

Michael Rosenberg: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee(s):

Michael Rosenberg

Reasons why chosen for an oral history:

Michael was the owner and director of Partridge Films, a highly respected and prolific wildlife film production company.

Name of interviewer:

Michael Bright

Reasons why interviewer chosen:

Colleague and friend

Date of interview:

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Partridge Films Offices

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1. The early years

MB: Well, let's go back to the beginning, that's South Africa. How, did you have an interest in wildlife as such, or movies, or what? What was it attracted you to this business? Was there something in your boyhood or whatever?

MR: Well, my father was a man who worked five days a week as a managing director of a steel company, but his passion was filmmaking and wildlife. He bought a farm in the Eastern Transvaal, right on the border of the Kruger National Park. He bought 180 acres in 1948 for £45, half a crown an acre. Not quite the same today. And every year in the winter, South African winter - June, July, August - we'd go out for two months from the middle of June to the middle of August because those were the perfect temperature, sort of seventies, and no rain. And we used to go into the Kruger Park every day, and he was the only person I'd ever met who shot 16mm as an amateur. And he had one of those magazine cameras in those days, and I

always remember one of his friends, who thought he was insane, said “52&6, boom, 52& 6, boom”, as the **magazines** went through. And he shot, and we went and we looked, and I was fascinated by what he was trying to get and how he was trying to get it. And then I used to watch him in the evenings, in the winter, because J’oburg [Johannesburg] is quite high, sitting in front of the fire with a **Moviescop editor** going back and forth over the material that he’d shot and trying to put it together, and I always thought, “That’s the wrong way round”. He had no idea what he was going to get, he had no idea why he wanted it, and I have his films today which prove that he had no idea how to put them together.

Anyway, so I was just intrigued by telling a story with film, and I was a good still photographer. So when I finished school and we came to live in England, we were politically of the South African extreme left, which meant we were Tories in England. So we had a new definition of communist, which is anybody who disagrees with you. We came over and I didn’t really know what to do. My Dad and Mother both came with [me, I’m] an only child, and I didn’t know what I wanted to do. Firstly I had to get ‘A’ levels because South African University entrance and British University entrance requirements were a million miles apart. So I did physics, chemistry, pure maths, and applied maths, which even scares me now today. It scared me then and it took a lot of hard work to pass it. But I didn’t know what to do, and eventually having tried chemical engineering and not got anywhere, I did a degree in photographic technology at what was then the Regent Street Polytechnic. And while I was doing that I met up with people who were making movies, not natural history, but one particular man called Christopher Nupen, who ran a company called Allegro Films. My Dad did a deal with him to say, “If I give you the money to start up your company, you train my son to be a film editor”. So we did that, I finished up at the Regent Street Poly, and for three years I was an assistant film editor on documentaries about classical music, and Christopher today is one of the best known producers of documentaries about [Vladimir] Ashkenazy, and [Pinchas] Zukerman, and [Itzhak] Perlman And we did one on [Andrés] Segovia. And my job was to **sync** up the **rushes** and log them, and know where everything went. Now, I did that for three years and I was then allowed to occasionally intervene in the editing but I could never tell where you should cut to, because if you had an orchestra playing something, did you pick up the melody, or a secondary melody, or a third one? Or something that you wouldn’t notice unless you saw the actual pictures. So they did all of that but I never knew why. And BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] were advertising at that stage in about 1968, 1969, for a holiday relief assistant editor.

I had by then been studying photographic technology, which at college, which was really how to run a photo lab, and how colour film worked, and colour formers, and dyes, and processing, and then how video worked, as it was in the late 1960s. So I was interviewed, and out of 500 or 300 odd people, there were 33 jobs; I got one. So I then worked as an assistant editor on Tomorrow’s World (1), Horizon (2), and I finished up doing 24 hours in Lime Grove [Studios], where I would be handed rushes at three o’clock in the afternoon and they would go out that evening. And it was there I discovered a fondness for whisky. Because I was so frightened at having to cut a three minute or four minute piece, that I would have to have about two large whiskies just to be able to control the editor because I was shaking so much. And we used to work from ten in the morning until midnight, on a three day cycle so, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday; Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday; and Monday, Thursday, Friday; and Monday, Tuesday, Friday, so there were two, five day weekends in every five. And I learnt quite a lot about how to do this sort of stuff.

And then my father had become obsessed with Israel, and he was going back and forth there, and he got involved with conservation in Israel. Now, I knew that he loved wildlife, and I was fascinated by wildlife. And he got involved with them and their nature reserve authority. And they did a film promoting the work that they did (3). And he sent it to me, and I said this is nearly the worst thing I’ve ever seen in my life, in fact, if I couldn’t make a better film than this - I put this in writing - I would throw the film and then myself over a cliff. So he showed this to the head of the Nature Reserve Authority who turned out to be a colleague of Ariel Sharon called General [Avraham] Yoffe who was just off to the Six Day War and he said “All right, big mouth, come and do it”. So I made the Holy Land (4) and that was the first film that I sold to the BBC. And that’s where I met Chris Parsons, who wanted to know what else I’d made, and the answer was nothing, so he thought “Great, we’ll keep this running”. And so from there on I’d met Chris, who I got on very well with, and he introduced me to a cameraman called David Hughes, who turns out to be one of the truly great geniuses that natural history film had ever produced, and I thought he was a typical wildlife cameraman. I mean, he

had a PhD in Zoology, he probably has an IQ of about 190, he's totally self-sufficient and he's a genius photographer stroke cameraman. He did a little film, called Arribada (5), which was shot on a wind-up Bolex and is still better than anything else I've ever seen; [it] was about the ridley turtles coming to Costa Rica, which we put together with him. But his first film for the BBC was for Ned Kelly. [It] was The Great Turtle Mystery (6), which is about 1972 or thereabouts. And that's where I started, and so David and I made a film on the Okavango (7) which was very mediocre and, [had] lots of problems all the way round, and it was a BBC/Partridge co-production where it was edited inside the BBC, and I ran into a different way of working from anything I'd known about. So after that, when that was finished, we got another film which was about the Namib desert (8), and that one was done outside with people coming to visit it and see what they thought, but, kind of like the set up we have here, I've ever since then, from the days of being puzzled by what the hell my father was doing, I've discovered I was puzzled by what most people were doing when they were sitting and editing 'cos I have no –. They didn't seem to me to be actually stringing a story that I could follow together, and I work on that basis that I'm not that smart. If I could follow it, then the viewer can follow it. So, that's what we did. And then so we made Namib (8). Now, I remember bringing Namib (8) to BBC Bristol in 1976 because it had to be quality controlled. And I've forgotten the name of the guy in the **dubbing theatre**, the guy with the blonde hair. Do you remember?

MB: Peter somebody? Peter Copeland?

MR: Peter Copeland. And I had to show him the film in the **dubbing theatre**, and he had to approve it, and I was sitting there. I was so nervous I must have lost half a stone during the viewing. And he kept sighing during it and I thought, "Oh, he's going to throw it all back at me. God, yes it is, it really is the worst thing I've ever seen in my life. I don't blame him if he gives it back, I'll just slink out". And he turned to me at the end and said, "God, why don't we do soundtracks like that?" So, completely off the scale the wrong way, but that's always been the case with anything I've ever made. I have no ability to tell if it's good or bad. I get right inside it, and totally emotionally involved with it. And, I think, looking at Namib (8) now, it's a fairly decent movie, it's certainly the best we ever made. We made a few that, sort of, came close.

2. The history of Partridge Films

MB: At that time you mentioned Partridge, is that when Partridge was formed?

MR: Partridge was formed immediately after making Wildlife in the Holy Land (4). We needed a company to do a second deal with the BBC. And in doing the deal, we needed a name of a company. Now, I'd been working from my spare room in London and we went to look for an office, because obviously, as you see again, I've now come full circle and we're sitting in the living room of the place I'm living in Bristol wanted a place, and the office that we were trying to get was in Pear Tree Court. So I thought, "partridge in a pear tree". So, that's nearly as good as the humming bird joke, but not quite. So we decided to call it Partridge Film. And it sort of stuck ever since, so we found that.

