For

The Oral History Library

of

The Fashion Institute of Technology

An Interview on

BOB COBURN
Hollywood Photographer

by

Robert L. Green

with

Matthew Daniels
Q. Once again, one became dependent on John Kobal for direction as to some of the early photographers who deserve recognition and deserve our attention. And he strongly urged that I track down Bob Coburn. It will become apparent to you, as time goes on with this tape, how important Mr. Coburn was and the many remarkable photographs that he took. But it was a fascinating experience. You have to understand that this took a number of visits, because Mr. Coburn is...

Are you ready for this? ....Eighty-eight years old. And he's living in, oh, sort of a, I guess it would be called a retirement home next to a golf course, a little way below Palm Springs. And, I mean, you looked at him and you had the feeling that...

Well....You were looking at the century. I mean, he was born in 1900. And I kept thinking, what does he remind me of? And if you know any of the Charles Russell paintings of American cowboys, that's what he looks like at this point. He looks like a lined, wizened but slim and has rather good posture, although you sense the ultimate frailty that is there. But...And the other thing...Remember those...Oh, the really early, wonderful John Ford movies in which Ford seemed to surround himself with people--apart from his stars John Wayne or Henry Fonda--other people in the backgrounds; other cowboys, other...that seemed to spring from the land itself, rather than from any sort of casting office. Because you couldn't make that up. You'd have
to have lived and experienced enough to have your face become
the kind of maps that those particular individuals represented.

Well, that's Bob Coburn. That's what you get. And when
you talk to him, of course, as you will see, he speaks some-
what slowly. Not really hesitantly. I mean, there is a difference.
It's as though... As though his mind were an extraordinary chest
(I mean chest in the sense of hope chest), and he was pulling
things out of it and lifting things, layer after layer, and
making a decision before he actually formulated the words, as
to what it was that he wished to say. In other words, he's got
it all under control and there's no evidence of a lack of mem­
ory or anything of that nature. But he's a conscious person
in terms of everything that he does. The general feeling that
you get about it (and I've seen pictures of him as a young man),
he was... I guess the best way for us to describe him would be,
he was a James Stewart type. So that some of this hesitation,
some of this control, is part of the basic character of the man
himself. You could also see why the ladies that he photographed
would find it rather delightful to be in his presence, because
he was an attractive, very clean cut, tastefully dressed man,
with manners that were not courtly--they were not old world--
but were just those of a church-going, great American family,
young man.

As one goes on interviewing creative talents like this list
of photographers, they vary so in their relationship to their
work. For instance, Coburn really had to be talked into bringing
out some of his photographs. This, as opposed to other people who arrive for an interview with book after book after book and blowups. You know. Enormous wall charts of their work. It's interesting. In the den of the house there are a few photographs on the wall, but they're not so brilliantly lit that you notice them immediately. They are there and we become conscious of them afterward, but they're...It's also interesting the ones he has selected. We will talk about that a little later.

Oh, well, why not right now?

He obviously photographed Rita Hayworth many times, and when you see his photograph, it's a photograph of one of the most beautiful women in the world, as well as one of the most sensual. But also as a very vulnerable person. So that you are dealing with Coburn's ability to elicit that quality. There's not the sense of the fake pose or the actress, just projecting sex. It's a beautiful woman slightly off guard, and, thus, it's very wonderfully touching.

It's always fascinating that when you deal with these people you're either dealing with a companion, you know—who's paid to be there—or you deal with (in the case of Coburn) his neighbor, who is apparently a good friend and who is...Of course, it's so terrific when you deal with...He refers to "off the record" on the side, to Coburn, as "the old man." And this neighbor is 79. You'll hear his voice occasionally because he entered...I encouraged him to enter, as I always do. I think it makes everybody more comfortable, and makes it seem less as
though they're being judged by the interviewer or examined in any way, and just becomes a friendly conversation. We seem to elicit better information that way.

When you talk to some photographers you get the sense that they really love to gossip. That is not true of Coburn. Not at all. As a matter of fact, we might rhapsodize about his work, he doesn't. He kind of shrugs his shoulders and dismisses it as "It was my job, my responsibility, and therefore I did it," and he's most at home when he's talking about the technical qualities of what it was that made the picture work, or what he found that he was able to do with it. At the same time, I don't wish to imply that he has no opinions or responses. He has his own peeves and he has his own favorites, and there is even evidence of a few things he'd rather not think about to say nothing of talk about. And they probably have to do with experiences with ladies that were difficult at the studios, or made his life uncomfortable.

It's also clear--well, pretty clear--that Coburn enjoyed Hurrell, because Hurrell worked at Columbia for about a year in the '40s...were not exactly the best of friends. Things did not exactly go smoothly between them. But, as I tried to push a little, to get Coburn to, you know, maybe burst through with some strong emotion--like he was a bastard or he hated him or...Not at all...The more you pursued the more he kind of withdrew. But you just got the feeling that things were not well between them.

I have the feeling that, as we go through all of this
material, and the tape, you get the sense of not only Coburn himself, but also the nature of the industry at that time, and the feeling of how these images that were created by these great photographers have assured our sometimes tenuous but nevertheless still quite strong thread between the present and the past of this industry, and how powerful the motion picture industry really was. How these images affected lives all over the world. And we have to be grateful to both John Kobal, for stirring this up (because, frankly, I wasn't that aware of Bob Coburn), although when I saw pictures of him I realized that I had seen a couple in private collections. He did photograph Vivien Leigh and I remember her showing me that picture, but we never got around to saying who did it, which is, unfortunately, a commentary on our relationship to photographers frequently.

Okay. Let's plunge into our tape. Shall we do that?

I suppose a contemporary photographer would have a certain amount of envy of all of you who were able to work in the golden days, the beginning days, of Hollywood's great power, because it was all new and it was formulating another art form. How did you feel about it, Bob?

A. Oh, we all had a sense of glamorizing Hollywood at the time. But I think each individual had his own workings. I know I had a different one for my end of it, because I'd read a script and I'd get an idea. And that idea was to sell that
picture, when I read the script.

Now, what pictures should I concentrate on when I'm on the picture? Or, if I'm not on a picture... I only shot the special stuff anyway, after the picture was over. What should I shoot to sell this picture? Maybe it wasn't to get this gal the most beautiful thing. Maybe I had to make an old hag out of her, you know?

Q. Merle Oberon?
A. Not Oberon.

Q. Not Oberon.
A. Not Oberon. But, for instance, Sadie Thompson, when...

Q. Rita.
A. ... made that, it was another thing. Rita was a completely different girl in that picture. In other pictures she'd been a sweet thing. You know. Stanwyck...

Q. In Stella Dallas, for instance...
A. Stella Dallas... I got that picture with the fur over her and she was a slut.

Q. Right.
A. You know. And this is the thing that you have to do, and that was the "24 sheet" and that's the thing that I shot for, and (?) usually bought it. We'd hash things over back and forth. They'd give me a list of their ideas and I'd choose mine too. But the selling point, just the same as... I brought a couple of these things out... What we... Now, I ran into this the other day, a complete thing that I take... West Ways (?)... That's
an (?) . . . club magazine, and there is one of my old pictures of King Kong.

