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***THE SWEETEST SOUND.* DIARIO DE TRABAJO. SELECCIÓN 1998-2001**
THE SWEETEST SOUND*. WORK JOUNRAL. SELECTED ENTRIES 1998-2001*

ALAN BERLINER

16

July 15, 1998
1:30 pm

This small plane is about to take off. Expect some jittery handwriting.

I'm en route to Branson, Missouri, to film the 30th annual gathering of the Jim Smith Society. This is the first real shoot for "the name film," and I'm a bit nervous. I don't know what to expect, coming all the way out here in the middle of the middle of the country to observe firsthand how people with the same name come together to create enduring communities that somehow function like surrogate families.

I begin with one simple fact. Smith is the most common surname in the United States. One way or another, you cannot make a film about names without going through Smith. And that's why I'm here.

My mission is to come away with an important piece of a (still to be determined) puzzle. To shoot something that hopefully influences the shape of that puzzle—and (eventually) becomes a critical, inextricable part of it.
All of this is just another way of saying that I really don't know what I'm doing yet.
As is customary for the way I work (and always existentially, not to mention financially dangerous on my part), I begin with an intuitive inkling, without ever really knowing where I'm going to

end up. And so this is my first plunge—not so much a trip to Missouri, as a dive into the unknown.

I also want to mention that yesterday I sent out hundreds and hundreds of letters to Berliner households all over the world in search of additional "Alan Berliners." I already know of nine others, but I'm still hoping to find an "AB" from a different generation; someone really young—age 5 or 6 perhaps—to add to the diversity of my upcoming dinner party (for all the Alan Berliners in the world) this coming October. I've more or less given up hope of finding a woman named Alan Berliner or an Alan Berliner of color. In my letter, I also solicited responses as to how each of them (the Berliners out there) tells the story of where they got their surname. Perhaps I can glean some new theories for use in the film.

October 15, 1998
3:16 pm

I sometimes think of films in the terminology of Olympic diving. What the commentators and judges refer to as "degree of difficulty." Every film—every work of art—sets out a task. A challenge. A plane of aspiration. What it attempts to do. The spectrum and range of its ambitions.

The more difficult and the more ambitious—by that I suppose I mean the greater the "risks" taken—obviously the higher the degree of difficulty. This is one way I privately measure my response to films (or any other art form I see for that matter)—on my secret "DOD" scorecard. The higher my "DOD" score, the more I tend to admire the artist, and by direct extension, the project itself.

This opens up new avenues for discussing art as either "interesting failures" on the one hand, or "safe successes" on the other. As with more difficult dives, the stakes are always higher; the risk of failure greater. According to this method, judging (that is to say "judgment") is more keen and discerning, but also more understanding and forgiving. And if "the dive" is successful, both the measure of its difficulty and the difficulty of its success should always be recognized.

Naturally, (if only out of self-preservation and as a way of lowering expectations), I see this "names film" as something with a very high "degree of difficulty." Something akin to a simultaneous double somersault, triple back flip and quadruple pike dive—I have no idea what that actually means, (I just threw some words together) except that it feels as though I'm about to attempt an *impossible* dive.

Why do I choose such a state of affairs? However perverse it sounds, I like the idea of tackling a subject that no one else would ever risk wasting their time or risking their careers on. No one has ever tried to make a film about names—and its no wonder. There's nothing visual about them.

There's no inherent drama. They're not fashionable. Not sexy. They don't strike people as particularly emotional subjects. They're not a part of life that people give much thought to at all.

In fact, despite their ubiquity, names are invisible points of reference for how we understand and reckon with "identity." Like the color of our eyes, the shape of our ears, the color of our hair, our body types, even our personalities—names are intrinsic "constants"—always under the radar of serious consideration.

There's too little about them, but there's also too much about them. They differ from culture to culture, from nation to nation, from race to race, from religion to religion, class… ethnicity… etc. Some believers (true believers at that) would give them the power of magic, or a kind of significance usually associated with astrology, graphology, phrenology, and (especially)—because they often are intertwined—with numerology.

For my film to succeed, I need to keep reminding myself of two simple facts: One—Everyone has a name. And two—more importantly—everyone has a story to tell about their name.