MB: Where were you based?

MR: And it was based in London at that time. The original Partridge Films was in 12 Millfield Lane because it turned out that if you took a **Steenbeck** - if you recall, Steenbecks are very heavy - if you took it onto the first floor of this office, it would have gone straight through the floor and finished up on the ground floor. So having got Partridge Films, which wasn't at Pear Tree Court 'cos it never got to Pear Tree Court - it turned to Partridge Films of 12 Millfield Lane. The cycle closed in that when I left Partridge Films in 2000 and I had to start a company. I've called it Pear Tree Film. So if I can find a building called Partridge Court, that would be very nice.

MB: And how many people were with you at that time?

MR: The original Partridge films had an assistant for me and an editor. The assistant was a guy called Brian King, and while I was out doing the Botswana film (7) with David Hughes, I managed through great sweating and effort to get through to London, 'cos at that time phoning London from Botswana was no joke, and I got the police in my living room: "Mr Rosenberg has just been killed in a motorcycle". What happened was that I'd advanced him the money to buy his beloved Honda 650 motorcycle, and he'd got killed on it. But it was registered in my name and he was not carrying any ID, so they thought he was me, so very unnerving to be told by British Police long distance that you're actually deceased. So in the words of Mark Twain, you know, the news of my death is, whatever it, however he quoted it, [a] little premature. I hope. So after that there was a lady called Helen Wolfson and the editor, who was an assistant editor at that time, was a man called Dave Dickie, who we all know and love today, is one of the best editors there's ever been. And he worked with me from 1973 until 1992. At which point Partridge had moved into the big time and then had run through a series of mishaps at the hands of HTV and a gentleman called Patrick Dromgoole.

MB: Shall we just look at that history, the process, before we talk about the films? Partridge was very successful in London, what happened after that?

MR: Well, Partridge had been very successful creatively and had never been much cop financially. I always did the wrong thing: I was sole owner, and managing director and controlled financier, so I always wanted the film to be better than the budget would allow. So I always subsidised them. And so, the company sort of broke even or made small losses over the years, and that was fine when there were three films because I had other income. My father died in 1971, and he left me some money, which is what paid for Wildlife in the Holy Land (4) and subsequently for Namib (8) and for, well in correct order, for Okavango (7) and then for Namib (8). And then the sales carried on from there. And we made about three films every eighteen months so [it] was a small volume, which was not too bad, and then in 1979 – I'll go back. In 1976, I sold Namib (8) to the BBC and I did a deal with a gentleman called Peter Clark. Now, I signed the deal and after that he looked at me, put his head on one side and said, "Do you do all your own sales or have you got an agent?" [I] said, "I do all my own sales". He says, "There's a card of an agent. You'll go bust if you do any more deals like this one, so you're not safe to be let out of the door". So I met a man called Anthony Morris, and he was the distributor for Partridge from 1977, until he sold out his company in the late eighties. And in 1979, he was a very close friend of Jeremy Isaac's, and when [the] British Government decided there needed to be a Channel 4, which was, if you read the original legislation 'intended to establish an independent film industry', and the current people at Channel 4 should read the conditions that were imposed on them at that time and which they are still supposed to be working too. They would find that what they're doing now is treating people as freelancers and not as independent. An independent is somebody who owns the copyright of their own work. Anyway, he got me, i.e. Partridge, a twelve part series called Fragile Earth (9), which due to certain mishaps with the finances became a six part series on Fragile Earth (9) and produced some quite amazingly good movies and during that period we decided that there was not enough room in my flat for me.

I had got married in the meantime in 1979, and I moved out of my flat now, which had been my accommodation [and] now was the home of Partridge Films. But it was a two bedroom flat and there were 14 people working in it and one day I had a meeting with the bank manager and we had to conduct it in the loo because it was the only place where there was any room at all. Everybody was **track laying**, and cutting and people were arguing and everything. So I bought an office at 38 Mill Lane, which was in West Hampstead, and moved into that in 1981 and stayed there 'til' 1991, 1992. And so we moved to 38 Mill Lane in London and we produced then about six or seven programmes a year. Fragile Earth (9) was quite good in that it produced three **Golden Panda** winners which is not bad out of six. And every one of them, except one of them, won an award of some sort at Wildscreen.

[In] about 1987, June Dromgoole, who has worked for BBC subsequently [and] was called June Morrow in those days, came to me and said she had a contact with a gentleman called Patrick Dromgoole, who was the MD of HTV. He and I did a deal on 12 one hours [episodes] and 24 half hours [episodes] and when that deal was done, we decided that we had to get a proper office, even a second one, which was really a house. It was actually a store with a flat over the top of it and it had four **cutting rooms**, administrative office and a

basement, and then various holes in the walls which turned into **cutting rooms** and I remember having to get an evaluation from a chartered surveyor who became a friend of mine and he looked at it and said, "I've met gerbils who have a better quality of life than the people who work for you". So, I was looking also for somebody to run the company because it was quite clear that I had a conflict of interest. I wanted them to be good, and we needed –. As the volume was going up, if you had a 10% error, 10% error on two or three films is uncomfortable but not ruinous, if you've now have fifteen programmes or twelve programmes a year going through, then a 10% is just extinction time. So, in a fit of enthusiasm I employed Derek Anderson, who had been the unit manager to BBC, only to discover that Derek had come from a BBC world which is very different from the one today and even he was unaware about how little he knew about running a business. For example, he didn't know anything about cash flow. In the real world, you sign a contract and if people pay on the due date you're very lucky, but they might not. In the BBC, you have an annual budget and you call it down as and when you need it so there is no issue about when the money –. And he started writing cheques when there was no money in the bank because the contract said it was due, but we're dealing with Discovery, National Geographic and public television, and if it's within, say, three months of the due date they regard that as pretty good. And of course, so every month, at the 15th of the month, I had to go and see the bank manager about arranging an overdraft facility for the end of the month in case –, to pay everybody in case the money didn't arrive on time.

Now, the overdraft got up to £250,000 and then Mr [Nigel] Lawson started doing his tricks with interest rates and suddenly it was quite clear that our management team didn't have a clue. He was a brilliant manager, he didn't do any nice things but he did very good things for the company and he sorted all that out, brought in a company called FlexTechs, and suddenly the finances were sorted. And he did a whole lot of other good things, but all of that hole that HTV got itself into, Partridge got caught in it as well without knowing about it.

So in 1989 we bought an enormous house called Ellencroft up in rural Gloucestershire, Wooten-under-edge, which had 13 **cutting rooms** on the top floor. It had 26 rooms, it had accommodation for people, and it had 7 acres of land, and it had administration offices on the ground floor. We bought it and we couldn't afford it, but we reckoned that we'd have extra business and after all, who ever got hurt by buying property? 'Cos we'd had 15 years property. Well, Mr [Nigel] Lawson and Mrs [Margaret] Thatcher sorted it that we got hurt buying property, and, precipitated one of the biggest crashes in British history in 1990, and so from being worth £900,000 it was something worth £250,000. And of course you were funding that with the value of the –, using the value of the property as security for –, had to –. We then had to go and do a deal with HTV and they assumed control of the company, and in 1992 they brought in a guy called Mark Broughton, as a managing director and he stayed until 1997. Actually he didn't he stayed until – he came to our twenty-fifth anniversary – so 'til' June 1999. And [he] turned the whole thing around. Partridge became a real business. We were able to –. I was the, became director of programming, and we were supported right up until the time that United [New and Media] bought HTV, which was about 1997. Yes. And then they, United then decided to get into a power play with Granada, about being this whole ITV company, and lost, and they had to sell their television holdings, or they decided to sell their TV holdings to Granada. And Granada really had no interest in what we were doing. By then we were joined with Survival, who had been our mortal enemies throughout our history with, whereas the relationship with the BBC was a cordial one and we made some films, over the years. We made a series called Okavango: Jewel of the Kalahari (10), and we made Amazon: The Flooded Forest (11) for the BBC, and we made whole series of half hours and individual Natural World's (12), and [it] was a very cordial relationship. We weren't really competitors. We were total competitors with Survival, and Survival ran their business in a quite different way. So there was no –. When we were put together and found we were in the same business, it was a bit like the Israeli soldier waking up with a Palestinian lady in bed with him. Who's going to shoot who and with what? So that was definitely not a good thing from Partridge's point of view.

