

Robert Nelson Interview by Gerry Fialka

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Experimental filmmaker Nelson (March 1, 1930 - January 9, 2012) sent me the following hand-written answers to 81 questions I sent to him in the fall of 2011. He answered 49 of them – much to contemplate.

1- What's the best thing for a human being?

1- This may never be determined.
We have many ideas
all full of holes.
"Heaven on Earth" may seem like the
obvious answer ... but wait... is it
really? No that would ruin everything.

2- What is your favorite form of information?

2.- Experience	1st-hand.	①
Intuition	" "	②
Reading	2nd hand	③
Radio	" "	④
face to face	1st-hand	②.5
OBSERVATION	" "	⑤-①
Movies/T.V.	2nd-hand	⑥

3- Why do we collect/gather information?

③- 1- to survive
2- to get stuff
④- to manipulate

4- Is this need or want to collect information learned or hardwired?

④ Hardwired reinforced by learning
enlarged

5- What is your earliest memory?

⑤ Eating dirt in backyard Liberty St. (S.F.)
approx. 3 yrs old.

6- Is memory a curse or a blessing?

⑥ Depends on the memory specific... it could be both or neither... as to "memory" as a function, everything remembers
Sand remembers the last lap
Tree rings remember the years and conditions
your body remembers satisfactions & pain
your mind remembers all kinds of shit.
The earth remembers

12- James Joyce was the first projectionist in Dublin over 100 years ago. He checked out and asked, "Why should I go inside a building and see a movie of a tree when I can go outside and see a real tree?" Years later William Faulkner said that the best fiction can be more true than journalism. Why do we have to recreate/reproduce things in order to get them? Why do we go to a theatrical play of people acting out life? Why don't we just live life?

⑫ a picture is much less complex (^{it is} abstraction) than what it depicts. We reduce and abstract and simplify to better understand to have more approaches (to the subject / to truth) to make complexities more manageable, to study incrementally, to make models

14- A screen writing teacher told me a great film is when you can clearly see the intention of the maker? Kubrick says the opposite - great art is when you can not see the intention of the maker. What role does intention play in your creative process?

(14) I tend to agree more w/ Kubrick
The intention should be unknown to the artist.. It should only be discovered, if at all, afterwards or in-process
That said, it is important (?) to make things that look intentional that seem intentional otherwise you risk losing your audience. So therefore your unplanned meanderings should seem as though going according to plan. How? Let your sub-conscious be your guide. It's a dangerous game buddy.

15- What first attracted you to pursue filmmaking?

(15) Seeing a ~~couple~~ hundred^{or so} experimental avant-garde films, about 99% lousy. They made me feel like "I can at least do better than this s---." The bar seemed very low, even I could perhaps get over it.

16- If clothing is an extension of skin, and knife & fork are extensions of teeth, what human sensorium does the moving image camera extend?

(16) The mind's eye the mind's ear

17- McLuhan said there is no such thing as a good or bad movie, it's a good or bad viewing experience. Any comment.

①7 Re McLuhan: yes and no. I've seen a lot of stinkers. and what about. (forgot what I was going to say)

18- Peter Greenaway said that cinema is much too rich a medium to be left to storytellers. Are experimental filmmakers telling stories a different way or doing something completely different? Is Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* story telling?

①8 The Flicker is shamanism and direct experience induced by ~~big~~ cinema. There is no story involved. It's either voodoo or science.

19- If you and I were starting the Ann Arbor Film Festival with George Manupelli many years ago, would you want to be more inclusive or exclusive? Keep in mind that its featured a fraction of animation and docs, but mainly is experimental. Chick Strand was starting Canyon Cinema around the same time in the SF area. She told me they were trying to recreate their 11 cent movie going experience by showing a feature, a newsreel, a cartoon and added an experimental. Brakhage told them to just show experimental. Those other genres have venues.

①9 Should show all ~~types~~ types of film w/ emphasis on experimental/home made/personal. No "mainstream" movies need be considered since the movie market sorts them out pretty well.

20- Can we avoid the ghettoization of experimental film? When Jackson Pollock was on the cover of *Life Magazine* in 1949, regular folks could start developing an aesthetic on experimental painting. No Bruce Conner or Maya Deren on the cover of *Life Magazine*. Generally its the privileged (alot of rich art kids) who dominate the experimental film world. Any comments.

②0 at least there are no "riches" in the field, so ~~no~~ less corrupting influences. No fame no fortune no audience no greatness

21- When I asked Michael Apter years ago why rock video makers feel so obliged to edit fast, he told me "because we have learned to take in information faster." Martin Scorsese also said that he edited his films faster because of MTV. Can we indeed learn to take in info faster?

(21) No, we do not take in info faster, we let it go by faster (very different concept)
We cling less to the blurry haste

22- "Film as an art form has been swindled by capitalism." Any comments.

(22) yes, but that's like saying "money corrupts" so what's new? What hasn't been swindled by capitalism? (The entrepreneurial spirit, oil speculation. The haves. The have nots?)

23- Jean-Luc Godard told Michael Moore his film was going to help Bush get elected. With the slew of political docs over recent years, do they more activate or more passive?

(23) Jean Luc Godard is full of shit.

24- Marcel Duchamp said there is no art without an audience. What role does the audience play in your creative process (during the making)?

(24) Marcel Duchamp is great. During the making I imagine being loved by audiences. After the fact, I can barely stand to show my films and have been profoundly disappointed by most of them

25- What was the motive of the cave artists?