Perhaps the biggest problem I face in conceptualizing a film about names is that so much of what fascinates me is the sheer quantity of *information* that surrounds them. Statistical. Anecdotal. Historical. Cultural. Psychological. In some ways they're related to just about everything—literature, history, linguistics, psychology, sociology, cultural studies… the list goes on. But all of it—if not presented in a dynamic way spells boredom—and—as my father would say, a response of, "who cares?" from an otherwise indifferent and skeptical audience.

Can I make a film that is full of information but also filled with emotional substance? A film that is intellectually complex but also psychologically evocative? Better yet, even provocative? How can I link ideas to information? Information to meaning? Meaning to something that matters? How can I make it so that people never think about their own names in quite the same way ever again? And, most critically, how can I give such a large (and ubiquitous) subject a compelling personal dimensional?

I am inherently a problem solver, a solution maker, and this film is guaranteed to present me with a wide range of confounding problems to tackle. That's as it should be. So far, I feel up to the task. But that's before I've touched a single frame of film.

October 23,1998
5:06 pm

Why did I invite the Alan Berliners to New York for dinner? What was I looking to find? What did I need to learn? Why do I struggle with this very basic question? What is it about a name? What is it about my name? Why is it so hard to answer these questions right now?

In the end, I discovered we share very little except the mysterious fact that our nervous systems are tuned to the same frequency, are trained to respond to the same written symbols, the same little melody composed of the same five syllable in the same simple rhythm—Alan Berliner—the sweetest sound in any language —our name.

What if anything does that mean?
At this point, I am rather dubious.
It was as if I gathered the first 12 white (Jewish but for one) men I found on the street and invited them over for dinner. In most ways we were (as if) 13 strangers. Not relatives. Not cousins. Not "club" members. Not even (necessarily) friends. But, because of our name affinities, we were all somehow pre-disposed to liking one another. Perhaps that explains why everyone was so friendly, comfortable and accommodating around the dinner table.

But if our event was a first, it was also a once. I don't think even half of them would return for a second meeting.

So…
Does all of that make the dinner a success or a failure? I'm thinking this is the wrong question to ask. It was an "experiment." You learn something important regardless. And like any good scientist I'm taking copious notes, but it'll take some time to figure out what I've learned. The film will be my final report.

July 30, 1999
12:01 am

It seems to me that I'm going to have to talk in this film—that I'm going to need to have "a storytelling presence." After all, I have a lot of explaining to do.

I'm the one who spent months searching the Internet, who sent out hundreds of letters and who couldn't rest until he found every single Alan, Allan, Allen or Alain Berliner in the world. I'm the one who's become a member of the American Name Society, who visited the Jim Smith Society meeting last summer, the National Linda Club this summer, and who's read everything he could get his hands on about names. How can I possibly convey the why of all this without speaking directly to the audience?

This scares me. Narration is a dangerous convention. It creates insidious filmmaking "traps." For one thing, it makes you edit images and construct sequences (directly) into and out of words, which often leads to predictable transitions, facile sound/image juxtapositions and more often than not, a tendency towards illustration.

It also changes the filmmaker/audience relationship. Viewers tend to relax; they don't/won't work as hard when they're being told what they're seeing, or how to think about what they're seeing. Generally speaking, narration encourages a more "passive" mode of reception.
I don't have the answer yet. In fact, I don't think I've even framed the question clearly. In the back of my mind I'm wondering if there's another strategy altogether that might allow me to avoid all of this.

Oh yes. I mentioned the "Linda's." I just came back from the annual meeting of the National Linda Club, a group of approximately 47 warm and friendly women who were gathered in St. Louis to bond and have fun simply because they share the name Linda. A sisterhood of Linda's—unconditionally loving and supportive of one another.

We shot "Linda's" posing for group pictures, singing the Jack Lawrence song "Linda," (accompanied by a quartet of harmonica players), and filmed a procession of them saying their name directly into the camera. We also took close up shots of fetishistic Linda objects, including pens, pencils, stationery, coffee mugs, buttons and jewelry. Cute. Silly. And like the Jim Smiths—all about fun.

I can't help but be fascinated with the strange ways that people form intimate communities outside of "traditional" family boundaries. Perhaps these name societies (like other affinity groups) are "the new families?" Maybe they satisfy the enormous hunger people have to "belong." Something that family alone is not giving them.