And then John Willis was appointed - he'd been appointed by United. He had been the factual programme controller for Channel 4, and we'd made a big series for Channel 4 in the early nineties called The Sexual Imperative (13) which had not been a great success. It was, had a lot of production difficulties, and he didn't like natural history anyway and he didn't like natural history people. And so he was, not actually obstructive, just not interested. So when he then came along, the idea of having to get permission from him on every, at

every turn, on what we could do and what we couldn't do was just not on. So, before I did anything too stupid, we agreed an amicable parting of the ways. Whereupon immediately after I left, he left, and I have no idea what Granada were doing. They seem to have abandoned the use of Partridge, the name, and Survival [too]. They got 67 years together, 'cos Survival was forty [years old] and Partridge was twenty-seven [years old], and probably the two best known brands outside of the BBC and National Geographic, and they've shelved them and put them under wraps. And they've got a thing called Granada Wild which makes programmes I think, but it has nobody that I'm sympathetic to or who is sympathetic to me and it doesn't seem to want to make the very best. Partridge under me made the best it knew how and I had no interest in doing anything else. So –.

3. Reflections on Partridge Films

MB: Mike, you've gone through the history of Partridge and your involvement with Partridge. Looking back at all that time, I mean, do you feel bitter?

MR: No, because the mess that Partridge ever got into was down to me. By the time, if I had, what's the right phrase? Exercised more fiscal responsibility as opposed to worrying about the quality of the product, or if I had bitten off less, then I could have kept my eye on the ball but I, sort of, was too determined to be all things to all men, the best there ever was, and the most. Now, in the –, when we agreed the deal with HTV, Partridge was in fair shape but only fair shape and what I should have done is found somebody who was really competent at managing the company. Now admittedly I chose Mr [Derek] Anderson on, in the belief that he did know what he was doing but nevertheless he was the wrong kind of man to do it anyway. What we needed was somebody like Mr [Mark] Broughton who was an investment banker, and he needed the authority to say no to me and at that time I wasn't interested in anybody saying no to me about anything. So I think I went through a phase of being very arrogant and rather, what is the word, hubris? Having too much hubris? And trying to take on too much. So, I don't feel at all bitter about how HTV got into my life. I feel very sad at the lack of respect that both United and Granada have paid to me personally and to the work that all those people did with me because I honestly think that we did some of the best there ever was. And I think we and they and the wildlife industry deserve to be in much better shape than we actually are in, because of the –. It's really the kind of people who have taken over, so I'm being like all old farts, reminiscing about a better day. And to compare a man like Chris Parsons or John Sparks to somebody like John Willis is just nonsense. John Willis really was a very mediocre individual, he still is as far as I know, and these other guys had a vision and a passion. Now maybe John has a great passion for something that I don't know anything about, but it certainly wasn't wildlife and he was totally the wrong man. But by the time he came along the writing had already got onto the wall and he didn't –, he just –, we got onto a slippery slope and that was it.

So, yes I am sad that I'm not working with the best people in the world making, trying to make some of the best films. I feel that –. Alistair Fothergill made me an offer that I really wish I had been able to take which was, leave Partridge. This was, it'd be about 1995 or 1996, when Alistair was about a year into his head of the unit and he said, "Michael, you're not a businessman, ok, you run a business as though you've never read even the first book about it. Why don't you stop pretending to be a businessman and come and work for us and we'll give you a couple of programmes a year, and you can choose the subject, and you can make them". And I really thought Granada would take me. They –. I talked to Willis about doing that and they didn't. But unfortunately at that time I still had personal commitments to Partridge, to all the people who had trusted me and I couldn't just dump it. Apart from anything I'd probably still be in court but I couldn't dump it, and yet it was a great offer. So I'm sad but everything comes full circle in life. I don't feel that I've made my last film yet, but I need to find enthusiasm from somewhere again. And at the moment getting commissioned is like trying to push a roll, a very large ball of something very unpleasant up a hill with your nose. It is a bit difficult.

MB: Looking back on, on times when, which, were potentially exciting, you mention Ellencroft - what was your vision then?

MR: All of the cameramen like David Hughes and Alan Root, Hugh Miles, that I really respected and who were subsequently, or even at the time, the best there were, all hated working in town. They all wanted –. They had sought –. People that make wildlife movies sought to get out into the countryside, into nature, into wildlife, to do whatever they were going to do there, and then they came back and we put them in some ghastly place in some hot sweaty little room with a steambake and expect them to pay attention and to be happy and focused. And I thought, “Well, this is crazy”. So, I wanted to be in somewhere that was nice and comfortable, with, where, if you got brain-jam at the **steenbeck**, you walk out of the French windows and go for a walk in the garden, go down have a look at the pond and just think about things and you stay there. And it’s beautiful, and it’s –. It then makes film, that kind of filmmaking a way of life, which natural history filmmaking is a lifestyle, it’s not really a business. If you want to make money, you don’t make natural history movies, you do something else.

So that was the intention. And it brought every one of the best I knew voluntarily up there to do their thing, even down to Passion for Angling (14) where I had a minimum, you know, financial interest in it, but Hugh liked working there. Old [John] Sparks used to come up at weekends simply to go after the garden, because it was an enormous garden in a dreadful state and he got a real buzz out of doing things to the garden so he’d emerge sort of covered in brambles and bleeding gently and happier than Larry. And it was to try and get away from it. Ironically it then led to us working in probably the nastiest place I ever worked, which was in HTV in Brislington which was –. Brislington is not the garden spot of the planet and it is sort of typically HTV that they would seek to put themselves there. Their other main building which was out in Culverhouse Cross, near Cardiff, was known affectionately as the Taf-mahal, which was a horrendous building complex where HTV Wales [was based]. And it was just somehow typical that they, they didn’t go for a nice –. The BBC had beautiful buildings in the old days in Bristol, before they decided to build a few of their own, at which point, they’re still not in the class of Brislington but they, the original buildings were really old, were nice Georgian houses that had been joined together and it was like a rather friendly rabbit warren, unlike BBC in London. So it was much more of a cottage industry feel about it all when I first met it and right up to the nineties I suppose. So.

MB: Ok, shall we go back to the films now? We’ve looked at the, a little bit about the politics, and we’ll, maybe we’ll return to the market place later on.

MR: OK. Cheers.

4. The making of the Partridge programmes

MB: When you were making films like the early films like, Okavango (7), and Namibia, Namib, Namib desert (8), were you still learning there, and what was actually happening in real time?

