

## 25. Up to the Hype

How often did Al think he might see wildlife in those out-of-the-way spots they traipsed through, yet saw nothing? Then, not expecting anything, he came across a flock of pheasants nestled in a hollow against howling winter winds or a herd of deer in a wide open space. A white tailed trio bounded across road, impeding progress of bicyclist and motorist alike, but nevertheless captivating. Persistence eventually pays. After thousands of rides in predominantly urban New England he had seen scampering free: Blackbirds, bluejays, bobcats, cardinals, chipmunks, cormorants, coyotes, crows, deer, eagles, falcons, flycatchers, foxes, frogs, geese, grackles, hawks, herons, loons, mallards, mice, mourning doves, ospreys, owls, pheasants, pigeons, puffins, rats, seagulls, skunks, snakes, sparrows, squirrels, starlings, swans, swifts, turkey vultures, turtles, wild turkeys, wolves, woodpeckers, and wrens, to register some, a veritable uncaged menagerie of mystifying diversity making its home alongside mankind's blight, some thriving to become a nuisance in such large numbers, as thousands of deer which strip gardens and orchards. Biologists track their habits and populations, but nobody listens, then they complain something knocked over their garbage pails. Later spent time himself identifying them under reference titles. Not to overlook countless insects and other forms of life, there were probably more he'd forgotten along with all domesticated creatures including bulls, cats, cows, dogs, donkeys, goats, horses, llama, ostriches, oxen, peacocks, pigs, ponies, sheep, and steer. Better than roadkill, and bikes were unlikely to cause more.

At first he didn't grasp why being out amidst fauna and greenery was important, ascribed it to his autochthonous heritage, sprung directly from surrounding dirt, or innate sense of oneness with nature. Who else realizes that a hawk on wing screeches dreams of Spring? Gradually it occurred to him it was more likely to witness its demise, or was it mankind's? Continual despoilment was mounting and spreading. Motorists dump trash everywhere. They cut trees to put tar over trails, destroy habitats, and usher along decline. On a winter day at a shopping plaza, sat and watched a bare dwarf tree festooned with plastic bags trembling in wind. All incarnations of Earth Goddess—Demeter, Inanna, Nammu, Tiamat and others—have long been forgotten in a linear, patriarchal society, especially Maat, Egypt's goddess of truth. No room for mythology and unscientific thinking; no more pagans suckled on

creeds outworn. Even devote nature worshippers are steeped in technology, communicate among themselves by email and satellite. Naturalists drive climate controlled sno-cats across permafrost and tundra to film penguins and puffins marching and terns migrating in spectacular documentaries not to be missed. Frozen water doesn't flow. Cultures die even though their pretty artifacts still shine. They've kept the art and lost the reasons. Yet once art was created to commemorate the most important rituals. Sculptures were memorials to deeds. Chalice held sacrificial not symbolic blood. Man is yet a fusion of primal scream and sacramental song.

Must not forget about everything. Massacres dishearten but no longer horrify. Madness of chiefs and kings commands interest but doesn't compel. Why not learn to accept? What sort of plan hurts, maims and murders instead of greets with fellowship and mutually beneficial plans? Or go back into a shell and scuttle about like a crab hiding on a seabed, picking on bones of fallen rivals. Everyone is bound by their commitments to politics, science and technology. Maybe it's better to aimlessly drift, roam streets at will, swim freely in schools, transit space and time unafraid even when sharks surround. If something as trivial as bicycling can make you reevaluate life as it exists, what life changing discoveries await from other activities intently pursued?

Reality television was a symptom of this change. People rather do than view, sometimes doing and watching simultaneously, as when cooking or dancing, learning new techniques, something entertainment industry dismays. There's hardly anything worth your time in films and television anymore. Blatant sensationalism went out in the '80's, along with consuming, destroying, and domineering. What's become interesting is communicating, helping one another, participating, realizing goals together, volunteering. There was a definite trend afoot: Music produced by independent studios, mountain bike treks on single tracks overlooking ravines or out to wilderness sites with bears and big game, and pursuit of extreme sports: bungee jumping, circum-global boat racing, zorbing. Not so hard to see the popularity of eco- and ethno- tourism into jungles and primitive highlands as yet unspoiled. Orthopedists, sports equipment retailers, and travel agents rely on people abusing themselves far from home and paying big for this dubious privilege.

