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Fair Chase: A Cinematic Essay on Hunting in the Northeast U.S.

by

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Abstract

FAIR CHASE is an experimental ethnographic film examining hunting in the Northeast United States. It documents various aspects of hunting—the ritualistic preparation that precedes the hunt, the actual hunt itself, and the post-kill butchering of animals—using an observational style that draws on the work of films and filmmakers that includes the earliest *actualites* produced by the Lumiere brothers, direct cinema works from filmmakers such as Frederick Wiseman and more recent films produced by the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab such as *Manakamana* and *The Iron Ministry*.



Project Description

I'm a product of a suburban environment, having grown up in a bedroom community on the I-95 corridor, sandwiched between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Unlike in the remote, rural areas where I shot my film, *Fair Chase*, there was no ingrained cultural practice of hunting in the town in which I grew up in. Hunting was something I gave little, if any, thought to. My impressions of hunters were rooted in stereotypes—I imagined them as Bud-swilling rednecks loudly stomping around the countryside in ATVs, firing their guns at random into the air.

But my experience making this film made me acutely aware of my own prejudices, while complicating any notions I had of hunting as a pursuit born of bloodlust or trophy seeking. To be sure, there are hunters in the world motivated by those factors, but I didn't encounter any during the making of my film. In fact, the first subject that I found that was willing to let me accompany him on hunts immediately disabused me of my preconceived notion about the archetype of the American hunter. In addition, the process of creating the film left me with complicated, and sometimes contradictory, feelings about the nature of hunting and hunters. In this sense, I found that making *Fair Chase* more closely reflected my own life, where issues that once seemed clear-cut are less so the older I get.

The idea of making a film about hunting first arose in conversations I had with my classmate Tomasz Gubernat. To be honest, we both initially saw the subject as one that would easily allow us to escape New York City for the more bucolic environs of upstate New York, giving us a respite from the crowds and cacophony of the city. Finding hunters in New York City was no small challenge, but I was actually surprised at the number of people who said they knew someone, or knew *of* someone, who hunted and also lived in the city. Some were transplants

from parts of the United States where hunting was a cultural norm. But others, such as the first subject I shot with, were raised in ways where hunting was not a practice handed down generationally.

Like me, Josh Ott grew up in the suburbs of Maryland outside of D.C. And, like me, he is a person of color who was raised outside of a hunting culture. In fact, Josh came to hunting as a result of his lifestyle politics. In search of a more natural diet, Josh first began to avoid factory-farmed meat in favor of free-range, organically fed livestock. But his desire for healthier meat led him to conclude that the most logical way to obtain naturally raised meat was to hunt wild game. As a result, he and a friend began to teach themselves how to hunt on a farm owned by the friend in Maryland's rural Carroll County.

My initial idea for my thesis project was to make a film about Josh to document his nascent meat shipping business, which was intended to connect consumers in the tri-state area interested in the provenance of their meat with his childhood friend, who raised organic, free-range livestock on his farm in rural Maryland. But it soon became clear to me that the logistic constraints of Josh's schedule and my lack of a car would make the process of documenting both his business and education in hunting prohibitive.

So, I cast a wider net in search of additional subjects with whom to shoot footage. I found one subject through my classmate Emily Collins. Her father Tim was a hunter, but also a person whose personal politics were firmly rooted in liberalism and the Democratic Party, a dynamic that I considered to be at odds with my notions of hunting and conservative politics going hand

in hand. In addition, I also found a New York City hunting Meetup group. This group was geared towards connecting people who grew up hunting, but who now lived in the city, with one another to help defray the costs of going on hunting trips. They also encouraged those without any hunting experience to join the group to find hunting mentors and others who would help them learn the basics of hunting. In the end, I found myself joining up with any hunter who agreed to having me tag along on their hunting trip in order to gather enough footage to support my film.