MR: What I was doing was Chris [Parsons] introduced me to David Hughes. David was learning, I was learning, we went out in the field together, and it was kind of a joint effort. David, I’d subsequently learnt, prefers to work on his own, and what I did was, I facilitated it, so on Namib (8) I only went out once, but where I contributed was in the post-production rather than in the actual production. So, I hope I’m still learning. I certainly don’t know all the answers, but the thing that I found was that there was a real buzz about getting people who both knew their craft and had a passion for it, and you just let them get on with it. And so in the eighties when I met Howard Hall, which was through PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] through David Healy at WNET, there was this very amusing, very intelligent guy who had been an underwater cameraman. He worked in –. We met him in 1987, 1988, but he’d actually worked on the National Geographic special on sharks (15) in 1980, so he’d been around a long time and I think nobody had ever made a movie with him. But he knew his business and he sent me this box of **rushes** at the request of David Healy, called California Subtitle (16) and I read the script and thought, “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding. After about a page I’ll put it in the bin”. And I put the box of tapes downstairs in the basement, which was where all the viewing happened, kind of a setup like this over here, and then about two days later, I was

waiting for a taxi and I was bored so I got the box out and put the tapes in and looked at this and I thought, "Bloody hell, I've never seen anything like this". And he had opalescent squid schooling, he had blue whales, he had the sequence that I was, that you [the interviewer] saw when you came in of the blue sharks and the krill and all that. So I slunk upstairs and phoned up David Healy and lied through my teeth saying, "I've mislaid the script, can you send me another one please?", and read it and thought, "Jesus, this is horrible. But the footage is stunning, so let's have a go". So Howard [Hall] came over and he explained what he'd meant in the script 'cos he'd written a bit like a biology teacher for seven-year-olds or something. We assembled it; we came up with a shopping list, swimming into the kelp forest, swimming out again and all that kind of thing, do this left to right and all that. So he came back, shot the lot and we finished the film. And it was a treat to work with him because he knew what –. He didn't think he knew everything, he didn't have his ego on the line about being asked to add to what he'd done, he was interested in learning, and he subsequently has –. That film, I think, really launched him because he then did *Seasons of the Sea* (17), so that film which was *Seasons of the Sea*, and then he did *Shadows in a Desert Sea* (18) with us, then he did a National Geographic special about the Caribbean Sea (19), I've forgotten what that's called, but then he'd gone into IMAX and all that kind of thing, so he really moved on. But it was a real treat to work with him because he was bright and intelligent, and I learnt from him, he learnt from [me].

In *Shadows in a Desert Sea* (18), we cut that in Ellencroft and he was working with Mark Fletcher who was the –, he started his professional life as an assistant to Dave Dickie and in the Ellencroft area there was couple of apartments which I used if I was staying overnight. So I had collapsed early, went to sleep about ten o'clock, ten thirty, woke up about midnight, maybe one o'clock, listening to this drunken laughter coming from the **cutting room**. So I staggered upstairs and they'd found a shot of this blenny going [gestures] to the camera. And I said, "Wouldn't it be great if George Page could be –, [his] voice could be put in there". We were having a real battle with *Shadows in a Desert Sea* (18) 'cos he hadn't shot any storyline, it was just *Seasons of the Sea* (17) without the kelp, and so we decided, I decided then and there that we would make it the blenny's story. So, that was where being amongst the people, working together, listening to our harebrained ideas, sometimes you can take the essence of that and make it work that way. And so that, but that is really a product of not doing too many programmes at once. And suddenly we found ourselves with *Sexual Imperative* (13) which was six hours and the first six of the HTV lot (20) all being produced at the same time, and three of them being cut here and three *Sexual Imperative's* (13) there, so I had to go from cutting room to cutting room. And that's what I mean about being arrogant because I should have said, gone back to everybody and said, "This is impossible, we're now going to slow it all down". But I'd committed us to Ellencroft by then. Nobody twisted my arm, nobody had a gun to my head to go buy a place for £800,000. There was no money on cash flow. On the assumption that everything was hunky dory today so it would be hunky dory tomorrow. Anyway, so, we worked with a lot of those guys that way.

MB: When you worked, in that way, in the way that you liked, how did the stories come to you? Did they come out of the pictures or did you know what the story was going to be before you started shooting?

MR: Well, we always had an outline of what we were trying to do, and then you would sit with –. I had a steenbeck in my office and subsequently a TV and a beta player and so I watched the rushes as they came in. And I knew what they were supposed to cover in a story 'cos I had the notes that we'd generated together and then had a look and thought, "Well, now that's all very interesting, what has it got to do with the movie?" and, "Ok, well, we'll change the movie and that can do that". So there was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing and communicating about where the film was going and then you'd bolt it together and find that we'd gone one, two, three, four, five, six, and actually, number five should be where number two is, so we'd do all of that as well. And the cutting room was the final word always.

[We] had a ghastly experience with *Okavango: Jewel of the Kalahari* (10) and at that time it was Andrew Neal who was the *Natural World* (12) editor. And he came down to see programme three (21) which was the conservation one. Programme one (22) had been giving me a lot of trouble, and he hadn't liked what he'd seen and it was about five hours long. And I had just got back, and I'd had a look at the cut down they'd done while I wasn't there and I'd actually made the editor hang every single shot up in the **trim bin** again, and we had literally gone back with ten days to pick the lock to nought. And [we] started from the beginning again

with a clear idea of what story we were trying to tell because the one thing that had emerged was that the story we were telling wasn't working. So after several sleepless nights and a couple of weekends of working right round the clock we managed to get it finished and it makes sense now but it didn't make sense at the beginning, and a lot of the things that the researcher said were going to happen didn't. The seasons didn't do what they were supposed to do so once you've got a fairly tightly researched story, if then reality doesn't follow your story – I've discovered that a lot of the animals have never read the scientific papers about them. They not only do they not read them, they don't believe that they have anything to do with them. And I always think of [when] Spike Milligan did a wonderful little sketch which was, he came on the stage in long white trousers, white polo neck, a striped blazer, a skimmer with a cane, and he went, "This is my impression of Thirston Kay Quat in the summer of 1908, you'll just have to take my word for it". And I think that a lot of the researchers had seen that and I knew a guy called Ian Games, or I knew of him, and I am sure that he was –, his animals all came out of a bottle of scotch or were inhaled gently through what they call controlled substances. But I don't think that sitatunga in Botswana had ever done the things that he'd described. And we did film things like hornbills and he [said] absolutely categorically "Forty-five days of nesting". Oh yes? What about try sixty-three [days]? And you've got Jim Clare sort of bolted onto a tree, waiting for these bloody things to hatch because there's a scientific paper that he and his wife have found, and they've done really thoroughly, it's between 45 and 48 days. Well, but the bird hadn't read it. And so I[']m deeply suspicious of what the scientists write in their papers because how do you prove anything different?

The other side of it is, it's always very amusing to find out how scientists react when you challenge them and Howard [Hall], particularly, did some filming of Bat rays mating, 'cos he just happened to be there when they did it, and he went along to the various people and said, "This is how they do it", and they said, "Nonsense, this isn't how they do it, they do it like that". So he rolled the pictures and he said, "Tell them, then! They obviously haven't read your paper, they do it this way". And answering little mysteries, like how the blue sharks actually eat krill, because if krill is spread out over the ocean, how the hell does a little shark –? It's eight or nine feet long, swim[s] around. You can see how blue whale can do it, but –. Then they discovered a krill ball so that the mackerel had all concentrated the krill in one place. So it was wonderful to be able to actually shed a little bit of light. And we had a great viewing with a guy from the University of Sterling on fiddler crabs for Siauru (23) which again was another Wildscreen winner, for one of the Fragile Earth (9) six. Looking at fiddler crabs and he said, "I've seen –" he looked at the rushes, not at the cut – he said, "I've learnt more about fiddler crabs here than in three years of research". Because wildlife cameramen are the only people who have the privilege of being able to go and stare for a relatively long period and record in real time what's going on. Those were the buzzes that came from it and it's still exciting today. We did the sardine run with [Peter] Lamberti last year and it's made me determined to go and see the sardine run this year, because we got an aerial shot from a **microlight** of a thousand dolphins in one place, all visible at the same moment. Well, I didn't even know that there were a thousand dolphins, that were –. I thought they were a bit like wild dogs, that you got thirty of them and that was your lot. But the idea that these massive schools of common dolphins were all following this insignificant in terms of the total migration 250 million fish. The idea that 250 million anything is an insignificant part of a process is just brain boggling to me. So I want to go back there and have a look and I want to be with people who go 'wow!' I mean the real buzz is to show people films and have them sit there and go 'Oh my goodness, I didn't know that. Wow!' and add something to their lives.

