

## **Please introduce yourself.**

My name is Walter Ungerer. I am a media artist living and working in Rockland, Maine, USA. I create films that are personal and experimental.

## **How did film making come to your life?**

In 1940 there was a movie theatre near where I lived in New York City. I went there often, and alone on Saturday mornings and afternoons. This is where I had my first introduction to “movies”. I remember walking into the theatre, and finding it difficult to see where I was going. I remember becoming engulfed by a darkness. I noticed other people were there, but they all seemed to disappear in a few minutes after I located an empty seat. Images of strange lands and larger than life strange people began to appear on a wall in front of me. There was a sensation of being transported, and with anticipation, to somewhere new and sometimes dangerous. You can call it magical. Eventually I became enthralled with that magic, that power and ability of film making, to move people to laugh and cry and feel emotions, I wanted to learn that ability so that I could use it in my own films.

## **By IMDB you have made 48 (!) films. There are feature films, experimental films, dramas. What do you think unites all these films? What is your process of film making?**

To begin, there is a similarity in the use of visual elements in all of my work: how I frame each shot (reliance on wide establishing shots opposed to extreme close-ups); my preference for rural outdoor locations rather than urban city locations; my choice of colours and tones which rely heavily on the warm earth colours and tones in nature; a slow, contemplative editing pace. It has been mentioned by others that my work has a painterly quality to it.

There is a similarity in the sounds I use in all my work. I use natural sounds: animals and birds, wind, rain, and water flowing. I produce my audio tracks from bits of material from live location recordings, from radio sounds and from CD recordings. These bits are re-assembled and altered in tone, pitch, and speed. Sometimes bits are reversed or overlapped with other sounds. This results in new sounds, and that collection is placed together like a multi layered sandwich. This approach to creating the audio tracks for my work is also how I approach making the visual material for my films. I recall in the early days of my personal film making, 1965-75, I lifted sound clips from popular songs to enhance the visual material I was playing. MEET ME, JESUS comes to mind as an example of such a method of sound track construction.

In retrospect, it is my personal sensibility that stands out and bonds my work; usually my choice of the natural as opposed to the artificial.

### **What is your process of film making?**

Today my process is different from when I first learned how to make films. In order to learn about film making back in 1955, I looked for any film jobs that might be available. Shirley Clark was directing a feature in Harlem called "The Cool World". I took the job of property manager on the film for a short time. Then Francis Foland Productions was looking for a negative cutter. That was a 10-day job for me. I recorded sound for a film about Edward Teller and Buckminster Fuller. I did some shooting in the Washington, DC Capital Building for a New York production company. They wanted footage of the Civil Rights Movement leaders signing into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Then I was the cameraman for a documentary shot in Nigeria about that country's independence from Great Britain. These were "freelance" jobs I took that gave me experience in several areas of film production.

In 1953 when I went to college, I wanted to be an architect. After one year I transferred to fine art, though I was all the time interested in learning film making, But I could find no film programs or courses. People in the film industrial told me to forget about school. Get practical experience working on productions. So that's what I did. What ensued were several years of testing and searching for what I wanted to do in film. What role did I want? Camera? Director? Editing? It all looked so good. It was like going into a candy store and being confronted with all that good stuff.

I was in New York City, where there were many young people eager for an opportunity to work on a film. I gathered together with some other aspiring filmmakers and I enlisted their help to be crew members on a short film I was preparing to shoot, called A LION'S TALE. I fine mime and friend agreed to play the main character. It was quite a learning experience: the logistics of scheduling the actors and crew and finding locations and maintaining the enthusiasm to make the film with no money for anyone. When it was finished, I sent it to a number of film festivals, and it was included in several of them. This is how my experience with film making began very practically.

The film making process for me today is very different, having evolved over many years of making films. Today I begin my working day in my editing room. Whatever idea comes to me there, I follow. It might suggest where I should go to film that day. I might go out locally into town with my camera. There is no preconceived idea or plan. Whatever attracts my interest, I follow. At the end of the day I come back to the editing room where I transfer the film clips to a computer hard drive. After several days, weeks or months I will have accumulated a body of film clips. When I have a

substantial body of material, I begin to review it and place it in some temporary order. I will organize everything in a folder. It will include sounds I've heard. They can come from a radio playing, a washing machine running, a bird outside, an airplane passing by overhead, a car sound, and almost anything. At this point in the process, a project is developing, and I continue to follow my impulses. This is my procedure to follow my impulses. As much as possible it is the creative, instantaneous decision making that occupies my time. The mechanics of operating the equipment and taking the steps to produce a film, are minimized, though when new equipment or new software comes into use, there is a learning curve to grasp what is necessary for using it.

