Above and Below the Snow-line

KURT DIEMBERGER

Filming in High Places

(Plates 50, 51)

'The climbers are allowed to refuse repetition of any moves and must not be required by the director or his team to turn around or change their direction for the sake of the film.'

So it said in my contract with a big American expedition which aimed to tackle one of the last problems of the Himalaya. Fortunately the climbers did not take the contract clauses too literally, and although our 1981 expedition failed to reach the summit, our documentary managed to pick up an EMMY award, thanks to an element of good luck and the well co-ordinated film team of Mike Reynolds, David Breashears and myself. There was another reason for our success: psychology – and its importance in understanding the American way of looking at things. Herbert Raditschnig, my brother-in-law, who for years made films in the United States, once said to me:

'Kurt, whatever discussions might arise, whatever doubts may appear, fix them on the film and try to show what motivates the mountaineers. You can be sure that there will be discussions, for this is the country of true democracy. But don't be surprised if they pull down Camp 3 after one meeting and set it up again after the next one! It will be just the opposite of a Herrligkoffer-type expedition, where 'Captain' Karl decides everything all by himself.'

When I recall the riddles that had to be solved on that unknown, untouched East Face of Everest, and the great danger of being hit by one of the huge icicles hanging from the headwall or forming a 'fringe' higher up at the 'helmet'; when I think of those countless avalanches, racing clouds of white powder, engulfing our tents again and again, and the fact that, instead of the 'normal route', we had chosen to pioneer a route up a face of breathtaking beauty which George Mallory had considered an impossible way to climb the mountain ... Yes, I am not surprised that the expedition turned out to be 'democratic'. In other words: after a lot of discussion, someone decided to go home and, in the end, only the hard core of climbers remained for the final day. It was fascinating for me and my film teammates to record how the opinions of top mountaineers like John Roskelley and George Lowe developed.

One thing can be observed by anyone who visits a mountain film festival: films of expeditions are often very much alike, showing the chronology of events, the technique of the ascent and the landscape. But a film only becomes a living entity when it brings to life the human participants, with

their aspirations, joys and fears! This, in turn, requires co-operation between climbers and film-makers and is particularly important when filming an eight-thousander, with all its difficulty of realisation and the danger of falling into a predetermined scheme. In my experience, many of the climbers regard the resulting documentary as nothing but a necessary milch-cow for raising finance. Fortunately, however, there are some who are willing to take the filming of an expedition seriously, and then it is possible to achieve almost everything that one dreams about.

A serious approach is no less important if your filming is dedicated to a local mountain community. When making my documentary *Tashigang – a Tibetan village between the world of humans and the world of the gods*, I needed the collaboration of the village people. Thanks to my daughter Hildegard, the local people trusted me and took pleasure in what I was doing. Being an ethnologist who had lived in the village for three years, she spoke Tibetan fluently and had even been 'adopted' by one of the nineteen families who inhabited this small settlement, not far from Makalu, in the rain forest at 2200m. It was a great experience to enter the world of these people, to observe their everyday life and to learn about the spirits of the water, the rocks, the trees and their belief in the mountain gods. Sometimes, high up on a Himalayan giant, I still remembered Tashigang.

Life at high altitude, what is it? A combination of things. In this world high above an ocean of peaks, a feeling of contentment that you could never explain in words takes hold of you ... and it shows in your friends' eyes. At the same time, there is fear and tension: will we make it and never come down again? Or will we make it and remember it to the end of our days? Or shall we give up and descend towards an unknown future? In a tent, with a storm raging outside, the hope, the fear and the tension all show in your friends' faces. Even their voices reflect it.

If the mountain gods love you, you may find a partner who is as determined as you are to bring such experiences down from the highest heights. This was the case with Julie and me. After our *début* with a French expedition in 1982 on Nanga Parbat, Julie Tullis and I formed 'The Highest Film Team in the World', climbing and filming up to 8000m on K2 in 1983. Julie recorded the sound while I operated the camera, and together we dreamed up and developed the ideas for our filming.