So, that makes me – it's a good segue way back – why did I start doing it? Well, my family and the white South Africans that I grew up with [were] able to be ignorant on a broader range of subjects than any other human beings I'd ever met . They were something shocking, I mean they really didn't know anything. The Jews in particular, my lot, my family lot, sort of came from middle Europe, and they were in Africa and all they did was try and impose Europe on it. And they didn't have any kind of sense of the wonder of this incredible place that they lived in. And no respect for it if you go and look how they developed it, you know they basically stuffed it up in lots of places. But if I could get them to sit still and pay attention they all –. Halfway through the movie when they saw Namib (8), they kind of walked out with their mouths open. And that was a real one against the philistines so to speak. And that was why I was trying to do it for the great populous. The British audience is very sophisticated compared to the white South African audience of that time, but I get this wonderful thing from commissioning editors in America, "Oh well, we understand it but the average guy in downtown alluvial Kentucky, he never will understand it". But with the greatest respect, to borrow from

Jeffery Boswall, meaning with no respect at all, you know the stupidest people I've ever met are TV commissioning editors usually. They don't know anything about their subject, especially in America, they just run scared on the ratings. And so you get people saying to me, "I want it new and original and exactly like the last one". Show me how you do that?

5. The change in the marketplace and wildlife films

MB: During the time that you've been working on wildlife movies, how has the marketplace changed?

MR: Well, we went through a phase where the UK was what somebody with a great turn of phrase called a 'vertically integrated duopoly'. There was ITV with its own production facilities, namely Survival, and there was the BBC. The BBC's whole finances were on the basis of, we did it inside and if we're gonna buy anything from outside, we'll pay the same as we pay National Geographic. So there was no concept of supporting an independent industry at all, and then, for reasons that have never been clear to me, there was a sea change in the attitude. And Channel 4 came on, and then there were instructions to the BBC and to ITV that they had to have a 25% quota. Which again proves how, well, you can do anything you like with figures, because – 25% of what? From whom? Where? But there was from about 1987, no, probably 19, no 80, 1981 – since Channel 4 was started – until about the end of the nineties, a sort of much more enthusiastic commissioning process. And that, the British have always produced the best wildlife programmes and the best television, and a lot of the European countries kind of ran their schedules on British programming. And it is only when Mrs [Margaret] Thatcher finally got at the statute book and produced this ghastly broadcasting bill where she moved ITV from paying a levy, i.e. a tax on their profits, to saying you have to pay for the licence. And the tax on the profits were, was mitigated by if you used money for production, then that counts as part of your tax. So, executives were given a choice between pay it to the government or make up stairs downstairs, or whatever it was. The ITV made some wonderful programming and very expensive because it was exchequer money otherwise. Anyway, Mrs Thatcher managed to turn it in, with a worship for all things crappy, she decided that the American model was far better than the British model and that we had to get our act together and worship money and nothing else. So that was what the finance bill did. And in 1996 I wrote an article saying that natural history programmes had, or programmers had been making the same programme for twenty five years now, only the only thing that has changed is the technology but not the stories. And really it was 1998 that the chickens came out to roost, so we had about a sixteen or seventeen year period of commissioning where there were lots of new channels coming up in Europe and lots of enthusiasm for the subject. So suddenly from nothing it was a deluge and now, we, the pendulum has swung back the other way almost to 1976 again, but it's too far the other way, it needs to go back a bit now.

In the meantime, what the Americans did – and I learnt this a long time later – in 1972 they decided that they would not put any factual programming on the commercial networks at all, other than the news, that the place for factual programming was on PBS. So in 1973 the National Geographic specials (24) moved to WQED, which is a PBS station in Pittsburgh, and stayed there until really about 1990. When did Dennis leave? About 1990. And at that point the whole audience had started to fragment. So they decided to put National Geographic specials (24) back onto network. And in 1988 BBC decided that they would try and 'out-National-Geographic' the National Geographic. [They] took Dennis Kane, who was the head of the National Geographic specials (24) and gave him a job doing a thing called The World of Discovery (25) which I have to say, I've always been amazed that Discovery never went after them for that title, but anyway they didn't. [They] put it out on primetime on American commercial network but only half heartedly so it never really got the ratings. Also they were – I don't know. They didn't quite hit. The Geographic specials (24) hit better with NBC [National Broadcasting Company] but two years ago, or three years ago, NBC decided that that was enough, they were going and American broadcasting has now gone back to 1972 again. With the one difference in that you've now got all the satellite and cable channels picking up the factual programming and in competition with PBS. So, the main commercial networks are now back with everything except factual programming. And it got nastier and nastier, American television.

The whole process which makes Britain different is that the BBC was invented by Lord Reith, if you like, and started out with the philosophy of, "You will watch it because it is good for you. And if you don't like it you can turn it off, and that's it. And you will pay for your TV set to be in your house, and that money will go to make programmes that are good for you". And somewhere down the line the American thing of, instead of paying a licence fee and having two channels with no commercials, the Americans always said you have your TV set free, what you pay for is by having to watch three hundred hours of commercials every day. Or what seems like it anyway. The whole philosophy was different at the beginning. There was a meeting of minds, and then, and a lot of the British programmes were shown both on PBS and getting high ratings and on ABC [American Broadcasting Company], NBC and CBS. And the, for example, the Survival specials (26) all went out on ABC, all of the, in the sixties, up until 1972, and all over the National Geographic specials (24) a man, David Wolper, who is a fairly well known American producer who organised the 1984 Olympics, was the executive producer for the Geographic specials (24), so they were given the razzmatazz but they were still quality programmes, and, what's happened now is that the quality has gone down and down and down. They have a forty-three minute hour, in terms of programmes, so seventeen minutes of commercials and promos and other rubbish, so they're virtually unwatchable. That's why it changed.

MB: You touched there on a change, not only of the industry but the fact the programmes have had to change. Can you just again go through your experience of how wildlife films have changed in the time that you've been making them?

MR: Well they've come, they –. We'll go back. When I started making them the only guide I had was, did I have a passion for it? Was it something I was interested in? I was making a very small volume and people wanted them and that went right through to the nineties. It's now coming back. There are people who want to make one-off very expensive programmes but what happened in the late eighties and early nineties was the volume went crazy, and the amount of money that it cost to make a really good **blue chip** natural history special was too much. Also as I said we'd been making two kinds of programme; it was either a single species study or an ecological overview with the seasons and all and things and people wanted something different. Now, nobody's really ever worked out what the difference is and I'm sure the BBC's latest experience is that the traditional form of wildlife is alive and well with the audience. You know, with Blue Planet (27) and Africa (28), they got very good ratings again. So, I think that there was overkill, there was just too much and we were lucky. We could spend two years on making a film because we didn't have a big overhead apart from a brief insanity at Ellencroft, and so we could put the money on the screen. But nowadays, you're trying to, with cameras like the one that I'm speaking to at this moment, it is possible to record perfectly acceptable images, relatively cheaply and quite quickly, and for cable and satellite operators, they can't afford the big things. So, they can have the third or fourth run, but it's the first and second run, and it just got to the point where there were too many with not enough money being made by people like Devillier Donegan, like Discovery, and you had eight or nine months to shoot a film that had been taking two years and that you could see the difference. And, the problem was, they'd seen the two year and three year ones and when we did Korup (29) that was five years of filming with somebody who was absolutely dedicated, you know, Phil Agland doing his thing during the dry season. And then going into hospital to get all the – that was in the rainforest – getting all the parasites and things like that knocked out of his system before he went back again. Well now, you get six weeks if you were lucky to make the film. And I don't know what an average Natural World (12) is, but the money, the gross amount of money hasn't gone up in, for a long time now. So, it always you time to make a fair film and you've got to be bloody lucky to make a really good one on the basis of the cost of that. So, whereas Partridge made something like Siarau (23) which was the film about the mangrove in Fragile Earth (9) and it cost £140,000. That was 1982 pounds. That would translate into £500,000 today and to try and do it for two hundred [thousand], remembering the overheads and the post and everything, it's not going to be as good. So, every so often there needs to be a Rolls-Royce type product. And what has happened is that we've Ford Cortina'd them to death and the audience got fed up with it, so they turned it on and in Germany you couldn't turn a satellite channel on without running over elephants or lions or something. And of course, in a country like South Africa, you've got a lot of people who've got the cameras and the technology but no clue how to make programmes, but they still can get the pictures. And those, they then put them together and sell them much cheaper than people like me and that worked for a

while and it actually has done me no good and them no good now, because the actual customer is no longer buying that kind of stuff. I think what we need to do is to find a new way of telling the stories, I mean, the stories go on forever and they're wonderful, but we've got to actually apply some of the rules of drama production to natural history, to actually shape the story and really genuinely not pretend that we are, there are no human beings on this planet. It's got to be a different kind of story. So I've tried with the Abdi film (30), which is story of a Somali guy, to bring one man's experiences into the storytelling and we'll see, but it's different.— It's still lions, it's still leopards, it's still crocodiles and hippos, it's amazing natural history, but it's been set in a different kind of context. And I think if you took him out of it, you would have a very ordinary movie of things you've already seen before.

