

RIVERDOG JOURNAL

by

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Riverdog Journal

Robb Moss

submitted to the Department of Architecture on May 10, 1979 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Visual Studies.

In the fall of 1978 I spent thirty-five days filming a river trip through the Grand Canyon. What follows is the background leading up to the making of the film, the conceptual formulations and reformulations, and the issues and consequences which arose during the making of "Riverdogs."

Included in my thesis presentations are two videotaped sections from "Riverdogs." Also included are sections from "Absence," the first film I made MIT, which is used to counterpoint some of the discussion of the river movie.

Thesis Supervisor: Ed Pincus

Title: Adjunct Professor of Cinema

I. Background

In the fall of 1970 I dropped out of Berkeley and went to Minnesota to visit a woman I knew. When things didn't work out for us, I hitch-hiked lengthwise across the United States to Arizona. I met a guy in Tucson whose family had taken a commercial river trip down the Colorado. This was the first I had heard of river trips. The image of floating through the Grand Canyon stayed with me, and the following May I did some work for one of the Canyon outfitters and got on my first river trip as an apprentice boatman.

In the next few years a veritable flood of people attracted to life on the river arose and grew into seasonal communities in and around the rivers of Arizona, California, Idaho, Oregon and Utah. People who were looking for ways to generate an income dropped into this community; others joined the community by way of dropping out. I have river friends, former computer programmers, who had an article written about them in the National Enquirer, "Couple Abandons \$30,000 a Year to Live in School Bus Like Gypsies." There were also lawyers, carpenters, social workers, and dental hygienists. For six months out of every year we would come together and work as river guides for rafting companies. On our time off we would take river trips with other river guides.

For me, private river trips (as opposed to commercial river trips) were an opportunity to live, if only for the length of the river, the life that I had come to believe in during the sixties. The system tried to

poison us with preservatives and pollution; I was for health. The system made us compete with each other and relegated us to our nuclear families; I was for communalism. In a thousand ways the system favored sameness and discouraged difference; I was for anarchy and the individual. Somehow the river allowed one to be healthy, ecological, communal, and eccentric.

River trips became for me a coming together of issues and choices which have comprised much of my life for the past ten years. As an opportunity to share and explore this phenomenon, I had wanted to make a film about a river trip for a long time.

II. Preparation

It's a bummer to put an entire film together by oneself. One tends to do everything twice and some things not at all. I was meticulous about orange sticks and Q-Tips and never ran a sync check to see if there was a sync pulse going on the tape. There was not, with expected results.

There were also some interesting problems to solve in the shoot. One was that since there is no electricity in the Canyon, a way had to be figured to power the camera. In fact, two ways had to be figured, as I wanted a back-up power source in case something went wrong with the primary system. I ended up using Stuart Cody's expedition batteries--two 12 volt non-rechargeable lithium cells run in series and running into a dummy nicad where the usual nicad sits in the CP-16, and the Terry Lockhart field solar battery charger--four 6 volt solar panels hooked up in series through a small regulator which could switch from trickle to fast charge. I ended

up using the sun-charged nicads as my primary source, as I didn't have to be connected to Cody's off-camera batteries. The major drawback in the solar charger is that if you want to fast charge for reasons of limited sun or time, you must manually monitor the milliamp input so as not to overcharge the nicads. If there were a way to mechanically monitor and limit the charge as the nicad approached its maximum capacity, one could leave the panels in the sun and return five or so hours later to a fully and safely charged battery. Evidently, there are ways, but they are expensive and less than reliable, according to Terry Lockhart. The use of the solar panels excited everyone on the trip and was a lovely application of an appropriate technology: no outlets, but a lot of sun in the Grand Canyon.

