



Richard Chisolm
Director of Photography for Film and Video
Documentary Specialist
Skilled Hand-held Camera Operator
20 Years of Film Making Experience
National Emmy Award for Cinematography



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Richard Chisolm



Personal Statement

Having spent most of my childhood drawing, painting and studying art, I turned to making films when I was about fifteen. From the University of Maryland I received a B.A. degree in Interdisciplinary Studies in 1982, with cinematography as a focus.

During most of the nineteen-eighties, I free-lanced as a camera assistant and then cameraperson, and taught film courses at the Johns Hopkins University. I have worked on a wide variety of commercials, feature films, TV shows, corporate and educational projects. However, most of my work and passion continues to be shooting documentaries and actuality style drama. As a DP, I work in all professional formats of film and video, including 16mm, 35mm, DV, Betacam, and Hi-def.

I have always wanted to make moving images for which the world has a need and I am intensely drawn to the depiction and observation of real life. I thoroughly enjoy being "in the moment" and consider the recording of people's lives, thoughts and experiences to be the most meaningful task I can possibly perform. When shooting, I think about the concerns of the producer, the balance of light and shadows, the interplay of camera and subject movement and the crucial concerns of the eventual editing process. But transcending all of this, I imagine in the back of my mind the perspective of a curious yet critical viewer. I try to do whatever I can to deliver to that audience the feeling of being there and the reason for observing. To me this intuitive process is as important and integral as the technical aspects of cinematography.

Recent projects include *Spies That Fly* for PBS/NOVA, *The Press Secretary*, a high-definition video documentary on the White House press office for PBS, the 6-part ABC television series *Hopkins 24/7* (DuPont Columbia Award Recipient 2001), a 5-part series called *Nurses* for Discovery Health, and additional camera work for *The Wire*, an HBO drama series.

Over the years I have done camera work for 11 National Geographic specials, two of which have earned prime-time Emmy nominations for cinematography. In 1998, I received the Emmy for one of those nominations, a one-hour film entitled *Don't Say Goodbye: America's Endangered Species*. In 2001, I was chosen as a Distinguished Alumni of the Year by the University of Maryland Baltimore County.

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Richard Chisolm

Selected Credits

- K Street** Real-time fiction political series for HBO.
- Shaping the Future** Documentary special on the making of a cultural center in Japan.
- Spies that Fly** PBS NOVA special on new aviation technology.
- The Press Secretary** PBS Hi-Def feature documentary on the White House press office.
- Hopkins 24/7** Six-part ABC prime-time series on the daily life of a major medical center.
- The Wire** HBO dramatic series (second camera/second unit.)
- Revolutionary People** Documentary on the power of mediation in dispute resolution.
- Don't Say Goodbye** One hour National Geographic/NBC special on endangered species. National Cinematography **EMMY** award.
- Anatomy of a Homicide** PBS documentary on the making of an episode of NBC's *Homicide*.
- Avalanche!** One hour National Geographic/NBC special on avalanches. National Cinematography **EMMY** nomination.
- Cracking the Code** PBS/WNET Innovation program on fertility research.
- Waging Peace** Independent documentary on veterans returning to Vietnam.
- Discover: The Brain** One hour Discovery documentary on neurological research and surgery.
- Childhood** Six-part PBS/WNET series on children around the world.
- Listening to America** Premiere episode of PBS series with Bill Moyers.
- Stop Drinking?** PBS NOVA documentary on the history and science of alcoholism.
- The Screen Painters** Independent PBS documentary on Baltimore folk artists.
- Global Change** PBS miniseries on international development projects.
- In Time of Need** Documentary on the International Red Cross.
- Twice Born** BBC Horizon special on fetal surgery.

References and samples available on request.

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Sometimes I shoot talking heads...