When ITV signed their last deal with Survival and agreed to pay them x number of hundreds of thousands for a UK distributor, for a UK outlet, they needed a co-producer from the [United] States in order to fill the hole, the gap, between what ITV were paying. And in every previous deal, they'd had, well you can have one, because you could, and now, not worthy kind of attitude. And this time out of the six, only one of them got a co-producer. The other five, the Americans turned down because they're different Americans now. Survival were still making the films that it made in 1960, even today. They had really not moved with the times at all in terms of their way of making films or the films they chose to make. But it was kind of breathtaking to find that Discovery wouldn't touch any of them. And these were absolutely traditional **blue chip** natural history things about jaguars and things about lions and hyenas and stuff. And the only one that got a co-producer was the Deeble and Stone film (31). And that was not because of the subject, [it] was because it was [Mark] Deeble and [Vicky] Stone and the commissioning editor actually had heard of them, had seen what they'd done.

MB: This was the hippo film?

MR: Yes, that was the one that was made —.

MB: Mzima (31).

MR: Hmm? Yes. Which to me is an interesting film in that technically it's superb. If you actually go and dig out the old Alan Root film (32) made in 1967, [it] hasn't got the spirit or the passion or the enthusiasm that the original had. It's become sterile and that I think is one of the problems with a lot of the natural history programmes is that it disengages the audience. It's kind of a new replacement for religious broadcasting. It's a special kind of product.

MB: Do you think we are too reverend about wildlife?

MR: Well, I think the wildlife programmes, certainly in the nineties, had become a bit like processed cheese in that they had been refined and refined and refined and refined to the point where the people, the story was always pretty much the same. The people spoke or the narration was in a language that no human being could speak. The music was always very similar and they just looked like each other. And they sounded like each other. And they were very much in the distance. And a lot of the BBC stuff had Mr [David] Attenborough, who sounds like Mr Attenborough, who else would he sound like? But they were the same, and there was in, I think in the audience in the UK's point of view, a feeling of safety in that once it was Attenborough it must be good, kind of thing actually happened. But as far as evolving new stories and new ways of telling things, they were safe. I mean David Attenborough's what, in his, nowadays, in his mid-seventies? And there is no other presenter who's in any kind of distance of him. He's taken centre stage and he's been there for, what, twenty-five years. Really it is time for him to move on now and let somebody else, can do this. Not that I'm applying for the job you understand. I just think that, time to move on now. And we've had various other attempts at presenters like Simon King, who's not been that successful, but I just think it would be nice if we did move on. But to be honest, I don't know how. I don't know what would work. The audience is very conservative and as we've seen, in fact what we're doing is now going back to the beginning of the cycle again. I'm sure that **blue chip** by 2006 will start to take off because it'll have a rarity value again. You either have to dig up the

things that I've made and re-voice them and re-master them because they're all **off print**. You can see '**grain by Kodak**' on them, which even on standard 16[mm] with modern **telecines** you can make it look like it was shot yesterday. They're going to have to start making those kinds of programmes, so I'll keep my fingers crossed, maybe.

6. Mike's best films and their effect on audiences

MB: If you picked out, say, one film of the films that you've made over the years as a film that you'd like to say to people, "That's what I can do", what would it be and what is it about it that you think makes it so special?

MR: Well I think there are three, actually there are four. There's Namib (8), which was the first. Every single frame in that, particularly the scenics, is a work of art. You could make a poster, put it on your wall, the photography is stunning. It also shows you a place you didn't know existed, that you couldn't imagine existed, and it gets steadily stranger as you go through the film. We managed to get the story to work and we managed to find the right kind of music. We used Pink Floyd and [Le] Structure Sonore which was people playing on glass rods I think, and we, a man called Stomu Yamashta. It all came off record and we had to clear it. And it was in the days before we commissioned specially written music, it was the sheer difficulty of clearing the rights on their music that made me decide it's got to be easier just to write your own music and be done with it. So there's that one, which I just think is, I would love to see it re-mastered now. There's the Siarau film (23), which is a description of a place and how it works. It is quite flawless and again it's got stunning pictures. And then there's the Otters of Yellowstone (33) which never really to me got the kind of recognition that it deserved. Fred said that, Fred Kaufman at WNET, ran it in January and got the seventh highest rating that month on PBS. But it's Bob Landis, who is not in the same league as either David Hughes, or Jim Clare or Richard Foster as an artistic photographer, but has got more staying power than anybody I've ever met, has actually managed to film wild otters and there's not a setup shot in there, in Yellowstone. And he's got them, particularly at the beginning of the film, sliding on their stomachs and the music is just right. I mean you get the joy of the animals and they're just wonderful animals and it makes me feel good to look at it. So those are three of them. And the fourth one is Seasons of the Sea (17) which was the first underwater film that I'd seen which was almost entirely underwater, which I didn't feel like I had been drowned or taken out and left in the water. And again, stunning pictures.

MB: Do you think any of these films will have changed the audience, in their attitudes towards wildlife?

MR: I think it will have added to their knowledge, and I know that during the existence of Partridge a lot of legislation came into being, a lot of attitudes did change. When I showed these films, particularly things like Korup (29) and Selva Verde (34), which explained about habitats, and also the third programme for Okavango: Jewel of the Kalahari (21), it actually showed people things that we were talking about. Instead of giving them the benefit of our opinion [we] could actually show them. We had an example in the Okavango film (21) where you saw, first of all, a wildebeest then a springbok eating grass and you saw that they bit the grass and left the roots. And then you saw a cow, which doesn't have any teeth in its upper jaw, getting hold of it and ripping it out and just seeing the roots and the sod coming out of the ground gave the audience, particularly the Botswanan audience, an example of what we were talking about 'cos they didn't know what the hell we were talking about. Why, what's the difference between cows? Cows eat grass and the other animals eat grass. So what's the problem? Well you could —. The problem was there in one picture. And they say a picture's worth a thousand words, well they'd had ten thousand words on it. But the picture's actually what made them understand. And there was a complete change of attitude by the government there. And, the same with the Belize government, we showed them various things, and apparently that series which was made for Channel 4 which was called Path of the Rain God (35), that actually was compulsory viewing for all the cabinet and cabinet ministers in the Belize government. So, yes, you've got to get people to evoke what you're talking about. If you lecture them they switch off, so you've got these pictures, beautiful pictures of a beautiful place, and not too much "now look, it's all going to disappear", because we already know that. Got to actually get them to care about it. So I think it, they did something.

MB: Has the technology, the changes in technology, enabled you to reveal more?

MR: Oh I think so, I mean what with laproscopes and endoscopes and being able to, you know, evoke more sophisticated lenses and all that kind of thing, you can see more and more. The question is, what do you do with that information? And of course, cameras like this one, and generally the whole advantage of things like digi-beta, so if you've got a wild dog burrow, and you want mum bringing the pup out, you lock the camera off and you leave it running, go have a cup of tea. Then you have a look and see if it's there and if it's not there you rewind and start again. And if it is there you drop that bit in and, you know, film is very expensive. So, yes, I think it's easier now to get the amazing shots if you want them, but the question is what do you do with them, because if you go down the John Downer route, you –, eventually the film is about the technology and not about the subject.

7. Beautiful pictures and the importance of music

Are there times when you've, with the films that you've been making, that – just thinking of the camp fire stories – have you had danger, have you had peculiar events that have taken place that you've been involved in?