I also had to figure out a way to keep the camera gear, sound equipment, and film cool and dry in the hot desert and cold rapids. After much hunting in marine supply houses, army surplus stores, and fiberglass manufacturing plants, I ended up using large plastic Igloo coolers. I glued rubber gaskets to the runners where the lid met the casing, and I strapped them shut with 3/4 inch rubber bungie with metal hooks on either end. I also stored shot and unshot film inside waterproof rubber bags inside the coolers: can't be too careful, I thought. I feared equally the heat and the rapids. I have seen runny emulsion in still cameras on river trips; I have also seen boats flip in rapids and dump their loads to the river's bottom. As it turned out, of course, I could keep things too safe. For the first week I could hardly shoot, as I first had to wade through all my handiwork to get to anything; I would arrive at the scene

with light meters falling out of every pocket, a nervous wreck, and far too late to film the thing I was after. Out of frustration I would shoot anyway. As the trip went on, I struck a saner balance between safety and accessibility, though the choreography of the equipment was an issue the entire trip.

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I wrote a proposal to the American Film Institute the week before the trip put on the river. In it I described what I was looking for in the film:

Life on the river is an extraordinary event. This is a film about a 17 person, 6 raft, 8 kayak, 35 day Colorado River trip through the Grand Canyon. This is not an adventure film in the sense that it features the white-water. It is rather a portrait of a group of people who run rivers professionally and who have known each other for many years.

Like cowboy movies, river trips boast a lot of space and few people. As happens, this space begins to fill with the culture and values of its inhabitants. Extended river trips offer the opportunity to recreate the world in one's own image. My generation seems intent on establishing a sense of community while simultaneously trying to hold on to the value of the individual; communality and individuality in equal measure. River values as well champion equally the individual and the group. There is a kind of folly attempting to hold on to these two values at once; each seems to chase the other away. The environment and structure of river trips, however, provide a remarkable context in which to attempt a resolution of this conflict. Living out of doors places all of us next to natural forces far stronger than any individual. The daily tasks and chores are essential for everyone's well being, and people easily come together around such sturdy and sensible activity. As well, the out of doors offers an awesome range of powerful and personal experiences

that can only be experienced alone. River trips for river guides are less vacations than experiments in communalism and anarchy. The successes and failures of these experiments reflect the yearnings of a generation.

Being on the river affords an enormous freedom from outside stimulation. As a result, the ways in which people relate to each other, organize work, and make decisions become more a function of actual choices. River trips make visible in everyday life what kind of lives the men and women on this trip would have for themselves. Socially and politically, we rarely have the opportunity to create so completely what our lives are like. What this group of people does with this opportunity is the subject matter of this film.

III. On the River

Once on the river I had hoped to film the situations which could best express some of the ideas put forth in the AFI proposal. Specifically, I wanted to film the group process, especially in decision making, close interpersonal relationships, and the work and play which make up much of any river trip. As it turned out, for a variety of reasons relating to logistics, natural phenomena, and conception, I was largely unable to film all but the simple acts of work and play.

The logistical problems were related to the number of people, number of boats, and number of couples. There were 17 people on this trip, more than any other trip I'd been on, and the numbers tended to push people away from each other. It was just too large a number to comfortably come together as a group. So, the natural movement of the group was to disperse. The sense of dispersion and the fact that, once on shore, people literally

disappeared into the bushes, made it quite difficult to anticipate when or where the group would come together. I remember following the group around all morning waiting for the plans of the day to be discussed. I had to leave the camera at the bottom of a series of waterfalls that people had climbed up. When I reached the top of those pools and falls, the group was sitting around having the discussion I had waited all morning to film. This was quite typical.

There were also 6 rafts and 8 kayaks. Excepting days of intense rapids, we tended to float in a loosely associated way downstream. Of the three people not rowing or kayaking, I needed two of them to film: sound and oars. This meant that there was one person who could be sitting on a raft with someone else. People floated in their individual crafts every which way, coming together at odd and random moments, notable mainly in that I and/or the camera were absent.

There were also as many couples as crafts, that is, there were 14 of us in couples. The preponderance of couples tended to further divide and disperse the heart of the group. People not only were driven away from each other by the sheer numbers, but there was a ready place to go once away from the group. The number of couples further atomized the amount of group interaction and further reduced the opportunities to film some of the things I had been looking for.