Movies are made to make money. They sometimes try to capture truths, if filmmaker thinks there's a market for it at that time. Audiences don't procrastinate, eager to consume whatever's produced, as if fresh fruit, run to latest flick, snort it up like hogs without any forethought or preparation, not knowing what it

means and hardly remembering what it was about. To be topical, you have to anticipate a trend, authored reams of material on it already, and, when its time comes, spring it on public. All trends recur, like a pendulum; you just have to be patient and keep busy. Whatever you're against will eventually fall out of favor, suddenly become suitable for bashing, persecution or satire. What's *in* now will be *out* sooner than you can accept or adapt. Yogi Berra used to say, "Nobody goes to that restaurant anymore, it's too crowded." To stay ahead of the curve, you have to set your own trends. But universal truths, once captured, exist outside of time, form links in a chain, span barriers.

He'd meant to view 3 films, but only got around to it 40 years after their theatrical release. Problem was he could never find them anywhere. Made him all the more curious, find these blips off everyone's radar screen. *Zabriskie Point* was among the few Antonioni movies (among classics, *Blow-up*, *L'Aventura*, *The Passenger*) he hadn't seen. Reckoned, "How can you go wrong?" Great director, soundtrack with Grateful Dead and Pink Floyd, supposedly a cult classic. After a student uprising in which a cop is killed, a youth on its periphery goes on lam, despite not being culpable, steals a plane, and flies out to desert, buzzes from above then frisks about in sand with a pot smoking lovely. Howard Hughes used to watch it over and over. Yet it's amazingly bad for someone as great as Antonioni, time killing boredom that lacks characterizations, motivations, and ironic twists of Michelangelo's other offerings. Uncompromisingly unique, sad to see Antonioni and Hughes go.

Other 2 were really the same movie. *I am curious—yellow* and *I am curious—blue*, newly available on DVD. Alternate designations meant practically nothing, except the "director", Vilgot Sjöman, used colors of Swedish flag to designate a second movie with out-takes from first. So, it's the same story twice told, seen from a second point of view, so to speak. "Yellow" was, of course, better, at least in his mind. The press of their time agonized over them as bad cinema at its worst—for production values and storyline think Ed Wood in Stockholm—while U. S. customs confiscated copies as obscene. Despite this hype, it's 1 of the greatest films ever made in black and white. Mailer said it changed his life. Most critics are still afraid of it, don't get it, pan it.

Chubby radical Lena Nyman is a movie heroine for all time, full of beans, big heart, expressive face, incredible honesty, nobody to trifle with. She spends a lot of time on an old bike. In an exceptional scene, she's weaving dangerously along in the rain when a speeding motorist splashes all over her; she lets out a string of

epithets the likes you've never heard even after naval service. This itself speaks to all bicyclists. Styled directly on Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman, shot in 1966, and celebrating a landmark anniversary, "Yellow" remains ahead of its time and amazingly relevant. Returned him nostalgically back to his youth, yet raises unresolved issues from today's headlines: anti-fear, anti-violence, border incursions, class conflicts, making love not war, questioning values of consumerism and peaceful demonstrations (a perspective it shares with *Zabriskie Point*), voter complaisance, and women's rights to use their bodies any way they want. Lena was to Sjöman's vision of woman as was Giulietta Masina, "Juliet of the spirits", to Fellini's. It's like Michael Moore orless on steroids, only feisty Lena is asking questions, doing her own research, keeping notes. "Newspapers work too fast and can't be trusted. Science works far too slow and gets no results. You have to do it yourself." Utomordentligt, Lena! Today, anything you read in newspaper is passé, useless today, wrung dry of any opportunity already. News articles aren't a priori; there's a scandal, but money and perps have vanished. If you want to be at the right place at right time, you have to make news yourself. Conceive and do, not position and wait.

You'd never be able to make a movie like this today. She caught real government officials by surprise, who no longer give such interviews, who have spokesmen with scripted crib notes, in Sweden or elsewhere, particularly America. There's even an exclusive short chat with Martin Luther King, Jr. As a documentary, it mocks the very genre, *mockumentary*, at once sophomoric and wise while intentionally confusing fiction with real life. It doesn't hide crew doing filming, makes use of real actors' names, and presents sexuality that's so shockingly intimate it's beyond prurient. Just like it used to be, everyone screwing, spreading disease, and suffering consequences. Lena is often naked even though she's ashamed of how she looks, too flabby, short. She admits submitting to her first 19 partners because she couldn't imagine anyone would ever really be attracted to her just for herself. Pretty critics don't comprehend self loathing. Despite poorly attended marches and practically ignored slogans, she dreamed, "I thought I could organize freedom." How Scandinavian of her! The Stockholm Sjöman depicts busts stereotypes of nothing but long legged blonde stewardesses. Full frontal nudity of both men and women led to case after case of free speech and pornography rulings in its favor. It became a victim of its own revolutionary success. Art houses began showing actual porno, so it fell through the cracks of '70's disco, drugs and sex. It should be required viewing for all adults, like a textbook how to

act responsibly, behave in a democracy, transcend contemporary delusions. In comparison, Hollywood's treatment of counterculture was self indulgent phony pandering now forgotten, yet this indie handling was brutally genuine, so much so it's suppressed to this day. What does that tell you?