MR: Well regrettably, and one of the reasons why I'm going back to Africa now is that as Partridge got bigger I got, as you can see from my lean and athletic look, got more and more ensconced behind a desk, and the original intention I had was to go out there and be there with the filming, but I hadn't been in on much of the filming. I've gone out there, got everybody set up then rushed back to deal with something else. Bit like –. Really it's not that different from running the Natural World (12). That we were doing that sort of volume at Partridge. And producing every programme, so there would be five or six on the go and I regret doing that. So my life has become simpler now. But the revelations are always when you sit there and watch rushes. One of the worst experiences of my life was watching the rushes of the proboscis monkeys which had never been filmed swimming before and they being out of focus, and wanting to commit various forms of homicide at the time. But the amazing sensation when, twelve weeks later after much anguish, we got the best pictures I've ever seen of proboscis monkeys, where they're walking in the water and they look like little old ladies who've just had their nails done, walking along like this [mimics]. And they'd swim, and then they'd jump in the water, and they were just fantastic. And the cameraman, Jim Clare, got a shot of a young proboscis just sitting there, and he was utterly unaware of the camera, he's at peace with the world and he's idly sort of looking at a leaf, and his world was perfect, and he doesn't have to do a thing about it. I like that, as much as the sort of, getting the five hundred frame a second cheetah hunt or the lions killing. And so when I look at what's coming in, I've got part of what I really want to see and part of, my god, this is for ABC, they'll want the kill, we can't have more than four seconds of sunsets and sunrises, because, or beautiful pictures. We were looking, when you came in at the Passion for Angling (14) and I have no passion for angling at all. But I love beautiful pictures and nice film making. And the opening there is just of beautiful, beautiful misty morning, then great crested grebe and then a barn owl. Five or six shots of the barn owl and then off he goes, then the pictures and the music match each other, and then finally, he flies out of frame and you pan down and there's the fisherman. You see the fisherman in the title but you don't actually see it. It's got just the right number of words, and that's where it's exciting. You make something beautiful out of it. Seeing how it's footage, even though they hadn't shot it for me, so that's the part where there's a real buzz. Good rushes are still the most exciting thing that can happen.

MB: You've talked about beautiful pictures but you also have a deep interest in the soundtrack of your films. How important for example have you, what importance have you placed on music?

MR: Well I think that the music and the pictures, you can't –. I'll go back. You cannot make a good film without good pictures. But you can make a bad film with good pictures quite easily and so we went to a lot of trouble about getting the right atmospheres, the right footsteps, the right quality of the soundtrack, and then

you've got to evoke the mood. I've never tried to make a documentary film, I've always tried to make a film which is in a sense a kind of true life drama, so that the music has to evoke the mood and to tell you what to think. So lead you, so that you're sitting there and you're being guided, you're not just on your own. Again if you look at *Seasons of the Sea* (17), there's this wonderful sequence of all of the sardines going after the krill. And then suddenly the shark comes in and the music tells you, as clearly as it can, this is the bad guy. And I've always hated films where the music is simply put in to fill in a gap because nobody can think of anything to say there, and it's usually sunrises and sunsets. Again if you look at *Seasons of the Sea* (17), there, not a single sunrise or sunset has any music over it. And music is always there to drive things. And if you look at any of [Walt] Disney's cartoons, or the things that, his movies that he made which made his name, there's an hour and a half, there's fifty minutes of music. Now the wrong music, that is incredibly irritating. And American factual programming, particularly if they do something like covering a golf tournament, they've got, it appears that somebody's left a record player on in the studio by mistake. That's the sort of music they use. But if you look at their movies, in a real drama, the music and the atmosphere actually lead you, and help you, and nudge you with the pictures. So, it is a very critical part of how you make the film.

8. The Partridge Films archive

MB: Now in Partridge films, you gathered a huge archive. Do you think that's got a new role in the future?

MR: Well, it would appear so, because they've been making endless programmes out of it. It is kind of ironical that the making of that archive is what nearly put Partridge out of business, because it was over-shooting, and subsequently all of the programmes that are being made from it now have never benefited Partridge, because they –. But yes, I think it's also records of a world that's –, many worlds that have disappeared. We started in the early seventies, but certainly if you go and look in the *Survival* archive where they started in the late fifties and early sixties, you can see places that no longer exist. You know you could get in a space[ship], you're doing some real time-travel there. Go in a spaceship and have a look, so, this is what was, and this is what is. And there are things like, Simon Trevor did a film about twenty-five years in Tsavo National Park (36) and it is kind of mind-boggling to see what man's influence has been on that because it's an interesting programme in that it has Tsavo West and Tsavo East, I don't remember which way round it is. But one of them they decided to manage, and they had terrific droughts in the seventies so they shot all the elephants and managed everything, and the other they left, and it was common wisdom that the elephants are going to destroy it all. In 2000, it turns out that the bit that they left alone is rich and prospering, and the bit that they interfered with seriously is turned into woody scrub and doesn't support it very much. So, that kind of thing from an archive is really fascinating to see because you've got locked off pictures over, taken, you know, year one, year nine, year twenty, and year twenty-five, and they are almost unrecognisable except, the, maybe one landmark, that's where Simon lived, and that was he was able to go and film. So, I think our archive shows that you can also make lots and lots of cheap, not particularly wonderful programmes out of it, but then you invented Wildvision, with Mr [Andrew] Buchanan, did you not? So, that's the BBC archive, though, pretty much the same. It's much, much smaller obviously. But there are lots of other stories to be told with the same footage. It's just a shame that the critical shots are missing then, 'cos they go into the one programme they were shot for.

9. Returning to South Africa

MB: Now, yes, after all this time, in this country, you've decided to return to South Africa. Why, why is that?

MR: Well I left South Africa in 1961, in December 1961, and arrived here January 1962. We were very opposed to apartheid. They were, I was the only child and my family and I all decided that we didn't really want to be part of that. It was –. South Africa became an African Republic in May 1961 and it had commonwealth status. It was a member of the commonwealth until it declared as a republic, and so there

was a standstill agreement for one year where any South African citizen could come and live in the UK as a commonwealth citizen. Simply got one stamp in your passport, 'resident alien' and you didn't have any problems with right of abode, or anything like that. So, given that that wasn't going to last for long, we decided to take it up. So then I became a naturalised British subject. I hated apartheid and I hated the stupidity that went on in South Africa, and I really didn't ever want to go back.

So, forty years have passed, just about. Eight years ago Mr [Nelson] Mandela and his government were elected in, and the South Africa I wanted resumed progress. There are crime problems, there are all the insanities that apartheid created there, but it's a country that has got unbelievable potential. It is now not a pariah nation anymore, it is acceptable to go and work and live there. There are people who have been deprived of any kind of contact with Britain and what I learnt, while I was here and I think it's very exciting. I've been invited to go and teach at colleges where Africans are learning to make film. There are a whole lot of the people that I knew, I think it's the next generation on now who want to make programmes, one of which is a programme about the history of the African National Congress (37), which I don't think anybody knows anything about, including me. Which I think would be fascinating, because all the protagonists are still alive and it would be a fascinating thing. That, plus the –. As I'm getting older and more decrepit, I object to the climate here a little more, and from September to April we had 180 days of which 172 were windy and rainy, and I thought, "This is insane, what am I [doing here]?" I had left Partridge already and I didn't want to go back to Johannesburg because of the crime rate there mainly, and also because I grew up there but, like my archive or Partridge's archive, it is –, my memories and what's there don't bear any resemblance to each other. So I decided to go to where my mother was born, which is Durban, which is by the sea. It is very hot in the summer, but from about April until October it's the most perfect climate in the world, and there's all these interesting things. I want to go see the sardine run, I didn't even know the sardine run existed. The ignorance about what is in South Africa continues and I would love to be able to reveal and make people say, "Wow! I didn't know that", and maybe there I will get enthusiasm for stories that nobody here knows anything about and come and make some films about it, so that's part of it. And also the price of things there makes it affordable, and I can get a house with a swimming pool for about a tenth of the house that I'm sitting in here. And my daughter has threatened to come and stay. She discovered there's a swimming pool and a Jacuzzi so she said the only thing that would get her back to the airport is a, somebody with a gun. So the idea of daddy looking after her, and basking by the pool seems to appeal to her, and then if she gets bored of the pool we can go down to the sea.