25. Magic and prayer

26- What is more important - conviction or compromise?

26. — ? I can't tell the difference Compromise

27- Is ambition based more on fear or joy?

27. Fear

28- Is loyalty based on reason?

28. Hardly so.

29- T.S. Eliot said that poetry is outing your inner dialogue. What language is your inner dialogue in? What form is your inner consciousness in?

29. Bits and pieces mostly pictures
verbal self-recriminations, some snatches
of old songs

30- George Manupelli says "Ignore yourself." Jonas Mekas says there is no self-expression. Cecil Taylor says he is a vehicle and it comes through him. Is art making more self-expression or more vehicles for whatever dominant technology or culture is currently present? Can art be ego less?

30. Yes you're a vehicle and the expression picks up your signatures as it passes through.
Art can be egoless As you drag a stick through sand or a pen across paper
Technologies influence the look and meaning of expressions

31- Is perception reality?

31. No.

32- McLuhan probed *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce: artists dream awake. We all have creative powers we use to dream while sleeping, but artists also use them while awake. Dream awake. Have dreams played a role in your creative process? How?

32. Yes. I've always been very interested in all aspects of dreams and dreaming

33- McLuhan reworded Browning's "Our reach should exceed our grasp or what is heaven for?" to "Our reach should exceed our grasp or what is a metaphor?" How and why do you use metaphor in your art?

33. art is metaphor. art is how metaphors use me (discovers me) as I do my slow-motion dreams (movies/ptg)

34- Why is it so difficult for humans to consider the possibility that life may be pointless?

34. Because we want approval from mommy and daddy

35- Lewis Carroll said "I believe in as many as six impossible things before breakfast." Have you believed in any impossible things lately?

35. no.

36- What elements of your art have changed and what have remained the same since you started creating art?

36. remained the same: confidence in drawing ability. Excitement at the "magic" (better than I could imagine) that sometimes occurs, changed: everything else.

37- Moshe Feldenkrais said that it is literally possible to identify a weakness and incorporate it to become a strength. We are normally taught to overcome a weakness. Please tell me a weakness that you have turned into a strength.

37. As a baby I crawled, now I walk

38- The American Indians and Eastern culture respect their elders. Can you explain Western culture's disdain for old age?

38. Old people in our culture are often ugly and repulsive and dress badly and smell badly, ... but does that mean we shouldn't respect them? I'm asking.

39- Why would Joseph Beuys say "Make the secrets productive." Can you tell me a secret?

39. because we look for tricks to make us more productive. A secret? No.

40- Can anger be a productive emotion?

40. Usually not, but yes, on occasion.

45- How do you find peace of mind?

45. I'm still searching

46- If you were walking down the street today and you met yourself as a 12 year old, what would you say to your 12 year old self?

46. "Get outa here, go on home."

47- Should toilet paper go over or under the roll? Why?

47. over the roll, . It's a male thing,

48- If a publisher was to release your autobiography, off the top of your head, what would the title be? They want to scent the glue in the binding. What smell would it be?

48. Excuse me for living. French fries

49- If a statue was built in your honor, where would it be displayed and what would it be made of?

49. ICE, over the Fire-place

50- Please tell me something good you never had and never want.

50.

51- If you were in a vat of vomit up to your neck and somebody threw a bag of shit at your face, what would you do?

51. Cancel my membership

52- What is the healthiest cultural shift you see developing today?

52. Racial distinction dissolving (possibly)

53- What gives you the most optimism?

53. Winning non-competitive events

55- Please answer the 4 questions of McLuhan's Tetrad for the Ann Arbor Film Festival, or any human invention (tangible or not)

A: what does the Ann Arbor Film Festival enhance or intensify?

B: what does it render obsolete or replace?

C: what does it retrieve that was previously obsolesced?

D: what does it become when pressed to an extreme, what does it flip into?

55
A Movies
B movies
C movie
D. faecium

56- Any rituals or routines in your creative process?

56. NONE

60- Larry Jordan: "Human beings conduct their lives from much stronger sources than the rational mind." Name other sources?

60. Mindlessness irrationality destiny fate karma luck among others

64- Consider: TV is light through, like stain glass window, right brained, more female. Film is light on, left brained, more male. Any comments.

64. no comment

72- Introducing Andrei Tarkovsky to an audience at the 1983 Telluride Film Festival, Stan Brakhage declared: "I personally think that the three greatest tasks for film in the 20th century are 1) To make the epic, that is, to tell the tales of the tribes of the world. 2) To keep it personal, because only in the eccentricities of our personal lives do we have any chance at the truth. 3) To do the dream work, that is to illuminate the borders of the unconscious." Any comments. What are your 21st century's updates?

72. Good list, first time I've seen it

75- What guides your decision making? Allen Ginsberg says first thought, best thought. Jonah Lehrer (*How We Decide*) says fast-blink decisions are not always useful. Malcolm Gladwell (*Blink*) recommends gut-decision making.

75. I prefer slow-blink decisions after I consult I Ching but always delving into the structure of Good fortune or Bad fortune, and (miscellaneous consequences) and deemphasizing "fortune-telling" aspect. Finally, it should come from gut mind ~~and~~ heart and conviction

To Gerry Fialka
Interesting quiz
Good luck w/your efforts.

11/8/11

Robert Nelson

This is Nelson's
OK to publish
the interview



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