Looking at the King Kong photograph, Bob, one realizes that you'd already been in the business a very long time. You had already been in the business about 12 years. How did you get into the business.

A. At that time, before I went to RKO, I was entirely... I thought maybe I could be a motion picture cameraman...

Q. Right...

A. Because...

Q. With the late Billy...

A. Billy Beckwith. The old English photographer, the old English cameraman over here at that time. And he took a liking to me. And, of course, I liked asked Billy nine million questions, and he's another "Bachrach," motion picture wise. He answered all my questions. And when I first started... I think I started as assistant cameraman... And he carried around his little black... Or his little locked up box with all his goodies in it. And those were all trick, (?) lens gimmicks that he made up personally. He was good at making things, he was a good machinist too. For instance, irises and stops and all those kinds of things that now is done by another department, which is the trick photography department. In those days we did everything before the camera. There was no trick photography. We were the tricks, and Billy was the... He was the man who thought them up. And he wouldn't let anybody in that box.
And finally after about three months and I asked him nine million questions, he finally said, "Here are the keys."

He said, "The box is yours."

Q. Obviously photography was not an adult preoccupation or introduction to your life.

A. I was born on a cattle ranch and they always said I was born on a horse with a camera around my neck. So, the first picture we ever did, my father put some money in a picture and they made it at our ranch, and I was 16 years old. I remember my father came to the ranch... We had one of the biggest cattle ranches in the country then. He came to the ranch with an Eastman Kodak. This fascinated me. And I wouldn't have it but what I had to have the whole ball of wax. I just went completely berserk about this stupid camera. I carried it on my saddle and I took pictures of it and everything. I finally had my mother's bathroom looking like a photographic lab. I sent for things in mail order and they'd send me the photographic chemicals, and I learned to do all my stuff when I was 16 years old, and did all that. So, when Billy Beckwith hit the ranch, of course, I couldn't stay out of his hair. And he sensed that. He sensed that this kid had something. And I taught photography; I used to give speeches in colleges and schools when I was in business because it was good for the studio. You can sense... You either have to have it, or you don't have it. I had so many men work for me that they're scared to death to go on a set and make a picture of something. And you couldn't keep me... I was trigger
happy. I was pulling the trigger all the time. I'd go in where angels feared to tread. And loved it.

Q. Bob, can you give me an example?

A. John Ford. He wanted...He was working for...He hated or he disliked photography....Photographers...Didn't even like his own cameramen. I think John was a pretty hard Irishman to get along with. But I'm Irish too, so I....He interviewed me. He was at RKO and I did something over there special for him and did good pictures. And in between...When I would finish a picture, I would go into the gallery with Ernie. See, Ernie had one of the best photographic studios in the business. I'll go back to that.

Q. Yeah. Great.

A. But, getting to John Ford: He was going going to make a big picture called "The Informer," and so, asking around, they finally said "Why don't you get that Coburn if you can get him," or something or other. So I went over and saw him, and for the very...I heard all about him: Stay away from him. Don't do a picture with him when he's chewing on a handkerchief. Never shoot him on his blind side. He had one eye, a patch over one eye.

Well, the first...And keep out of his way. Well, the very first morning on the set, on the very first scene, I went in and sat on a box right next to hi, right underneath the camera. Here's the camera's lens right here, and I sat right here with my camera. And John Ford was over here in his seat.
And he kept...I kind of sensed him looking at me, but he never kicked me out, see, and I never...I had a thing cooking with every sound man that I would never ruin their take by the click of the camera. I'd either shoot when there was a noise on the set, or somebody shouting or shooting or something, or at the end of the take. In fact, I was one of the...I guess I inaugurated shooting in action with miniature cameras. Thirty-five millimetre. I shot this whole picture...

Q. Thirty-five millimetre.
A. Hmmm?
Q. Thirty-five millimetre?
A. Yeah. I got a Leica and shot this whole picture, "The Informer," with a 35mm. And he looked at me and he said, at the end of the take he didn't say a word and this went on for about a week. And one day I didn't want the scene. I got into...Whatever the action was, I didn't sit there. And he was a guy who wouldn't walk under a ladder and wouldn't let a black cat go in front of him, and he had to have his grey pants on when he was shooting a picture, and that kind of stuff. So by God, he looked down and saw I wasn't sitting there, and he called the assistant director and he said, "Where's Coburn?" He said, "Well, he didn't want the..." He said, "Get him in here." I had to go and I had to sit on that stool every take from then on, see.

Well, we became very fast friends, and he...I never did...I could see his logic in everything that he did. Just like...He was such a realist, that when we had the drunken scene
Q. McLaglen?
A. McLaglen. Well, he got him drunk. And this wasn't acting. That drunken scene was drunk. He took him into his dressing room and gave him a quart of whiskey and said, "Drink this." And Ford sat there with him and he drank it. And he came out of there looped. He couldn't make it from here to there! And he was pawing all over the gal, you know. And that was exactly what Ford wanted. And that's why he was such a good director, because everything was real with Ford.

Q. Bob, I really feel that you should be complimented, because it's obvious that when... At the time that you were shooting 35mm, at the time you were shooting 35mm film, was way in advance of anybody else, because nobody took it seriously in terms of the kind of work that you were doing. Which means that your own kind of advance thinking set a pattern for people to follow later on. You certainly were doing, back in the '30s, what people eventually began to do in the '50s and '60s. That's rather terrific.

Now, you obviously shot both still portraits and.. As well as the gallery portraits. Did you find it difficult in any way to adjust to the difference? How did you adjust to the difference.

A. We played that two ways. Whatever was on the set we shot. Right? When I'm under the camera here, with Ford, I'm shooting you as you're talking to me. You can't do something...
for me. You have to...I have to shoot you as Ford told you how to act. I'd get those. But in my mind, on a picture, I know what I'm going to shoot at the end, when we get to the gallery stuff. When we get in the portrait gallery.

Now, you see, I was kind of a two-fold...They wanted me to cover....People like Goldwyn wanted me on the picture if possible, plus some of the special stuff, and I guess Goldwyn was the perpetrator of the whole thing. He was the one who instilled...Insisted, in fact, on me doing the pictures on the set as well as on the...

Q. That's very unique. I find very few who do.
A. So then when I went to Columbia, it worked out so well that that was the only way I would go to Columbia; to take full charge of everything put in pictures. Two pictures at once. I had a man on one and I did the other one.

Q. Bob, the more I get into seeing the photographs of all the people that we've interviewed in the series, the more I realize that the ones who really stand out, in the most complete sense, are the people who had the artist's talent; the creative ability to establish their own personal style, to the point where, as one can recognize a Degas or a Rembrandt, one can certainly recognize a Coburn or a Hurrell. Did you find that that was true? Am I just reading into this, or is there some basis of truth in this?
A. Oh, Ritchie and (?) and those guys were...We shouldn't...I never ran any of those guys down. The only guy that I
didn't like was Hurrell. I couldn't stand him, the reason being that he went in the army and he came out of the army and I was signed up with Harry Cohn at Columbia, and Hurrell still had a year to go when he got out of the army. So he came back and he was workin under me and he didn't like that.