"Yellow" is a supremely subversive expression, not mere caprice. It is heartfelt, ironic, a middle finger salute to a thoughtless world of abusers and betrayers, like club officers, government statisticians, and institutions, all of whom treat you with complete contempt. Lame placards Lena mounts on her back fender were like banners that cyclists sometimes wave. Like most people, Lena is incompetent. Unlike most people, she's not afraid to admit it. Her yoga experiments on country retreat are particularly laughable. Weren't most people trying yoga at the time? Though set in Sweden, it's a typical time capsule of America in the mid-'60's, right down to the bourgeois dreams and cumbersome hair dryers. Makes one proud to wear yellow, a maillot jaune, although it's lately been appropriated to represent a fight against cancer, so much apparel and bracelets aligned with Legstrong's foundation.

Commentators are always getting things wrong, misinterpreting unfamiliar content, objectifying non-English expressions as "too foreign", willfully undermining what doesn't serve their own interests. "Yellow", while superficially a send up of Sweden, is more an unbiased reflection on 1960's American turmoil and how it rippled throughout World. Something important happened, and its effect are still felt. Now he knew whence Lena Wertmüller's sex farces of the '70's came. Along with *Evergreen* magazine writers Ginsburg, Mailer, Satre and *Tropic of Cancer* author Henry Miller, such experiments redefined boundaries of what society will accept. Under Fascism, candor is never tolerated and penalties are usually severe. Only fellow artists understand. Please! If it's rated R, expect to hear vulgarities or see nipples, or select something else.

Artists seem the only humans with senses, eyes wide to what's happening around them. They are barometers of change in society—dangerous developments, environmental decay, new opportunities—should anyone pay attention. In a *Spin* interview, Björk spoke of getting "high on nature" without use of other stimulants. At the rate species are disappearing, habitats are endangered, and water polluted, there won't be any nature left to enjoy or intoxicate within your lifetime. Nature will shake out fools and straighten itself out, one hopes, but not necessarily so you'll survive. Artists and writers must never be dismissed. It should pay to be observant, a boy scout's first rule, but usually doesn't, makes you instead a

target of mobs and myob shysters. They duck when anything as bright and revealing as a lighthouse's beacon rotates their way, but bright beacons are few. Most people avert their eyes, choose ennui, shut down emotionally rather than stay engaged.

Americans need not go global to uncover alien attitudes. Pee Wee Herman on camera maniacally chased a stolen Schwinn, and off surreptitiously hid wee wee passions under a raincoat in art houses. Private adult titillation and programming for children apparently don't mix on any level for a prudish public. But where's the connection? Surely an oddball performer is entitled to discrete gratification after hours off screen. Blonde Nazi Fannie Kultur wrote a book that decries Democratic liberalism as Satanic and is interviewed on the Today Show as if an evangelist. Radicalism of '60's has been reinterpreted into rabid radio republicanism. Frigid cunts pushing conservatism to such extremes is clearly pornographic, the very thing for which Americans condemn Moslems. At least liberal laws allow her to write such nonsense. If you do, you better bring your A game, be oh so clever with every phrase you pen, unlike an interview, where being personable and polite mean more than what's said. You can lie outright, repeat gibberish, or spread unfounded rumors as long as you do it with a glint in your eye and a Reaganesque smirk. Kultur's opinions are just as prejudicial as Al Queda's or Hitler's and quantitatively less informed. You can imagine strange fictions about strangers or learn to know them better and lose your fears. Anyway, aren't differences something to celebrate? Yes, as long as unopposed opinions don't lead to concentration camps, genocide, and prisons. Believe what you want, don't impose it on others, or turn it into terrible, unenforceable laws.

