

Document Citation

Title	[Peter Adair] -- excerpts from an interview 5/24/77
Author(s)	Peter Adair
Source	<i>Pacific Film Archive</i>
Date	1977 May 24
Type	interview
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	8
Subjects	Adair, Peter (1943-1996), United States
Film Subjects	Word is out, Epstein, Robert, 1977

File under WORD IS OUT

NOT For publication
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Peter (excerpts from interview 5/24/77)

Back in 1972 I had seen a few attempts at gay films, but there were no films that I really respected. I felt that someone should make one because it was an obvious film to be made. I felt a good film had to be done, but I didn't want to be the person to do it. It was work. Later I realized that it was also a film that could be made, that it would be realistic to think about making, that I could ^Oprably raise some money for it. It would be a film other people would like to see made.

I was working at KQED, but I wasn't doing good films there. I was doing stuff that wasn't even meeting their needs, much less my needs. Working for a television station, everything that you do has to be sort of "groovy" because you're competing with commercial television. You're competing with those production values, and that money, and that whole mentality. I realized it was not a film I could make in the context of a television station, or something like that.

Years before that I ^{made} had done a film, but I had done it in an absolutely ²sheltered environment: I had the money I needed, the equipment I needed; I had a ^{good} subject, ~~that was good~~. I just followed my intuition, and it turned out really, really well. Partly because my intuition was right, and partly because I was lucky. But you can only do that once. Then I did a whole number of films that were terrible. I understood that it was necessary for me to make a film that was meaningful to me again.

A major influence was a couple of Marxist friends. They kept saying, "What is the meaning of what you're doing? What is the purpose of it? What are you trying to say?" A lot of the stuff I'd done for television was very flashy, a lot of flashy cutting, but woe be it if we ever thought of meaning, ever.

One of the reasons I didn't want to do the film at first was that I hadn't thought of a good way to do it. I didn't want to do the basic kind

of 'television' approach: you go out and you interview some people who have thought about the subject, maybe some gay leaders; you film a gay march; you do some sort of fake verité filming in some couple's apartment where they look happily-ever-after-married. And then you put it all together with some sort of linking narration. That's the most obvious idea of how to do it; that's the only idea I had about how to do the film. That's why I put off doing anything about the film for a long long time. Because I never really realized an approach. Once I had the approach, it was all much easier. Then I felt there was a film there.

A couple of things affected me in those early days. I saw The Sorrow And The Pity. That film had so much meaning for me! And that film was doing everything 'wrong.' It was in black and white. It was ^{four and a half} 4½ hours long. It was full of jump cuts. It was shitty looking. It ^{had} was the worst fucking photography. And it was talking! But I could have sat there another three hours watching it!

Then I read Studs Terkel's book, Working. I realized that it was fascinating to hear other people talk about themselves. If it's well edited and well done, that alone is very interesting. There was also an article in Rolling Stone magazine. They had asked their readers for autobiographies. They got thousands of them, and they just printed them as an article. It was a beautifully edited article. Some of the autobiographies were only a paragraph; some of them were a page. But it was just fascinating to hear "just people" talk about what they do. So that's sort of how the ~~form of the film arrived;~~ how I arrived at the form of the film.

I went to Europe and thought about it for a long time ^{and} became more and more convinced that this was something I wanted to do. By the time I

came back, I knew what it was going to be. ~~I knew what I was ready to do,~~
I knew the direction I was going to go in. I decided that I was going to do this film, or I was going to do no films. I was going to pour all my energies into this film until I felt that it was absolutely impossible. I realized that it took all my commitment, ^{it} it was either doing this film or not doing any films. And more than once when it really looked like there just wasn't going to be any realistic chance of raising the money, I thought I would even ~~be able to~~ ^{be able to} fund it. It wouldn't have mattered to me if I'd got busted because I was going to make the film and that's all there was to it. It was me on the line, and I had to ~~either~~ ^{either} do it or give up films.