Q. Bob, I'm not going to push this any further, but I just want to establish, for the purpose of the tape, that obviously you don't want to go into any of your attitudes toward some of the other photographers, and it's obvious that the one you felt the most strongly about was George Hurrell. So, you're... You know... We've got your big statement. You're just going to say that you just didn't like him. And I'm going to make the assumption that it must have been a conflict of interest by virtue of the fact that Hurrell, having come back from the service, would feel that his position had been usurped and how dare anybody else place him in the position where he has to work under somebody. And when he left he ran the department. You don't have to say anything at all, Bob. I just wanted to get that on the record, because I do think that's the nature of our following the sequence of how these events occur.

And always, in arguments of this nature, there are two sides to every story and both people have a justifiable reason to respond as they do. That's what we call irreconcilable differences. Now... Well, just as Hurrell returned and found himself working under you, I'm interested, for instance, in how did you come to replace Ken Alexander at the Goldwyn Studios?
A. Well, Ken Alexander was a silver shirt, you know.
Q. What does that mean?
A. He was anti-Jewish.
Q. Oh really.
A. Anti-Semitic. And he was the leader, I believe, a lieutenant of the "Silver Shirts," which was really a Nazi outfit.
Q. And he was working for Goldwyn?
A. And he was working for Goldwyn, and Goldwyn didn't know it. And one day I was on a John Ford picture. Now what was it? And the publicity department found out that Kenny was ... had this stockpile of arms and food and everything out in the Hollywood Hills, and they were going to have a wing-ding someday, and Goldwyn heard of it and all hell broke loose over at Goldwyn's and they said let's get rid of him and get somebody else. So, the guy at Goldwyn's then used to be at RKO, as head of publicity. He called up and said can you come over and talk to us. And I went over....
Q. Not Russell Birdwell, no?
A. No, not Russell Birdwell. No. No...
Q. We'll get to it. We'll get to it.
A. Well, anyway, I went over and he told me all about Kenny. And he said, "I'm talking about tomorrow morning you start with us, not next week." And so I went back and I was on this John Ford picture, and I went to Ernie Bachrach and he said, "Well, I'm not going to hold you back. You can make
$200 more a week over there." I was earning the top wage, which was $85 a week.

Q. And this was a six day week.
A. A six day week. But I was on all the time. I was never let go. There were a lot of photographers. The only incentive for me to stay with Ernie was that I liked him, period, number one. And I was learning. And also that it was steady. So now I have to go, and Ernie said, "You'll have to see Ford. John Ford. To see if you can get off the picture." So I had to go to him and he said, "All right. Go ahead. I can't stop you, to make more money." He said, "The only thing is, Bob, please get me somebody who will get along with me. You know me." So I went down to Ernie and I said, "Do you think we can jerk Alex (?) off the picture he's on and put him with Ford, because I think he will get along with Ford if anybody can."

Q. Right. Right.
A. So I got ahold of...And he said yes let's do that, so that's...I got a hold of Alex and I told him all about Ford and I said this you can't do and this you can do and all that stuff, and Alex was an old German, born in Germany. He was one of the wild German guards at the...

Q. In Berlin.
A. In Berlin. And he...I'd tell him each thing and he'd say, "Ja, Bob, ja." I understand. So he gets on the set and the first thing...I said to Alex, above all, don't shoot him on his blind side, because we all like to sneak up catch as
catch can, odd shots of people when they didn't know we were making pictures of them. Because they're the best.

Q. Yeah. Sure.

A. Well, the first thing he did, he couldn't stand it...

Alex couldn't stand it because Ford was in the middle of a grinding part or something and he was chewing on his handkerchief and he's got the hat over his one bad eye, and Alex sneaks up and snoots a picture. Well, of course, the lid flew off and Ford called him over and said, "Didn't Bob tell you about not making a picture when I'm doing this?" And he said, "Ja, Mr. Ford, ja, but I just can't help it."

"Well, see that you don't do it again."

"Ja, Mr. Ford."

Well, it wasn't ten minutes and he shot another one. And this went on for three times, and Ford said, "Alex, or whatever your name is, get the hell out of here and have your boss send me somebody else."

"Ja, Mr. Ford, I do yust that."

Well, Alex went to the makeup department and he made himself up into a big white beard and white hair, big mustache. Now Ford is up on a big six foot catwalk with his feet on both sides and a camera on both sides of him, and Alex sneaks right up underneath here and aims right up and shoots a picture of him, right smack under the...The one that Ford wouldn't like you to do.

Well, everybody thought Alex was gonna get killed,
you know. And Ford looked down at him and he said, "Go take your God damned makeup off." And he said, "You win. Go take your makeup off." And that's how I got off the Ford picture and went to Goldwyn. And I had to go over the next day and start right on the picture, whatever it was.

Q. Bob, I don't know whether you ever saw Peter Bogdanovich's documentary on John Ford. Well, you're nodding that you did see it, so you'll appreciate this. The extraordinary moment where he was interviewing Ford and doing this intellectual analysis of the changing position of the West in the mind of Ford, from the first film that he did to later films that he did, in the development of John Wayne's career, and Bogdanovich is pontificating endlessly about this. At which point...Eventually, of course, he had to say, "Well, can you make some comment about that," to Mr. Ford, and John Ford (and this is...the reason I thought of it is because of your description of his "Take the God damned makeup off and get back here on the set, you win), he simply looked at Bogdanovich and said, "I don't have any comment. I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

There's something about that kind of directness that is admirable. It also explains that you do deal with people who need to concentrate on the set, in thinking through things, and they don't intellectualize. They feel very often from the gut. They very often know what works for them, what doesn't work for them, what they can sense is right. It's...Because the truth of the matter is, that all of the directors, if you examine John Ford's
work you realize that he's one of the few people who deserves the title both artist and poet.

One of the themes that seems to run through all of the interviews that I've done with photographers is their special relationship to lighting as part of their art. In other words, it's one of the instruments that they use to create, obviously, light and dark shadows. And I would be very curious and interested in knowing just how you use light, Bob.

A. I never found I lit the same gal twice the same way. I would paint her picture with light, the same as an artist would with oil.

Q. Can you describe me a sitting?

A. Selling this picture the way I considered the picture to be sold. The picture that she's working in. Maybe "Stella Dallas." It's my own conception of Stella Dallas lighting, or whatever you want to call it. See.

Now, this is just...This was my way of working in Hollywood. I didn't have any...Nobody told me this, I did it myself. Bachrach rubbed off on me. He had some of it too.

Q. One of the things that fascinates people who investigate the whole world of artists and their art form is to understand who the influences were; who were the forces that molded and directed and in some ways stimulated them to move in the directions that they eventually ended up with. I think that, just the way you pronounce his name, it's a dead giveaway that
somebody who certainly seems to have been very important in your life was Mr. Bachrach.

