoaned the fact that space exploration was interrupting our education.

II. FIRST TRIP TO THE CAPE

The few interesting articles that we did uncover gave us the names of some people whom we might contact upon arrival at the Cape. By fortunate coincidence, Professor Leacock had invited Ross and I to participate in the making of a film about a chitlin festival in Salley, South Carolina. This got us half-way to Florida; an exploratory trip to the Cape seemed to be a good idea before committing ourselves to such an ambitious film project. On Thanksgiving day, we emptied the Film Section of its Super 8 equipment and boarded a plane headed for South Carolina. Celebrating Thanksgiving in an Eastern jet with only a turkey sandwich to remind me of what I was missing seemed sacriligious, but my disappointment was easily overcome - I was excited that this trip to the South officially marked the beginning of our project, "Space Coast".

During our three action-packed days documenting this annual event in the "chitlin capital" of the world, I concentrated on filming the colorful and densely scheduled festivities, trying not to be overcome by the rancorous odor that results from the cooking of pig intestines. It was a film project that allowed us free reign to follow our intuitions and film whatever attracted our attention - a nice preview for what Ross and I intended to do in Cape Canaveral.

Our first visit to the Cape was eventful. Most importantly, we quickly came into contact with Mary Bubb, a wire service stringer who boasted of covering more launches than any other reporter (over 1600 of them). We sensed that she would become our first film subject. Touring the Cape, we noticed that even the topography was revealing. Aside from the crumbling launch pads and the abandoned space facilities at the Kennedy Space Center,

there were hastily constructed bars and restaurants on the highways that were obviously in want of business. We noted that the many signs with space motifs were weather-beaten; many stood partially hidden by overgrown shrubery. My favorite sign was in front of a church. It read: "CLOSING THE SPACE BETWEEN MAN AND GOD". Incorporating landscape in our film became a major preoccupation during our next three visits to the Cape, but to our dismay, most of the activities of the people we chose to film were confined to dark, air-conditioned interiors.

Among other things, the first trip to the Cape shattered my illusion that the climate is always agreeable in Florida; the sun didn't make a single appearance and the rain continued non-stop for our entire visit. We returned to Cambridge convinced that our project had definite potential, but we were thoroughly water-logged.

III. SECOND TRIP TO THE CAPE

Our second trip to Florida had been carefully scheduled to avoid the bitter cold of January in Cambridge, but invariably our plan backfired and a blizzard followed us south. The miserable driving conditions hampered our progress. We were cramped because our production equipment included three New England lobsters, a present for Mary Bubb.

We found that there were few newsworthy events on the Cape, and that Mary struggles to find things to write about. The dull pace of her life since the phase-out of the space program made filming her very difficult. On one occasion, Mary's reporting duties took us to the test firing of a Trident missile, and on another we filmed her covering the routine launch of a weather satellite. Both events were devoid of the glamor and excitement that

had surrounded the manned launches from the Cape. After the lift-off of the Trident missile, we filmed Mary's repeated attempts to convince the military officials and other onlookers that the rocket had travelled off-course. She failed to get any reaction from them and dutifully returned to file her story.

Mary's only companion is Ted, her elderly father who recently retired to Florida to live with her. For Mary, his presence is only an added burden and they rarely communicate, preferring to stay as far apart as the house physically permits. Ted remains in his room making appearances only at mealtimes or when one of Mary's guests shows any inclination to see Ted's collection of family photographs. The bewildered guest receives, along with a glimpse of the pictures, one of Ted's long, incidental monologues about the varied activities of his relatives. Filming Ted and Mary's distant and strained relationship was difficult, but one scene in particular succeeded in doing this. With his television tuned in to "Happy Days", Ted sits contemplating a photograph of his favorite granddaughter, an aspiring actress who occasionally gets bit parts on that program. Ted thinks that he's caught a glimpse of her on the show but continues to double-check, confessing he isn't sure. At this point, the camera tracks through a dark corridor until it comes upon Mary sitting with her three dogs, her television tuned in to a blaring war movie.