### **Which of your films is your favourite or strongest? Why?**

Of my older films THE ANIMAL is a favourite. I also like THE WINTER THERE WAS VERY LITTLE SNOW. They are both narrative feature length films, which determined how they were to be shot and edited. There was a shooting script for each. There was a crew, actors and location shooting. THE ANIMAL was a difficult film to shoot. It was shot in winter time. It was cold and there was a lot of snow. Often we all had to trudge through 2 to 3 feet of snow with our equipment to the location where shooting would occur. The morale of the crew and cast was not always at its highest because of the physical stress on everyone. I remember very well the first day of shooting. The daytime temperature was 10 below zero Fahrenheit. At one point the camera began to labor running. I stood behind the camera operator, and I knew something was wrong with the equipment. When I got home at the end of the day, I had to throw out all the 400 foot reels of film because the camera tests indicated the film hadn't been properly exposed. I didn't tell anyone because I thought they might lose confidence in me and the project. I knew to make the film it would require continuously shooting in extreme cold and snow for four months, and without pay. There was no salary for anyone.

When a film is finished, any of my films, I never ever know exactly what I have created. How will the film speak? What spiritual quality will emerge when a film is finished? I'm talking about a feeling or mood that gets instilled in the film from me and the others involved... unconsciously. This is the real mystery of film making. Hopefully, a mysterious energy or spirit begins to emerge as a film is being finished.

Of my more recent films I feel close to them all: PARVA SED APTA MIHI, MONARDA, GREEN EYE, ICI, noCOM, I JUST DON'T GET IT – IT'S MY RUSSIAN SOUL, CURIOUSLY. Maybe that's because they are also still recent and new to me. Always, it is a spirit that I hope will appear from a universal soul.

## Elemental Ghosts and Human Mysteries: An Interview with Walter Ungerer

by Cullen Gallagher June 9, 2011



Walter Ungerer's *Monarda* (2010) has been screening across the country as part of the [2011 Black Maria Film Festival](#), a traveling program of new experimental cinema. Like much of Ungerer's work, the 10-minute *Monarda* explores the mystifying qualities of nature. Beginning with a shot of grass, Ungerer quickly abstracts his images through digital manipulation until they are barely recognizable. Traces of natural forms (leaves, twigs) ground what is an otherwise indescribable procession of images. Though the visuals evade literal synopsis, there's a simplicity and concision to the film that allows the viewer to get caught up in their own experience rather than get sidetracked on decoding the filmmaker's intentions. *Monarda* instills a feeling of both apprehension and wonder in the viewer. It's a disquieting film, but one whose subtle craft and atmosphere becomes more impressive over multiple viewings. Ungerer's version of nature is as ominous as it is beautiful, as inviting as it is distancing. We may recognize bits and pieces of Mother Nature in *Monarda*, but her enigma still remains.



Monarda

### What is *Dark Horse Films*? What are you doing there?

Dark Horse Films is a non-profit film company I started in Montpelier, Vermont in 1976. It had a board of directors. I formed the company as a non-profit company because there was federal grant money available to non-profits so that they could function as production companies. Dark Horse Films had four employees. I was the unpaid director. The other three employees were funded through a federal grant program, which I had applied for and received. Obtaining the grant money obligated me to train the employees. I taught them film production skills: editing, camera, sound and working together as a production crew. Today the company is dormant, save for my using the name as a brand for my films.

### What are films for? How cinema is better than other art forms?

Because films are time based and because they can simulate reality, a major use is educational and informational: documentary films and news clips of events. They are also used for entertainment purposes extensively. People go to "the movies" to escape the pain of everyday life. The potential of film to convey a spiritual quality, as I consider to be possible with the "art film" or "film as art", is much more minimally used. It doesn't offer much financial gain compared to

documentaries and theatrical films. People don't rush to see an art film. Entrepreneurs don't invest in films that don't make money. The world has become very materialistic.

I don't believe film is better than other art forms

### **What is *independent film* for you? Why did you choose it?**

An independent film is one that is produced and financed outside of the Hollywood system of major studios. At one time it was very separate from the Hollywood system, but today there might be some Hollywood financial backing for an independent production which potentially affects the creative decision making process of producing a film. The lines have grayed.

At one time I thought of an independent film as one that was guided by purely aesthetic values, and had as its primary objective to create a beautiful product with cultural and spiritual values. Today I think this is still a possibility, but difficult. When more people are involved with a project, it is more difficult to have agreements. People have different aesthetic values. There are other values, too. People want box office success. People want to enrich the culture. The more people that are involved with a project, the more there is potential for dissection and disaster. Mostly, I work alone today.

### **What is important for every filmmaker? Is it a must to finish a film school to become one?**

Most important: honesty.

Is it a must to finish film school? When I taught film making at Columbia University, where the tuition was high, I told the students they would be better served using the tuition money to make a film. It would offer better direct film making experience in a shorter period of time, and the result would be a finished film. Life is a different path for everyone. My Columbia University students thought film school was the answer.

### **What do you do *outside the set*?**

Cut grass, chop wood, and watch the clouds go by.