A. I never was influenced by any... I think Bachrach was uppermost, probably, in my mind today, as "the" teacher, that taught me the fundamentals, from the lab work on. Plus, he contended that you were never a good photographer unless you knew how to develop what you shot. If you didn't know that, you couldn't make... Which was overboard a little bit too, because there were a lot of great ones. But anyway, he believed in a thorough knowledge of photography, period. I knew a lot when I went there. I was really a nut. You know. There wasn't anything that I didn't think I knew. But I didn't know anything until I went there.

Q. Give me some examples. Can you be specific, like...

A. Well, for instance, making these King Kong montages. The way to cut... Of course, I had a steady hand and I could do just the same as he could. But to cut out a lion and not have it show... We made the whole picture so you could fit those things with very little retouching. It looked like it just came out... Of course, we'd photograph King Kong so that we knew we were going to put Alice Faye in there someplace... Or Fay Wray... In his hand or in there someplace. And... So, we would have a background that would take this cutting out. And also, her being in his paw. But, I was thinking all the way through, every picture we made of this, we thought "We've got to make a cutout of Fay Wray and put it in there."
Q. (inaudible)
A. So, they'd have King Kong (?) ... at the beginning of the picture. It took them a couple of years down there to make it, and we would tell them any time they would change to an interesting shot of Kong to call up the department and I would go down. And sometimes I would stay all day if it was an interesting week...
Q. (Inaudible)
A. And sometimes they would forget script and do...I would get an idea and say could we do several different things. I get to shoot Fay Wray tomorrow, and I'd like to get some different angles of him. And they would concentrate on King Kong, just for me, for an hour or so, and I would shoot him in all kinds of different ways. Of course, we were never allowed to touch him. What's his name...
Q. (?) O'Brien.
A. Yeah. O'Brien. Those guys were terrific, and nice fellas too.
Q. Bob, in fairness to the nature of these tapes and the way in which they will be used (they will be used by people who are seriously investigating the world of Hollywood and how it operated, and certainly the special niche of the photographers), I repeat this on tape after tape because I think it's so vitally important: The images that you photographers took, these pictures that were sent out all over the world, from the poster art to the publicity releases--the glossies, the stills, and the portraits that appeared in books and Sunday rotogravure
sections and very special treatments, were the things that made us all identify with worlds that for most people were just fantasy worlds. Our images of the very rich, of true luxury, of Rocco of the Desert, of China, of a medieval period, of Ivanhoe--of all of these things--all came from what you people did. Because it wasn't that everybody saw the films--they didn't. You know, the reality is that it was the newspapers and these pictures which were repeated over and over again, and people had a chance to look at again and again--cut them out, put them on their walls, fantasize their dreams about them, their hopes, their wishes--Think of all the people who obviously, in their own heads, made such strong identifications with these characters that very often it influenced their entire pattern of living, or their speech patterns or their manners or their clothes. This is why all of this is so vitally important. So, I don't want you to leave us just with the fact that you know all that Mr. Bachrach taught you, because in your mind he was an excellent teacher. I would like you--if you will, please, Bob--expand this for us.

A. Well, number one, I think there were only three of us in Hollywood, and Bachrach probably taught us both. Bachrach and myself and "Feeley," who never made a straight shot. We always cocked our camera. We usually (?) . . . Something. We'd turn the camera, do something, to go for the composition and the picture, and make something interesting out of it, rather than just what we called "company front." It means standing
there, you know...We'd make it cockeyed. Cock it...If you could. You can't make a guy standing straight up cockeyed, you've got to go in and shoot it at least full figure. But, all these heads and things...There wasn't anything that I made straight.

Q. Bob, how did you start working for Bachrach.
A. Well, it just happened I guess that all of a sudden he wanted...He said "Will you finish this sitting," and I finished it. He had to do something else. And from then on he knew that I could do it. Oh, yeah, Bachrach was highly regarded, all over.

Q. It's very interesting, when you recognize that the great producers, early on, understood the impact on the public of the clothes the stars wore; of the awareness that when a star appeared and took on a special look, even though the clothes frequently had little to do with real living...I mean, miles of fur...There would be no way you could get in and out of a car, actually. Or dresses that had panels that only operated if you kept your hand on the cornice of a door; otherwise you'd be mopping the floor. But they were gorgeous clothes, and they were...For instance, both Zukor and Goldwyn, both went to great lengths to bring Princess "Aerte" from Paris, and Rene Hubert from Paris, to...And Chanel, as a matter of fact,...To do clothes, because they had a feeling that that would, of course, attract the women, who very often made the decision as to what the entertainment for the evening would be. Because we also have a tendency to forget that early motion
pictures were family oriented as opposed to anything else. It was an experience. It was like going to a museum or a sporting event. It was considered totally acceptable until it all got out of hand, as we left the Bible and moved into the fantasy worlds of Mr. DeMille's erotica. But, I think what I'm trying to say is that the costume designs, which caused a great deal of attention and were picked up all over the world, had to be photographed. And the fashion photographs...For instance, people like "Baron du Meya," people...Well, Cecil Beaton. The early photographs of Beaton. And...Oh...I mean, moving it along to all of those people on the magazines in New York who were supported by "Vogue" and "Harper's Bazaar" and were given great acclaim and became stars in their own way, because it was...The magazines had a sense that there was additional marquee value to simply say "Layout by Cecil Beaton," or photographed "by Avedon," or whatever it may be, as we moved into later periods.

The fashion photographers began to think of themselves as a special breed, because they had a social relationship to the realms of the image makers. Whereas, it seems to me, their attitude toward the Hollywood photographer, who really didn't have that same sort of social relationship, Hollywood photographers were a working group who had an enormous responsibility to do their job. For instance, I was very impressed when you spoke about taking the script home, reading the script, making a decision in your own mind as to what image you wanted to select from the plot structure of the movie, so that the public
would have an identification with what that movie was all about and what that actor or actress looked like or should look like as that particular character. This certainly never has been done by the fashion photographers, and I have also explained the difference as being that they...To be a successful one...

As a matter of fact, it's fascinating: Almost every one of them were people who moved into the social world that they were operating in, because that became part of the way in which they were able to make the person to be photographed frequently comfortable. And the reason for that, if you know the history of magazines, is that magazines, to achieve their position, started in France as a matter of fact...Paris "Vogue" broke the mold by not using professional models, but by going after the Comtesse, le Duchesse, le Baroness--the society ladies married to the richest men in Europe, the greatest lineage, the greatest nobility--and put them in the clothes and photograph them.

The result was that you had to have a photographer who could be welcomed into their homes, and could become part of their social world. That was not true in Hollywood. What, in your mind...Who were the Hollywood photographers? What were they doing?

A. I don't think that they even knew we existed. Now, we were a group of very important people at the time. But these (?)... and the big...They didn't know we existed. That was... Theatrical photography, to them, that was below their...thinking. They wouldn't lower themselves, in other words, to get
into this kind of stuff. And believe me, ours is the toughest of all. They had nothing but gravy. Compared to us.