That week's ride had a block of loose shoreside sand and no pavement, glittering waterviews, and lots of angry motorists. They got fingered from other side of road by an unobstructed speeder within a totally open lane. An errant arrow led to a dead end where he was dangerously accosted twice by a rabid English bulldog, who, though fat and slow, could have easily latched onto his ankle while he climbed and taken him down, tragicomic farce that might have come out of Benny Hill or Mr. Bean. His pace was so deliberate while escorting distinguished matron Velotta Fiets, a few kids on single speeds aggressively passed them on a straightaway. So he gave them a thrill, shifted, caught up, and said, "Let's go." For several minutes they merrily competed, pedaling like the pelaton, before he dropped them both gasping and spent. Stopped at next corner, not even puffing, to let all stragglers catch up, especially fat bottomed Velotta from far behind. Was a cruel lesson—some

middle-aged man can outdo your best efforts—but quietly instructive, perhaps future incentive. Will one someday become your next peloton champion? It wouldn't be him. Athleticism? Competition? Bah! Sounded too little like fun, too much like work.

One Memorial Day weekend in impeccable weather, over 150 riders turned out for what became that year's best attended club ride, the very route he and his friends designed. While a mere dozen or 2 usually showed, his tour represented new territory, and who didn't want something new for a change? He chose blacktop city with all those extra parking spots as his start point, which, as chance had it, they did need after all. Standing on road inside veterans cemetery wrapped in fluttering Stars and Stripes and gazing across field dotted by tiny versions at individual resting sites was simply surreal, sad, inspirational, poignant, an indelible memory. He appreciated those who thanked him personally, and passed along credit to his coconspirators. Of comments overheard, his favorite was, "Where the hell are we?" This pleased him like a baseball pitcher is pleased to fan a batter. Rides that totally disorient within familiar nearby towns are just plain clever.

Bicyclists who want all information painted on ground are spoiled brats. Once upon a time, all club gave was a map, and you were on your own. Arrowing became a way to increase participation, especially among racing sportifs, whose reckless haste around course make courteous riders look bad. Those who raced expected a precise set so nobody out front might lose time by taking a wrong turn, and thus wind up trailing those they aggressively dumped much earlier. Map challenged defectives needed arrows to find their way, as street signs sometimes were missing, and they didn't bother to familiarize themselves with area beforehand. Arrows at start implied they would be found throughout, but were no guarantee. Diligence was something to appreciate, failures par for course.

Arrowing involved experience-based skills that were interesting to practice on occasion. He prided himself in doing it well. Consistency in shape and color are helpful; they tie them together which avoids confusion. Using nominal cues—go left for 25 mile route versus right for 50—where short routes split off is usually preferable, although *home*, *long*, *short* or *xtra* were acceptable given rider knew overall distances. With maps he drew that showed point-to-point mileage, reckoned 1 word would suffice. With 4 different loops that week, would have had to put 3 distances together, just as confusing. Anyway, that's an arrower's prerogative. "Do it your own way," was his answer to those few small minded

insiders who complained out of anger and envy. They always complained whenever they couldn't steal credit for themselves.

Placement was crucial. A key arrow supposedly went at each intersection where direction was not obvious, or just before, about 10 yards. But, when descending, advance warning, as much as 100 yards ahead, increased attention; then, a long hafted bent arrow worked nicely. Confirming arrows, marked just after intersections, were useful, too, since they could be tracked in reverse when pushing a broken bicycle back. Choose spots to avoid arrows being run over by cars, obliterated by sand, or obscured by debris, such as leaves. A good practice was to paint directly over arrows from previous rides, since they lasted; anyway, old arrow might be confusing, and paint held up better as a second coat. Otherwise he'd vary arrow placement, trying to pinpoint where vehicles would miss or straddle, not always successfully. Arrows placed in heavily used travel lanes have a half-life of 3 days, especially if it rains. On sunny days, with sharp contrast of light and shade, no arrow color is ideal; white and yellow contrast best against dark asphalt. Although they use upside-down spray paint designed to mark over sand and light gravel, he'd carry a dust brush anyway, as paint stuck better on clean pavement then lasted longer. It might only be type of paint that they bought, but spray cans had tops that rotated to restrict flow at 1 vector but open at another. Generally, turning top through 180° increased flow to maximum. Nobody bothered to tell him; perhaps they didn't know, as evidenced from varying thicknesses from ride to ride. As usual, 90° was best, not too heavy (depleted paint fast) or thin (wore off quick).

Volunteers arrowing new rides are loathe to mark over arrows laid down earlier, worry they may be disrupting some former or future ride beyond information they were given. There are only so many ways to loop routes through backwaters that club cyclists prefer. Thus, there *is* a lot of paint at certain intersections. Can't be helped, may be messy, but only noticeable if you happen to live right at that spot. Better than a lot of things you find in gutter! Arrows may take up to 2 years to totally wear off, depending not only on roll over, rainfall and sanding, but type of paint formulation. Clubs purposefully use paints that wear off easily, unlike vandals. Since he made it his business to study ride schedule and whose marks they were, he'd often black out obviated arrows with spray when he happened upon them. Thin tar works better, but messy to carry around, although he encouraged city maintenance workers to roll it often to negate offensive images and words vandals use to deface public space. Tar over asphalt seals surface, too.