As a result, my project evolved from one that was supposed to be a character-driven story. It became a series of vignettes of various hunts that I was able to attend. I began to conceptualize the film as a type of ethnography of hunting, recorded by an outsider with an outsider's perspective. Instead of a narrative, my film presents a series of scenes that are intended to surface some of the themes I found fascinating about hunting: modern ritualism, the expression of masculinity in a framework of violence, camaraderie and friendship, the expression of unwritten codes of a subculture. And, of course, death.

Intellectual and Aesthetic Approach

From the outset, I knew that I wanted to employ the formal approach of an observational style that leaned heavily on the direct cinema movement of the United States, particularly on the work of Frederick Wiseman and films such as *Titicut Follies*, *High School* and *Basic Training*. I feel that Wiseman's work does not make his point of view immediately evident, but his stance becomes clearer after some time through his construction of scenes and editing choices. In spite

of this formal approach, Wiseman's style gives viewers enough latitude to create their own meaning from the work, something I find fascinating.

As Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins write in their book *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*, Wiseman's films "are invariably about institutions and usually reflect his liberal politics, but are never obviously 'campaigning. As this piece makes clear, he has no illusions about the 'truth' or moral superiority of his method of film-making. He has simply chosen Direct Cinema as his discipline and continues to make his movies that way because he likes to." (278)

My formal approach was also strongly influenced by ethnographic films including Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateman's *Trance and Dance in Bali*, Tim Asch's *The Ax Fight* and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's *Sweetgrass*. The first of these films is one that presents recordings of dancing and trance rituals in Bali as dispassionately collected empirical data, a representation that is complicated by the non-profilmic information that Bateson and Mead enticed these activities from subjects through barter, as well as the fact that some sequences were shot on different days but stitched together to create the illusion of continuity.

In contrast, Asch's *The Ax Fight* presents an initial interpretation of a series of events, but then eradicates that reading by providing a deeper analysis of the relationships between and motivations of its subjects. It demonstrates how "wrong" the meaning created by the viewer (in this case the anthropologists themselves) can be.

Finally, Castaing-Taylor's *Sweetgrass* provided some ideas about how to record subjects that are situated in nature, as well as how to structure a film that does not rely on narrative or character study to pull the viewer along.

In *Representing Reality*, the writer and academic Bill Nichols notes the power of such observational cinematic strategies. "Observational cinema affords the viewer an opportunity to look in on and overhear something of the lived experience of others, to gain some sense of the distinct rhythms of everyday life, to see the colors shapes and spatial relationships among people and their possessions, to hear the intonation, inflection and accents that give a spoken language its 'grain' and distinguish one native speaker from another." (42)

Because hunting can be a hot-button, polarizing issue, I wanted to use an observational formal approach that lacked a clear judgment of the material, but that provided viewers with enough information to generate their own ideas and feelings about the practices of hunting. My aim was to create work that reflected the internal conflicts I felt about hunting, without being so muddled that it would lack any point of view at all.

It was important that the viewer feel my presence as an objective recorder of reality, and not think of me as a dispassionate fly-on-the-wall. For that reason, I chose to shoot nearly all of my footage hand-held, and to use extreme close-ups to allow the viewer to find the salient information in the frame along with me. In addition, my breathing can sometimes be heard in the film, while the camera rises and falls with my breath, accentuating the cameraperson and their spatial relationship to the subject. I feel that this formal approach helped to underscore my

experience as an outsider to hunting, a feeling I strove to pass along to the viewer. In effect, I strove to make my “gaze” as visible to the viewer as possible.

As Catherine Russel notes in her text *Experimental Ethnography*, “The gaze...remains an important structural component of the cinema experience and means of understanding the relation between films, spectators and people filmed. ‘Gaze theory’ addresses the pleasures and powers of the viewing experience, which is not necessarily specific to cinema, but links cinema to other media, such as photography and video.” (121)

There were other aspects of my experience as an outsider to hunting that also shaped the film, although they are not directly reflected in the content of the film itself.