Well, it was a never ending thing with us. And I'll tell you, it was a challenge... So much of a challenge, I hated to go home at night. I wanted to... And that's not true anymore....

(End Side 1, start Side 2)

Q. Everybody who was involved in the creative process... I mean, actors and actresses worked 12-14 hours a day. Everybody seemed to be devoted to the process of the thing that they were creating. Was this true of photographers? For instance, how did you feel about your job?

A. Well, I'll tell you, it was a challenge, so much a challenge, I hated to go home at night. I wanted to.... And that's not true anymore. But it was true with me in those days. I wanted to keep on because there was something I had to do more. I had to get... I wanted to do more that day than I had done.

Q. So this is the still. I'm looking at a still of the truly lovely Merle Oberon, with that exotic face, in a period dress--crinolined out--she's sitting on it. She has a look of deliciousness. She's pleased with the dress, very pleased with herself. But also, as always with her, there is a "don't touch" quality. That tight skin, you know, which somehow or other... It's fascinating, because you look at the skin and you think of ladies in advanced years having plastic surgery. But this was Oberon as a young girl, with that wonderfully tight skin
pulled across those cheek bones, and those oriental eyes, and you are aware that this woman enjoys the camera. And the camera feeds on her special quality. But the cameraman—in this case, of course, you, Bob Coburn—must have gotten great pleasure from taking this photograph.

Now, somewhere in the moments when we were having our cup of tea, it seems to me that you did mention there was a story....That's what I meant by saying "this is 'the' still." I...You're reticent, Bob, and you won't gossip, and you won't tell these stories, but I'm going to insist that you do that. I really want to hear the story. I was a great admirer of Miss Oberon's, and I just...I had the experience of working on the television show based upon her life, based upon the Michael Korda book, and so I have a special identification. Please, do me the favor; tell me the story.

A. Well, the girl in the studio portrait gallery was a crummy little old place that was about...It was the oldest room at the studio and just about falling down. But it was the only place that I could work and be alone. So I set it up as a portrait studio. I kept my big cameras in there and my lights. And the night we were making that picture, there was a cloud-burst outside and I had her all nice and neat and tidy and with her dress up and fluffy and sitting on some pillows and stuff, and the damn ceiling came in on us. And I dived off with my camera, and I leapt right smack on top of her!

Q. You mean the ceiling just came down.

A. Yeah. The plaster and everything came down and hit me
on the back, and my assistant ran over and got himself into it too to protect her.

Q. Who was your assistant?

A. An electrician...I forget his name...I know my assistants at Columbia because I was with them for years. But anyway...Oberon was funny, and she had a sense of humor anyway. She said, "Oh, isn't this nice and cozy, Bob. It took a week to fall in on us, to have this happen." And it saved her from getting...Because she would have gotten it on the top of her head.

Q. I keep going through endless photographs in the taping with other photographers, as well as, of course, the research we've done to establish who's who in the business, and it seems quite apparent that you must have shot more pictures of Oberon and Rita Hayworth than anyone else. And...Can we make the assumption? And I gather from the story that you just told, which is really sweet and delicious and how nice of her to have that response, but I've seen pictures of you, Bob, as a young man. She perhaps was sending a little signal in her own way? She found you attractive, I'm sure. You must have gotten along well with her.

A. She was the type of person that you never got tired of shooting. She was cooperation from the time she walked in the gallery until she walked out. She worked hard, and grasped everything I said to her. She wasn't...A lot of them were...Never paid any attention. You'd have to go over and move a hand or...
You know, they had no grace, no... I don't know, we just talked the same language, and she did everything and she was very enthusiastic every time we had a sitting. And it just went like clockwork, and so fast that it was over before we even knew it.

Q. I'm curious as to the corporate relationship. Did Sam Goldwyn know your work before he hired you?
A. Yes, he must have seen my work, I don't know. He covered his office with everything of mine, and every time somebody would come in on the set he'd tell me to bring out the shots on it, and he was always proud of the stuff that we did. He must have seen me or seen my stuff, or he wouldn't have had me. Because it wasn't a trial thing to say would you finish the picture. Because I was on a big picture when I left, and I wouldn't leave it unless... In other words, he must have known what he was getting.

Q. It's interesting to recognize that when one examines the work of the Hollywood photographer, you suddenly become aware that we really are dealing with three different categories of... Perhaps three more general categories. One, going back to your intelligent identification with the script--getting the script, spending some time reading it, analyzing the character yourself and beginning to see and feel what it is that they should project so that that image is associated with the film and stimulates the movie goer to want to go to the film. That's point one. Then there is, of course, the actual character that they are playing. In other words, where you shoot, not just the
fact that this is a story about the mysterious Orient, with Myrna Loy in some exotic costume. But where you are dealing with the real character and its relationship to the fact that it's a frightened person or it's a happy person or it's a miserable person or it's an aging person--whatever it may be. That's the second thing. It's related specifically to the film itself. And then, of course, I've seen a lot of Hollywood art, photographic art, that really must have been generic to just the business of sending out a beautiful picture of that particular star, particularly as they became more famous or they were promoted. Because when you think of, for instance, stars who were far more famous in terms of their stills, their generic stills, than any movie they ever made, and so that I would be interested in knowing how you prepared yourself, for instance, for the latter. In other words, it's quite obvious, from everything that you've said, what it is that you did to get into the character, which, of course, shows what a true professional you really are. But I am interested in knowing what the process is, in just shooting a truly beautiful woman and just making that work. Or, a star who was not truly beautiful. I mean, for instance, the Bette Davis's of the world. I mean, this is not a truly beautiful woman, but, God, there have been shots of her that have been absolutely breathtaking. How do you do that? A. Sometimes we'd get an idea just...We had about...I'd get about 20 magazine covers a month. And if we went on a picture and were selling that picture, I'd call Merle, as it happened
to be then, or I'd call Hayworth later, or somebody. And Hayworth and Merle were natural, because they were easy to sell for a cover. And I would get sketches and things from these magazines on the next cover they wanted. And I would get the people in and we'd sit down and dream up our own way of how they would.....

Q. It's interesting that when you have a direct, close, intimate relationship with somebody and can get them essentially alone to pose for you in front of a camera, brilliant things can happen between the two people. When you think of...I mean, I know you don't like George Hurrell, but when you think of, you know, that first move of his; those first photographs of Ramon Navarro and the first photographs of Norma Shearer, where there was no entourage. Navarro crept into his studio, looking for somebody who wouldn't even know who he was, really. And Shearer, who was doing it against the studio photographer's inability to make her look seductive, so she could believably play "The Divorcee..." It is fascinating to realize that as, of course, stars become commodities and important property, they are then very often demonstrate greater and greater insecurity, which means that they need greater and greater support. Or, sometimes, it may well just be in the minds of the corporate structure, where they think, where they equate that the larger the entourage, the more people that are involved in creating this image, the better it may be. We both know that that is not necessarily true. I love the way you're nodding, because it's
absolutely...You're absolutely right. But when you get that...When you get the makeup person and you get the...Somebody from the costume department flecking sleeves and changing the hemline and moving this and moving that, and all those people who are very much like the...What's the word I want...The fish that fasten themselves on to...Well, leeches or whatever...That may be too strong a word, because they do some work, and I always think of leeches as not doing anything at all, but what I was thinking of was...It seems to me that in the Hollywood scene, where there are performers, I have seen entourages get bigger and bigger. You also see it, of course, in the rock stars and the music business. Not so much on Broadway. It's interesting. People on Broadway, major stars, leave their dressing rooms by themselves. Out the backstage door. You know. Often just with a babushka around their head, walking down the street. But in Hollywood there is this need to surround yourself with these people.