Bike arrows are little graffitis that everyone should tolerate given they lead to people cycling instead of polluting neighborhoods with noise, mercilessly driven tons of steel, and toxic exhaust, and threatening humanity with foreign reprisals, war, and World annihilation. Some people understand this and use a bicycle as a conveyance, as it was intended, instead of racing like ravagers on weekends. But how is this unlike drivers emulating what they see on television every day: car chases, murder mysteries, NASCAR? Could tell many stories about being attacked by dogs, hassled, nearly arrested, and questioned by landowners while arrowing. Most turned out okay. People are naturally curious, and he was thrilled to explain in a non-threatening way, which they seemed to appreciate. Better than saying, "Not your property, why not mind your own business, a\*\*hole." Some he schmoozed even joined rides. Yes, public rights-of-way are for everyone, whether by bike, foot, wheelchair or zealously registered mo-ve, but not go-carts and pocketbikes, Why permit them to be sold since there's nowhere to use them legally? Can't restrict trade, they say. Why not? They do restrict weapon sales, and how's this any different?

About the only time he found arrowing to be a pleasure was when he had designed ride himself, drawn a map, and picked where to mark. While this sounded a bit arrogant, it was actually more practical. Being able to vary route based local knowledge and changing conditions was like inviting strangers into your garden and showing off your prize peonies while ushering them quickly past compost piles or faded displays. You can give from your own experiences, include pleasant corners and scenic spots to ride by, rather than rigidly follow someone else's idea of fun, which often wasn't fun at all. Defined routes became a hassle. Many designers seemed to go out of their way to find pointless slopes without views and bad descents, tolerable only as long as there were rewards, a historic farm or nice ridge view or pleasant ambience. Having designed rides, he realized that they either didn't consider contours or used them in malevolent ways to spoil a ride, for example, including a tough gradient at end, when your knees had had it. Nazis want everyone to conform, but riders like him, who knew their way everywhere in a 100 mile radius, spontaneously altered routes to suit needs and whims, much to organizer's consternation.

The day of his tour, he did entire ride, long and short loops, just shy of 70 miles, averaged 12.2, maxed at 39 mph. Did short loop with a can of paint rattling in his bottle cage. As always, they decided to pave over some arrows, which he quickly replaced. Praised be new pavement over old, but please hold fields,

streams and woods sacred. There were plenty that day. But he was less enthused when they laid it down between painting arrows and riding. Several just inexplicably disappeared, possibly sabotage, and he replaced them last minute. You can hardly ever evade some arrowing mishap, especially on really long routes, increasingly what club offered irrespective of demands that puts on arrowers, and riders often get lost despite your best efforts. Once, broke for lunch; when he returned to resume, a street sweeper was diligently effacing paint he had already laid at that intersection. What timing! Glad for both a brushed road and chance to straighten out beforehand. The moral: Don't obediently follow arrows or leaders. Rely on good instincts and maps. Nobody studied maps. Club riding is a bad joke. Punch line drafts around and practically nobody smiles.

Members sometimes meet on days other than Sunday. Usually these are short, unarrowed rides led by a so-called *map*, another rider who knows route. You'd stick with your map, who, if decent, would wait for you at hilltops and intersections. He'd played that role often, always patient with stragglers, even leading riders he'd overtaken home. Bringing an actual map of your own is good advice, in case you fall too far back or martinet leader was unforgiving. With his misanthropic attitude and slow pace, he'd been dropped often. Unbeknownst to crappy company with which he rode, there was no getting him lost in a 100 mile radius, only escape by creating distance. He was tired of cold distance, emotional walls of defense, lack of warmth, willful indifference. Weeknight rides seldom exceed 50 miles, about as far as you can go before dark in Summer. Excursions of any length were possible year round with lights. Weeks would go by without a ride; he'd begin to wonder whether he'd top his usual 5,000 miles for year, then miles would again pile up. Couldn't wait for ideal days or he'd never keep quota. Some outings were worse than others. On a dreary afternoon, all over soaked and borderline hypothermic, he was captivated by an optical illusion you usually only see in caves. Along a canopied bikeway, bright reflections off slick pavement made it seem like he was skimming surface of a deep pool, but he couldn't really skip over water, just a numinous perception, not so mysterious, but seldom seen and somehow pause for thought. By enhancing physicality, bicycling impressed with many unique experiences. Bicycling is surely a sensation factory.