When we were not patiently trying to film Mary's sedate day-to-day life, Ross and I spent time searching for other potential film subjects. Meeting Marty Caidin proved to be another influential factor in the planning of our film. Marty's inimitable style and out-going nature has put him in contact with all types of people, and he is a legend on the Cape because of the success of his novel, Cyborg, and its subsequent adaption into the television

series "The Six Million Dollar Man". Though Marty made it clear to us that his private life was out of bounds for any camera crew, he was anxious to have "Iron Annie" included in our film. "Annie" is Marty's mammoth, three prop German relic which he claims was once Hitler's staff plane. But more important than this was his suggestion that we contact John Murphy and Willie Womack, two people we might find interesting.

Our first encounter with Papa John Murphy, as Marty had predicted, left us stupified. The demise of the space program had cost Papa John his job as a maintenance man at the Kennedy Space Center. Jobless, and with ample spare time, he turned his attention to organizing an outlaw bike gang called the "Saints". His other passion was developing unique interpretations of the Bible. We listened to his intriguing attempts to reconcile his disparate life-styles as a bike club president and a self-styled Biblical scholar.

Willie Womack was equally intriguing. As owner of a small-time construction company, his boundless energy and varied activities also served to counterpoint Mary's immobility. When Willie was not tending to the chore of organizing his employees, a group capable of botching the simplest job, he liked nothing more than to fit his four-hundred pound body into a clown suit and to entertain children at various civic functions.

With a better idea of how our film would develop, we returned to Cambridge to prepare for our third trip to the Cape.

IV. THIRD TRIP TO THE CAPE

Since Papa John had given us unlimited access to his delapidated '68 Cadillac, an offer that was difficult to refuse, we chose to fly to Florida. Checking in at Logan Airport at mid-night for the "red-eye" special was a

memorable event. Delta personnel winced at our two-hundred pounds of excess luggage, but allowed us to board the plane. The ordeal of travelling with all our film paraphernalia was hair-raising, and had we been charged overweight, our budget would have been severely dented.

The majority of the next few weeks were devoted to Papa John and his family. We discovered that his duties as bike club president were often trying on his patience. The economic hardships caused by the departure of the space program had forced most of his club's members to leave the area in search of work. Those who remained formed a skeletal representation of what had once been one of the largest bike gangs in the South, and they rarely lived up to Papa John's expectations.

His Biblical theories required our utmost concentration. Papa John tested our stamina by keeping us up till the early hours of the morning lecturing to us on the Scriptures as well as detailing the results of his five year study of Genesis. We quickly abandoned any hope of rigorously presenting those theories on film, their labyrinthian nature being the major obstacle. But there were an abundance of opportunities to include his pre-occupation with the Bible during our filming . While watching a Biblical epic on television, his temper flared when he realized that Hollywood preferred to dwell on the sensational aspects of the Bible. On another occasion, Papa John commented on N.A.S.A.'s extravagant efforts to send astronauts into space and concluded that when he went to heaven, he wouldn't need any missile.

Papa John's intra-family relationships are complex. The squalid neighborhood in which he lives is comprised of run-down apartments which house four generations of Murphys. All the complexes are owned by Papa John's father, a maverick baptist minister who has managed to finance his church

by dabbling in real estate. Compelled to limit the number of people we were filming, Ross and I chose to focus on one particular relationship within the family - that of Papa John and his daughter, Diane. Diane's life had been beset with difficulties. Her illegitimate child had caused family tensions, and when we met Diane, she was struggling to cope with a new marriage that was failing. There was ingrained resentment between Papa John and his daughter that surfaced on occasion, and we filmed a wrestling match between the two of them that escalated into a vicious and frightening contest.

Whereas with Mary, we had waited patiently for opportunities to turn on our camera and tape deck, with Papa John and his family, we faced the opposite problem of suppressing the urge to film continuously. Whether Papa John was reviewing one of his biker's arsenals or the family was attending a professional wrestling match in the local, seedy auditorium, we were granted total access. This required us to exercise restraint because our film stock was quickly disappearing.

Willie Womack's character proved to be as electric as Papa John's. We spent a few days filming with him and my favorite scene from our footage of Willie occurred in his office with his secretary. Entangled in phone wires, the two of them negotiate a variety of business affairs simultaneously and the chaos which results is reminiscent of a Preston Sturges comedy.

