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A Conversation With Michael Apted

Michael Apted

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with
Michael Apter

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March 3, 1993

Good evening. I'm Michael Rabiger, director of Columbia's Documentary Center. Would you please give a very warm Chicago welcome to our distinguished guest, Michael Apted.



Thank you.

Michael and I last saw each other 27 years ago when we were working in Manchester. Can you talk a little bit about how your career developed, sort of where you came from and what motivated you to work in film?

Well, I'm first generation show business. There is no background of the entertainment industry in my family at all. I grew up in the middle-class east side of London and I was interested in radio, television and theater from an early age. When I was 17, I went to school in the middle of London, which was my big break really because I was right in the middle of the cinema and the West End theater. I went to see Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* and I sort of fell in love. I'd been interested in books and plays, but when I saw this movie I realized that movies could carry ideas and emotions..... Up until then, movies had been part of a typical Saturday night following girls and sitting behind girls and hoping to meet girls. So for the first time I saw that movies could be something more, and from that moment on, I really had this dream to be a movie director. It seemed impossible and I had no idea how to go about it, but I still worked in the theater at school and went to college and university. In our day there was no such thing as film school. It was unheard of, certainly in England at that time, and so I did history and law. My dream, as I said, was to make films, but since that seemed impossible, I thought there might be some chance to get into the theater. My parents, however, were very keen that I should have a career and become a lawyer. But all through university, as I was studying law, I was a contemporary of John Cleese, the funniest man in England. We were at the same college, and I suppose in those early days he invented the ministry of silly walks. I was doing a lot of theater work at that time and then the other big break in my life happened. I was recruited by Granada Television -- where Michael and I met, incidentally -- which was a small, Manchester-based, left wing television company that had a huge reputation in documentaries, news and drama. England is sort of dominated by the BBC, but in 1957, the government granted the rights to commercial companies to form a second channel. Granada was one of the brightest of those channels, and they had decided to recruit raw

talent. Instead of stealing from the theater or journalism or whatever, they would just take young people out of university and train them up. I got on one of those production courses and that's how it started for me. It was a huge piece of luck to come out of university and get that kind of training. So, as I said, the big epiphany in my life was at the Academy Theatre in Oxford Street looking at Ingmar Bergman's film. That's how it started.

What are a director's responsibilities? When you think of yourself as a director and you look ahead at a project, what are the sorts of priorities that you set for yourself?

I do documentaries and feature films. Perhaps I should tell a bit about what happened to me after I joined Granada. I'd done a little bit of training in the news and documentary division, and my very first job was to research *7 Up*, a documentary film about seven-year-old kids for a weekly program called "World in Action," and this assignment has haunted me all my life.

I should say that it's tremendously valuable. A great many people here have seen *28 Up* and *35 Up* and I screen them regularly. Everyone is deeply moved by them.

I'm glad. Thank you.

Your haunting is worthwhile.

Well, no, it's really very awkward because I'm aware that they're used a lot in teaching circles, not just to teach filmmaking -- that I can handle -- but by psychologists and sociologists and educators. It's quite embarrassing because I don't really know anything. I mean I just know these people and make these films and there's no mystery to it. The only thing I really did was to hang in there and keep it going. But you get people asking you incredibly learned questions and you just feel foolish when you say, "Well, I don't really know what you're talking about. I just do it." Anyway, that was my first job. But I secretly had this agenda that I wanted to be a dramatic director. I eventually got to do that and managed to keep both forms going while working my way up through Granada's drama department. I started out doing a serial called "Coronation Street," England's most famous serial which is now in its 35th year.

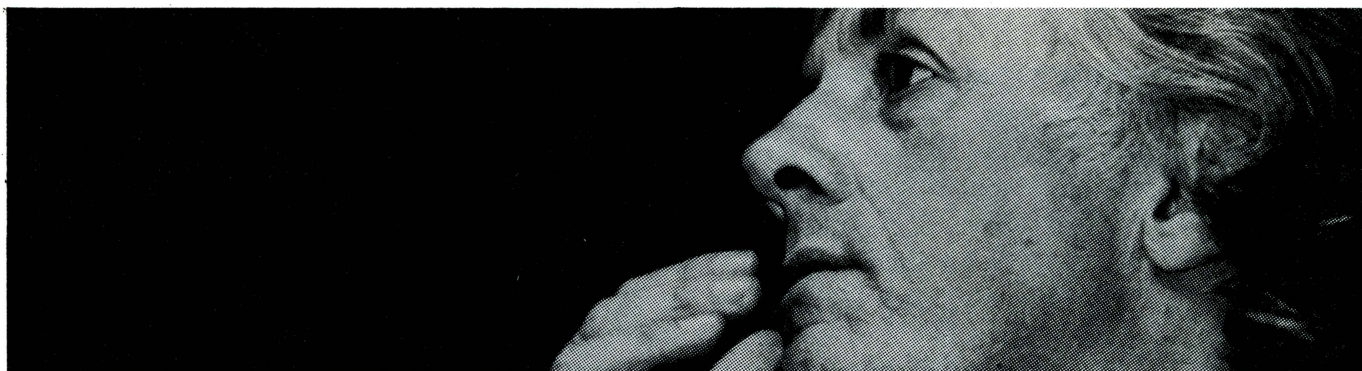
A soap opera.

A soap opera, yeah. But it was a fantastic experience because there were three of us and we were doing an hour of film a week. We were working with a lot of different writers and actors, some of whom were wonderful, some of whom were big stars within that world. And the great thing about working in television was that it was quick. And soap operas are really quick. You gain an enormous amount of experience, and it kind of runs itself. Although being in television, one had horrendous stories of screwing up. I remember doing a news program and forgetting to put sound on the interview and broadcasting it to the English nation.

Isn't that reassuring.

I'd forgotten to tell the sound recordist to show up. And we broadcast it.

It was ridiculous. The production assistant was actually crying and I thought, this isn't the job for me. I'm never going to survive today, let alone the rest of my life in this job. But somehow I managed to work my way up through television in England. As I said, I started on soaps and then went on to serials and series and eventually plays. That was through the '60s, and then in the '70s I made four movies in England, although I was still keeping my television work going. I formed an alliance with David Puttnam, who is a leading English producer, and did a couple of films with him. And so that was my life in the '70s. I was struggling to build a movie career



although, in my lifetime alone, I have seen the movie industry in England just collapse after being very vigorous in the '50s and then again in the '60s when the Beatles made England -- for 15 minutes -- the cultural center of the world. We were in Manchester, and it all was happening in Manchester and Liverpool. It was a real struggle because the film industry was disappearing, and the movies I did were made in Hollywood and so were the financial and creative decisions. So I made a decision fairly early on that if I could get to America, I was going to go and give it a try. I got asked to do a film by a very notorious American producer named Ray Stark who -- I hope he doesn't have family here tonight -- asked me to do this amazingly ballsy thing which I still can't figure out, and I resigned from the film even though it had been my dream to go to America. He'd asked me to make a film about a load of Julliard students who were trying to keep body and soul together while they were at college, and so it was very similar to *Fame*, the film my colleague Alan Parker later made. So Stark sent me off to New York to cast it and I thought, well, if there's someone in it who's supposed to be a trumpet player, I'd better find someone who can play the trumpet, and if one of the characters is a dancer, it might be helpful if he or she could dance.

Seems logical.

Yeah. Well, I was wrong, wasn't I, because I got back to California with a tape of all this raw talent -- I mean, Daniel Stern was on there -- and I discovered that he'd started offering parts to Tatum O'Neal and David Cassidy. So I don't know how or why I did it, but I resigned.

And survived.

And survived because my big break came right at that moment. Universal was looking for a director for *Coal Miner's Daughter*, a film they didn't have any great belief in because they felt it would just play to the country music audience and they'd make their money back from the

soundtrack. And this English guy turns up -- me -- to be interviewed. By that time, I had an American agent, and he had put me up for it. Sissy Spacek knew a friend of mine and the writer had the same agent as me, so it was all kind of insidious. Anyway, I was interviewed and got the job largely because, as I said, they didn't think the film was particularly important. I guess they figured that if this guy wants to go off to the Appalachians, let him.

How did you make the cultural transition? How could you, an Englishman, enter a completely different culture? That really fascinates me because not many people can do it.