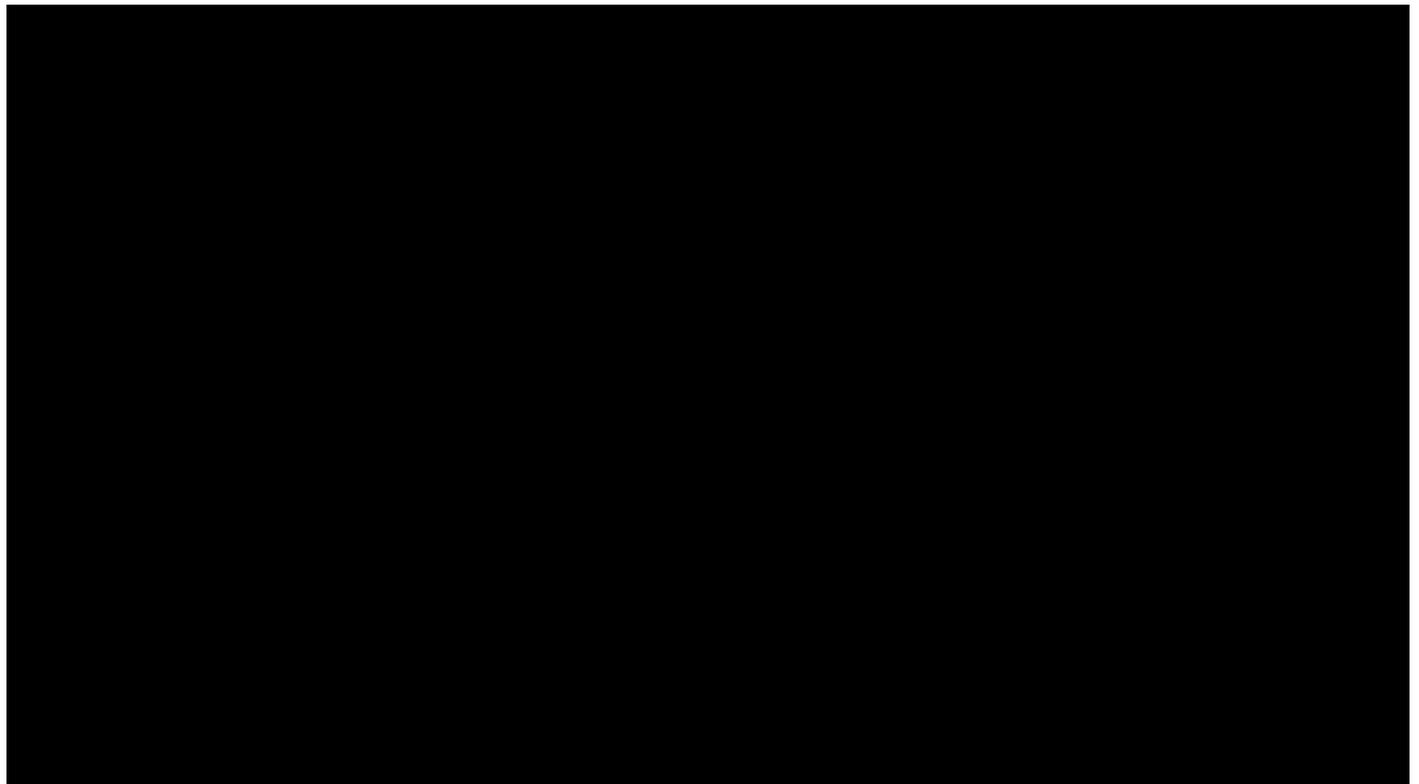
### **Is film making actually a *dream job*? Does it pay well?**

You could say that. To be able to work creatively with all the elements for making film available to me as a filmmaker, is wonderful.

No, it does not pay well. It hardly pays anything at all, and that is what I must endure. Still it is the way I have chosen. I am an artist. My art is film making.

### **Who are your film making heroes and why?**

I have great respect for people who struggle to improve the difficult conditions of the world through whatever method they may have at their disposal. Some are filmmakers. They are all important to me. Where do I begin with the filmmakers? Eadward Muybridge, Etienne Marey, Thomas Edison, Luis Lumière, Auguste Lumière, Georges Méliès, Edwin S. Porter, Carl Dreyer, Man Ray, Luis Buñuel, Winsor McCay, Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Ernst Lubitsch, Claude Chabrol, Serge Eisenstein, Walt Disney, Lars von Trier, Yasujiro Ozu, Ingmar Bergman, Nicolas de Gunzburg, Hans Richter, Jean Cocteau, Fritz Lang, Vittorio De Sica, Michalangelo Antonioni, Roberto Rossellini, Susanne Bier, Akira Kurosawa, F. W. Murnau, Federico Fellini, Andrei Tarkovsky, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Robert Flaherty, Leni Riefenstahl, Satyajit Ray. This is just the beginning of a list that hasn't touched contemporary work, experimental or otherwise. These people are all heroes and influences on my work. How can I illustrate their work? Only with a black screen to represent the endless continuum.



**What film making have taught you?**

Life is one mistake after another. Just keep making mistakes, and learn from them.

**Your film making motto:**

Within me lies the soul, absolute truth. It resides in us all.

My work attempts to emanate from there. No intellect is required,  
only honesty. It presents itself as the spirit of my work.

More is unknowable. This is the mystery called life.