Edward Albee - Alan Alda - Russell Baker - Bob Ballard - John Barth

Jorge Luis Borges - Andre Braugher - J. Carter Brown - Bill Bruford

Art Buchwald - George Bush - Michael Caine - Naomi Campbell

Jimmy Carter - Julia Child - Bill Clinton - Hillary Clinton - Jacques Cousteau

Walter Cronkite - Johnny Depp - Matt Dillon - Bob Dole - Elizabeth Dole

Michael Dukakis - Marion Wright Edelman - Ahmet Ertegun

Geraldine Ferraro - David Frost - Carlos Fuentes - John Kenneth Galbraith

John Glenn - Jane Goodall - Al Gore - Bernadine Healy - Patty Hearst

Seymour Hersch - Jesse Jackson - Kay Jamison - Jack Kemp

Ted Kennedy - Larry King - Elizabeth Kubler-Ross - Ricki Lake

Sugar Ray Leonard - Dave Mathews - Robert McNamara

Joan Mondale - Walter Mondale - Mother Theresa - Bill Moyers

Ralph Nader - Joe Namath - Willie Nelson - Paul Newman

Wayne Newton - Queen Noor - Jim Palmer - Iggy Pop - Pope John Paul II

Paulina Porizkova - Colin Powell - Robert Rauschenberg - Ronald Reagan

Max Roach - Cokie Roberts - Brooks Robinson

Kenny Rogers - Mark Russell- Carl Sagan - Jonas Salk - Tom Selleck

Martin Sheen - Beverly Sills - Hedrick Smith - Mitch Snyder

Isaac Stern - Billy Taylor - Mel Torme - Nina Totenberg

Desmond Tutu - Jack Valente - John Waters - James Watson

Elie Wiesel - Stevie Wonder - Phil Woods - Neil Young - Andrew Young

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by Michael Fickes

director's cut



Real

Director of Photography Richard Chisolm seeks out the highs and lows of real life.

The social philosophy of realism and its documentary filmmaking counterpart come together in Richard Chisolm, a Baltimore-based director of photography specializing in documentaries.

Over the years, quite a few heavy-weight documentary directors and producers have turned to Chisolm looking for that combination. During his career, Chisolm has shot documentaries for the American Red Cross in Zimbabwe and El Salvador; handled the camera for a PBS series on Guatemala's homeless children, and earned Emmy nominations for two of the 11 National Geographic documentaries he has shot. One of those nominations, *Don't Say Goodbye: America's Endangered Species*, won the Emmy.

In addition to documentaries, Chisolm has shot corporate pieces and commercials. In recent years, however, he has moved away from the commercial world to focus on documentaries — from highly stylized and formulaic productions to low-budget, freewheeling cinema verite projects.

Whichever kind of documentary he works on, Chisolm is at heart a realist who believes in shooting what's there and not what someone put there. "To me reality can be entertaining, hilarious, tragic and enlightening," he says.

When asked about his favorite scenes, he consistently offers examples where he as

audience collided with reality. Two years ago, for example, he shot a six-hour ABC television documentary series called *Hopkins 24/7*, about the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.

One of the segments covered 160 medical students as they entered a laboratory room and divided into 40 groups of four. Each group approached a table and uncovered a dead body that would serve for a time as their anatomy teacher. Chisolm shot one group's response to the chilling introduction. "This group was different," he says. "They didn't seem to know each other very well. They had been thrown together and told to uncover a cadaver. The first thing they did, apparently without thinking, was to stop for a kind of spontaneous group prayer or moment of silence."

It was a collision with reality, recorded without comment by Chisolm's camera.

A news trailer edited to introduce the media to the *Hopkins 24/7* series offers quite a bit of commentary by way of camera movements. When asked about his favorite camera techniques, Chisolm hurries to say that he can apply techniques when asked but prefers not to. "I'm the anti-gimmick camera person," he says. "I'm in the school that says no one should notice the camera."

In the National Geographic documentary about endangered species, viewers do notice cameras. Not Chisolm's, but the cameras wielded by two naturalist photographers who served as a vehicle for telling a

endangered species. The naturalists, who are real, have embarked on a quest to photograph every endangered species. One of the species they photograph, the Little Kern River Golden Trout, has recently been removed from the endangered list.

In the segment, Chisolm shot the photographers as they worked with Dan Christianson, a Fish and Wildlife employee. Within the filming of the fish story, Chisolm created a profile of Christianson, a soft-spoken, thoughtful man, who makes an unlikely hero. As a boy in the 1940s, Christianson fished the creek for the Golden Trout. Later in life, through his job, he discovered that the fish were endangered. He labored for years by himself to repair problems in the stream. In the end, he single-handedly saved the Golden Trout from extinction.