Well, I was sort of smart because I took one look at the films that had been made about country music and realized that no one knew anything about it. So I wasn't at a disadvantage being English. I've always felt that if someone asked me to make a film about the Vietnam war or about civil rights, I wouldn't dream of touching it. I wouldn't do something that was in the American blood. But once I got there, I realized that there was much more sympathy for me as an Englishman than there was for the Los Angeleans or the New Yorkers or the Chicagoans -- excuse me, Chicagoan -- on the crew. And looking, as I said, at the track record of Hollywood's country music films -- apart from *Nashville*, which is a magnificent movie, but nonetheless, its underlying attitudes towards country music are very patronizing and superior -- I felt I didn't really have that much to beat.

But it's not about music. It's about character, about a special quality.....

Yes. But I've been well trained for that kind of stuff.

Talk about that. When you say you've been well trained, what do you mean exactly?

I've been kind of culturally well trained. It's the sort of person I am insofar as I grew up in London and went to work in Manchester. From an early age I discovered that I was very interested in being in different places and absorbing the culture of a place and finding a way to put it on film. I didn't seem to have a great impulse in me to tell my life story, the story about this person who grew up in Ilford and Essex and London. I was interested in moving into a culture and finding out about it and putting it onto film. A lot of people, and better men than I, are more interested in making their movies or their work or their documentaries autobiographical. I've never had that impulse. I've been what I would think of as a traveller. That became clear to me when I was working in Manchester. Here was a completely different culture, as the north of England is quite different from the south, but I just kind of immersed myself in it, loved it, and was not intimidated by the change or the variety of it. I even gained a certain notoriety for working with northern writers and putting northern work onto film. I was also greatly influenced, as we all were, by the way Ken Loach, who is an important English director, cast his films, and I used all those lessons in *Coal Miner's Daughter*. The smart thing I did was not to pretend to be something I wasn't. Loach would cast off the street. If he made a film in Barnsley, he would cast it in Barnsley. When he made *Kes* -- what I consider to be the best English film from the '60s-- he decided to film in a school and then just found a kid from that school. He didn't go to casting agencies. He didn't go to London or Liverpool or Birmingham or Manchester to cast it. He cast it from that school. So what he taught me was that if you're going to put a place on film, you don't just shoot it on location, you put its people in it, and then the geography isn't just physical, it's also human. In

Coal Miner's Daughter, there were only three people in the film that had ever acted before: Sissy, Tommy Lee Jones and Beverly D'Angelo. I used all local people and people from the music business. Those were the tricks -- or shall we say, manner of work -- that I'd used in England, and so I used all that when I came here. I didn't try to do it differently. So whatever strengths I had, whatever I'd learned in England, I was smart enough, in a sense, to employ and wasn't intimidated. I had tremendous rows at Universal because I decided pretty early on that Sissy would sing. Again, I wasn't being clever or anything, but I'd just watched *The Buddy Holly Story* which, in my opinion, wasn't a terrific movie because it simply dealt with him as a legend. But I thought that one of the amazing things about it was that Gary Busey sang. I just thought it gave



it terrific vitality. He wasn't lip syncing to Buddy Holly and no one seemed to mind. So I thought, well, stuff that. If they'll do it for Buddy Holly, let Sissy sing for Loretta Lynn. Now I had no idea whether Sissy could sing. She told me she could but I didn't know whether she could. So I kind of trusted it and then had a huge confrontation with the Universal management who were appalled by all of this. They said, "You must use Loretta's voice. Think of how you'd be insulting her fans. Loretta is still alive! Just think of the trouble you'd cause. You're going to go out there in the middle of nowhere and shoot live music?" But I stood my ground and told them to stuff it. That's the way I decided to do it. It would give huge vitality to the film because the character is most alive when she's singing. And if you take that from an actress you're going to shoot yourself in the foot. I was just lucky that Sissy could sing. She was taught and she did it.

Did they make you shoot tests?

No, they didn't. I said that's the way it's going to be and that was that. We went to a lot of trouble to train her. She worked with Loretta's recording producer, and Loretta even helped her. But it was just something I had a feeling about and I stuck to my guns and it worked. You only had to look at *Sweet Dreams*, the film that Jessica Lange made about Patsy Cline, to see that lip syncing wouldn't work. Jessica's a great actress, but I think it kind of destroyed the performance because it took away the power. So to answer that question about how an Englishman enters this culture, I think you have to pick and choose. And when I did *Thunderheart* and *Incident at Oglala*, I again felt that I didn't have too much to beat because Hollywood's records with those subjects had been pretty horrible. I just immersed myself in it. I love researching, finding out about stuff. I feel I can research as well as the next man, and if it's not something that has to beat in the blood, I feel I can take it on. But to go back to the question that I started babbling about regarding what a director's job is.... I suppose a director's job -- and I'm going through it

this very minute -- is to have an idea of what you want, an idea of what the film is. It's going to change, of course, because a lot of people are on your case, and a lot of people are going to come to you with a lot of both good and bad ideas. So in some ways it's about figuring out what you want to do, while remembering the impulse that drew you to it and sticking to it. I'm not a great believer in the auteur theory of one man sitting there with a great vision and everybody falling in with it. But I do believe that it is your energy that has to keep the movie going. You have to keep the movie on track even if you're going to move the track a little bit because actors and cameramen and even producers inevitably come in with great ideas, terrific ideas. People come in every day with new ideas, and I just think the job is to orchestrate it while trying to remember the agenda.

Can you talk about working with professionals vs. working with people off the street? What are your techniques when you work with someone who is trained, fairly intuitive and produces a performance fairly fast and someone who may lack confidence and needs a lot of your time?

Well, it's very interesting and I love to do it because I think it makes professional actors better. All you can do with someone off the street is make sure you cast them for what they are because they can't give you anything other than what they are. Take *Thunderheart* as a case in point. I had to cast the part of an old man, but there were no actors around who could do it and who could speak Lakota. Floyd Westerman was a possibility, but he'd just done *Dances With Wolves*, and I didn't think he was old enough anyway. So there simply were no actors out there who we could cast. There are only two reservations that even speak Lakota, so I just made the decision with the casting director that I would find the best old man on one of those reservations. Whoever it was would get the part. If that hadn't worked out, I'd have had to think on my feet and cut the part down or work my way around it and move on. But, luckily, this guy could do it.

He's wonderful.

Yeah. I was incredibly lucky. I don't know what happened. The only problem I had with him was about taking his teeth out.

Did he?

Well, yes, I said he had to take his teeth out, and every day he would play tricks to keep his teeth in. It was the only direction I ever had to give him. He was who he was and he was able to learn the lines, but he didn't enjoy it very much and said, "I'm never going to do this again. What kind of life is this?" So he began and ended his film career with me. The interesting thing was that he had scenes to play with Val Kilmer, who is really quite difficult in a kind of intense way. You know, "I must have my space and I must have my quiet and everybody must get out of my fucking eyeline," and all that kind of stuff. So you couldn't have had two more different attitudes. Here was this frankly simple old man who really didn't want to be there and there was Val tearing his hair out. But Val simply had to fall in step with him because he was smart enough to know that if he started playing tricks he would look idiotic. So that's an extreme example of what I think can be a very powerful experience because I think it brings a reality and a truthfulness to what you do that professional actors can pick up on. But it's not just taking people off the street. I

about a guy who has a terrible car accident and sues the car company -- I used a guy who had lost his legs in a terrible car accident. I didn't search for people in that condition, but he came in to see me, and although he wasn't a great actor, he nonetheless brought an authority and power to it. I like going for that. I like going for things that bring a kind of authenticity, a reality, to it. I suppose I tend to do that because of my documentary background. And it's a tough thing because a lot of actors can come in and kind of con you into believing that they know what they're talking about, but when you find someone who does know what they're talking about, then you can put it on film. Whether it's an emotional thing or a physical thing or a job or an experience or whatever, I think it just adds a lot of weight. It informs the film, and then I think it informs the cast, the crew and, ultimately, the audience.



It sounds as though you use your experience as a documentarian as a measuring stick and that you try to move your cast towards this idea of authenticity and certain realities.

Yeah. And it can kill me. I tried to do a comedy, but I've done two comedies in my life and I've not been asked back. *Continental Divide*, which I shot here in Chicago with John Belushi, wasn't so bad, but I did a really ghastly one with Richard Pryor called *Critical Condition*. I just wasn't the man for the job. All I could do was research the thing and get into it all, which is exactly what wasn't needed. Rather than figure out what really goes on in hospitals and what really goes on in a blackout and all that kind of stuff, it was just supposed to be funny. It simply confused Richard who is a very, very nice and clever man, and I should have just been doing better jokes. So sometimes it can hurt me because, basically, I think all my movies are documentary driven. They're always based on research and if there's a problem, I just go back to what really happened and try to figure it out. It's happening now. We start shooting *Blink* next Sunday. We're rehearsing now, but half the rehearsal is sending the actors out into their characters' territory, whether it involves being an eye surgeon or a homicide cop or a fiddler in an Irish band who starts out being blind and is learning how to see. They're all out there. And, inevitably, they all come back saying, "This couldn't happen," and it's very alarming when they do that.