Now, when you have a large group of people descending upon a gallery studio, to fuss with the person, do you find that this becomes an irritant? That this thwarts you? That it makes it difficult to take the kind of portraits that you want, or get the kind of intimacy that you wish to establish? For instance, who were the most difficult forces in those entourages?

A. Sometimes. I'd kick hairdressers out. And stars would want to...I would go in and let them mess up their hair or something and they would come in and want to comb it and I'd kick
their little fannies out.

Q. Certainly, as Merle became a bigger and bigger star, the entourage must have gotten larger. And also, when you photograph somebody over and over again, (and, after all, there are just so many directions you can take) how do you keep coming up with original and fresh and creative ideas to photograph someone like that.

A. It seemed like the more we did together, the more we wanted to do. We never got tired of these sessions. Never. It never was tiring and it never was difficult. It was a pleasure. There were a lot of sittings with people who were awkward and ... Although they had been in the business for years, they were still awkward in front of the camera. Like David Niven. He hated to get up in front of a camera. And he was ... He said it was just like going into a dentist's office. And he told me all this before we had a sitting over there. And finally, after that sitting, he said, "You know, that's the first time I've ever been comfortable." I sensed that he had that feeling, and I wanted him to get over it. So I didn't...

You know, there are so many photographers who were never sure of just what they were doing that it made it tough for the actor, really, because you don't like to sit down and have somebody just shoot away at you. You can ... A good actor can sense right away whether someone knows what they're doing and you could yourself. And that's why they didn't like a lot of them, and I consider my crew ... I picked my own crew with a fine tooth
comb. And I had about five or six guys working for me for years who I could put on anything. Of course, I had the ones who were strictly Western shooters, and one who was restricted to comedy. No, I had all that...At Columbia I had all of the stooges, and I had a guy that could shoot "The Stooges" and get along with them because he was just as crazy as "The Stooges." Those were the things that I say, you have to match the man with the picture.

Q. One of your many photographs of Merle Oberon that sort of is tattooed on my brain is that extraordinary closeup of just the face, in which the skin has a luminescent quality. I've turned it all sorts of ways, I've put it in different sorts of light. I thought originally when I looked at it there must be something happening with the lighting. But it's in the photograph itself, and one gets the...You'll be amused, Bob, that I always refer to it as the pearl. Because, you know, when you look at a pearl and you hold it in your hand, and suddenly that smooth, incredibly smooth surface, that at the same time has movement of light and shadow, that seems to play around it, and has nothing to do with anything but that pearl. It doesn't happen if you just hold your hand there. It's the pearl in the hand that makes that happen. It's almost mysterious in its own way, and sometimes a little eerie. Truly beautiful. And looking at the photograph, I was just overwhelmed by what you had captured in the face. But the skin was so smooth that I began to question whether this could possibly be real. Does anyone have skin that
smooth? After all, we are human beings and we are full of the natural forms that affect our bodies. Was that all makeup? How did you feel about makeup?

A. I didn't like makeup. I'd light her...She...You see, she had makeup poisoning and she had pock marks in her face, and she couldn't have any makeup, and the makeup poisoning made marks on her face, like smallpox.

Q. Really?

A. For years she had it, and she was right in the middle of a picture when it started. She just...The makeup just poisoned her skin, so it was difficult for the cameraman on the set. Now, I could retouch it out or I could put a gauze on, or I could tint it whiter so that it didn't show. If you flat lit her (which the cameramen started copying me then), when that happened, they...The first three or four days after she got out of the hospital with that stuff...The stuff was awful on the screen, and they fired the very famous first cameraman, and she came running up to me and she said, "Bob, will you take the picture from now on?" And I said, "Well, sure, if you want me to."

Q. As cameraman?

A. Yeah. So I said, "Fine," and then Korda had already hired another guy. This was when she came in for makeup. I'd met her a lot earlier, about 8:00 in the morning, and she ran over to Alex, and he said, "Well, we just hired a guy, it's too bad."

Q. One of the fascinating things, of course, when you
look at photographs that...I think particularly of people that you know are not great actors...They may be great stars, but they're not great actors. And every once in a while I'll look at a photograph and you get this extraordinary projection of an emotion coming through the photograph, and you think, How was that created? What stimulated that mood, in the studio itself? Was it a story that the photographer told or was it a direction--"Think about the saddest thing in your life," or "the happiest thing in your life." I know some people use other art forms, such as look at a painting and see what it means to you, or let's put on a piece of music....

A. I never used music except with Hayworth. She liked it once in a while. But music took away an actor's thinking, to me. I hated to have music on the set. Some of them bring in their records and their...And, of course, we always had a recorder and a record player and a stereo, but I was dead against it. It bothered me and it bothered her. I mean, it's bound to, I don't care who you are. If you're dancing and you're (?) and whatever it is, you're not paying attention to what the guy's doing. Is that right? And it's right. It shows in their...They're thinking...Dancing in the dark or something, and you're telling them to be something else. You talk to them and you get into...

See, you're always talking script. You're talking the story. You say "Do you remember so and so when you were at such and such a place at the time." Those things would stick in my mind and I wanted to get a good shot, and that's how we got them. Just
reminding people of certain scenes and re-acting it and maybe building from then on. I built a lot of things in my own mind. Q. It's always curious when those of us who are not photographers, and not technically totally knowledgeable, I've never been able to discern the difference, for instance, between a photographer who shoots with a conscious awareness of the aperture, moving this light this way, that way, whatever the technical things are that people do while they're doing the setup for taking a picture, as opposed to those people who take essentially a fairly straight, normal shot, and then depend upon the magicians that they become in the dark room, and the ability to play with those chemicals, and the mysterious things that are done in dark rooms by talented photographers that create wonderful effects. Which technique is yours, Bob?
A. In the beginning I did a lot of dark room work, because I didn't think anybody could do it except me. But at the end, I had a good trained crew, and I had at my disposal everything that a person would need, so that I didn't have to build up anything in the dark room. I'd use props if it was necessary, and a lot of times it was necessary.
Q. What comes through in photographs, of course, frequently, is a sense of mood, and I'm still trying to get you to define to me what exactly you would do to stimulate that mood.
A. I would be talking and telling them things, and I'd be focused all the time, I'd have it all ready to shoot. If they got into what I wanted, I'd crack the picture. Film was cheap,
as far as I was concerned. I just shot like a madman.