As both a person of color and a hunting novice who grew up outside of the culture, Josh ended up becoming an on-camera proxy for myself during production, although I hadn’t intended that. After a weekend spent hunting geese at a camp in upstate New York operated by a middle-aged, working class white man with a high school education who was insistent on talking with us about his conservative politics, Josh asked the man point-blank if he had ever had people who looked like us stay with him before. The man answered no, he hadn’t. But he also told us that we were welcome back any time.

On our car ride back to New York City, Josh and I talked about the fact that we were always acutely aware of our role as “race ambassadors” in such situations. Whether we liked it or not,

people like the guide was likely to judge other people who looked like us based on his interactions with us, instead of on their individual merits or flaws as human beings.

It's a reductive worldview that feels all too common today. But the experience was also a deeply complicated one for me. While I often found his politics abhorrent, I would be lying if I said I didn't leave those cornfields with some measure of camaraderie and affection for the man. We had both risen hours before dawn to load a truck with decoys, then spent hours setting them out in the dark. I felt an affinity between us grow as a result of the shared labor, one that only grew as time passed and we spent more time hunting and living with each other in close quarters, sharing our meals together and sharing stories about our lives.

It was experiences like these that also influenced my formal approach, with the hopes that these same feelings of internal conflict might be aroused in those watching the film.

Research Analysis

My research for this project started with identifying some writings about hunting. My initial searches led me to the nonprofit Orion – The Hunter's Institute, an educational organization that claims its two main goals as 1) "improving the image of hunting with an emphasis on fair chase ethics," and 2) "putting hunters at the forefront of our nation's conservation ethic." In addition, I purchased two short books about hunting by Jim Posewitz, Orion's founder. One was *Beyond Fair Chase: The Ethic and Tradition of Hunting*, which spells out the ethical and moral hunting code. The second was *Inherit the Hunt: A Journey into the Heart of American Hunting*, a series

of hunting essays that Posewitz uses to try to connect the reader to a lineage of hunting dating back to the Stone Age.

But just what is the principle of “Fair Chase?” In 1887, the wildlife conservationist organization the Boone and Crockett Club—an organization that counts President Theodore Roosevelt as its founder—published a statement defining a code of ethics for hunters in North America that called for “the ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit and taking of any free-ranging wild, native North American big game animal in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper advantage over such animals.” This code is now commonly known in the United States as “Fair Chase.”

According to the texts from Orion, Fair Chase is really a philosophy that calls on hunters to act ethically in their pursuit and killing of animals. In very practical terms, that means that hunters should be fit enough to hunt without the aid of motorized vehicles or other mechanical devices that might give them an unnatural advantage over their prey. They should take the time and effort to train on a shooting range to ensure that, when the opportunity to kill an animal should arise, they are skilled enough to shoot with true aim to minimize the suffering of their prey.

Orion views hunting as intrinsic to a form of wildlife conservation that maintains a balance between man and the natural. Its website bemoans the “urban deer, bears in orchards and goose poop on every golf shoe in Montana.” It sees its role as one that fill a need for “educating hunters, fish and wildlife professionals, mainstream media and the general public” through various communication efforts. In effect, it is a public relations enterprise.

At first glance Orion's position seems to be a natural outgrowth of wildlife management and conservation ideas largely credited to Aldo Leopold, a wildlife ecologist, writer, philosopher and hunter who is considered the father of thought about "land ethic." Leopold wrote the seminal land ethic book *A Sand County Almanac* in the 1940s, penning a series of essays that touch on issues of ecology, forestry, environmentalist and conservation. His ideas behind a land ethic call for a considered, ethical and holistic relationship between people and the land. That relationship is not one dictated or dominated by hunting, but one in which hunting is one of several practical applications of land ethic philosophy, alongside various modes of farming, forestry and land conservation.