You mean the script couldn't happen?

Yes. And then I think, oh my God, I've created a monster. I'm encouraging people to tell me the truth and that's not what I want to hear. But you've got to be honorable about it and you've got

to figure it out. So far, I haven't come unstuck.

Do you rewrite the script?

Yes. Aidan said something to me yesterday and I said, "Well, if that's true, we don't have a movie. What shall we do, 'The Three Sisters'?"

Maybe "Hamlet."

Yeah, why not? But really, if you set that course of action in motion then you have to honor it. If you ask an actor to take the trouble to go out there and figure things out and research it, when they come back with all these things you don't want to hear, you've got to pay attention to it.

But you're doing something that actors aren't often used to and you're giving them so much added responsibility.

Well, I believe in that. I believe that if you treat actors as collaborators, then they'll do better work for you. And I've always rehearsed my movies.

I was going to ask about that.

I rehearse for three weeks, although a typical rehearsal might be three hours in the morning just sitting around chatting. Then in the afternoon Madeleine goes off and plays the violin and Aidan goes off with the cops. So it can be very casual. But because of the way I grew up, the way I started in the theater and in television, I wouldn't know how else to do it. I wouldn't know how to deal with it. If actors show up who have never met each other and who I've never even spoken to except to say, "Thank you for doing the job and you'll wear this and this," I wouldn't know what to do. I don't understand how people can work like that.

So you create a company.

Yes, I try to create a company and a kind of energy because I feel that movies are, in some ways, documentary. It's Aidan becoming a homicide cop, and it's his process of doing so that's interesting to me. That's why I want to go along with whatever they come up with because I'm asking them to make the parts their own, to embrace them, and in some psychological way, actually become the characters. So you kind of get some confusion between who it's really about, and I think that can bring the performance to life.

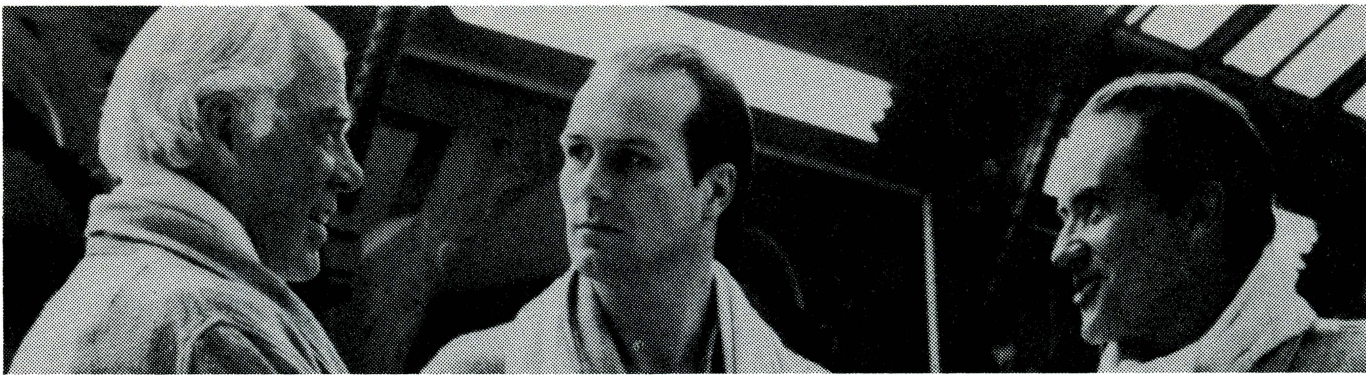
Does it create competitiveness between the actors? Some directors would say that it's dangerous to give the actors so much control.

It does make it difficult, yeah. On the other hand -- none of them are here, are they? -- it's a very subtle way of creating interdependence. What I could do is just get them all to show up one day and stand there with a big bullhorn and shout at them and tell them what to do. But I don't think that engenders any kind of respect. I'm trying to get them to talk to me. I'm creating an arena for discussion. They know they have a job to do. They know they're not going to have to sit there for weeks while the crew is sitting around waiting to do a shot. I think that interdependence is,

in a sense, power. It isn't just a simple hierarchy. It's the power of collaboration and it can be difficult. But on the whole I find it works better than working with actors who don't know what they're doing.

Can you give me an example of a difficulty you've had in working this way?

It happens all the time. I create collaborators and then they feel entitled to question everything I say. And that can be very irritating and very time consuming as well. Unfortunately, I can't think of anything funny to tell you because it didn't seem funny at the time. I can tell you that when I did *Gorky Park* with Bill Hurt, it was pretty difficult. He got so wound up in this whole KGB thing that he became convinced that the KGB was trying to poison him. So he had to have everything he ate and drank tasted beforehand like he was Louis XIV or something. But I created



that situation by getting him all involved in the work because he was Arkady Renko, a cop at odds with the KGB. I had him meet all these Russians and do all sorts of things to prepare, but he began to get so paranoid that it kind of blew up. So the downside of it all is that a little knowledge can be very dangerous. An actor comes in playing a doctor, and he researches it for three days and suddenly he's a world bloody authority on eye surgery or something.

How do you feel about having to confront people, about having to contain them? There must be times at which they threaten to unbalance the whole operation.

You just have to keep your nerve. Rehearsal is a very unnerving period because in a sense you're putting everything on the table, and unless you're doing Shakespeare or Chekhov, most scripts will fall apart. So if you invite the kind of analysis that I usually invite and that I respond to, you have to keep your nerve because there are some days when everything goes wrong and you think, "Do I have a movie here? What the hell am I going to do?" But because of people's psychological clock, they all know that they've got to get out there on March 12th and start putting it down. And gradually, things get put back together again.

As they do in the theater.

Yeah, exactly. But you have to keep your nerve. If I panic, then everything becomes chaotic. So even if I am panicking, which I usually am, I can't show it. I think one of the tricks of the job is to hide whatever nightmare you're going through.

Talk a bit about scripts. How do you read a script? How do you choose a script?

Well, I read a lot of them. I'm not a writer, unfortunately, so I don't generate my own material. I choose scripts in different ways. I just thought *Blink* was exceptionally well written and it also had two things that appealed to me: first, I hadn't done this sort of thing before, and second, it had a very strong female protagonist. I've had a certain measure of success with female protagonists in my films. The film is about a woman who is blind and who regains her sight in time to witness a murder. On the surface it's very conventional, but the writing of the character was very fresh because she wasn't a victim. She was a very ballsy, spunky woman and I love that. I just love the idea that this woman wasn't being patronized or treated as a victim. The other thing that attracted me to the script was that it was about a strong relationship and that, I feel, always has to be at the heart of any movie I do. It doesn't have to be a man and a woman. In *Thunderheart*, it was Val and the old man. It could be two men or two women, as in *Agatha*, or whatever. If you try to dramatize a story without a strong relationship, then the story just becomes endless plot, endless narrative, and it doesn't have any kind of emotional underbelly to it. Sometimes I'll read a script like *Thunderheart* which I think, with all due respect to John Fusco, wasn't very well written. But I thought the material was so interesting, and I also had just started work on the documentary, *Incident at Oglala*, so I was beginning to know a lot about this world. I'm never quite sure what draws me to something. Sometimes I think it's desperation. Usually I'm anxious to go to work or need to earn some money. It's true. I'll finish *Blink* in September and then I'll be reading scripts again, and I suppose I'll do the best thing that's available at that time. It's not like this great cosmic choice of what you do. You do what's in front of you when you're free. I suppose I do read scripts a lot and most of them are very, very bad, but occasionally you get a script like *Blink*.

What does well written mean to you?

Well, I thought *Blink* had some good dialogue and there was a good cinematic sense to it. I think good film writing is very minimal. There was a tightness, a crispness, about it and strong character development. I just think that recognizing a promising script is instinctual. I could give everyone in this room three scripts and I think we would all pretty much disagree on them. The woman who wrote this script had only written a few scripts before and never had one produced. The only other time that ever happened to me was screwed up by the studio. A real estate agent in San Francisco sent me a script that I thought breathtaking. I really wanted to do it and met the guy and it was wonderful. And then the studio got hold of it and just developed it out of existence. They wanted it to be rewritten and recast and this and that and the film died. I think I could have gone out and shot that script and made a decent film of it.

