

James Blue on *A Few Notes on Our Food Problem*

In August 1971, a correspondence developed between Anil Srivastava of the Cinema Workshop in New Delhi, and James Blue, while Srivastava was researching an article for *Movement* magazine. The main topic discussed was Blue's filmmaking activities for the United States Information Agency (USIA) between 1962 and 1968.

Editors note: The response from Blue included several document packages to which he refers throughout the letter. These have not yet been located, and so are not included. The full transcript of the Srivastava-Blue correspondence is available in Buffalo Heads (ZKM/MIT Press, 2008).

We have seen some of your films, viz. *A Letter from Colombia*, *The School in San Diego* (sic), *The March*, and *A Few Notes on Our Food Problem*. We would like to know how much freedom you had while making your films? Is *A Few Notes on Our Food Problem* a propaganda film? How did you go about making it? Did you have any specific brief or any sort of script before shooting or did the film evolve as you went along?

(Note: The short school film is called *The School at Rincon Santo*, not San Diego as you state.)

With regard to the amount of freedom given me in these films (see package #2a, pg. #11), once I agreed to the general message or duty of the film - i.e., people must help themselves, or the farmer must be given the opportunity to respond, etc. - and to the budget and working conditions, I was entirely free. No one ever so much as looked over my shoulder - until the rough cut. But then when the film was in I had to justify it. Here I must mention one of the great reasons for my affection for George Stevens Jr. - then head of the USIA film service - was that he was never afraid to stand up to government officials or to Congress for that matter in defense of the films I made. This gave me a great sense of freedom and devotion to my work. And there were several times when controversy erupted over my work (see packages #5a, b, c).

My principle belief has been that within the context of the limitations imposed by its sponsor, a film must be a personal one. I can say that I have not made a film that I did not believe in. I have refused several. See #4d Statement of principles. Also see #6g for a view of the kinds of changes USIA officials asked to be made in the rough cut of the food film.

Is *Food Problem* a propaganda film? (See my remarks on the back of #4d.) I do not consider 'propaganda' a necessarily prejudicial term. All films propagate a particular worldview and a concept of the nature of man - no matter how unconscious this may be. Audiences are always being asked to believe something either implicitly or explicitly. I consider *Food Problem* a didactic film. It very overtly presents an idea in a manner that hopefully makes the concept striking and clear. I have clearly avoided pretending that the film has presented the proof of anything. In fact I state at the beginning of the picture exactly what the film will do and how it will operate, "we are going to move our camera about the earth to show you images which illustrate the problem."

This search for images to illustrate the problem rather than proof becomes the main concern of the film. Anyone who claims that he is presenting proof in a film is in my opinion suspect. Of course, you can show proof. In *The March* I showed large crowds - in a way that they were undeniably large, and we hear what Martin Luther King says, and it's undeniably true that he said that. But the total effect of the film is one of hope set in tragedy - a coexistence of joy and sorrow for mankind - that feeling is the result of the filmmaking and it is beyond the concept of proof.

In a way *Food* is a much more honest film than *The March*. *Food* tells you very openly what it is up to. My hope was that an audience at *Food* would come away reexamining their own attitudes around the farmer and the food/population situation.

How did I go about making it? See all of #6, but especially #6b and #6c.

Did I have a specific brief or script? See #6c and #6f (description of my way of working). Essentially I took the themes worked out in #6c and went to countries doing exactly what I say at the first of the film: "... looked for images which illustrate the problem." As I went to each country I responded to what people told me and what I found and fell in love with. See #6d for the impact of India on me. See #6e for the harassing difficulties of working in this improvisational manner. See #2c, package 2 for a more articulate statement of how I like to proceed. Basically, I thirst for a dialogue between me, my subject and the world around me. I am not capable of creating a film in the totally controlled environment of a studio production. In some way I feel that nature and life helped create my picture. That I am not totally responsible for it.

Talking further about *A Few Notes on Our Food Problem*, why is there an absence of a political stand? You only make a few statements and others you choose to ignore. Were you inhibited or do you consider posing the problem or drawing attention to the problem sufficient? Why did you avoid the overproduction phenomenon in the United States? Is the absence of a political stand to be regarded as a confusion in your mind?

I'm not sure I know what you mean by a political stand. The picture has a very definite view of the logic of the traditional man and his willingness to respond to an intelligent opportunity. Moreover, the film sketches out quite strongly man's thirst for a better life. I think these things have far reaching political implications that fall beyond the vagaries of day-to-day "issues".

I was never inhibited in what I did. I felt I had a legitimate message, an urgent one; I didn't want to cloud it over with additional problems. I felt that - as I said before - the audience should be prodded into reconsidering, reviewing their own beliefs. I never felt I could, in any one film, take up all the relevant interwoven problems. I have seen United Nations films which have attempted this and they wind up achieving the miraculous: they BORE us to death with the most important and exciting problems on earth! Attempting to put all the issues together just simply muddles it up. Hence, I did not treat the economic problem of overproduction in the US. I felt that it was reasonably clear that agriculture needed emphasis, and people needed to have confidence in themselves and their farmers. I do not feel I falsified anything by eliminating U.S. overproduction. If I felt so, I would not have done the film.

How would you define a film for development? Would you place some of your work in this category: *The School in San Diego [sic]*, *A Few Notes on Our Food Problem*, *A Letter from Colombia*?

All of my films have been in one way or another development films. And this is true of my latest scripts (done for myself, not for government). See the results of *Rincon Santo*, #4c; also read all of #4. My latest studies deal with early stages of US development. i.e. the Revolution and the change from a predominantly agrarian society to a predominantly urban technological one. I am deeply concerned with the devastating effects of change ('development') upon a man - his sense of his own worth and his potential for growth as a contented human being.

These are concerns you in India will be facing should you not also learn to live with your development at the same time that you are accomplishing it.

A film for development? I suppose I define it as any film lending itself to stimulating economic growth, etc. Conventionally it refers to films exposing a problem, advocating solutions, or - and unfortunately this is mostly the case - singing the praises of some success story or solution.

Do you have any experience of your films being used in classrooms? Do you make your films with a particular audience in mind?

I've had the opportunity to see my films used in high school and college classrooms a number of times. Properly presented they lead to a fruitful discussion. The *Food* film is particularly versatile. It lends itself to discussions in economics, political science, government, aesthetics, literary composition and media (film and TV) studies.

I make my films with different audiences in mind, but primarily myself and a few acquaintances whose taste and insight I trust. The *Food* film again received more careful attention in terms of audience. See #6. It was thought of as being directed to people who might have the power to change things for the farmer - government, business, elite groups, opinion makers. Most development films talk 'down' - are patronizing - to their audiences. I hope I didn't do that. I also wanted the film to be beautiful, arresting - and, yes, even entertaining - as well as thought provoking. In India, I loved your filmmakers' habit of breaking up the action with almost totally disconnected songs and dance. One of my favorite films of all time is Mehboob's *Mother India* - I don't know how you think of it but it exhilarated me beyond belief - its ruptures of tone, of genre: farce, melodrama, lyricism. A circus! My own filmmaking could not hope to juggle all of that, but the quick switches to lyrical scenes, images and, yes, even to dance in the *Food* film, was a half-conscious attempt to pay homage to Mehboob and traditional Indian cinema.