January 9, 2000
1:07 am

I feel thrashed around and about by conflicting strategies, solutions and lots of unanswered questions. And I'm tired. Very tired. No room for distraction. No margin for error. A "punch-drunk filmmaker" plodding my way towards clarity. Here I am, lying in bed, barely able to keep my eyes open, yet filled with details, fears, hopes, needs and an awareness of the long and arduous road ahead.

I've been focusing on the text of the film—my essay—but translating thoughts into words feels like trying to fix liquid in place. Words are so fluid, so flexible, so malleable yet also—in the flow of a film, so ephemeral. I want every word to have meaning and purpose—to be perfect. I want to refine the text to the point where there's nothing about it I would change.
It's one thing to write an essay; it's another to read that essay out loud for a film. It's hard to write words that don't sound "written." Words that sound natural when they hit the air. Words that can be *spoken* with character, inflection and intimacy.

I don't want to be seen (or heard) as merely reading a script.   I want to be heard telling a story. There's a big difference. Many so-called "personal non-fiction" films suffer because the voice-over was *written* intimately and then *read* formally. The lack of emotional presence *behind* the words hinders an audience's ability to make an empathetic connection with the words, to the speaker, and ultimately, to the film itself.

Because I've been struggling with this film, I've had no choice but to turn that struggle into a kind of "fuel" that ultimately powers the filmmaking process itself. If things get real desperate, perhaps the difficulties I'm experiencing might eventually get woven into the very fabric of the narrative. My problem right now is that I can't seem to find a comfort zone, a plateau from which to pause, to look out and reflect upon what I'm doing. I'm paddling as fast as I can, and yet the shore doesn't seem to be getting any closer. Bogged down in details *and* overwhelmed by the big picture, I feel like I'm playing a hundred games of (four-dimensional) chess at once.

Tuesday January 11, 2000
11:22 am

I think this past weekend was the breakthrough I was looking for. Ever since Luciano Rigolini's visit on December 17th, followed by a visit from Alain Berliner (Belgium) on December 28th— (my angels from Europe!)—I've been set on a new course of action—a new way of looking at the film.

Understood.
The film can't possibly cover the (history, culture and psychology) of every name in the world.

Realized.
It should be possible to get at the essence of names by examining just one name in extreme detail.
Accepted.
Every idea I've ever had…
Every revelation I've ever had…
Every fascination I've ever had…
About names…
… is going to be filtered through an exploration of *my name*.

That makes some things a whole lot easier.
But others a whole lot harder.

Easier because I can be released from the pressure of creating a film that includes everything I know about every name I know. Harder, because by limiting the palette, my options are redu-

ced. Because now there'll be much more emphasis on insights and lessons drawn from the Alan Berliner dinner event (which was, in many ways a big disappointment). I now have the extra-added burden of self-discovery and personal vulnerability to deal with. I'm simply going to have to dig deeper.

And yet as much as this approach scares me, I know it's the correct one. The idea of even trying to make a film that resembles a "survey" of names—by sampling the distinct qualities, histories and traditions of a mixed bag of racial, ethnic, religious, and nationality groups was (obviously) misguided. As Luciano kept reminding me over and over and over again, "That's not what you do!" In any event, he's made me realize that whatever I do or don't do—it's not what I do best.

I still think that my time, energy and money were all well spent. I had to go to the Jim Smith Society and National Linda Club gatherings. I had to go out on the streets and interview random New Yorkers. I had to buy dozens of National Public Radio audiotapes that contained name-related stories. I had to do all that reading about naming customs and traditions all over the world. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have the confidence to "go it alone" now, so to speak—to look at everyone's names through the prism of my own.

February 19, 2000
3:06 pm

With regards to the main issue of "drama" in the film, I can't help but acknowledge two main obstacles (life circumstances) that prevent me from having an even deeper personal story to tell:

First…
I am not (sadly to say) in a position to name a child (of my own) in this film. That occasion would, naturally enough, have given the film both a personal and emotional hook—allowing me to connect with and evaluate (both sides of) my family naming traditions in a direct and immediate way. Baby naming is a big deal for parents all over the world, and I would have gone about it as *obsessively*, as *neurotically*, as *playfully*—and as *cinematically*—as possible. I would also have been in the position to introduce another character—*two* other characters actually—into the story.

Secondly…
I don't hate my name. There's no "frisson"—no insidious or even wicked tension that might have really propelled and motivated a film about names through profound negative experience. If I were really and truly annoyed with the name my parents had given me—if it had been the sources of humiliation and embarrassment—of angst —during my childhood, then I'd have all

sorts of reasons to huff and puff about the power of names with appropriate resentment and anger.