Is there a way back?

I don't think so. What happens is that films accrue huge costs. When they get it rewritten, other directors come on, they make commitments to certain actors to hold the actor for three months, and before you know it, a million dollars has been spent on a script. So if you are going to take the script to someone, they'll say, "This is terrific," and you'll say, "Well, you've got to buy the script and there's a million dollars attached to it." So I don't think there's a way back. But most of the stuff you read, unless it's written by one of the top 10 or 15 American screenplay writers, is poorly written. Usually you find a script where the material appeals to you and then you've

got to develop the script from there.

I have a sense from your films that you're interested in what forms people's destinies.

I am a bit. I'm interested in people's histories. And if you sit down with me, as you did earlier tonight, I'll ask you a lot of personal questions. I mean, sometimes I'm just incredibly rude.

You did ask a lot of questions.

I have an interest in what makes people who they are.

Why?

Why? I suppose it's a personal thing. I just sit there and wonder how this 50-year-old guy got



to be what he is and where he is in life. I mean, what went on? What happened to him? What happened to me? I can't really figure out where I got the interest to do what I did or what the spark was that created it. I'll look at a couple, for example, and think, "How did they meet? What draws them together?" I'll stare at people in restaurants and get into trouble. It's just that I'm naturally inquisitive about what makes people who they are. And although my films aren't remotely autobiographical, one of the things that attracted me to *Coal Miner's Daughter* was the strong sense of roots. When she left her roots, she fell apart, and when she came back to those roots, she and her husband were reunited and she found strength. At that period in my life I'd uprooted myself. I had come to America and, in many ways, cut myself off from my roots.

It would seem that there is something autobiographical in your films.

Well, I respond very much to things like that. In *35 Up*, I feel I got a lot out of Nick, the Yorkshire guy who teaches in Wisconsin, because he and I could relate to each other about what it's like to leave your roots. It's part of the question of what makes you who you are, because if you're going to do anything, you've got to know who you are. I may not make autobiographical films, but I suppose I have a sense of who I am. Even if I'm not that interested in putting it onto film, I think whether you're a filmmaker or a poet or whatever, you've got to have a sense of identity.

Would you share some of that identity with us?

What, mine?

Yeah.

Well, frankly, it's an ongoing kind of mystery to me. I mean, I've never been able to figure it out. My marriage recently broke up, so I went into therapy and it's kind of astonishing for a 50-year-old man to learn things about the influence my parents have had on me and all that kind of stuff, things I'd never questioned. Sometimes I think I've lived my life as a sleepwalker, and maybe I haven't been very incisive about who I was and how I grew up. But, nonetheless, I'm intrigued by other people.

That's very English, isn't it?

Probably, yeah.

Perhaps this is a good time to talk a bit about the *Up* series. For those of you who are unfamiliar with it, Michael has followed the lives of a group of children every seven years since they were seven years old. The most recent one was *35 Up*. How do you get these people to open up their lives -- with all their low points and failures -- to a huge audience?

Well, it's not easy. Every seven years I go through this torture of being a used car salesman trying to convince them to do it again. I've lied to them. I've bribed them. I've done just about everything to get them to be in the film. But in America, I find myself fighting people off! Everybody wants to be in it. There's definitely something in English genes which makes us kind of reserved.

When I first came to America to do some directing, my producer said, "You'll love America. Everybody's got an act. Stop anybody on the street and they'll give you a immediate spiel."

It's great. People are so open. There's a kind of openness about America that I love, and there's something uptight about us Englishmen.

You say you don't miss England at all, but I know you've got children there. Talk about the business of leaving and looking back.

I think England and I have a lively interest in American politics simply because of what happened in England during the last two decades as a conservative right wing government dismantled an education system, a healthcare system, and an economy. And the lie is that you can't put it back together again. I'm fascinated with what Clinton is trying to do because I could see the same thing happening with Reagan and Bush in America.

And you worked for him.

Yes, I did some political commercials for Clinton. I seemed to have gained a certain notoriety because of the *Up* films. I also do commercials occasionally and I did a commercial about early pregnancy testing which was pretty hideous actually.

Why was it hideous?

It was very successful, but when I tell you what it was about..... We advertised for couples who thought they might be expecting, but didn't know for sure and we tested them.

You told them?

Yes, that was the point of it. We tested them ahead of time so we knew, but they agreed, for barrels of money, not to find out whether they were pregnant or not. It was beautifully lit and shot and all that and there I was with 12 couples and I know, but they don't know. So I interview them and halfway through the interview I give them the test.

You opened the envelope?

Opened the envelope. I mean this is a major event in people's lives and it was really grotesque,



although it was very successful and kind of skillful really. Anyway, a lot of people saw it, including some of the people who were running George Bush's campaign, and they rang me up and asked if I would do commercials for Bush and I said no. But then, funny enough, about two weeks later Clinton's people rang up and asked and I said yes. I don't know how we got onto this, but anyway, now you know the dark side of my documentaries.

Tell me about the business of ethics and being responsible. How do you deal with subjectivity in your documentaries?

It's very difficult. All I know is that you shouldn't lie. I had this combustible encounter with Michael Moore about *Roger and Me* which I thought was obnoxious in a way because I think he lied. There's this great myth that documentaries are truth and movies are not, and I don't believe that for one minute. Every edit you make in a documentary is a decision, a choice. What is truth? Truth is simply your integrity as a filmmaker. You make as many editorial decisions with a documentary as you do with a movie. There's nothing more true about a documentary than there is about anything else. I've sat on seminars and panels and had discussions about all this and tried to suggest to people that documentaries can be as disingenuous as any movie. And, in a sense, it's worse because.....

It's masquerading as truth.

Yes. I've thought about it at length and the only thing I can really say is that you shouldn't lie whether you're doing a feature or a documentary. That is my filmmaking ethic. *Incident at Oglala* is an incredibly loaded documentary. It's not fair at all. For a start, the FBI wouldn't agree to be part of it even though I gave them every opportunity. I wasn't interested in doing the film to give the federal government a chance to present what I thought was a flawed, unsound case. I only wanted to do the film to make a case for Leonard so he could be released from prison. So the film is as loaded as hell. I let the prosecutors kind of damn themselves. I chose bits where they're being ridiculous and I chose bits of Leonard when he makes you cry. So if you want to look at it in terms of some kind of objective truth, forget it. It's a loaded piece of political hogwash, but at least there are no lies in it. My passion for the case is in it, and, in a sense, I set out to disguise my passion. I wanted the movie to be evenhanded, which is another decision I had to make. I could have had a lot of people up there on the screen saying, "It's outrageous that this man.....," but I wanted the movie to at least try to be even. I didn't want the audience to recoil. I wanted them to get sucked into it, so I kept it very low-key in the hope that the passion of the film would creep up on them. So an FBI agent might sit there and say, "Well, that's very cynical," and I suppose it is cynical. I think the ethics in filmmaking is pretty hairy stuff. Whose side are you on? All I can say about *Incident at Oglala* is that I haven't lied. I may have obscured some things and brushed over other things, and someone could make another film about this situation and it might be quite different.

I wanted to discuss the differences between *Oglala* and *Thunderheart*, which takes on the same issues. I felt that *Thunderheart* idealized the central character while the Indian issues sort of sank into the background, and that the violence in which he sort of finds himself is contradictory to *Oglala*. *Thunderheart* just doesn't seem to fit in with your other work.

There are certain realities at work here. In a sense, it was a pretty ballsy decision for the studio to even make the movie. Fundamentally, the movie is saying that the American government was seditious and the American government condoned murder and violence. And on a practical level, even if the movie wasn't that expensive by Hollywood's standards, it still cost \$60 million. So I had to make a decision. Do I make an honest, tough, and ultimately incredibly depressing film because the American Indian movement is dead and there's frankly very little hope for the American Indian to survive unless Washington has a lobotomy? And I don't mean just throwing money at the problem. That doesn't work at all. They've got to create a whole infrastructure on the reservations. At Pine Ridge, where we shot, there was 90 percent unemployment. Well, you can throw as much money as you like at people and it won't work. The most vivid, dramatic image I saw there was the "survival food gifts." It read on the cardboard, "A gift from the people of the United States." Fucking hell, what are they talking about? And there must be millions of cardboard boxes and no one in power sees the irony of it. So the truth of *Thunderheart* would have been incredibly depressing. The film would not have been allowed to be made had it been that depressing or if it had centered around -- as a lot of critics of the film have complained about -- an American Indian. The studio simply wouldn't invest that kind of money in it. So I had to make a decision. Do I want to make the film and try in an entertaining way to educate people who would never see *Incident at Oglala*? Or do I just walk away from it and say, "No, this isn't completely truthful. I'm misrepresenting it." And I decided that I wanted to make the film. The

critics of the film have said it was sentimental and they're right. The film has a kind of "feel good" at the end. But I don't think that's irresponsible because I feel that the end is more about Val Kilmer's character at a literal and metaphoric crossroads. So I made a decision with my maker that I would make the film, and I knew I would do it better than anybody because I would make it as truthful as I could. The politics were sound and I couldn't not do it.