The problems in on-river filming would not have been so critical had there been more off-river filming possible. The trip was taken in the fall, and as we moved later into October the days grew shorter and shorter. We ate dinner in the dark nearly every night of the trip. People's personal

lives, group discussions, and music almost always took place after night-fall. . The days were filled with river running, hiking, and the kind of work which needed daylight, i.e., boat patching, cleaning, and food reorganization. Evidently, one doesn't need daylight to relate to other people.

IV. Issues and Considerations

Conceptually, as well, I painted myself into some corners. After "Absence," I was not interested in making a film that somehow hinged upon my personality to derive its sensibility. It was not so much the presence of the camera as it was my presence which makes or breaks the film. What happens in front of the camera happens fundamentally as a result of my presence in the scene. Again, by my presence I do not necessarily mean the camera's presence. In the case of "Mom" or, say, the Robert Frank photograph of the black couple looking at the camera on a hill overlooking San Francisco, it is the act of "filmmaking" which provokes the subject matter. In "Absence" the subject of the film--my trip home, its mood, my relationship with my family, etc.--would have taken place without the camera's presence. However, without my presence, the film's subject ceases to exist. This is fundamentally different than, say, the Drew films, where what is being proposed is that the events would be happening independent of any camera or crew. What I am saying here, I suppose, is what seems to define the personal film out of the general body of documentary. The personal film's subject matter simply ceases to exist without the physical

or creative presence of the filmmaker. I am not saying that anyone could have made "Happy Mothers Day," but I am saying that anyone could have filmed the event of the Fischer quintts. In "Absence" there was no event to film until the filmmaker arrived.

I did not want the river film to be a "personal" film in the way "Absence" was. I felt that the event had enough in-the-world presence without my participation. I was also interested in trying something new. What moved me to make this film was not the personalities on the trip, but the occasion of the river trip. I was interested in making a film about the trip itself. However, in trying to find an expository form, one must necessarily come to terms with the issue of characterization. Seventeen people is a lot of people, in any case far too many to get to know in an hour film. I felt I had three choices in how to deal with the issue of "getting to know" the people in the film. The first was to follow a few people for the length of the trip. I was absolutely against this approach, as I felt the movie would be entirely subsumed by the personalities of its subjects. I would then be making a kind of portrait film, which I wasn't inclined to do. The second approach was also the most problematic. It would have meant actually sitting down and participating in the trip with the camera. Had I done this, the film would have been changed in drastic and unforeseeable ways. As it is now, there is a real lack of distinct characterization in the film. This is partly what is interesting about the film, but it is still a real lack. Had I opted to participate with the camera, "open address" I believe is what Claude calls it, the film would be populated with the personalities of its trip members and, as in

"Absence," my personality would have then taken on a fundamental role in the exposition. In a way, I would have liked to have made two films, and using both approaches. On the heels of "Absence," however, I went for a different manner of narrative and lent the direction of the film toward the trip itself and away from the filmmaker. In so doing, I took the third option and essentially let the audience not know anybody very well.

One thing about filmmaking is that the implications of one's choices become quite visible quite quickly. In viewing the first assemblage, I was aware of a curious lack of feeling in the film. You don't (surprise) get to know anybody very well in the film, and there just isn't that much feeling coming from the characters. I came to realize on this trip how extended river trips tend to take on the characteristic social interplay of small towns. While there is a tremendous sense of commitment to everyone's well-being--people would and do risk their lives for each other on the river--there is also a whole protective superficial way of interacting on a day-to-day basis which is oddly reminiscent of small towns. People talk shop, talk about the weather, nobody wants to get too close or things to get too messy. The value of the community is of paramount importance, and behavior which upsets the sense of social solidarity is inappropriate. These strictures are not things which are decided upon, this is just what happens. As a result of all this close superficial contact, the main vent for social tension becomes gossip. My own feeling is that gossip can be filmed if in so doing one does not violate the basic function gossip serves; that is, gossip can be filmed when the act of filming does not upset the social order of the gossiper's world. In "Grey Gardens," for example, the

Maysles are identified with the outside world and, as such, can be gossiped to. Edie's gossiping to the Maysles does not constitute a threat to her world; on the contrary, it allows her to remain in her world by giving a harmless outlet to her inexpressable desires. In the river film I could not be gossiped to, my being too much a part of the river's world, and what everybody really thought went unrecorded.