In contrast to Leopold's rhetoric, Orion's position seems to view an encroachment of nature on the man-made as the result of poor wildlife management techniques. Nowhere on Orion's website does the organization assign blame—or even the hint of responsibility—to humans for colonizing the natural world and effectively turning animals into refugees on land that was once their dominion. I found Orion's more recent position on hunting a telling reflection of the way that a person's position on hunting can immediately feel polarizing.

Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* was a revelation for me because it situated hunters as acting in concert with nature, and not in opposition to it. That really shattered one of the main preconceived notions that I had about hunters and allowed me to open myself up during my filming to try to observe my subjects as apex predators operating within their natural context. As a result, I strove to record and present my subjects without an obvious moral or ethical judgment

about hunting. In cases where I felt like I was observing behavior among hunters that was in conflict with my understanding of Leopold's beliefs and the basic tenets of Fair Chase, I attempted to present those conflicts pro-filmically, but without being overly obvious or didactic about my position.

One other idea furnished by Leopold that I carried into production with me was his thinking on the communitarian principles that underlie hunting in the US. In England, hunting has historically been a privilege reserved for the landed gentry, and not commoners. By dedicating large swaths of land in the US as a public good, the government intentionally rejected that dynamic, allowing anyone access to public land for hunting under strict regulations. But Leopold also stressed the role of the individual acting in concert with the environment. "In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it," he wrote. (204)

While the hunters I observed did not necessarily conceive of themselves as behaving within Leopold's land ethic framework specifically, they had an unwritten, but self-enforced, ethical and moral code about the behaviors of a good hunter. It was one that they enacted in dialogue with each other both before and after the hunt. Certain behaviors were considered laudatory, such as passing up a buck when lacking a clean shot. Others, like wounding an animal and leaving it to die in agony, were spoken of with clear derision. The seriousness with which my subjects took these matters surprised me, and further complicated my feelings about them and hunting.

Another text that I read during my research phase was *In Defense of Hunting* by James A. Swan. The book spells out a litany of reasons that support the idea of hunting as an ethical practice. Written in the 1990s, the book seems something of a reaction to the culture wars of the era that relied on hot button issues like abortion and gun control to split the electorate. Contrary to its title, Swan's opus is often less a defense of a behavior, and more of an attack on what he believes are very wrong-headed notions about those opposed to animal cruelty. At various times in his book, he attributes the motivations of antihunting activists to fear, financial gain and even an acting out of childhood conflicts with parents. (114-115)

But Swan also has some interesting ideas about the relationship between hunting and the expression of the feminine that I found fascinating, especially since my subjects were uniformly men. Swan writes that "Research has shown...the right side of the brain and the left side of the body are dominated by the feminine aspects—emotions, intuition, body sensations, spatial relationships, and so on." However, Swan neglects to cite any research that empirically proves these statements. Instead, this part of his argument seems more calculated to create the idea that hunting is not a pursuit drenched in masculine archetypes. It would have been much more interesting had Swan taken the time to find and interview female hunters and frame his position around their experiences and feelings. This was something I was very interested in learning about myself, but was unable to find any female subjects for my film.

Another book on hunting that I found illuminating was *A Hunter's Heart: Honest Essays on Blood Sport* edited by David Petersen. The book taught me that there are many hunters acutely aware of how they are perceived by non-hunters and anti-hunters. And they also struggle with

the moral and ethical aspects of taking an animal's life, even when they continue to do it. But the book also imparted the sense of how important story telling is in the world of the hunter. When the game has been dressed and butchered, when the layers of warm clothing have been traded for a rumbling fire, the ritualistic aspect of the sharing of stories about hunting is often practiced.

In addition to the readings, I felt that a thorough approach to researching my subject required that I learn to hunt. I felt that gaining at least a basic understanding of hunting would serve me well in being able to converse at least somewhat legibly on the subject with those people I planned to shoot footage of. In addition, I was concerned that some subjects would fear that my motivations in making the film might be to show either hunting or gun ownership in a bad light; I felt that showing them I was not averse to hunting myself might alleviate those potential concerns. (It turned out that I was wrong on this count. Not one of my subjects ever raised the possibility that I was making the film for reasons other than my stated one of just learning more about hunting culture. In fact, like people with any passion, most were excited about sharing their enthusiasm for hunting with me.)