Let's open this up to the audience.

I understand what you're talking about in terms of a loaded film, especially a documentary. I've only seen *Roger and Me* once, but I'm curious to know what you found offensive.

He messed around with all the dates and, therefore, with cause and effect. I thought the subject of the film -- the effect of corporate America on community -- was breathtaking and incredibly important, but he simply moved events around, and by doing so, I think he shot himself in the foot because he gave the people who are quick to criticize documentaries the grounds to criticize it. I can't really go into detail without going through the film with you, but basically, he simply



said certain things happened at certain times when they didn't. He messed around with all sorts of cause and effect in the film.

But it seems like he probably didn't even need to do that.

Exactly. He didn't need to at all, and that's what makes it even more idiotic to me because it weakened what I think could have been an incredibly powerful film.

How do you get your *Up* subjects to feel comfortable enough to open up to you?

I think it's both a personality thing and a question of reassurance. I don't play tricks with them. To get them to do it there has to be a certain agreement on what they want and don't want to discuss. Tony, the taxi driver, might not want to discuss money because he's cheating on his taxes, and that kind of thing. And if they say to me, "Look, I don't want to discuss this," I respect that and they know they're not going to be tricked. We've been through a lot together and even though I only see some of them when we're filming, there is a special bond because we've gone through it together. But sometimes it's just a question of wearing people down. I always find

that if I just keep going -- I shoot on 16mm so I can shoot a lot of stuff -- I can get some good material. Sometimes the best interviewing technique is not to say anything and just let them keep talking. I do very long interviews, and this allows me to establish a bond with the subject and sometimes they'll forget that you're filming them. I also have a great cameraman who has done three of these with me, and we always use pretty long lenses so he's a good way back. So it's kind of easy for them not to feel borne down upon. And I suppose it's my relationship with them. Also, in some perverse way, they understand what's expected of them and they know they've got to deliver the goods. It's not like our interview here. I've got to get more stuff out of them. It's got to be more intimate.

Did you know those people before you began this series?

No, I found them. That was my job.

As seven-year-old children. You know, I remember seeing that film on television in Manchester, and I was tremendously affected by the kid who does the drill bit.

Bruce, yeah.

Well, he's drilled, but the kid who does it.....

Something Miner..... What was it? I've forgotten his name.

Do you ever feel uncomfortable throwing yourself into the lives of these people every seven years?

It's odd and it's very dispiriting because I don't have the mentality of a journalist or that ability to knock on a door and kind of push my way in. And it was odd doing *Thunderheart* and *Oglala* back to back in the same place because on the documentary there were five of us in a van driving around trying to find people who were avoiding us and threatening us. And I couldn't even offer them money because I didn't want to. I had to be politically correct, so there was no question of finance. It was quite difficult because a lot of people didn't want the film made. They felt that it was opening up old wounds and a lot of people were very upset by it. Yes, it was awkward and I felt very intrusive. And then suddenly I'm there with a huge Hollywood crew and forty-ton trucks and five assistant directors running around and money being thrown everywhere.

They must have wondered what hit them. How do you justify it?

By the end product. That's one of my great moral blackmailing techniques with the *Up* people, too. I tell them that it's a unique and valuable film. I don't think anyone's ever done anything like this before, certainly not a longitudinal study like this. People find it moving and entertaining and I think -- and this is my super blackmailing technique -- we have a kind of obligation to do it. Oomph. If you're too sensitive, you would never be able to get out of bed. I feel worse when I'm really going to crucify people. I sat smiling and being charming while gleefully watching the prosecutors in *Incident at Oglala* bury themselves. I look at the pictures of their children and wonder what they're going to think when they see this film, and I don't know.

How do you feel about the limited box office success of *Thunderheart*?

Well, I don't feel very good about it, but not for the reasons Michael gave. I think that the film is too complicated and didn't find a wide audience, but I tend not to go back on it. I try to learn from it and not brood about it. I think the film wasn't successful because people couldn't understand it, and I suppose in some ways I got slightly buried by my documentary.

Do you think you might have known too much?

Yeah, I think so. But I also think that if someone else had done it and had not gotten it accurate, it would have been laughable. The politics of the original script was simply the FBI taking on Native Americans, which is ridiculous because that isn't what happened at all. What really happened -- which was much more sinister -- was what happened in Vietnam. The American government pitted Indian against Indian and created a lot of conflict. I had to explain the two Indian sides and how the federal government financed one side against the other, and it got pretty complicated. But I get kind of depressed thinking about the films I've done. I'm happy to talk about them, but you won't get me saying I think they're terrific and all that. I'm more likely to knock them down a bit. I tend to see only what terrible mistakes I made or what could have been better, which I don't mind. It sounds a bit of an affectation, but it isn't. And that's the way I



generally feel about them. How much better they should have been, and how could I let that happen, and why did I do that, and how could I have allowed that actor to do that, and why didn't I have enough courage to do this or that, and all those other things I regret. That's the attitude I tend to have.

Is there anything you find yourself saying to yourself over and over again?

Well, I think it's always, "Have the courage" or "Speak up" or say to some well-classed cameraman, "That's a terrible idea." Have the courage to be confrontational if it's necessary. Don't walk away from it and don't take the easy option. And also, just work as hard as you can and never settle for anything less than what you want. If an actor wants to do another take or you want to do another hour on the script, do it. Just put as much into it as you physically can. Don't let something go. I suppose I say that to myself every hour of every day, especially when I'm shooting. You get so tired and the crew is cold and they want to go home and it's so easy not to do another take. You have to stop yourself and maybe force yourself to do it because the crew

will get warm again, but you'll never have the right take for the movie.

What kind of relationship do you have with your director of photography?

It's a very, very important relationship, even more so on a documentary than a feature film. A documentary cameraman is much more on his own and you have to trust his instincts. You can never relive a moment and quite often you're not even there. I just make sure that I always provide earphones for the cameraman when doing documentaries so they can hear what's going when I'm interviewing someone. They're just more part of the whole process than the director of photography on a feature. It's great if you can find a director of photography who comes to rehearsals and becomes really involved in pre-production, but it doesn't really matter if they do all that. It might make their work a tiny bit better if they do, but it won't make or break you. I've been interviewed now and again for things, and I've seen cameramen kind of set their camera up. The interviewer asks the questions and they just walk away and I think, "What's going on?" If the director of photography on a documentary doesn't listen and doesn't have any real rapport with the people, you can forget it. If I'm interviewing someone on the *Up* thing, I can't tell the cameraman where to be. He has to be someone who has a real sympathy for the material. Now I could really care less whether Dante Spinotti, who is shooting *Blink*, is interested in blind people or not. I just know he's a really great cameraman who is going to light it beautifully. But if I'm doing *Incident at Oglala*, I care incredibly about what the cameraman thinks because he has to become politically involved in it. They can really skew your film if they see things differently than you do. I could care less whether Dante Spinotti or Conrad Hall like actors, but I look for documentary cameramen who get along very well with people. If Maryse Alberti, who shot *Oglala*, isn't incredibly personable with Native Americans, I'm in big trouble. So I think the documentary cameraman is much more involved in the subject matter.

When you decide on a script that you really like, what do you do next?

It depends on where a script has come from. If it's come from a studio.....

Let's say it doesn't have money.