Chisolm moves easily among uneasy subjects. For a PBS documentary chronicling the lives of homeless children in Guatemala, he literally moved in with the kids, camera and all, for seven days. "It was at times very depressing," he recalls. "The kids were so desperately hungry that they sniffed glue to stave off appetite. They stole car parts and sold them to get food. They slept on the streets. At times during filming, middle class Guatemalans drove past and threw rocks at us for making the film. It made me sad and angry."

One day, it wasn't so bad. "The kids each paid a quarter and went swimming at a public pool," Chisolm says. "For an observer like me it was a huge relief to see them playing in the pool and laughing. I thought, oh my God, these kids will never live to be 20 years old. But at least they have some joy in their lives."

When you see the film, you feel

When asked about his favorite scenes, he consistently offers examples where he as the shooter along with the subject and the

cameras wielded by two naturalist photographers who served as a vehicle for telling a story about six people who try to save

joy in their lives."

When you see the film, you feel Chisolm's relief. ■

APRIL 2008 MARKEE

The Baltimore Sun

January 18, 2000

Getting the picture

Baltimore cinematographer Richard Chisolm, at work on a Hopkins documentary, finds moments of truth and insight in a shadow or a sideways glance.

By *Stephanie Shapiro*
Sun Staff

It was one of those youthful miscalculations that most adults would rather forget. Richard Chisolm and his Catonsville High School buddies were cruising in his mother's car on the Spring Grove Hospital center campus. With his brother's hand-me-down Super 8 camera, Chisolm filmed the psychiatric patients, their odd gaits, bent heads, friendly waves. At the exit, the boys were stopped, their film confiscated and destroyed. Such antics were strictly forbidden.

Twenty-five years later, here's Chisolm once again, in another car, camera in hand. Now he's 42, and a field producer for ABC's ambitious, six-part documentary on Johns Hopkins Hospital scheduled to air this spring. He and a sound man are traveling with Dr. Annelle Primm, director of the community psychiatry program at Johns Hopkins Hospital. She and a caseworker are on their way to see a patient, a young woman battling severe depression who has moved into her own apartment.

Chisolm, in the front seat, tapes Primm with a tiny, state-of-the-art video camera as she drives.

Baltimore's shattered east side flickers behind her. "What is the general crux of this visit?" Chisolm asks. "To congratulate her," Primm says; the move is a big milestone. More crucial, she adds, to emphasize how important it is to take her medication.

Just getting to this point in the production process has required a certain amount of professional and personal agility. After a brief, introductory chat with Primm, Chisolm prevailed upon her to haul him, the sound guy and their equipment in her car, and to chat naturally on camera with the caseworker about their client's progress. It's a delicate balancing act: intruding while not being intrusive, manipulating conversation to make it sound real, making judgment calls while in the service of a major television network.

This time, though, Chisolm's footage will not be confiscated; it may well be seen by millions of viewers. Since that misguided Spring Grove lark, Chisolm, a lifelong Baltimorean and 1982 graduate of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, has traveled the world as a cinematographer. He's been to war-torn Zimbabwe and El Salvador for American Red Cross documentaries. He's filmed homeless street children in Guatemala for a PBS series and flown over Alaska with avalanche detonators. Closer to home,

Chisolm has filmed documentaries about screen painters, Baltimore's signature folk artists; about "Homicide: Life on the Street"; and about a Severna Park man who owns a fleet of Edsels.

In 1998, Chisolm won an Emmy Award for his work on a "National Geographic" special about two photographers who travel the country taking pictures of endangered animal and plant species. Last year, he was nominated for but didn't win another Emmy for "Avalanche: The White Death," also produced by National Geographic Television.

Along the way, Chisolm has accumulated a lengthy roster of "talking heads" he has filmed during interviews: politicians, celebrities and cultural icons ranging from Iggy Pop to the pope.

'Opportunistic' approach

Credits alone don't define what Chisolm does or what sets his work apart. It's not simply a matter of holding the camera steady in precarious situations or finding the action. It's a complex, shifting equation of subtle choices based on what's available: light, motion, subject matter, and whether to zoom for a close-up or step back for a wide shot. A good cinematographer is also keen to make the most of unanticipated images; a sidelong glance, perhaps, or a tense, private conversation.

Chisolm says his is an "opportunistic" approach. He peers through the lens as if he were watching television or a movie and constantly asks himself, "Is this an interesting shot?" If not, he moves on, seeking shadows, natural light, angles and shots that often require him to accordion his rangy frame into impossibly awkward spaces.