Marty Caidin is an elusive character and since he spends more time flying over the Cape than on the ground, contacting him was a frustrating job. We were beginning to doubt that "Iron Annie" would be included in our film when Papa John was invited to join Marty and his friends who were making a short film. "Iron Annie", whose fuselage is strikingly decorated with swastikas, proved to be the ideal backdrop for Marty's histrionics. The skits that Marty directed and filmed that day climaxed with the cameo appearance of three top-

less dancers who emerged from the cockpit, climbed into a convertible, and drove off leaving some of the curious onlookers quite shocked. Our filming of the event was brief and frantic, but visually delightful.

Papa John's increasing impatience with the bike club was manifested in his moodiness and we had a premonition that he was preparing to take drastic measures. We decided to spend our few remaining days with Papa John sensing that there would be some interesting developments. It is important to mention here that the logistics of our film were getting intricate; with three major film subjects, no phone in our apartment to keep in touch with them, and a Cadillac "production car" that broke down periodically, scheduling our days was becoming very difficult. Not surprisingly, Papa John resigned his presidency of the "Saints" at a small gathering of the club, stating that the bikers' predilection for "partying" was undermining his authority and the club's strength. Getting this important scene is a testament to the patience that this sort of filmmaking requires. Being in the right place, at the right time, is not always easy.

By this time, we had exhausted all of our energy, and more importantly, all of our film stock. We made the difficult decision to return to Cambridge, knowing that one more trip to the Cape was necessary to finish the shooting of our film.

V. FOURTH TRIP TO THE CAPE

Before describing the final visit, a brief digression seems appropriate. Filmmaking is a particularly expensive habit, and supporting it had left Ross and me impoverished. Therefore, we spent the next six months trying to raise funds to complete our project. "Space Coast" had escalated into some-

thing larger than we had envisioned. Inexperience was one of our problems; since we had no way of foretelling how the film would materialize, our groping had forced us to invest more time and shoot more film than we had anticipated. . Our first efforts to raise funds were directed towards educational television and we contacted a number of programming directors at stations all over the country (our phone bill was staggering). The scope and off-beat nature of "Space Coast" was apparently impressive to most programmers, but many of them expressed a fear that our desire to include so much unrelated information would produce an unwieldy film. Because we could not project exactly how the film would resolve itself, we were unable to convince any television station to support our project.

Sobered by our inability to convince any program director that our film merited support, I took pleasure in likening our experience to that of Barnett Newman's (an arrogant parallel, but I had nothing better to do). When Newman declared in the Fifties that "an artist paints so that he will have something to look at", critics excused his scheme as outrageous or frivolous. A generation of painters, the Abstract Expressionists, were inspired by his philosophy and they relied on the spontaneous activity of painting to reveal a subject of its own. "Cinema-verite" filmmakers have always relied on that kind of intuition. But "Space Coast", unlike "On the Pole" and "The Chair", two films by Richard Leacock and Don Pennebaker, lacks an intelligible story line. There was no inherent drama in what we were filming, no crisis situations, and little narrative because we were filming so many different people. But we were excited by the compelling nature of unrelated vignettes, the scope of which would hopefully outweigh any threat of diffuseness.

So when not making plans to escape debtors' prison, Ross and I continued to make countless phone calls, and practiced our typing skills by writing

letters and proposals. The most entertaining activity during those months were the entries into our "log of futility", an unabashed diary of our ineffectual efforts at fund raising. Our luck eventually changed when a small private foundation provided funding.

During our final trip to Florida, we focused on Willie Womack and his family. That portrait developed very differently than the others. Circulating rapidly from meetings with contractors and clients to clown show engagements, Willie's schedule was non-stop. He was equally restless and his character shifted from boisterous to dictatorial without forewarning. It was immediately apparent to us that Willie warranted a different style of shooting. With Mary and Ted, our long takes had stressed stillness over action. In Papa John's household, we also shot lingering takes that included many activities that were developing simultaneously. In order to capture the immediacy of Willie's manic energy, we were forced to adopt a piecemeal approach, often sacrificing the beginning and end of incidents we were filming.