To do so, I spent the majority of one weekend at a hunter's education course hosted by a hunting club in upstate New York to obtain a hunting license. The class consisted of several hours of lecture and education based on a text published by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. During the class I learned about the different types of actions on a rifle, how a choke affects the spread pattern of a shotgun shell, the optimal angle from which to shoot a deer, and how to field dress a buck, being careful not to pierce its paunch for fear of tainting the meat. While not codified in the text of our learning materials, it quickly became clear

to me that these hunters saw themselves as stewards of a form of conservation that had been handed down from the founding of the Boone and Crockett Club.

Our instructors also believed a hunter had a responsibility to hunt ethically. That meant dedicating oneself to practicing with their rifles long before finding a buck in their sights so that they would more skillfully and easily take down a deer with one shot, thus minimizing the animal's potential suffering. As Posewitz writes in *Beyond Fair Chase: The Ethic and Tradition of Hunting*, "Repetitive training prepares you to do the right thing, make the right move, and to do it even when you get excited, become tired, or feel stress. To get ready to do things right, you practice, and you practice ... and then you practice some more." (21-22).

Finally, I bolstered both my readings and practical knowledge of hunting by viewing a number of films that I thought could help to inform my approach. One such film was *Cree Hunters of Mistassini*, a National Film Board of Canada film about the hunting practices of First Nations Cree people in northern Quebec. The film is a fascinating document of Cree life in the wilderness beyond just hunting, using techniques like voice of god narration, shots that seem obviously staged, and on-camera interviews—approaches that did not interest me. But it also provides a really fascinating look into a culture that I knew nothing about, something I hoped to reproduce with my film.

I also watched several films that dealt with the killing of animals and processing of meat, two things I knew my film would address. It was important to me that the violence, butchery and gore in my film not seem sensationalized. My aim was not to appeal to viewers' prurient interest

in these matters. To better inform my thinking on these matters I watched Georges Franju's *Blood of the Beasts*, a short film that documents the work of a slaughterhouse in post war Paris, France. In addition to this film, I viewed Frederick Wiseman's *Meat*, which similarly documents the care and slaughter of livestock, but also includes the labor practices and mechanization of cattle raising. Both these films are tough to watch at times, but I believe that both use shots of slaughter to impart to the viewer interesting ideas about our relationship with animals, especially those that we consume.

Another film that had an influence on me was Jessica Oreck's *Aatsinki: The Story of Arctic Cowboys*. In this film Oreck documented reindeer herders in Finland but used the four seasons as a structural model for the film that also lent it a cyclical feeling. That was something I also strove to achieve in my film.

I also thought about the Lumiere brothers' *actualite* films while preparing to make my film. I'm fascinated by the idea that some of the earliest cinema created is something that we would easily consider a documentary by today's standards and definitions. Many of these films were considered travelogues, but they featured footage that I believe could also be considered ethnographic studies, even though it is likely that many of them were staged. The blurred line between fact and fiction in documentary can be traced back to its earliest examples, and I took that history into consideration while making *Fair Chase*.

Production Process

My production process began with identifying potential subjects for my film. As I wrote earlier, I had initially intended to focus my film on Josh Ott's meat business and his desire to source natural meat by learning to hunt. When I realized that Josh's schedule would not allow for me to capture the footage I needed to support that film, I began to cast a wider net for subjects through my personal network.

While I was surprised at the number of hunters I was able to contact who expressed a willingness to participate in the film, the reality was that several eventually backed out for one reason or another. My core group of subjects became Josh Ott, Tim Collins and a group of young men who met through the NYC Hunters Meetup group.