Imagine the sensibilities of a still photographer; apply them to an art form that flashes by at 24 frames a second. These sensibilities make the difference between stock footage and what Kristin Fellows, vice president of Journey Films Inc., calls visual poetry. Fellows is co-producer of "American Byzantine," a documentary premiering this spring that explores the relationship between art and religion and its consummation at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. She worked closely with Chisolm on the project, both at the Shrine in Washington and in Italy's Carrara mountains.

"My favorite part of his work is his eye for the story in the details," Fellows says. "Richard becomes one with what he's shooting. I have seen him lying down, on the altar at the Shrine during a huge Mass, an Easter Mass. He wanted to backlight this incense coming out of the censer. Just having this beautiful silver orb moving through the air slowly with smoke coming out of it. The incense, you almost get a whiff of it," Fellows says. "It hits your senses more than just your eyes."

In the same way that an author extracts the relevant strands of a story, Chisolm is "able to isolate those moments, those details and capture it with a camera, so that people don't need to sort through all of the cacophony of images later," Fellows says. "He's the sorting mechanism."

Getting good shots is also a "function of time and trust," says Chisolm, who lives in Roland Park with his wife, Meg, a psychiatrist, and son, Jasper. In Guatemala, for example, he couldn't just whip out his camera and shoot homeless street children. For one thing, he had to crouch down on their level. He spent hours sitting with the kids in doorways, on bridges, and roaming Guatemala City's teeming streets. Eventually, the kids stopped giggling and mugging for the camera and permitted Chisolm to record their daily, and not always lawful, struggle to survive.

When the walls fall down and people stop asking, "You didn't get that, did you?," Chisolm hits his stride. Nor does he shy away from bringing the camera forward into the action, however painful or intimate.

"Richard has a sense of comfort and confidence to bring the camera in as a full participant in the event before him," says Martin Doblmeier, president of Journey Films. Viewers "may not see that unfolding consciously, but subconsciously they're becoming a participant in the event and feeling very comfortable,"

he says.

Shooting people, even wiggly little ones, is never as tough as shooting wildlife, Chisolm says. He's spent weeks in tents waiting for gazelles to mate. Besides, he notes, you can't make eye contact with a gazelle. And Chisolm is the kind of guy who likes to make eye contact. He prefers to work on documentaries about humans -- the more human, the better. While a general fascination with "real life" has spawned an explosion in nonfiction film and video productions, most of the work, on the "spectrum between pretty and real," leans toward pretty, Chisolm says.

"Pretty" in the sense that light, image and color are manipulated by the producer to the point where a situation is often distorted beyond its basic facts. The "more we can stand to get to 'real,' the closer we are to documentary," Chisolm says. Most producers "are scared to death to give up control" and allow a piece to unfold of its own accord.

Chisolm, in pursuing his own projects, has run into obstacles thrown up by HBO, the Learning Channel, Discovery Channel, and other broadcasters who prefer their programs to fit pre-conceived narrative templates. Somehow, no matter what natural disaster, historic event or wildlife environment is addressed, the stories all sound the same, Chisolm says. No one wants to derail the advertising gravy train, he says.

Avoiding the cliches

One of Chisolm's own pet projects was defeated by the penchant for formula. Several years ago, he followed 15 Vietnam War veterans as they visited their old battleground and discovered a beautiful country. The project never got funding, he says, because there was no "blood, no helicopters, no Nixon speeches, no Oliver Stone cliches."

When he can, Chisolm works around these story-telling conventions. On the job for National Geographic Television and other production companies, he takes "the formula and pull it as far as I can toward cinema verite." The "little tips of icebergs of reality" are the best one can hope for.

For those reasons, Chisolm almost didn't take the Hopkins job. "They had to convince me it was a documentary series," he says. It turned out to be a great opportunity for Chisolm, who is the field producer for segments on Hopkins' department of psychiatry and the medical school.

Right now, Chisolm is also awaiting funding for a history of the founding of the Sheppard Pratt Hospital, a project with Historic Towson. The fund-raising short he directed won a prize, but the money has yet to materialize.

And then there's Chisolm's dream project: To write, produce, direct and film a documentary on bamboo, the fast-growing, versatile plant used around the world as a building material, art object, food and natural habitat.

Chisolm, an avid gardener, already has the title: "Amazing Grass."

Originally published Jan 18 2000

www.sunspot.net

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