My favorite episode with Willie occurred when he took his two sons on a hunting excursion. We travelled to their hunting grounds, a huge housing development that had been started in the mid-Sixties and suddenly abandoned because of the space program's phase-out. The hundreds of sub-divided plots, joined by an intricate maze of paved roads, were desolate after a decade of neglect. Driving slowly through the area, Willie and his sons scouted for birds, rabbits and other game. This particular hunt was devoted to "gophers", land turtles that are a delicious addition to any soup. After finding a neatly burrowed hole, Willie jammed a fifteen foot pole into it, hoping to hook the pole on a gopher's shell. What ensued was a seemingly endless battle between Willie and the cornered gopher. Much of my shooting concentrated on the reactions of his sons; they stood alert, armed with shotguns and knives, ready

to protect their father from any unfortunate rattlesnake which might appear. Willie, cursing the gopher's stubborn refusal to surrender, finally wins the tug of war and what appears at the end of the pole is a tiny skewered turtle. The gopher's courageous attempts to thwart off the attack of a four-hundred pound man were of no avail, and Willie stood proudly with his catch as his son took photographs.

One of the most important scenes we filmed was of Papa John and his daughter, Diane, after the news of her best friend's death. Though the scene begins with a few off-handed remarks about the death, most of the discussion circumvents it. The emotional tensions continually shift because Diane's distress is side-lined by an argument that develops. While her daughter, Jennifer, eyes a package of cookies with impatience, Papa John and Diane squabble over whether or not the child's appetite will be spoiled. Of all the shooting I did in "Space Coast", I think it was here that I was strongest. As Papa John's lecturing becomes more emphatic, and Diane's agitation more evident, I chose to hold medium close-ups of the facial expressions; those reactions were much more telling than what was being said. The squabbling was only a cover up of the emotional tensions caused by the death of Diane's friend. The crucial point occurs when Papa John asks Jennifer if she would prefer to stay with her grandfather; a long silence follows and I hold a tight shot of Jennifer. The expression on her face strongly reflects the degree to which her mother is overcome by her emotions. I pan to Diane, who is crying. Off camera, Papa John is heard instructing Jennifer, in an apologetic tone, to go over and console her mother. The conclusion of the scene results in yet another wrestling match between Papa John and his daughter. While throwing bruising punches, Diane and Papa John launch light-hearted insults at each other. Their wrestling, which alternates from playful to

to tense, is apparently the means by which they best communicate.

It became apparent to us that Papa John's commanding biker's image, which was predominant in the scenes we had filmed earlier, was more an acquired style than substance. Ross and I regretted that our filming of him had only circuitously intimated what we knew - that many of his day-to-day concerns were not that different from ours. We wanted to penetrate Papa John's facade of non-conformity and it was his domestic life that gave us the opportunity to explore his multi-faceted personality. What was interesting to us was his relationship with his daughter; this scene of Diane and Papa John, though not straight forward by any means, was the most revealing.

VI. CONCLUSION

The editing of "Space Coast" is underway but not yet completed. Since Ross and I have acquired compatible and patient shooting styles, the cutting of individual scenes has required a minimal amount of editing. The sequencing of those scenes is the major challenge and our attention has been focused on creating a rhythm that can support the many shifts in mood and feeling. The rhythm is sometimes syncopated, and other times gentle. Our initial experiments of juxtaposing scenes of Willie, Mary and Papa John are often surprising in the way that they neatly compliment each other.

If nothing else, the editing of "Space Coast" brings back thoughts of our memorable experiences on the Cape. There were lots of adventures. Flying with Marty in "Iron Annie" was exhilarating even though, while fastening my seatbelt, I noticed a sign that read: "EXPERIMENTAL AIRCRAFT, FLY AT YOUR OWN RISK". Sometimes we hitch-hiked a ride on the back of Papa John's Honda

and were first-hand witnesses to his skill at accelerating a motorcycle to 100 M.P.H. in a matter of seconds. There were frustrations as well. Finding Willie to set up appointments to film him was an ordeal and we considered hiring an under-cover agent to report his location. Papa John continually offered us spiritual salvation, but I remain resolutely ignorant about the Bible. Mary's newest endeavor, the writing of a cookbook entitled Any Man Can... Cook That Is, required her to test a variety of recipes and we were very often the guinea pigs. But my religious convictions, digestive track, and patience remain more or less intact, as does my belief that "Space Coast" will be a fascinating film.