

Interview Aesthetics

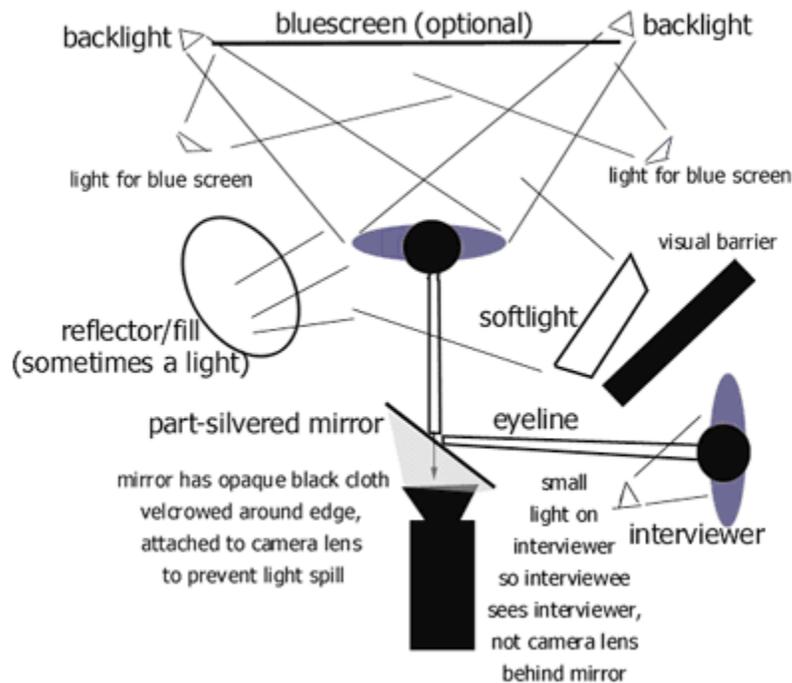
by Mark Achbar

As I contemplated a visual style for the interviews in **THE CORPORATION**, I had several criteria in mind. First, I wanted the viewer of the film to be directly engaged by the speaker, which meant having the interview subject speak directly into the camera. But I knew from my own experience how dehumanizing it is to have



to speak to a cold camera lens. And I wanted to put the interview subject at ease so we could develop an intimate rapport over the course of the interview, which in some cases lasted four hours.

To meet this challenge, for many years the master documentarist Errol Morris has used an adapted teleprompter (the video/mirror device anchor people use to read the news) but instead of text, through the mirror system of the teleprompter, he feeds a video image of himself for the interviewee to interact with. This works well for Errol, but to me, the video aspect of it seemed distancing and expensive. I came up with a low tech version of the same idea. A part-silvered mirror mounted in a metal frame, sitting just in front of the camera lens and positioned at 45 degrees to the camera. The mirror frame is surrounded by a black velvet hood velcrowned to the front of the camera lens to keep out extraneous light.



The interviewee doesn't see the camera lens, but instead, speaks comfortably to the reflection of the interviewer in the mirror. At the same time, the camera is seeing them through the part silvered mirror as they also look straight into the barrel of the lens. The CEO of Pfizer had never seen anything like it, loved it, and wondered why it hadn't been adopted as a "best practice" in the industry.

I later discovered there is a [commercial product](#) one can rent which serves the same purpose. It is advertised as being useful for filming "children", "performing animals" and "corporate personnel".

For people with experience talking straight to camera it's a welcome relief to have a human to engage with. For the non-experienced, the whole setup can be a little weird. The interviewee has to prevent themselves from the natural instinct of turning toward real location of the interviewer, who is sitting facing their side. We used a large light case to block our view of one another.



There's a quality to the interviews achieved through this technique that is unique. People are relaxed and directly engaged with me, the interviewer, and therefore they appear to be directly engaged and relaxed with the viewing audience. There are subtle, non-verbal cues that interviewees respond to, a lift of the eyebrows, a tilt of the head, that comes through in their interactions with the interviewer, and hence with the audience.

I also wanted flexibility in post-production. This was the first major production I had directed in video (Manufacturing Consent was principally shot on 16mm film) and it was too tempting not to take advantage of at least some of the technical possibilities. One technique, an old one at that, is to videotape the subject against a blue background, (blue screen), and later replace all the blue with another image. This technique presented a world of possibilities and also helped unify the wide variety of shooting locations we had to deal with.

Sam Gibara, then Chairman of Goodyear Tire, would only be interviewed in a room at the Waldorf Astoria in New York. So we had little choice but to rent a room there. Since there was no possibility of a half day rate, three of our crew members shared the bed. Since the only room we could afford was tiny, you may notice that Sam Gibara is a little closer to camera than most of the other interviewees.

Bento Box, a talented group of graphic, animation and web designers, created a number of stunning backgrounds for the interviews which cleverly and subtly commented on the content of each segment.

Unfortunately, when implemented in full motion, we discovered—and this was confirmed with audience consultations—that these beautiful backgrounds tended to distract from, rather than amplify the speaker's message, and this technique was ultimately dropped in favor of a simple black background with a slight highlight behind the interviewees neck and shoulders.

This lighting is typical of corporate portraiture, which serves as a subtle comment on the pervasiveness of the corporate aesthetic. Many of the exquisite graphics created by Bento Box for the interview backgrounds can be seen throughout www.TheCorporation.com.