Our first film *Diamir – Les Envoutées du Nanga Parbat* already made clear what I consider is the most important feature of a mountain film: originality. What this means in practice, as the word implies, will be different from situation to situation, from peak to peak, from climb to climb. Except in the case of a feature film, where there will be a script and actors, you must establish, on the spot, the main ideas for the film, what you think deserves special emphasis, and those people on whom you should concentrate your efforts. If you don't know anybody at the start, this can be a real gamble. I can remember a desperate team-mate whose daily song on an expedition always ended with ' ... this is the worst trip I ever was on!'

50. Kurt Diemberger in action on the Lhotse Wall when climbing Everest with the French in autumn 1978. The camera is a heavy Arriflex 16mm. (*Diemberger archive*) (p131)

51. Jean Afanassieff and Nicolas Jaeger looking out over the Nuptse Ridge from the top of Everest on 15 October 1978 during the filming, by Kurt Diemberger, of the first 'synch-sound' film at this height. They are speaking to France, via Base Camp and satellite. It was a world-first event. (*Diemberger archive*) (p131)

French leader Pierre Mazeaud dislikes women on expeditions and therefore in 1982 poor Julie did not have an easy life; moreover she was not allowed to go higher than 5000m. Although suffering from this restriction, Julie still gave her best to our filming but, being a blackbelt in martial arts, she could not resist 'hurling' the French leader justly onto the ground in a chapter of her book *Clouds from Both Sides*! Later, when we came down to the flower-meadows and woods and visited the local mountain shepherds, when we listened to their laughter and singing while milking goats and weaving cloth, they irradiated so much happiness in the midst of hardship that we felt relief from the oppressive atmosphere that so often prevailed at Base Camp, where everything was subordinated to the mountain. 'Bewitched by Nanga Parbat' were men who saw every change in the weather and every move they made as a factor in reaching or not reaching the summit.

Within this nerve-racking, up-and-down structure, when the mountain and its ominous weather repeatedly defeated our siege tactics, there were two outstanding characters,Walter Cecchinel and Hans Engl. Walter was a French mountain guide who had previously been involved in a serious accident on Mont Blanc; but in spite of knowing that he had almost no chance, he badly wanted to reach the summit. Hans Engl was a German climber who, in the end, made it solo to the top. His achievement and happiness, contrasted with Walter's desperate attempt and final disillusion, epitomised not only the heady warmth of success but also the cold and pitiless truths which big mountains can teach us. That film, which I edited in Paris, was a good start for Julie and me: it won three international awards and gave us a strong impetus to continue our work together.

On our next assignment, for an Italian expedition in 1983, we spent over five months in China, in the Shaksgam, exploring, filming and climbing. We shot 11km of film and took many hours of sound. But unfortunately the expedition leader decided to edit the film himself without our collaboration. This decision showed total disrespect for all our creative work ... and we never forgave him! None of the four films made out of these 11km of material ever got an award. No wonder! The editor in Rome was obviously unable to understand Julie's commands on the tapes; while unique scenes on synch-sound up to 7000m on K2 remained unused!

This Italian expedition, on which there were no high-altitude porters, employed a siege tactic, establishing four camps on the North Ridge to be used by three groups of climbers. But a film-team, which has to be where things happen, could not be included in such a rigid system of ascent. After bivouacking the first night in a crevasse, Julie and I decided to carry up a sort of 'mobile camp' consisting of a lightweight tent to be with us all the time, whether we were sleeping in already existing camps or establishing our own 'film camps'. This technique gave us independence and the freedom to climb and film 'through the expedition' in a quite original way. Our Italian friends showed great understanding and helped us where they could!

It would take too long to describe in detail all my varied experiences while filming expeditions over the next few years. Some can be found in Julie's book *Clouds From Both Sides* and others in my own book *The Endless Knot - K2. Mountain of Dreams and Destiny*. But I want to describe, flashing backwards and forwards in time, some of the events which I remember most vividly. One such event involved the longest and most original shot of my life, which I made during the filming of *K2 - The Elusive Summit* in the summer of 1984.