Q. Really. With 8" X 10"s.
A. I just shot, shot, shot, and some people would horse around and horse around and horse around to get everything ready and shoot three shots in an hour. And I'd shoot 300.
Q. My God.
A. Well, I'm exaggerating, but I...You have to shoot a lot of film to get a good one, and you can't just depend on that one shot being good. To get that expression on Hayworth, or that expression on Oberon...

Q. Of course I suppose all of us, all of our careers—all people who have worked...I have to think back as to how they move from one place to the next—I'm curious...You were at the Goldwyn studios for about five years. what caused you to leave?
A. Because the studio...He and Mary Pickford had a money situation. She took him to court. She had money in the studio, you know, so the whole...Everybody...The studio closed down, and that was when I went with Korda, and I did two or three pictures with Korda.

Q. I mentioned earlier that I had seen photographs of yours without being aware that they were photographs of yours, because nobody had given any indication of who took the photographs. And one of them that I was referring to, a specific one, when Vivien Leigh, who was a good friend of mine, did "Anna Karenina," and I remember you photographed...And some of
them were really quite fascinating. And in a strange way, they did more than capture the obvious beauty. I mean, Vivien was an extraordinarily beautiful woman. As a young girl, and way into her middle years, as a matter of fact, that beauty was just unbelievable. But I do know that she felt very good about that particular photograph, because she made a point of showing it to me. We had been talking about the nature of classic characters. Why is it that those characters we remember so well, that the great novelists of the world, that have their place in great literature, are always people who are terribly attractive to other people. And you find yourself recognizing that it has to be more than just the surface elements, and the fact that the Russian court, for example, must have been full of quite extraordinarily beautiful women. Because, to be received in court, and to be part of the entourage of the Empress and the Czar, the Czarina, etc, etc., you had to be attractive ...It's similar to being an equerry to Prince Philip. I've never seen an equerry who couldn't have made a sensational movie star. I mean, ugly and you're not selected. For, I think, fairly obvious reasons. But the difference in certain photographs is that one becomes aware that the great classic characters, as caught by photographers, as well as in their own worlds, have meaning to us because there's an inner spark; there is something that comes through beyond the surface beauty, beyond even the flash of wit or the intelligence. I mean, you have to recognize that Madame DuBarry, for instance, must have had
something very special for Louis, who had... I mean, his life was a smorgasbord; he could select anything he wanted. And when you realize that, you also realize that occasionally a photographer captures that. And I found that to be true in looking at Vivien's picture that you had taken of her in playing "Anna Karenina." There was something in that photograph, something in the eyes, that established for me who Anna was. A. I would say that she was... I knew during the picture that there was a spark there. Vivien had a spark and she didn't even know she had it. And I didn't know she had it. But it was there, and I (?) . . shot it. I shouldn't say this, I suppose, but just shooting her was like shooting a statue. An inanimate statue. She was inanimate, but she was beautiful, and it came over. Whatever it is, it came over, and she didn't have to say anything for it to come over.

Q. Bob, I hope you realize how appreciative we are of this time that you've given us, over this four day period during which we've visited this area. And I do want you to know that I am sensitive to the fact that... I'm getting a little tired, therefore I assume that perhaps you are as well. But I would appreciate it very much, just to finish this off, if you could sort of sum up your work.

A. Well, as I said, you conceive a character that the actor is playing when you read the script. Every one of them was a different character, and that gets into your thinking completely. The first thing I would always think of is what
am I going to shoot for the '24 sheet." The one that had everybody drive down the street to go to see Hayworth in "Salome." "Salome" as in that thing over there on the thing, which was on every "24 sheet" in Los Angeles. That thing there. Well, that was "Salome" to me.

Q. As a note of explanation, I am now back in Hollywood, sitting in my house, and I've asked Matthew Daniels, who spent a lot of time working with John Kobal in London on John's various books that he has created, and it was a nice opportunity. And it was a nice opportunity because I knew Matthew had met Bob Coburn, and it would be worthwhile to hear what he had to say about his sense of who Coburn was and what his position was and so forth and so on. So that we're going to sit and chat a bit about Mr. Coburn.

I found him very direct, very honest, very...almost remarkably unassuming. At the same time, he has a real appreciation of what his role was. For instance, when we got into the subject of, oh, the snobbery, for instance, of the fashion photographers, and their stardom, he was not in any way put off by that. He simply said, "Well, they had no idea that we existed. But, they indeed were forgetting that we were some of the most important forces in the 20th century culture."

A. I think he would also, in quieter, more relaxed times, probably not put on the spot in an interview, he would admit to the following, which is that one hand shook the other one. They may have looked down their noses at the Hollywood photographers, but they also copied some of their styles, as soon as
they were done. As soon as they saw what was going on with Hurrell, Coburn and Bachrach. You were seeing that in their designs. And, as he probably said, he would use magazine covers, done by "Karsche" and any of the others, in his own designs. So, it really was a complementary style. But he would be outspoken about that.

There is also a duality, a gemini like quality that I find fascinating. John Kobal was not, did not recognize it as much, but that's because John himself is a Gemini and probably was just closer to the source than I. But the way...The areas in which I really see it, with Coburn, are in the fact that he could do stills and portraits. He was known for doing that. And not just known for being somebody who could do it, but was asked to do it by the heads of the studios, by the directors, and by the stars. He was a man who could please everyone and did for a number of years. If Goldwyn wanted him on the set, to make sure that the stills got done, he knew that he was going to get the best stills for the movie.

Q. I had the feeling, in talking with the Goldwyn office, that what Goldwyn felt was that Coburn understood the script.
A. Yes.
Q. Therefore, he was concerned about how to make the movie reach the minds of the public as effectively as possible. As opposed to just doing a picture...
A. Right.
Q. ...and I got the feeling from the Goldwyn office that
what they were saying was that he was, in addition to being the photographer, he was part of the marketing skill, and that Sam Goldwyn himself recognized this and said, "Put it in Coburn's hands because we'll get what we really need."

A. Exactly. He was what every company head wants, a company man, who still had the artistry. Who's still an individual, enough to follow it up. The billboards were his first thought. The director was probably, I don't know this but from talking to him, the director was probably his second thought. How can I best work with the director? Like with Ford. Just to sit, very unassuming, right next to the camera, and do what he wants, but get what you want. The next process was to get the still as it is. Make what you see in your mind become a reality. And the third was, as he was doing all of this, to figure out, individually for each star that he was going to have to shoot a publicity shot for, how could he get that in the gallery, out of the stills. And then, as he did with Merle...I know he used to do this on every movie that Merle Oberon was on and he probably did it with Rita...For three days...The day that they wrapped a film, the next three days he spent in the gallery alone with the star, and they would shoot. So, they would still have the flavor. But now these were both for the movie, and just these generic shots. You know. So, he would have not only the quality of having shot them for a number of years, that sort of intimacy, but the intimacy of having been on the set with them for a week, two weeks, and that rekindled
again. They didn't even have six months interim to get over, they were right there, together, and they had that.

He was an innovator, and I think perhaps only now is he beginning to come into his own recognition.

