



Why I Make Movies, by Mickey Lemle

All movies are an illusion. We think we are seeing motion but in fact we are seeing twenty-four still pictures every second. Half the time the screen is actually black. Yet movies seem so real, and some have the potential to reveal great truth. In the Hindu tradition, what we perceive of the outside world is called *“maya”*, or illusion. It is described as a veil that obscures the truth. But maya also has another aspect, which is the power to reveal the truth. Film and other art forms can embody both aspects of maya.

“What kinds of films do you make?” people often ask me, after I’ve told them that I am a filmmaker. “Documentaries,” I tell them. “Oh, movies about reality,” they say. “True stories.”

The issue of *“truth”* versus *“reality”* is a constant tension in creation of any film, especially documentaries. Filmmakers know that every time we make a choice of where to put the camera or when to turn it on or off, we are making choices about subjective perceptions of reality. When we edit, as I did in my latest film, ninety hours of footage down to ninety minutes, we are clearly manipulating reality, or truth.

Like the best storytellers, I don’t let facts get in the way of the truth. This might sound like heresy to some, but it is the nature of art. My motivation is to move audiences: first and foremost, to tell them a great story that holds their interest and attention, and then to put them in touch with some deep truth, to the best of my ability to perceive it and communicate about it. In that way, if the viewer is ready, the film has the potential to transform the way one sees the world and oneself. Paradoxically, to accomplish this I must manipulate reality.

As an artist, one is always playing with perception. Most of us believe that what we perceive is the truth. “Seeing is believing,” as the expression goes. For instance, have you seen a beautiful sunset recently? Here we are hundreds of years after Copernicus and Galileo, and we are still seeing the sunset. The sun doesn’t set. The earth rotates and eclipses the sun.

Back in the days of Newton, there were absolute laws of nature. Einstein explained that everything is relative.

How we perceive the truth is often influenced by our belief systems. In closed systems of belief, in any orthodoxy, there can be absolute truth. True believers believe that they “and their specific belief system” have a lock on the Truth.

Mahatma Gandhi was once leading a large protest march across India.

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few days into the march, he found out that there was to be a great deal of violence, and he abruptly announced that he was ending the march. Some of his followers and supporters said, "But Gandhiji, you can't call off this march. Many people, from all over India, left their jobs and came great distances to be on this march." Gandhi replied, "Only God knows absolute truth. I just know relative truth. My allegiance must be to truth, not to consistency."

Perhaps one of the reasons we feel in the presence of Truth in front of great art is that it takes us out of our belief system and opens us up to deeper possibilities. I believe that each one of us has an honest witness deep inside that tingles when we are in the presence of the Truth. It resonates, just as when one experiences the presence of the divine in nature, in witnessing a birth, a flower, an ocean storm, a volcano, or a tornado. One experiences awe and aesthetic arrest. As James Joyce says, we are put in touch with the Primal Cause of all things, with the Mystery. I'm with Joyce. That is what we strive for. On really good days, we can get close.