Other consequences became apparent to me after viewing the first assemblage. In wanting to make a film in the wilderness, I had not wanted to make a film about an Outward Bound type of experience: inexperienced people coming to terms with living out of doors, people acquiring skills, the stress of performance among strangers. While potentially exciting ideas for a film, they seemed to me predictable. I was more interested in what happens after people have acquired the skills, know each other, and choose to live out of doors. What happens then? As it turns out, lots of things happen then, almost all of them unfilmable. For example, people already know how to do all the things necessary to run a trip: how to row, cook, organize, tie down loads, etc. Life on the river is a known quantity to the people in the film and, as a result, has a kind of closed, seamless quality to it. One tends to feel like an outrider watching the film, as there is no real point of entry for the viewer. In a lot of my shooting I thought I was filming process, but in retrospect I found I was filming the outcome of a process already worked out. The same is true for the much touted values I was so intent on portraying. When people have essentially already arrived at a consensus of values, there results a noticeable lack of descriptive tension. The values take on a kind of invisibility. People,

it seems, are not forced to articulate their views without conflict. This is why, toward the end of the movie, when there is a scene in which a clear conflict between someone wanting to move on and someone wanting to stay, the scene stands out so: this is the only time that a conflict of values is in operation.

Barry: I'm ready to go . . . I've mentally moved out, and there's nothing I want to do today . . .

Jim: We're here. Why go somewhere else? It's not going to be any better anywhere else.

This represents about the strongest statement of values in the film. The bond of shared values, and the values themselves don't seem to have the dynamic presence in the film as I experienced them having. The fact that the work gets done as simply as it does, or the fact that people are extraordinarily competent does not read as the dynamic forces they are; it reads as seamless homogeneity. I've been told that people have a hard time identifying one person from another. People on the trip do look alike but, more, I feel they must seem alike to people watching the film.

I believe that one has a tendency to feel superior to the people in cinema verite movies. As the film subjects reveal themselves, we smile knowingly at their lives and problems. While we often feel sympathetic to the filmed subject, and while we often look for things to like in them, we also are in a position of real power in that we can see them, but they can't see us. With such absolute power that the seer has over the being seen, it is quite difficult to not feel vaguely superior, stronger, smarter, etc. In the river movie, however, one can easily dislike its filmed subjects

for their extreme visibility and inaccessibility. Not only do they run around naked, have fun, and risk their lives on cliff and wave, but they don't seem to care that anyone is watching, and they make no gesture, implicit or explicit, to include the audience. The impenetrable work and society and the seeming unconcern of the filmed subjects make them seem even more distant and unlike oneself.

. . . men in general judge more by the eyes than by the hands . . . Everybody sees what you appear to be, few feel what you are . . .

Machiavelli
The Prince

Actors make successful politicians. One reason for this is that they have a certain control over how they "seem" to other people. In public spaces, how one seems often dominates how one is. An unshaven politician will seem seedy and disreputable even if he isn't. I go into a restaurant and order the soup of the day, which turns out to be horribly oversalted. The waitress and I talk, and she is nice enough to suggest another soup, which she exchanges for free. That soup turns out to be burned. When the waitress comes by to ask how everything is, I smile sweetly and say "wonderful," because I know I will seem fussy and ungrateful if I don't. In an acting class I once had, we were told to structure our lines around verbs of intention; a paragraph of script would be underscored with verbs such as to desire, to coerce, to avenge--whatever our interpretation of the scene suggested to us in the way of verbs. What is interesting is that

state of being verbs were completely useless; any of the "to be" verbs--to be happy, to be sad, to be mad--all were too general and unconvincing. Being verbs made an actor seem false. Picasso said, "Art is a lie which makes us realize the truth." In the case of the real life restaurant incident, the inverse was true: I was innocent, but I would seem guilty.