MB: Sounds delightful.

MR: Let's hope it's like that.

10. ARKive

Okay. I think that ARKive is very important because it will show people what we used to have and it can be used as a way of reminding people that conservation's something we've got to keep doing. I think that there have been some really amazing talents, you've met a lot of them, who have made these programmes and that, it's got –. What mustn't happen is that it must not become this sterile place where these tapes of everybody are put. People should get to know about them. And the new generation who really haven't got a clue what people like Chris Parsons and I did, and David Attenborough in his early days, or Gerry [Gerald] Durrell, and people like that. I think it's a great record too, of what was, so I think the history of where we've come from is really very important. I hope that is what ARKive is used for, and that access on the internet, or whatever, plus the programmes that I think Granada have agreed to donate, actually get seen by the people they were made to see.

11. Reflections on Seasons of the Sea (17)



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MB: Now, did you do a film on Polar Bears with Tom Mangelson?

MR: No, we never did. We got involved talking about it but we never, he's got the footage, but he never actually made it.

MB: He's never made the film?

MR: No.

(Music)

MR: This is the bit I just want you to look at.

Voice over: Foundation, of all this life can be traced to the Giant Kelp. As the huge seaweeds fragment, their debris feeds the minute plankton of the sea.

MR: Can I have a copy of that?

Voice over: And on that near invisible drifting life, feed hordes of shrimp-like krill, themselves in turn food for ocean animals large and small.

(More music)

Voice over: Anchovies herd the krill into a ball that is easier to feed on. Individual krill can be plucked from the edge of the whirling mass.

MR: That music was, just such a magic moment to hear that the first time. And this is what I was talking about.

(More music)

MB: [Inaudible]

MR: Enter the bad guy, yes? And if you notice the w—. There's no words 'cos you really don't need to put anything over that. If you can't work out what this is telling you, there's no point watching.

Voice over: A blue shark; twelve feet of elegance and power. Now it's the turn of the anchovies to be rounded up. Blue sharks are skilled at the technique. The school moves as one animal. Each individual darts for safety at the centre of the mass. But this time, the sharks are distracted by the ball of krill, still spinning from the anchovies attack.

MR: This was —.

MB: [Inaudible]

MR: A lot of trouble when, going, to get those sounds right as well.

Voice over: It's a strange liaison between anchovy, shark and krill. Unmolested krill spread out. Only a rosy haze betrays their presence in millions.

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MR: This is where I think you came in, so –.

Voice over: But there are animals that can comb this diffuse beast from the sea.

(Music)

MR: When I say the music is driving it, this is, as I say '1987/1988.

MB: It's an Orchestra...

MR: Mm, full orchestra, 37 piece orchestra. And you can't beat it if you've got a sensitive and creative composer, of whom there are several. We did a programme which was really no great shakes until Chris Gunning wrote the music and that was the one about the mountains in East Africa (38). I can't even remember what it was called. It was in the Rift Valley, it was with Natural World (12), about it. Blank. I'll think of it when you're gone. I've reached the age now where if I try and pursue the thing it just doesn't work at all. So I've got to just think of something else. Anyway, so.

Voice over: One hundred feet in length, the Blue Whale is perhaps the largest animal that has ever lived. Certainly greater than any known dinosaur.

MR: Well the problem about making these is that they're as expensive as hell. And the reason that this one was made is that Howard [Hall] didn't charge any fee. He was working for himself for, you know, for WNET. And the net result of that was he got \$150,000 he could spend any way he liked, and he had to get the footage. And then he came and he met me as a result of PBS and we got together and made that (17). And then I looked at that and I thought, "This has got to have a proper music score. If we put anything silly on this, it's just going to disappear". And so I took it to Jennie [Muskett] and she came back with a 37 piece orchestra and a £25,000 bill. And we did it also, you see one of the things that has happened again is that, you can get an orchestra now, you can probably get full orchestral music for about nine grand, eight or nine grand, if you go and do it in Prague. But firstly your composer had to do it in a hell of a hurry, and he hasn't been paid, he or she hasn't been paid very much. And b), they're all in there for the session and gone. And the thing about British musicians is they are fantastic. They are probably the best performing musicians, orchestras in the world. And the idea that we can't do it because of union regulations, just because they're pricing themselves out of the market all the time, is such a shame. So, Steve Nicholls did Alien Empire (39) and they did that, all that music in Prague, yes. But it was just, it's the sheer silliness of that whole process of –.

MB: Well, you can get the BBC orchestra now.

END

People, films, and companies mentioned

Alan Root

Alistair Fothergill

Andrés Segovia

Andrew Buchanan

Andrew Neal



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Anthony Morris

Ariel Sharon

Bob Landis

Brian King

Chris Gunning

Chris Parsons

Chris Rolands

Christopher Nupen

Dave Dickie

David Attenborough

David Healy

David Hughes

David Wolper

Dennis Kane

Derek Anderson

Devillier Donegan

Fred Kaufman

General Avraham Yoffe

George Page

Gerald Durrell

Helen Wolfson

Howard Hall

Hugh Miles

Ian Games

Itzhak Perlman

Jeffery Boswall

Jennie Muskett

Jeremy Isaac

Jim Clare

John Downer

John Sparks

John Willis

June Dromgoole

Le Structure Sonore

Lord Reith

Margaret Thatcher

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Mark Broughton
Mark Deeble
Mark Fletcher
Ned Kelly
Nelson Mandela
Nigel Lawson
Peter Clark
Peter Copeland
Peter Lamberti
Phil Agland
Pinchas Zukerman
Pink Floyd
Richard Foster
Simon King
Simon Trevor
Spike Milligan
Steve Nicholls
Stomu Yamashta
Tom Mangelson
Vicky Stone
Vladimir Ashkenazy
Walt Disney

ABC
Allegro Films
ARKive
BBC
CBS
Channel 4

Discovery
FlexTechs
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Granada Wild
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Israeli Nature Reserve Authority
ITV
Lime Grove Studios
National Geographic
NBC
Partridge Films
PBS
Pear Tree Film
Survival
United News and Media
Wildscreen
Wildvision
WNET
WQED

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15. (UNKNOWN TITLE)
16. California Subtitle
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18. SHADOWS IN A DESERT SEA (Nature) (National Geographic, 1992)
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25. *World of Discovery* (ABC)
26. *Survival* (Survival Anglia, 1961 – 1991)
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Glossary

Blue chip: a prestigious style of wildlife documentary which can be described as a depiction of mega-fauna, following a dramatic storyline, using only images of visual splendour, giving a sense of timelessness and with an absence of reference to controversial issues.

Bolex: Swiss motion picture camera manufacturers

Cutting room: the room in which the editor works.

Dubbing theatre: a studio designed and equipped for mixing a film soundtrack.

Golden Panda: the highest accolade that a film can receive at Wildscreen's biennial Panda Awards

Grain: Film grain is a gritty texture sometimes apparent on analogue film

Magazine: a lightproof metal or plastic container designed to hold and move film stock before and after it has been exposed by a camera.

Moviescop editor: Film editing and viewing machine

Microlight: a small, lightweight powered airplane subject to minimum regulation used mainly for recreational flying.



Off print: Media term meaning out of circulation

Rushes: the first, unedited prints of a film.

Steenbeck: Editing and viewing machines for 16 and 35mm film, manufactured in Germany since 1953

Synchronisation (Sync): A signal used in video systems to coordinate timings of lines, fields and frames

Rushes: Unedited, raw footage

Telecine: a machine which electronically scans film and converts the visual information into a television signal.

Track laying: Audio post-production process of recording and editing sound alongside images

Trim bin: a large, lined barrel with a row of pins inside on which **takes** of film are hung.

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