If it doesn't have money then I have to figure out what the power of the script is. Is it story driven? Is it cast driven? If I immediately see that it's going to be cast driven and when I approach the money people they're going to ask, "Who's in it?" then I know I've got to try to cast it. I've got to get actors to commit to it. If it's story driven and has something that isn't going to be dependent on casting and it has no money attached to it, then I think I would probably start pitching it to studios. But I've always found that it's much better to go into a studio or a financing organization with as much of the package as you can. It gives you more power. And if the script needs work, too bad. You only get one shot, so you've got to make it the best shot you've got. If it means getting the writer to do another draft for nothing, persuade him to do it. If it means ringing up Michelle Pfeiffer's agent and begging him to get her to read it, do that. You should go to a studio well armed. I think there's a revolution going on in Hollywood. It's still murder to get films made, but with the decentralization of filmmaking, studios are no longer interested in making films. They're much more interested in picking up films or financing independents. They are still the center of the industry when it comes to distribution, and in that area they're becoming more and more monolithic. But I think film production, which is kind of encouraging, is becoming more

splintered because it's so expensive for studios to make movies now. Their overheads have become so gigantic that they can't afford to do it anymore. They can only really afford to do big, expensive movies that they spend \$50 million on for production and \$30 million on for advertising and make \$100 million back in three weeks. Most films don't have that kind of arithmetic, and it's not worth their while to do a \$12 million movie when an independent can make the same movie for half that cost. So it's an interesting time. There's a lot more foreign money and independent financing now, too. Money is tight, but I think the economy of filmmaking is changing, and that means there are more people you can approach with a script.

Do you think that copycat movies degrade the original?

I've always believed that copycat movies never work, but I don't think they trivialize the original because the audience's imagination is captured the first time out. The second and third time out -- and that's what I try to avoid -- they do less and less well. I think the copycats are the ones that suffer. I don't think the original movies suffer.

I was wondering if the people from the *Up* films get paid.

Yes, and I paid them all the same amount -- 3,000 pounds each, I think -- because I felt that it



was a commercial enterprise and they were giving of their time. And, I admit, it was part of my blackmail to make them do it. Also, whenever we win cash prizes for something, I just split it up and give it to them.

Do any of them get approached on the street or anything like that?

Well, they do a bit and it's the worst. You can understand why it's so hateful. They get fame for a short time without the power or money to support it. They get notoriety without any of the good side effects. For a period after it's broadcast, usually two or months or so, they become celebrities, but then people forget about them. Some of them like it. Tony, the cab driver, loves it. He's dying to be recognized and all that. But I can't deny that it is a very serious invasion of their privacy. It would be unfair not to give some kind of compensation commensurate with the amount of money that's spent on the film.

I have a stylistic question. Is the motivation behind those beautiful soaring shots over

the mesas in *Oglala* and *Thunderheart* the same? In *Thunderheart*, they seem to signify that Val Kilmer is going into one of those dream states, and in *Oglala*, they seem to impart a sense of destiny and of the forces working against Leonard.

This isn't to demean anything you've said, but I probably didn't envision any of that. One of the most striking things that occurred to me when I was driving around was all this magnificent land. It kind of dramatized the tragic history of the Native American because, in the middle of it all, is a ghetto. You get a really strong sense of people being driven off the land into some kind of slum, and I felt the best way to dramatize that was to photograph it from the air. I'm not cheapening what you said because clearly it does have a kind of mystical impact. That was the reason I chose to do it. I learned it on *Oglala* and stole it for *Thunderheart*. I was really trying to make a political point in *Oglala* by showing how people are being disenfranchised from the land. Then it occurred to me that it was very powerful and very beautiful and very mystical, so I put it to use in *Thunderheart*.

You talked about compromising with studios and all of that. Have you ever been in a position where they pushed you to a line you would not cross?

It happens a lot. There's a lot of reasons you walk away from a film.

Does that affect your standing with that studio?

It might. But what can you do? The terrific row that I had with the studio on *Thunderheart* was over the relationship between Val and the girl. They wanted the film to be a love story and I said, "Absolutely not. That idea is obscene." By that time I'd gotten to know a number of the women on whom that character was based, and I just couldn't live with myself suggesting that one of these women would even think about consorting with an FBI agent. I told them that, to me, the love story was between him and the old man and they were quite angry about that. They really wanted a heterosexual love story in the film, but I think I made my case quite clear. I think that if you present yourself passionately enough within the perimeters you know you can achieve, people will back off.

How do you deal with agents?

It's very difficult and unproductive. I have a certain standing in Hollywood, not great standing, mind you, but I can get to most agents and actors. When I was casting *Blink*, for example, a lot of actresses turned it down, and I'm curious to know how many of them actually got to read it. An agent will say things like, "Hmmm, this is a New Line film. This isn't a major studio. Maybe there are other blind movies out there. Do we want our client to do this? We've got this offer from somebody else." Michelle Pfeiffer turned it down, Julia Roberts turned it down, Demi Moore turned it down, Geena Davis turned it down, Jodie Foster turned it down, Meg Ryan turned it down. I'd be very interested in finding out how their agents influenced them because I'm as curious as you are about that question. I think agents can become very obstructive. I wonder in my own life how much stuff I don't get to see because my agent unilaterally says no to someone. I object to that. I have someone who reads for me because I can't read everything that comes in, but I wouldn't mind being exposed to scripts that people wanted me to do. I think the super agent, the power agent, is a very destructive force in Hollywood. They have far too much power. In

Europe, it's quite different. You ring the actor up and say, "Do you want to work with me? Do you want to read the script?" It's one on one. I try to do that here when I can, but it's terribly difficult and some actors get very upset and some agents get very upset. But at least you know the actor is going to read it, and you know the actor is going to personally turn you down.

Is Hollywood as awful a place as people say?

No, of course it isn't. It's kind of thrilling because we live in a society -- in America, in the West -- which doesn't manufacture anything anymore, and it's wonderful to be part of a community that actually produces something that goes all over the world. You may say that ramming American culture down the throat of the world is not a thrilling idea, but nonetheless, people want to see American movies. And there are some terrific American movies. Of course, there are some horrible ones, too, but Hollywood is the center of the film-producing world and a \$60 billion industry, which is a substantial part of American life and how people see themselves. I just think that it's wonderful -- especially after watching England's economy collapse when I was growing up -- to be part of a powerful industry which produces. People know what they're doing whether they're a dolly grip or a studio executive. If Arnold Schwarzenegger has to be paid \$15 million to go to work, they'll pay it because they'll get it back. It sounds obscene, but it's business. And you can spit on business and all that, but business is at the heart of it. I mean, I'm as socialist and left wing as anybody, but people have got to work and people have got to create. Of course it's horrible. But I can imagine living in Detroit in the auto industry can be horrible. You have to play a lot of games and what is so frightening about it -- and all of you in this room know it



-- is that the business we're all in is a very gray area. Who the fuck knows whether anything is good or bad. You read one review that says this and another review that says that, and you show something to one friend and they say this and another friend says that. I mean, standards are just not absolute. We live in a very gray world of taste. *Coal Miner's Daughter* was a huge success, but I think it happened to come out at the right time. *Gorky Park* was a failure, but it might have been a huge success if it had come out five years later when people were becoming interested in Russia. Now I'm not saying they're both good or they're both bad, but so much of it is a question of timing and the moment. And you can't legislate for that. It'll drive you crazy. Of course I'd like to have a hit film. I haven't had a hit since *Coal Miner's Daughter*. You know what I can do about it? Nothing. There are a lot of egos that have to be massaged, there are a lot of tricks to be played, and it can be very depressing. A lot of very shitty films get made. That is undeniable. But nonetheless, Hollywood is the center of the film business. I left England because I wanted

to make films that people all over the world would see. I didn't want to stay and make Channel Four films. Better men than me have stayed, but I didn't want to do that. I wanted to work in the commercial cinema and Hollywood is the place. There's a lot of it that's bad, but I think that basically what it does is great. If you don't like it, you don't have to go there.

What would you have like to have been told when you were 25?

Well, the best advice I ever got was from one of the great heroes of my life, the theater director Peter Brooke. When I was at Cambridge, he came down to give a talk -- I suppose a bit like this one -- and I was one of the committee that had arranged it so I got to meet the great man and I asked him exactly what you just asked me. He said, "Do it. If you want to be a director, direct. If it means directing on a street corner, do it. Don't go to Hollywood and sit around and think somebody is going to offer you a big picture. Don't think you are going to be Steven Spielberg or John Landis or whoever. My advice is to do the job. Do your small film. Do your film on video because if you've got talent..... I've had huge breaks in my life and you're always going to need luck, but on the other hand, maybe you create luck. Maybe you create breaks. Do the job. And from talking with you today it sounds like that is what you do here at Columbia. Make a film and maybe someone, somewhere, will see it. Write a script. If you can write, then you have a tremendous advantage because Hollywood swallows material. Hollywood is desperate for material. If you're like me and can't create material, then make films. Do the stuff. Try and get people to see it. Do it. Don't think about it, do it.