All of which might have even pushed me to change my name as part of the storyline of the film. Maybe someone should make a film like that one day—about the way changing your name changes the way other people look at you and (of course, most importantly) changes the way you look at yourself? Or not.

Not having the dramatic tension of these two approaches as fundamental motivations for the film (necessarily) changes everything. I must treat the subject of names from a more whimsical position—that is, the identity problems provoked by the fact of *sharing* my name with others. This sets up a humorous conceit—what Ruby Lerner called "a confection"—a grain of sand *placed* inside the oyster. This approach can still be the basis for a serious exploration of what it means to have a name—it just makes it that much more difficult.

Then again, what if I was African-American and my name was a living reminder of the injustice and humiliation (amongst other things) of slavery? Or what if I was a woman and had to negotiate the myriad (social, political, economic and feminist) issues involved in deciding whether to keep my "maiden name," or take on the family name of my partner? What if the Nazi's took members of my family to the gas chamber because they had a "Jewish" sounding name? What if was I was Chinese, and shared my name with thousands, if not tens of thousands of other people? These are also interesting perspectives upon which someone could build a film about names one day.

April 11, 2000
12:47 am

Phillip Lopate came over to watch the film today. He didn't like it very much and I don't blame him. He had some particularly strong criticism of the *tone* of my words, and what he thought was the "forced solemnity" of trying to make names—especially through the use of old home movies and Holocaust imagery—more significant and important than they should be. In short, my essay wasn't working. Fair enough. He's right

He encouraged me to take more chances, to be bolder with my words —not to hide from the unavoidable (and inherent) narcissism of making a film about my name—but to play, and be playful with it. We talked about how making a film about one's own name is about as "navel gazing" as you can get. That I would need to go "over the top" in order to acknowledge it, but (at the same time) also need to make sure the audience sees me *smiling* through and with my words and the tone of my voice.

Did I actually think I could make a film about my name without being perceived as self-indulgent and narcissistic? Underneath it all, the very pull and power of ego—our innate need to feel unique, our yearning for individuality-- is intrinsically tied to our relationship with our names. Phillip recommended that the tone of my essay should aspire to something he called an "ebullient narcissism"—a persona that freely acknowledges I'm the main subject, the main character, *and* the author of the film. This film about my name, Alan Berliner. This film about not wanting to share my name, Alan Berliner with anybody else.

Perhaps most depressingly, Phillip denigrated the Alan Berliner dinner section as uninteresting (and way too long). The dinner doesn't deliver any epiphanies. "The less of it," he said, "the better." I was afraid of that.

Now that I think about it, I've let more people directly into the aesthetic cauldron of this film's making than any film I've ever made. I am especially thankful to Laurie Wen, Spencer Seidman, Ruby Lerner, Marsha Rock, Aaron Kuhn, Anya Miller and Susi Korda. Everyone's been holding me to a higher standard, pushing me to go further, deeper and beyond myself.

What is it about this project that makes it so necessary for me to need outside help, counsel and support. None of my other films were ever this "needy."

July 10, 2000
9:19 am

Something strange is going on. The film just "kicked out" the most somber and serious material… The Vietnam Memorial, The AIDS Quilt, The African American Civil War Memorial, The New England Holocaust Memorial, even Yom HaShoah—"The "Reading of the Names…"

All of it.
Out.

Ever since the film declared its new personality—its ebullient narcissism—the suddenly emboldened edges of my humorous ("spoiled brat") persona have made it seem impossible for all of this "memorial" footage—and the serious ideas behind it—to remain in the film. It's as if the film has come of age, reached a kind of maturity and told me it couldn't be, didn't want to be, and shouldn't have to be—everything I wanted (or hoped) it would be. *It rebelled*. And that's okay. For now.

Truth is, the film has taken on a more "jazz-like" quality. I can't find the right place to evoke the right mood for all this solemn material right now. But I will. I want the film to encompass the full breadth and scope of my original vision—the way names function both in life *and* in death.

I set out to make a film that understands why names are enthusiastically carved into sidewalks, trees and school desks. But I also want to make a film that explains the power of names as icons of memory, commemoration and immortality. I want to draw a map that shows not only where names come from, but also where they go when we're no longer around to wear them.