Unfortunately, I'm not the kind of filmmaker ^{who} that can go off and make a small, quote, personal film cheaply. It's just not the kind of films I make. I'm interested in longer, sync films and so on. So I had to come to terms with my human responsibility and my responsibility to myself. Making your own film, making a film that you care about is a process so divorced from other kinds of filmmaking. The process of writing a book is much nearer to doing this kind of film, one you care about, than the process of doing a film for television is. A lot of filmmakers never realize that because the areas are so diffused between art and craft and business.

Making the film would be a long, long, slow process because I knew people were not going to invest unless I had the shit together, unless I gave them the most impressing ^{ve} sort of approach. And it took a long, long time to learn how to do that, ^{Because} no one showed me how. Basically what I learned as we went on was more and more "an approach." We had to convince people that it was going to be a real film. ~~You see,~~ people don't raise money for documentaries this way. There are some films that are

hustled, but they don't usually turn out well because the people are more into the hustle than they are into the film. No good films that I know of have ever been done through investors. And it took me a long time to learn how to do it.

I had no idea. ~~How do you do it?~~ You know you have to raise money, at that point it was \$70,000 dollars. ^{How} ^{it} ~~What do you do?~~ The basic problem of raising money this way is one of credibility. If the investors genuinely believe that you would make them back money, without any question they would give you all the money they had because then they would be making a fortune. So why don't they think that? You have to go through the whole process and figure out why they aren't giving you their money.

Well, unfortunately, credibility is tied into all kinds of things. It's tied in very much to the class structure. I'm sure if I were ruling class, it would have been much different. Not only would I have had the contacts, but I would have had the savoir faire to move in there and operate on a certain level. I know many times I had contacts with essentially aristocratic people, and I didn't get anywhere with them at all. The horrible thing about it is that if I were working class, the film would never ever have happened. My class background gave me the ability to find the skills and abilities to operate. I didn't know how, but I had the ability to find out how. It took a year or two to learn exactly what you do, what you do on the phone, how you reach people, all of that. It was basically an education.

Just writing the proposal took me four or five months because I wrote it and then showed it around to a lot of people and changed it again and again until it was boiled down to what it is. People read the proposal and loved it. Almost universally, everyone said it was the best proposal they had ever seen. I thought we'd get the money from the proposal. We didn't get a nickel. People, I think, felt that yes, you can make a proposal, but

can you make films?

So we started doing video tapes partly to raise money. I asked you ^{Nancy} to do it because I felt ^{she was} you were a woman ^{who} that I could ask to do it. You ^{she} were interested, and the trade-off was that ^{she} you would do it in exchange for getting to use the video equipment. I also wanted to test you to see how we would work together because we ^{hadn't ever} haven't worked together and we don't get along very well, outside of work.

I had ~~say~~ always felt the film should be men and women; it would be a better, bigger film. But politically, I didn't see how we could possibly do it; the climate wasn't right. I didn't see how men could work with women, or that I'd even be able to find a woman. Obviously I didn't want to work with a woman who didn't have a strong sense of feminism, a strong sense of lesbianism, a political consciousness. For it to have been a male-dominated film would have been a mistake, not only politically but even economically. The film would never ^{have} said what it should have said, and would never have been accepted by women because it wouldn't have had a really strong woman's point of view, ^{that} it wouldn't have been represented, because the woman would have been working under me. I didn't see how any really strong feminist would work with me in a situation where it was set up that it was not an "absolute equals" situation.

But I was the producer, and I wasn't going to let that go because I've seen lots and lots and lots and lots of films where ^{the filmmakers were} they're more interested in process than product and, as a result, they end up with very bad films. I've seen more films destroyed that way. So I didn't want to automatically open ^{up} the film process ^{up} at that point to something that would be absolutely collective. I wanted to maintain the power in case things fell apart. At that point, I guess, the possibility occurred to me of ^{with Nancy} our working together.