Q. Oh, I think there's already evidence, in this year--1988--that there is a...You can just feel it happening...More and more references to Bob Coburn, and a whole sense, I think, of...Well, just to recap as the phone rang and I had to get up and answer it...Of...I find that more...There are more and more references to him, both in conversations, where you get into this whole discussion about early Hollywood at an AFI gathering his name came up very strongly. And then there was that recent issue of Los Angeles Magazine, the cover of his...

A. A beautiful shot of Rita on the cover.

Q. Yes. And really spoke about him and it's....It's interesting that that quality of work will not disappear. It's like talent, you know. It will out, and will eventually appear and reappear. I know that Kirk Douglas, for instance, very proudly, has a blowup of a Coburn photograph of himself, when he was young and no shirt on and...It's the way he liked to see himself at the moment.

A. Well, it was "at the moment." I think you've captured something right there. It was not only the person, as they were at the moment, but it was the character as they were at the moment. As somebody who did Rita over the years, who was the ultimate seductress and could be as satiny soft and luscious and almost...I mean, at times, although that's not the right
word, there was a virginal quality to her or something, and I
think really that's what made the allure. The shots that he
did for "Gilda" are shots of Gilda, they are not even of Rita
Hayworth. Clearly she's enjoying playing this very slutty part,
but there's one, in the dress that she did for the Mame number—
"Put the blame on Mame." And she's...There...I keep thinking
of the "S curve of 'Praxiteles' almost..." He's got rhythm
flowing through her body. You can see her undulating, because
of the dress, because of the clothes, and to really carry that
off, the fur draped on the floor, at the end of the hand you
can still see it flowing behind her. The hips moving, the legs,
the bust almost moving. And then cleverly he's got a cigarette
up above the head and the smoke moving, just to keep that move-
ment going. It really...Of the moment, as you say...It captured
a whole character, beyond the person. She's even...I'm looking
at it right now. You don't know whether she's blowing smoke
out or whistling or about to say something really nasty to
Johnny.

Q. It's true. It's true. I think he had a real understand-
ing of characters, as opposed to other photographers who didn't.
A. Well, even...Characters and the individual...That really
must be why he was so popular, because he did...He could please
the studio boss by really knowing how to sell a movie. But he
could also please the individual actor or star by knowing what
was best for them, in and out of character. You know, the shots
that he did of Cooper, and he described Cooper as an extremely
shy man who, not unlike Niven, did not really like having his photograph taken, because he...Coburn said that he needed to be in front of a moving camera. His whole appeal was in the very small little things that he did, not in (to him, it wasn't his facial beauty), and yet you see some shots that Coburn did of him, just sitting and painting his face with light, and they are extraordinary.

Q. I think one of the things one has to remember about the culture of the time is that for a man like Cooper, who was unmistakably incredibly handsome, it was not considered manly to be narcissistic...

A. True.

Q. ...to sit around and be photographed. I mean, it's fascinating to me that Jim Cagney, for instance, would spend hours putting on his own makeup. For a still photograph, because he wanted to look as effective as he could.

A. But here we have a theatrical background more than...

Q. Exactly. And so that part of Cooper's resistance to the camera is that in a deep, unconscious sense, it was inappropriate to be playing that role, and it is a wonderful commentary on Bob's skill that those brilliant photographs that he's taken of Cooper meant that Cooper was sufficiently relaxed to be able to project that quality. Which meant that he accepted Coburn as an unquestioned male dealing with another unquestioned male, and let's not confuse what we're all about here.

A. Sure. Well, add into that the fact that they came from
the same exact backgrounds—both boys out on the range, you know. A strong Dad, and probably ranch hands around. So it was a very male encrusted background, but from the open range and the midwest. I'm sure they had a lot to talk about when they were there. And Cooper seemed...I'm trying to remember the other photographers that he was the most relaxed with. They weren't the imports; they were the homespun American boys that he really identified with.

Q. Let me ask you a question.
A. Yeah. Okay.

Q. If you were summing up Coburn's contribution, what's the thing that pops into your head?
A. Oh, I think unquestionably it would be the fact that he really developed what we think of as...The use of a lot of photographs. Even the fact that he used 35mm cameras when he did. I mean, did he talk to you about that?

Q. You mean like...Almost like the candid shots where you just keep...
A. Yes. Just keep taking. The old world photographers would come and take one, two, a few very carefully composed photographs, whereas he would just...

Q. Click away.
A. Click away, but also both in small format and the big negative formats. He was using an 8" X 10" or, way ahead of his time, using a 35mm camera. He took a lot of photographs, and that to me is the birth of the mentality of the modern
photographer. Because we don't have photographers on movie sets. We don't have photographers in photographic portrait studios, who take one carefully composed picture. It's a series: We're going to build until we find that one shot, and then it will be in there somewhere. Clearly he was someone who understood that and did it and it worked. It must have worked for him.

He also (he may not have talked about this but he) was also one of the forerunners of printing color portraits. I think Frank Powolny was the first one to have one published, and to do work on an 8" X 10" color. But it was Bob Coburn who worked with color 35mm, and he developed some of the chemicals, the chemical process of developing color. He and another photographer, working for Eastman Kodak. So he was a ground breaker. He was a craftsman who was also a technician, who was also a diplomat.

Q. He is certainly a photographer of note, but he's also so classically American that you, you feel that the true American gothic has never really been quite touched. It's not necessarily the farm couple, it's these guys, who are part of the pioneer spirit of America, working on those open ranges. They were loners. They had to be comfortable with themselves and accept themselves as they were. And as evident in everything he did, there's no room for neuroticism, for instance, as you find in other photographers who are very excited and excitable characters. Not that there's anything wrong in that, because that kind of thing can
stimulate an artist. We all know that. But there's a solid quality to Bob Coburn that you have to admire. And also, I think it probably explains why he was so effectively able to work with everybody: The head of the corporation, who respected him; the beautiful star, who depended upon him. And, after all, who did Oberon turn to when...Can you imagine an aging beauty discovering that her face has been pocked by bad makeup?

A. And photographed badly afterwards. Yes.

Q. So, he is...It's been a very special privilege to know him and to have this experience. And, of course, you are dealing with time. The man is 88, so we're lucky to have this.

A. Yes.

Q. Thank you very much, Matthew.

A. Thank you.
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE
FASHION INDUSTRIES

Transcripts housed in Special Collections:

1. No photocopying without written permission from the oral author or his designee. The Director of the Library will furnish addresses; the reader must write for permissions.

2. Written permission is needed to cite or quote from a transcript for publication. The user must send the Library Director the pertinent pages of final draft; the Director will assist in obtaining the final permission. The form of citation normally used is: "The Reminiscences of ________, (dates), pages ________, in the Oral History Collection of The Fashion Institute of Technology." No fees will be charged for published use. User is asked to furnish Oral History Program with a copy of the published work.

3. In order to see PERMISSION REQUIRED or CLOSED memoirs, the reader must obtain the written permission of the oral author or his designee. Contact the Library Director for addresses. The reader writes for permissions. Written permission if obtained must be presented when the reader visits.