The world is full of situations where seeming dominates being. Film, as the most public of the arts, is, I think, the most susceptible to this problem. In the river movie I have had to deal with being and seeming problems in a variety of ways. In its lighter moments, the movie can be compared to the nude-blonde-Swiss-youth-as-seen-by-the-dark-Italian-chicken-farmers scene in "Bread and Chocolate." To say the least, there is a real lack of ethnicity in the film. The fact that more than half the people on the trip are Jewish means next to nothing; they seem gentile. How the nakedness seems is a whole issue in itself. I felt that the camera's attitude to the nudity was going to be very important as to how an audience would react. I wanted people to be able to watch and enjoy the nakedness and, at the same time, didn't particularly relish the thought of an audience beaver-shooting its way through the film. I felt, for example, if I had filmed any explicit sex, it could have undermined the entire movie. It seemed to me that a scene where people actually made love in front of the camera would have cast a whole aura of exhibitionism into the rest of the nakedness. I felt the camera needed to establish an aesthetic distance from the nakedness, at once appealing and artful, and I didn't feel I could pull off a sex scene without potentially casting the rest of the movie into sexual suspicion. Again, these considerations had nothing to do with the

reality of the situation: people were not exhibiting their bodies to the camera; it is a matter of how the nakedness must seem. As in politics, sex makes its own demands on being and seeming, and I avoided the confrontation. I was and am curious to know if I could have integrated outright sex into the movie's landscape.

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I have always felt that it is better to make films about things you really know about. In literature, one has to be relatively abreast of a subject to write a reliable book. There is a claim to expertness one is making when one writes a book that one is not necessarily making when one makes a film. People who have never seen a camel until the first day of shooting can go on to make a competent film about camels and still not end up being anything close to an expert in the field. On the other hand, it would be quite difficult to write a book about camels and not end up being quite knowledgeable about the camel question. My thought was, why not make films about subjects to which you can make at least a small claim to expertness? At this point, while I do not think it is necessarily a bad idea to make films about subjects you are close to, I can think of several of its attendant problems. These problems relate mainly to the nature of film itself.

Film is essentially about the visible world, the world of surfaces. In filming, one is describing how things look from the outside. All of us make sense of the visible world in ways connected to our own experience.

An example: You grew up in a large family with little money. The only item of convenience in the house was an old Singer sewing machine. Your mother embroidered to earn money for the family. She would hum a popular tune of the day, and you would think the way the machine clicked and whirred sounded like that tune. When she died, the machine had to be sold. Twenty years later at a garage sale, you come across the very same machine and begin to hum that tune and are overcome with nostalgia. The visible world has enormous associative powers for us; we are all the time investing the world with feeling and memory. In so doing, we transform our experience of the physical universe into a place that seems to relate to us as human beings. Try describing someone you know well. My sense is that people look less like their physical descriptions than like our relationship to them. When I see my brother, I don't see a certain facial shape or hair color, I see my brother. The fact that we can derive any emotion or meaning from this flickering two-dimensional light show called film simply reflects our attempts at this kind of meaning-making in the larger context of our lives.

