

One Lake and Two Kerfuffles

by Su Friedrich

Attending the Flaherty (*) four times over a span of many years has been really valuable, really exhausting, really fun, really instructive, and sometimes (really) aggravating.

Full disclosure: For financial reasons I've only attended on the four occasions when films of mine were showing. Needless to say, it would be great to attend in other years so that I could see a lot of films and interact with many interesting people, but also because there wouldn't be the pressure to be *on*.

I attended my first Flaherty in 1987 with *The Ties That Bind* [1984] and *Damned If You Don't* [1987], when Richard Herskowitz was the programmer. I was thrilled to be invited and even happier when I arrived at Wells College and saw that lake. Oh, that lake!! After hours of watching filmsfilmsfilmsfilms and talkingtalkingtalkingtalking, it was sheer bliss to jump off the dock into the beautiful water of Cayuga Lake.

I was impressed by the quality of the films and the discussions, although it was back in the day and there was a little too much of "This doesn't follow the acceptable rules of what a documentary should be," coming from the old guard. And although those remarks were tedious, they weren't surprising: Richard, with his wealth of knowledge about experimental film, had decided to break the box open, to bring works (like mine and many others) which weren't obeying the rules about how to make a "proper" documentary. It was an excellent move on his part that helped to open up Flaherty in ways that are still reverberating, and which he did even more aggressively (I use that adverb as a compliment) when programming the 1999 Flaherty with Orlando Bagwell.

I don't recall being chastised for breaking those rules, but was astonished to be told by a *woman* during the discussion about *Damned If You Don't* that it "wasn't yet time" for films to be showing the female nude. She cited Laura Mulvey's famous and influential analysis of the male gaze, while I pointed out that I was a female doing the gazing, and a lesbian at that!

Three years later, in 1990, I was extremely fortunate to be invited to the special Flaherty seminar held in Riga, Latvia, where I screened *The Ties That Bind*. This one was programmed by Richard Herskowitz, Raul Zaritsky, Ivars Seleckis and Abraham Kalzkins, and was structured so that half the group were Americans and half were from the Soviet Union (which dissolved a year later).

It would take many pages to describe that experience; suffice it to say that it was one of the highlights of my forty years as a filmmaker. There was no lake this time; instead, we swam in a lot of good vodka.

The very funny/ironic/preposterous/predictable aspect of the seminar was that the Americans kept ooh'ing over the fact that the Soviet filmmakers had access to shoot in 35mm and were making films which often relied on visually and intellectually wonderful metaphors (since they couldn't speak openly about political or social issues) while the Soviets did the same amount of ooh'ing over our ability to shoot down and dirty anywhere we wanted, and to speak so openly about our political and social concerns.

One thing I will always feel grateful for was the chance to spend so much time with Marlon Riggs, who died just a few years later from complications related to AIDS.

The third opportunity came in 1998, when Barbara Abrash and Linda Blackaby invited me to show *Hide and Seek* [1996]. I don't have any memory of the responses to the film, but it might have been problematic since half of *Hide and Seek* is narrative—but by now there was more acceptance of, and interest in, the ways that one could problematize documentary, or simply use it as one part of a film which also drew on other genres.

What I do remember is that they invited Hirokazu Kore-eda to show the documentary *Without Memory* [1996] and his second feature narrative, *After Life* [1998]. Both films were revelatory, in so many ways, and have had a lasting impact on me. I was also delighted to discover the work of Ning Ying, especially *On the Beat* [1996].

Most recently, in 2012, Josetxo Cerdan included three of my films in his “Open Wounds” seminar: *The Head of a Pin* [2004], *The Odds of Recovery* [2002], and *Gut Renovation* [2012], a feature documentary about the destruction of my neighborhood in Brooklyn.

Aside from a kerfuffle during the discussion about *Gut Renovation* with a filmmaker who felt that what I was doing was “wrong” in some way (I guess in comparison with what I had done earlier on; maybe I'm supposed to keep remaking *Sink or Swim* [1990] for the rest of my life?), it was another great experience.

It seems that each Flaherty introduces me to one filmmaker's work that particularly blows my mind. In this case, it was the work of Leila Pakalnina, and I wasn't the only attendee who fell head over heels for her work.

But speaking of kerfuffles, that's a known and remarkable aspect of the seminar. One can't (proverbially) lock 100+ people in a room all day every day for a week without there being an explosion halfway through. I recall during my first or second time at the Flaherty, the filmmakers who had done *Atomic Café* presented a work-in-progress about animal rights. Like *Atomic Café*, it seemed to me that they'd done solid research and had an impressive array of archival material to illustrate each of the themes they were planning to cover. But some attendees went ballistic, accusing them of insensitivity to the issue, etc., etc.

Usually during these blow-ups, people step in to defend the filmmaker(s), who are understandably in a certain amount of shock. I don't recall whether I defended them or their film, though I might have, because I tend to jump into a fight. I do hope that I did. The Flaherty is an environment in which it's presumed that serious conversations will take place about the effectiveness of a film, and any filmmaker who presents their work should be prepared and should allow that to happen. But this other thing? Naaah....

But aside from that annual funkiness, the Flaherty is remarkable. I feel grateful for all that I've learned when attending, and for the filmmakers, scholars and programmers who I first befriended at the seminar and with whom I have kept in touch over the many years since.

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