When Julie and I had practically finished our filming on the mountain, Wanda Rutkiewicz, leader of the Polish Womens' Expedition, decided to clear their camps by filling strong duffle-bags with equipment, rubbish and surplus material, and throwing them down from about 6700m above House's Chimney on the Abruzzi Spur. That would save a lot of carrying work; moreover, the bags were too heavy, anyway, for high-altitude porters to carry down.

The plan was for the whole camp to be evacuated by rolling the duffle-bags down the steep Abruzzi Spur, which begins at the base of the mountain at about 5300m above sea level. This would mean a height differential of about 1500m – a lengthy fall for a duffle-bag to withstand without breaking. But Wanda was convinced that they would survive the fall intact.

'Those Polish bags might well be as tough as their owners!' I thought, hoping that they were, because I had decided to film the event from the base of the mountain.

The great morning arrived. I was in touch with Wanda via walkie-talkie, though I could not see her as she was high above me, hidden from my line of view by the yellow-brownish rocks of House's Chimney. I could see the slanting crack of the chimney – and from somewhere there she was to throw the first bag in a couple of minutes!

A last glance at my gear. Will everything work? Julie, waiting at my side, had checked it too. My camera equipment was mounted on a firm, heavy tripod. I had even practised several times the whole long 'pan-scene', from the top to the bottom, looking through the viewfinder while following an imaginary bag down the whole visible length of the steep slopes of the Abruzzi Spur.

There was one crucial question: when the bag appears, will I 'find' it through the telephoto lens? In time ... or too late? I had better keep both eyes open! Julie calms me down. Ready. Eye on the viewfinder.

'Let it go!' Julie calls up to Wanda.

'OK ... three, two, one ... gone!'

Some 1500m higher a bag is coming down the mountain ... Nothing. I see nothing. Not with the one, nor the other eye ... neither through the strong 1200mm lens, nor without! I feel my blood rising hot to my head. Where is this bloody bag – perhaps caught by the rocks? Torn into pieces? No, here it is! God, I have it, that black whirling shape, in the viewfinder! Hold on, Kurt, keep it in the centre of the frame, don't let it escape! Keep

it, and pull slowly down as it comes, follow it softly, gently ... What a spectacle! It's racing downhill now at a tremendous speed, moving like the needle of a crazy compass, like the drunken hand of a clock in fast motion, now touching the slope with its upper, now with its lower end, perhaps as many as ten times a second ... I'm holding my breath – but for too long. I have to breath carefully. I never thought it could take so long for an object to fall a thousand metres! Now, what's happening? All of a sudden the bag has started to jump and make big summersaults! It's behaving like a clown, twisting, shaking his head. Now it's zigzagging like an acrobat showing his best tricks, one moment traversing the slope, head over heels, and the next rolling like an ordinary sausage. Now it's jumping again, on and on. Kurt, don't lose it, don't let it escape from the frame – it's really big now, getting close ... It should be almost down by now – Oh! It's disappeared from my view! It's down for sure now, somewhere on the moraine. For a moment I'm petrified, spellbound, immobile ...

Then I'm gasping for breath – and laughter. What a feat! I turn to Julie and we embrace. What a clown, a real *ballerino*, this bag full of jokes! We are laughing till our eyes water! And the film ran out, just after the bag disappeared! Good luck again! It's hard to believe, but we finished a whole roll of 30 metres of film – almost all of it on this one scene. That must be close to three whole minutes – we never expected that!

Several months later, when we edited *K2 - The Elusive Summit* with Christopher Ralling in London for 'Assignment Adventure', we had some headaches about how we could actually make use of 'the longest scene of my life' in the film. We found a place: the very last scene of the film, while all the credits were rolling, allowing several pauses in between to give the 'clown' time for his performance.

Incidentally, the remaining bags came down in a very orderly and uneventful way, except that one of them broke. It was only the first one that seemed to have a soul of its own!