The visible arts make use of the elements of physical description: line, shade, form, texture, color, etc. Film uses these elements as well, plus film has the ability to grant a context to the physical world it describes. In a film, anything which can be described can achieve associative or connotive meaning. In "The Apartment," Jack Lemmon comes across the tennis racket he once used to strain a spaghetti dinner for Shirley MacLaine. The sight of the tennis racket is a moving moment simply derived from the context of the film. It becomes the task of the filmmaker to

create out of a world of simple surfaces an associative and meaningful reality. In an oddly literal way, the filmmaker is attempting to have an audience share his vision. This brings us back to the problem of making films about things you really know about. If you are not making a personal film (by which I mean a film where the subject matter does not exist except for the existence of the filmmaker), then I believe one is often handicapped by having such a strong relationship with the subject. On the river, for example, the people, objects, and places had already been associated into something beyond their physical descriptions before I even arrived to put-in. I felt I was very out of touch with what these river views could look like to other people, with what things, though mundane to me, could be revelatory and important to someone else. It is partly why I am wide-angle so much of the time: I wanted people to be able to see what they might in a way that was not always directed by the filmmaker. Just as I felt there came to be certain problems in filming people who had already come to terms with what they were doing, I felt there were certain problems in my being so familiar with the people and the river scene. I didn't have to discover the sense of riverlife as I went along; I was looking for something in the present I had experienced in the past. I think that when one is forced to try to make sense, with the camera, of the events which surround one, it is exactly these acts of discovery, of "looking," as Ricky calls it, that are revelatory and central to the success and vitality of cinema verite filmmaking. I am perhaps stating this too strongly. For example, I would be quite interested if little Edie had shot "Grey Gardens." One assumes her film would be quite weird and personal. Whether Edie could have translated

her relationship with the phenomenal world onto the screen (i.e., her relationship with the objects of her past) is quite problematic, precisely because of her closeness to everything. The Maysles could see Grey Gardnes perhaps more closely than little Edie, or at least more like we might experience her world. Edie would have filmed her favorite cats; the Maysles just filmed the cats. In the river film, whether I can transform what is essentially a personal subject matter into a non-personal film (in the sense already described) is one of the central issues of the film.

V. Structuring the Material

Inasmuch as I was trying to evoke the spirit of a river trip, and was not chronicling our fall '78 trip as such, the structuring of the material had to find an editing strategy other than strict chronology. On the other hand, I wasn't sure that the footage, seen in chronological order, wouldn't reveal some of the things I wanted from the film. My first step was to make an ins and outs roll, keeping chronology, and screen the ins roll in its entirety. I was looking specifically for some kind of movement in terms of loss of clock time, increasing animalness and certain scenes which somehow embody the sense of a specific phase of the trip: beginning, middle, or end. My next step was to keep chronology where possible and begin to move scenes around to affect more strongly the loss of time, other-worldliness, and the simple pace of a river trip. My first real showing was a 90 minute version, and it was awful. It had all the problematic scenes I was unwilling to let go of. The cut belied a basic attitude which demonstrated that my

feeling for any given shot took preeminence over the movie as a whole. I think that the length of time I allowed myself to keep hold of this favorite shot syndrome is revealing about several aspects of my identity as a filmmaker. Like many young filmmakers, I think I felt that becoming a filmmaker was somehow intimately tied to being a cameraperson: doing good camera meant being a good filmmaker. In "Absence," I was as yet unwilling to confront the substantive issues of "good" camerawork. The thrust of "Absence" is not based around the shot; it is based around a feeling or mood. I didn't shoot when I was visually moved to do so. I shot when I felt a certain way about what was happening. This single-mindedness is both the film's strength and weakness. The film has a kind of emotional wholeness to it and, in many ways, could just as easily have been a radio show. The river film is quite the opposite. I shot when I was visually moved by something, when an image spoke to me and I felt it could speak to others. I was so far into the camera qua filmmaker that I arranged for inexperienced people to take sound. My inexperience as a filmmaker and my infatuation with the camera got me a lot of sound problems. It also got me a lot of "shots," and somehow I was still in the mode of good camera equals good filmmaker: I became enamored of individual shots to the detriment of the movie. Seeing the 90 minute version flop in front of other people sobered me up quick, and the next day I took a half hour out of the film, bringing it within striking distance of a finished cut. I am right now trying to slim, rhyme, and see how many of my favorite shots I can reintroduce without re-ruining the movie.