What's your dream project?

People ask me that and I know it sounds mundane, but I don't have any. I would spend years on projects that never got made and it broke my heart. Maybe it's a sign of weakness or lack of dedication, but I always feel I have to have three or four things going on at once. There's no point of having a great dream to do something because -- and this is advice for anybody and it's not cynical at all -- you have to have certain realities about Hollywood. If I had just done a \$200 million movie, then it might be a real question. But I haven't, so it doesn't behoove me to think about it because it distracts me from the real job at hand.

So you have a dream project but you don't want to say what it is?

No, I don't actually. I know it sounds awful, but I don't. I have a dream to keep working and to do better work, but I don't have a dream of some project I want to make.

I was really moved by *Gorillas in the Mist* and was thinking about your comment about being more successful with female protagonists.

I don't know. It's been the great revolution of my lifetime: women's rights, women's lib, women's changing role in society, whatever you want to call it. And I've been very tuned into it. I'm very interested in women and women's role in society, and so I would never do a film, I don't think, that puts women in a minor role. It's very difficult to find films which don't portray, you know, the woman sitting in the tent saying, "Don't do it, don't go" to the warrior husband. I don't mean you can't have a family and all that, but I like strong successful career women. And one of the sadnesses of it is that I missed it in the *Up* series. Maybe I'm more attuned to it now because

I missed it there, I don't know. I only chose four women out of the fourteen interviewees and none of them went through that predicament, that revolution. All four women either settled for what they had or decided to have a family and not pursue a career. And, ironically, that series, which was supposed to be a social history of the last thirty years, missed the revolution.

Usually after each *Up* film comes out you sort of compound them together. Have you ever thought of going back and using material you've never used before?

I do that. If something becomes relevant, if someone's life takes a turn, I'll go back and pick up stuff I've never used before. In *35 Up*, when this whole business of Nick's deaf brother emerged and he started crying, it was actually news to me. So I went back through all the stuff I'd shot at 14 and 21, which is when the brother is there, and I dragged out material that I'd never used, that I'd even forgotten we'd shot. So I do change it if it becomes permanent. And often the reverse. Sometimes I'll take a completely wrong course with a person because I second guessed things. I was convinced that Tony at 21 was going to end up in prison by the time he was 28 and I'd be interviewing him through bars. So I made a big deal in *21 Up* about taking him around high crime areas in the East End and talking about some of the more famous East End criminals, the Kray twins and all that. I was wrong. And I thought Nick at 28 was in a very strange kind of marriage.

We all thought he was going to get divorced.

Yes, well I did, too. But not only was I wrong, I completely alienated his wife, and now she won't speak to me and refuses to be in the film and refuses to allow her children to be in the film. So



I really shot myself in the foot there. Sometimes I make these almost unconscious predictions about people and they're wrong and I have to retrieve it in the next film. But unusual things do happen and I do go back to unused material.

I read that you're interested in doing a project about Tiananmen Square.

I'm trying to get money for it now. It's taken me a long time to figure it out. First of all, I got very interested in two things: what happened to the students of Tiananmen Square and what happened to the whole democratic movement. Here was an uprising apparently of millions of people. What happened? So I got into it and met with a lot of the students who came to America

and my first thought was that New York, where most of them are, is the Paris of the '20s. These were the future leaders of China -- the Ho Chi Minhs and the Chou En Lais of the '60s and '70s -- now in exile. But I felt after talking to them that it was not the right way to structure it. I also figured out that I could never get into China and do it properly because they'd wise up very quickly and throw me out. But now I'm trying to pursue it by focusing on two of the students within the whole Hong Kong issue which is coming to a head and seems to be seminal to the whole future of democracy in China. If the Chinese and British governments are fighting over the extent of democracy in Hong Kong, and if the British government and the local people win, it's going to be a real sorespot for Beijing. It seems to me that I could, in fact, tell the story of the fight for democracy in China through Hong Kong and through these students. They are very interesting and very political and are prepared to go back to Hong Kong. They are also willing to tell me how they got out of Tiananmen Square and escaped to Paris and New York and who paid for it. So it has taken me a long time to figure it out, but I may not even be able to make the film because it would be quite an expensive documentary.

Who have you had the best time working with?

As an actor?

Anyone.

I suppose the best answer to that is who I stayed friends with. John Seal photographed *Gorillas in the Mist* and he's still a close friend. And I'm still very friendly with Tommy Lee Jones and Sissy Spacek. But making a film is never really a good time. It's sort of a nightmare. Sometimes it's an unconscionable nightmare, other times just a mild nightmare, but it's a nightmare nonetheless.

What about the cutting room?

The cutting room is great. It's like being in heaven. The nightmare is over, the studio is off your back for a time, and you're not spending a lot of money. I think production on *Blink* will cost about \$80,000 dollars a day, so the pressure on you to keep on schedule is incredible. Everybody is looking at the dailies and moaning about them and everybody is tired and cold, but the cutting room is nothing like that, and it's warm. And now there are only a million options instead of a billion and you're in the sun again both metaphorically and literally. I guess I'm a bit overenthusiastic about it because it represents the end of the horrors of production.

What is your personal take on why there are so few women directors given that women have broken through the ranks in so many other fields?

I can't answer that because I'm not an employer. But when Jonathan Demme got the Directors Guild Award last year for *The Silence of the Lambs*, he said this very harrowing thing: "There have been 45 awards and I'm the 45th male caucasian to get it." It's pretty grim, isn't it? I applaud Black filmmakers, too. I certainly don't think women do the job less well than men. I just think Hollywood is an incredibly conservative, reactionary and sexist place. They'll put women where it suits them. They'll even have women run the studios, but then you don't find those women giving women jobs as directors. There is this kind of myth, like war I suppose, that men run

battles better than women, but there is no basis for that. There are some very good women directors, but not enough of them get a chance.

Would you make a film about Hollywood?

Not unless it was really good. I must say I thought *The Player* was a bit lame for such a maverick as Altman who has had such a remarkable anti-establishment career. I thought it could have been much tougher. And if he can't do it, I'm not sure that it can be done.

How important is music in your films?

Well, it's very important and actually I'm in a quandary at the moment because I can't afford to pay James Horner to do the music for *Blink* and I like him because we have a shorthand. Music is a nightmare for me because I'm not a musician, and although I've done a lot of films about music, I'm not very well educated in it. I can be very articulate about production design and about pieces of a scene with an actor, yet I find it very difficult to be articulate about music. But I have this kind of relationship with Horner where I can babble in tremendous platitudes and he'll bring it to life. Actually, that is one of the perks of being a director. You speak in these giant truisms and then other people make it real. Unfortunately, I've got to find a new composer for *Blink* and it's very worrisome because I don't know where to start. Because of the budget, I feel I've got to hire someone who is young and hungry. But, yes, music is very, very important.

The performances in your films are very natural and effective and I was wondering what qualities you look for in an actor.



Thank you for saying that. I honestly think that it's because I rehearse them. I make them understand -- or they make me understand -- what's going on. I don't allow actors to use tricks. I don't allow actors to become theatrical.

What do you mean by theatrical?

Well, acting. Really having nothing going on inside. Maybe it's horseshit, but I think if someone is lying on film, you can see it. Someone who is being untruthful tends to fall on theatrical tricks

like mannerisms and all that. I pay a lot of attention to an actor's understanding of his role and the dynamics of a scene, and I think that brings a naturalness out of it because people can understand what they're talking about. And since they know what they are talking about, they don't need to resort to mannerisms. I watch Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio in my movie, *Class Action* and *White Sands*, which she did for Roger Donaldson, and although neither movie was great, the difference between her performance in my film and in Roger's film was apparent to me. Because she didn't understand what was going on, because the part was poorly written and because the plot was so dense, she used tons of the mannerisms that I had spent so many rehearsals trying to get rid of. I didn't get rid of them by saying, "Don't do that," but by making her understand the scene so she had something real to play. I suppose that's the key to the question about the documentary side of my life. I want everything to be real and I want the film to be answerable to certain truths. So I instinctively make the actors respond to that. I think naturalness is synonymous with a reality and if an actor is being real then it seems natural because it's not forced, not theatrical.

I'm currently researching a piece based on a true event. Since you've done this for so many of your films, I'm wondering if you have any advice because it deals with a dark subject and I don't want to give it a happy ending.