One of the major challenges was negotiating with the guides that my subjects would book their hunting trips through. In order to follow my subjects on their hunting trips, I also had to assuage any concerns these guides might have about my presence or equipment ruining the hunt, and for understandable reasons. These guides' livelihood often depended on their clients bagging game, going home happy, spreading the word about their terrific guides and then returning the next season. In these instances, I was glad that I had taken the time to earn my hunting license; I believe the knowledge I gained through that experience helped me to negotiate with guides who were often wary of me. One side benefit was that, in several cases, these guides ended up serving as subjects themselves, giving me ingress to another aspect of hunting culture and practices.

Another serious challenge was simply managing the logistics of shooting in nature by myself. Hunting requires a lot of walking in the woods off-trail. In these cases, it was hard to get good,

steady shots of my subjects. In addition, if they were carrying loaded weapons, safety concerns obviously dictated that I would have to remain behind them, complicating my ability to get good shots. Hunting also usually takes place regardless of weather, meaning that several times I was trying to find focus or frame my shots in a fogged-up viewfinder. These experiences taught me the importance of extensively preparing my equipment and developing a shooting strategy the evening prior to a shoot. It also taught me the importance of keeping my camera ready to shoot at a moment's notice. I knew it would be difficult, if not impossible, to record an actual animal being killed. But I felt that good preparation could yield footage of the immediate aftermath of a kill.

I do feel that one of the main failures of this project was my inability to find a female hunter to serve as a subject. While hunting is conceived of largely as a cisgendered male pursuit, there are a fair number of female hunters in the northeast US as well. I think that spending time shooting footage of a female hunter would have given viewers a richer experience, one that would put the other scenes in a different context and given them deeper meaning.

I believe another one of my production failures was my resistance to recording interviews about hunting with my subjects. I began shooting the film without the intent of using such material, but I think it would have been more beneficial had I opted to record the interviews, regardless of whether I planned to use them. I think doing so would have taught me a lot about the motivations of my subjects and helped to inform my shooting approaches with them.

I do feel that my observational approach to filmmaking was successful in giving viewers a more neutral space in which to wrangle with their own feelings and emotions about hunting and its associated practices. In that sense I think my film is as successful as it can be. I still remain enamored with the direct cinema/observational approach to filmmaking. I would rather refrain from a more didactic approach to documentary that results in my work telegraphing to a viewer what they should think, or how they should feel, about any particular subject. Instead I would rather share my own carefully edited observations and let them reach their own conclusions.

Audience and Exhibition

My film is geared towards an audience interested in observational style films that give viewers a window into a world that is unknown to them. I think it would appeal to people for whom hunting is a largely unknown practice that sits on the other side of a cultural divide. This group includes city dwellers and suburbanites. I was surprised at the level of interest I got from people to whom I described my film while I was making it. It's true that some people reacted with horror to my film subject, but a significantly larger proportion responded instead with curiosity and asked me a number of questions about my production process and my own feelings about hunting.

In addition, I think that the film would also appeal to hunters themselves. Like any subculture, hunters feel misrepresented and misunderstood by wider culture. Although there are a number of films and television programs about hunting, such as Steve Rinella's TV program *MeatEater*, I get the sense that hunters still feel stigmatized by the way they're represented in other media. My

subjects have already expressed a strong interest in viewing my film. I believe other hunters would be similarly interested in the film for that reason.

The final segment of my intended core audience are the attendees of more artistic and experimental documentary film festivals largely located in Europe, but also in North America. This list of festivals includes Berlinale, CPH:DOX*, DOK Leipzig, DOXA Documentary Film Festival, Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), True/False,

In addition, I plan to target wildlife and conservation focused film festivals such as the International Wildlife Film Festival, the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival, the New York Wild Film Festival, the Wasatch Film Festival and the Wildlife Conservation Film Festival.

Finally, I plan on applying to various festivals geared towards supporting South Asian filmmakers, as well as the Maryland Film Festival since I grew up there.

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