Another adventure occurred to me in 1980 on the South Col of Everest. For days an Arriflex SR16 stood there, in an aluminium box inside a tent. Nawang Tenzing and Pasang Sherpa had carried it up and deposited it carefully. Then a storm raged for several days, and the box was left alone at 8000m. Its contents were worth around DM40,000. We thought of that, waiting in Base Camp: 'We hope it won't have flown into Tibet, by the time we get back to the South Col'.

When we did get back, the box with its camera was still there. But the camera was like a block of ice, and in spite of the fresh battery which we had brought with us, there was no sign of life to be had from it. A white fur-coating of crystallized humidity covered the black casing as soon as we opened the lid of the box. But I've got to film with it! Body warmth? Sleeping-bag? Hopeless with such an ice-block! The gas cooker? Dangerous when the heating-up is one-sided or too powerful. After all, an Arriflex,

with all its expensive mechanisms, mirrors and lens systems, is not intended to be a 'sucking pig'. For about twenty minutes we turned the camera, this expensive sucking pig, cautiously over the cooker's flame: it came to life again! Now I could wander over the South Col and film the storm ...

Cold is one of the chief problems that must be faced when filming in the Himalaya. For this reason the oil in the cameras is often replaced by graphite when working at high altitude. Even so, in spring 1978 such a camera refused to work on Makalu at 7600m. When we tested it at home after our return, it was found to be beyond repair. Strangely enough, only four years earlier I had used it to film the whole climb of the corniced ridge of 7500m Shartse, culminating in Hermann Warth's arrival on the summit in an icy storm. Perhaps the camera was just getting too old. In April and May 1960 I had used it to film the first ascent of Dhaulagiri (8167m) without any trouble; but by 1978 the camera had obviously lost its youth.

As regards batteries for electronic cameras at high altitude, lithium batteries are best as they are unaffected by cold. But beware: they must not be recharged nor get into great heat or water, for they can explode! Moreover you are not allowed to transport them by air. Weight is another problem. More and more people now use video cameras, perhaps the key to filming in Alpine style at high altitude. They are lightweight but delicate, and it would make sense to try out such a camera first in a storm on Mont Blanc.

Even if you are fond of Alpine-style climbing and refuse to use bottled oxygen and high-altitude porters, I am sure that, for the ascent of an 8000m peak, a few oxygen bottles would help a lot to improve the quality of any film produced at that height. The result will certainly be better than an 'elegantly-sporting' film made with a wobbling, oxygen-free camera!

To make a good mountain film at extreme heights one should not dispense with Sherpas. When filming at 6000m or higher, the cameraman needs so much energy and powers of concentration that he should not have to carry both his own gear and the film equipment. Some climbers might tend to regard this as a great privilege for the cameraman, even undue favouritism. Such a person might change his opinion if you could manage to secure him as your assistant for a day!

One can still find amongst the leaders of expeditions a few backwoodsmen who think that the cameraman should do everything by himself: filming, sound recording, organisation, assistance! I maintain that, to make a good film of an expedition to an eight-thousander, besides the collaboration with the climbers which is of paramount importance, it is necessary to have, apart from two to three porters (for the film equipment), at least one other person to be responsible for the sound and to act as the cameraman's assistant. For an expedition with a bigger budget, I would recommend taking along two cameramen which, if they collaborate well, will benefit the filming enormously.

When climbing Everest in 1978, Pierre Mazeaud had engaged only me as high-altitude cameraman. But although I had to do almost all my filming alone, I shall not forget the fine teamwork when we went for the summit. 15 October 1978 was a deciding moment of my life, and I knew on this lucky day that life expected me to render my very best. To be with my French comrades on the top of Everest brought both moving moments and incidents which still make me smile.

Pierre, his beard encrusted in frost, excitedly told his story to his compatriots, complete with gestures, as if he were making a speech in parliament. Fractions of a second later his countrymen learned what it was like up here, for we were using a satellite and this was a 'world first' for a live transmission from the top of Everest. 1978 was thus a turning point. Never before had a film been made with people speaking, laughing, and telling what they were thinking up there.