I don't think you should worry about the ending right now. I think you should worry about its scale. Film is great as a microcosm, so it depends on whether it's a big event or a small one.

It's a rape.

I think the mistake we make all the time is to try to second guess. I like "sex, lies, and videotape." It was a small, independent film that found an audience, made a lot of money and created a career. I think what you have to do is be honorable and honest with the material. It's a bit different from what I was saying about *Thunderheart*, but that's a different kind of story. If you start second guessing what people who put money into it or what the studios or what so-and-so's going to say about it, then I think it stops being yours. I think you should do what you feel and just make an honest piece of drama.

What about in terms of research?

Obviously, I would tell you to research it up the kazoo. You can never find out too much. I suppose there comes a point when your eyes begin to water and you can't take much more. But I've never felt any harm in getting to the truth of the matter. Research has always gotten me out of trouble, not into it.

Do you have a formalized system to evaluate what the effect of your visits are on the cultures that you cross into? *Thunderheart* amazed me because the trailers didn't really show what it was about. My friends kept saying, "You missed that one? Oh, it's great! It made people who live on reservations feel good about who they were."

I think it's an instinctive thing. As I said, when I took my first job away from home, I just found that I had a natural curiosity. I like to travel and I'm naturally curious about other people's cultures. Being in Africa was an astounding experience. I suppose like anybody, I don't like being

in discomfort and making *Gorillas in the Mist* was incredibly uncomfortable. But I made a vow to myself. I said, "Look, don't wish this to be over. Don't long for a hot bath or a nice hotel or England or Los Angeles because you know you'll never do this again. You'll never be in this place again, so get the most out of it." And I think I do have an ability to get something out of places.

Do you know what the effect of that film will be on white women who go to Africa and try to build relationships with Africans about their land and wildlife? Do you think you might ever develop a way to measure your effect over time?

No, no, no, no. I can't answer that at all. I just think I have a traveller's instinct, that's all.

I have a pretty hard question.

Oh God.....

Because of your documentary background, did you consult with Loretta Lynn on *Coal Miner's Daughter*?

That was pretty tricky because she was very helpful, but there had to come a point when I had to hand the thing over to Sissy. I had to say to Sissy, "Now, you play the role," and I had to say to Loretta that she couldn't be with Sissy anymore. She was able to give Sissy an enormous amount of help, but I found that it had gotten to the point where she became somewhat possessive of Sissy. Not in an unpleasant way, of course, but kind of subconsciously trying to control her, and there finally came a point when I had to say, "Enough of this." Also, I would never allow Loretta to be around when we were shooting. And because Sissy liked to keep researching and could have spent years with Loretta, I just had to draw the line and say, "I think you've done



enough of that," because it was becoming confusing. I think you have to be pretty simpleminded when you're doing biographies because you're telling someone's life in two hours and you have to become incredibly arbitrary at some point and say, "I'm not going to deal with this. I'm not going to deal with that." Now in Dian Fossey's case, it was trickier because the more I got into it, the more mad I thought she was, and I finally decided that I wanted to do the film without spending \$25 million on a film about a lunatic. I thought what she did with her life was

remarkable and tremendously symbolic, heroic and valuable, but she probably went mad there and eventually became completely uncontrollable. I think the truth of the matter was that she was raving mad by the time she was murdered, but I didn't want to make that kind of film. Now you might think that's an obnoxious decision, and it very well may be, but I made it. I wanted the film to be heroic. I didn't want to undercut what we had learned from her life by maybe telling more truth than I thought was healthy. I began to find out things I didn't want to know, and a lot of people who knew her were rather annoyed by the film because she was disliked so much. I found very few people who liked her, and if I had made a film about a nutter, I think it would have diminished the importance of what she did. I know that this totally contradicts what I said earlier about never hiding from the truth, but I had to draw the line. Sigourney was great and I can't imagine anybody else doing this because she's so physically and mentally strong. Every day we were shooting with the gorillas was a nightmare because sometimes we would have to walk with equipment for five hours through tropical undergrowth to find them and sometimes we'd never find them. Other times we'd come across them in ten minutes. I wasn't allowed to move them or disturb them in any way and I was only allowed three or four people in the unit. Sigourney did her own hair and make-up and recorded her own sound. I would have to carry stock and the tripod and be the assistant cameraman every day for eight weeks, seven days a week. I can't imagine another actress who could have the commitment and the strength to do that day after day and then shoot. She was with these fearsome 450-pound beasts who are benign to humans and like to play. But their idea of play was not the same as ours and it was very dangerous. Her commitment to it was just extraordinary, considering the unfortunate experience we'd had when we first went up there. It was boiling hot and I'd gone up with some studio executives and they had all passed out and the gorillas were around, but we couldn't see anything because it was such deep undergrowth. All we could hear was growling and farting and I thought, "What am I doing here?" But then a gorilla immediately came up to Sigourney and started playing with her camera and I've always wondered if they thought Dian had come back. She sensed that, too, and she had this remarkable relationship with them which still continues. She's become very vocal about protection for the mountain gorilla and they have become a big part of her life.

By what criteria do you judge your films and which film do you think is your most successful?

I think the criteria are simple. How many people saw it? If I make a film that I think is pretty damn good and nobody goes to see it, I don't see the sense of that. The art we work in, if it is art, is communication. If I can't get people to see it and if I don't deliver something that people want to see, then I don't know what I'm doing. If I spend millions of dollars of people's money and no one goes to see the movie, I can't, in all honesty, look at that film and say it's successful. Based on that, I guess *Coal Miner's Daughter* was my most successful film. I could also say *35 Up* is successful because it enters the culture. It's hugely successful on television in England and in theatrical release here in America. So I look at that and I know it's successful because I've communicated something. I look at *Thunderheart* and I don't feel that way. It did okay, but it didn't really find the sort of audience that I wanted it to. Now with *Incident at Oglala*, we're waiting for the results of Leonard's appeal. If they give Leonard a new trial or, God willing, let him out, then I would think it was a successful film because maybe someone in that courtroom saw it and might have been influenced by it. Maybe you'll think I'm being kind of venal, but in general, I think you have to judge success by the ability of the film to communicate. Pretty depressing, isn't it?

Does being successful at the box office necessarily mean that the audience got what you wanted them to get out of the film?

I think if you really find a big audience, then you are communicating, unless it's some complete misunderstanding. But I can't believe that millions of people can watch it and have the same misunderstanding. I can only assume that people understood what I wanted to communicate to them. Again, it sounds like a terribly venal answer, but I truly believe that it's my best film.

Once the cameras are rolling, do you still find yourself trying to manipulate the actors?

I think it's all plotting and devious, yes. The great Billy Wilder story about Marilyn Monroe on *Some Like It Hot* was that she came in with her acting coach and was doing all this useless stuff and Wilder just tired her out. He didn't even put film in the camera for the first 40 takes. She got so tired that all she could do was just say the lines. Now that's an extreme example, but sometimes you just have to wear this kind of theatricality out of people because it never works. As soon as you see it on the screen, you think, "Why did I let him get away with that!" Sometimes, if it's serious, I'll make an actor look at himself and say, "Look, this is what's happening."

But mostly you don't let them look at dailies.

No, I do. I'm very open about that. I had this big thing with Bill Hurt on *Gorky Park*. He was playing a detective, and he seemed to think that detectives had to think before speaking. In the early scenes I was shooting him as though he was on valium. I couldn't convince him. He was very stubborn. So I sat him down and showed him the footage and said, "This is ridiculous. You're playing this so slowly." An editor, no matter how skillful, cannot make someone speak faster. But I don't like to show actors dailies if it worries them. When I did *Agatha*, I had the best cinematographer in the world, Vittorio Storaro, and Vanessa Redgrave, who is perhaps the greatest film actress in the world, but after two days of shooting she came to me and said, "You've



got to fire Vittorio because he's making me look like a forty-year-old woman." Well, that's what she was. So that was the end of Vanessa seeing dailies.

Well, we've reached half-past eight. Thank you so much for giving us of your time.

Thank you for inviting me.



The
Filmography
of
Michael Apted

The Up Series 1956 - ?
The Triple Echo 1972
Stardust 1974
The Squeeze 1977
Agatha 1979
Coal Miner's Daughter 1980
Continental Divide 1981
Gorky Park 1983
Critical Condition 1987
Gorillas in the Mist 1988
The Long Way Home 1989
Class Action 1991
Incident at Oglala 1991
Thunderheart 1992
Blink 1993

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