Nancy's

Your video interview of Whitey was immediately just a knockout. It was so much like the film I wanted. It was what I had imagined in feeling tone that the film should be. ~~Very-much-so.~~ Also, there was a kind of immediate organic connection between the way ^{she} you asked questions and shot and the way I would. Without any lessons or specific kinds of aesthetic discussion, ^{she} you immediately had the same kind of aesthetics that I did. ~~about that~~ I knew that working with ^{her} you was going to be a real problem; it wasn't going to be easy, but it was the immediate kind of sense of what was on ^{her} your tapes that made me realize that it was worth what the problems were going to be. I was also aware that whoever I got to do the video tapes would be the most likely person to work on the project. It would have been hard to say, "Thank you very much. Now I'm going to hire Susy X to work with me." But I think I felt that if there had been someone else ^{her} of your ability, I would have hired them before I hired ^{her} you. ^{Nancy} Your being my sister was a liability, not an advantage.

The feedback from that first composite screening was really what led me to continue looking for money. I think too, that's when I realized that ^{its} ~~it's~~ form was essentially the form of the film: ten intercut stories continuously. That was exactly the form that I had imagined the film would be; that was the form in the proposal; but somehow, I had not really understood what would happen when you do that. It was just so much more important and powerful than I had imagined it would be.

But I didn't allow myself to really think of what the film is right now. I had a dream, but I didn't have the courage to realize that dream in a lot of ways. I felt it was better to make a film which is a lot safer. I found it very hard to take risks. A much safer film would be a film where

you had seven or eight basically good, happy people. ~~Role~~ Role models. That's what I wanted, but from the very beginning we never operated on that basis. We instantly picked people that were the most unlike role model people in the traditional CBS kind of sense.

That's going to be a problem when the film comes out. That's very interesting because I think that's very much a part of internalized oppression. Gay people don't even recognize that our stories are unique or valuable or interesting. You could have gone to people and said, "I'm going to make a movie about poor Black people in the South, and they're going to talk about all their hardships, and about their joys, and about their children, and it'll be them telling us their stories." People would have immediately seen a film there. But when you say, "I'm going to talk about gay people," THEIR only image of it was so negative that they couldn't possibly see a film there. So we had to sort of prove to them that there was indeed a film there.

There are two other things I want to say about the process of ~~doing~~ doing the film that I think are important for other people to realize.

The one, ~~singlemost~~, most important attitude that I had was one of just stubbornness. Once I decided that there was nothing else as important in my life. I think unless people are willing to spend years, unless they have a rich uncle, or they have luck, they won't get the money. That's what I think is important, that sense of determination.

And the other thing I want to say is that there was a synthesis of my own sort of religious philosophy which comes from karate and zen - the sense that what you are doing right now has to be meaningful for what you are doing right now. It's never the product which matters; it's your daily existence, the daily way that you lead your life that's important. I always tried to tell myself (and I think a lot of times I believed it) that if I never raised the money, it was O.K. Because otherwise you get very goal-oriented and you won't raise the money. If you believe in what you're doing every day,

believed

--whether or not it's realistic, whether or not it would ever raise money-- if I believed that what I was doing was important for me, every day, to be doing that, then I felt good about it.

Another thing that relates to this religious philosophy is the political one. This film really is part of the revolution, of some revolution, part of revolutionary change. It was very naive of us in the '60's to think that revolutionary change takes place quickly. It does not. Revolution is struggle, and finding money for this movie was struggle, continuous struggle. If it had come easy, then there would have been something very funny, very wrong, about the movie probably. In other words, if this ~~is~~ movie is basically ^{anathema} ~~anathema~~ to things as they are -- whether it's the way homosexuals see themselves or the way heterosexuals see homosexuals -- then, a priori, it's not going to be an easy film to raise money for. It's not a harmless film.

Something else in that ~~the~~ vein I want to say at some point is that I think that documentary films have always been the step-child of films. One of the reasons is economic in that it involves less money. As a result, in this culture, they're thought of as second-class citizens somehow. But documentary filmmaking is a very vital art at this point. Essentially nothing new is being done in feature films relative to all the ways one could make a film. They're essentially the same. That is not true of documentary films. Each art looks at a problem in a very unique way and poses a whole new vision of things as they are in a whole new way. And I think that's what documentary films do. They allow us to think about the human condition in new ways. Most people think that the advantage of documentary films is that they say things more effectively. What I'm saying is that they say different things. This film could not be done in any other way.