How did we do it? I only had a Nagra Mini recorder and a Bell & Howell 16mm magazine camera, which had to be wound up by hand as it ran by clockwork. At 8600m we split some of the weight between us. We took no clapperboard with us to the summit, and did not anticipate that this would present a problem. In an alpine meadow you can just clap your hands to give a signal for synchronising sound to pictures. Now, however, on top of the world, none of the good fellows wanted to remove their gloves! Wisely, but the sound of an eiderdown 'clap' cannot be picked up by the little mike we were using. So I let them keep their gloves on and, instead, yell '*Chac*!' with a single big wave of the arm at the start of a scene on sound. That worked, up to a point; but combined with the jerkiness of the cold camera mechanism, it gave the cutting editors in Paris something to get their teeth into! Fortunately, using modern techniques, much of the coughing was subsequently removed from the French sound version ...

This was the first time that Frenchmen had stood on the rooftop of the world. In *Spirits of the Air*, I wrote:

> *It comes hard on you to leave such a fantastic place. I want to carry it with me for ever! Up, Kurt! I say, and turn around on my heels to gather the whole, immense panorama from the top of the world into my lens ... to Makalu, India, Nepal, Tibet ... and back to Makalu. Still, I don't want to leave it.*
>
> *But I must! Soon ... Something like a frenzy has seized me in an endeavour to retain it all by means of my cameras as the moment of descent draws nearer. Take Six! Take Seven! Take Eight! Take it all with you, every moment. Can you? ... Only then, as we leave, the very last minute I find time for it ... I press my face against the summit-snows and thank the gods.*

In autumn 1978 I spent three days filming the documentary for the French at 8000m or higher. When Pierre Mazeaud, Nicolas Jaeger and Jean Afanassieff had gone, I stayed on at the South Col to complete the film, then finally loaded 20 kilos of equipment onto my back and descended to the lower camps. To be able to make that kind of huge effort one must really love the work. But why? That is hard to explain. Whatever the reasons, I remained again at the South Col in autumn 1980 for an extra three days, filming my Italian companions and recording their impressions on sound. On that occasion the wind was so strong that a tent flew away into Tibet!

Sometimes I try to explain the 'Why' to myself. Why do I do it? Above all, it's a challenge. To reproduce faithfully on film the experience of life at high altitude is something so difficult and at the same time so captivating that it could be compared with climbing a big beautiful mountain. Where words alone are inadequate to provide a complete answer to the question 'Why do you climb a peak?', the challenge is to provide an alternative, *visible* answer to that ubiquitous, oft-quoted reply: 'Because it is there!'

Why do I do it?

One of the reasons is the satisfaction of creating something new out of elements which you can both see and touch, and which are offered to your mind and soul. This source of creative energy goes hand-in-hand with a spiritual experience, often felt by mountaineers, of being at one with the mountain. And after actually touching the highest point of rock or snow, the mystical feeling of finding an answer to questioning, of repose after struggle, is as valid as if you were reaching a double peak – both the summit of the mountain and the imaginative summit on celluloid. With that intermingling of pictures and sound, if you feel that you have caught the true meaning of 'what it's all about' and have been able to convey that feeling to yourself, to the hearts of your friends, and to those thousands to whom you can never speak, then you have indeed found the answer to both questions, why you climb and why you film.

To bring down to earth the heights of the Himalaya for yourself and others is an explanation that is easily understood. But how can you explain an obsession so overwhelming that it can lead you to undertake again and again the incredible struggle of high-altitude filming? How can you explain your willingness to forego your preferred Alpine-style climbing in favour of the siege-style essential for making a good film? Or your acceptance of the ever-present risk of death and an even greater risk of frostbite than ordinary mountaineers have to face? Or the fact that you may not even make it to the top because of your film assignment?

For myself, one thing is sure: whenever I am privileged to film something uniquely beautiful and impressive, up there in that high world where I feel so much at home, I am always supremely happy.