For the
Oral History Library
of
The Fashion Institute of Technology

Interview on

GEORGE HURRELL
Hollywood Photographer

by Robert L. Greene
Q. Tape on George Hurrell, the most famous Hollywood photographer, and certainly the one who established more firsts than anyone else, and influenced a whole pack of people who followed him. Fortunately, Mr. Hurrell (who is now in his 80s) was available to answer some questions. But also, there is in preparation a projected book, and the author of the book, Matthew Daniels, was kind enough to, after I explained the nature of FIT and the Resource Center, and the way in which this material is used—for research and for students—to agree that he'd be perfectly comfortable, as long as there'd be no commercial use of this—to let us have all the research that he's done on Mr. Hurrell. So, I think we're in for rather a great treat, and I'd just like to make a few comments before we actually start, and that is that I was struck years ago with, going to the AFI for a lecture that Hurrell gave, and one of the things that I remember he said that I've never forgotten was that painters are all individualists and they actually seldom think alike. They're rebels, while photographers, as a whole, are pretty much alike, and they think alike. But photographers became rebels too against the camera techniques. They will, like the painter, become more individual and less conventional. If you think about that you'll realize that he's got a very strong point
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there. He was the person who studied with Eugene Hutchinson, who was the kind of person who opened up all sorts of possibilities for George, and I think he makes mention of that himself.

But I think we should move right into, perhaps, the chronology of George Hurrell, and I know that, Matthew, in your research you've done all that. So, if we can just go through his chronology so we don't...Anybody who wants to make reference to that will have it...

A. Good. This is sort of list form. I mean, it's not chapter and verse as it will be in the book. But, just some basic dates for you, for point of reference.

He was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1904, so we get him at 83 now. The next is that he was a student of painting, and that was at the Chicago Art Institute and Academy. He began there in 1920, and by 1922, he had joined Eugene Hutchinson, who was a great portrait photographer. It was his...He was in the position of being an assistant to the photographer, and that was really his first brush with photography, because he really did want to be a painter, a fine arts painter.

In 1925, he moved to Laguna Beach, of all beautiful places, and that's where he first began his interest with natural light and with what light could do. It was so different from Chicago, the Western coast light and the southern exposure, so for about five years he worked there. He also became one of the coterie of the socialite-aviatrix, Florence Barnes, whose
nickname was Poncho. And Poncho was successful in arranging meetings between George and Edward Steichen. So, there were two great photographic geniuses who came together at that point. This was a very important meeting, because Poncho also introduced Hurrell to Ramon Navarro, and Ramon Navarro will play a pivotal role for George in another two years, because what happens is, Norma Shearer happens to see a photograph of Ramon Navarro...

Q. If I remember correctly (because I was aware of all this), it was Navarro who wanted to be an opera singer. And because he was the "beautiful boy," the lead in motion pictures...
A. Right....

Q. ...he didn't think they'd take him seriously, so he shopped around to see if he could find somebody whom nobody knew....
A. Yes.

Q. ...and he could, thus, take pictures in the various roles that he wanted to play, such as the Toreador, and so forth.
A. And so, the helpful Poncho put the two needies together, and up they came with the beautiful shots, actually. Enough to have Norma Shearer see them and recognize in them a photographer who could bring beauty out of the face, out of the figure, not just out of the person, you know, to really create beauty. Because that was her whole metier; to be made
Q. Well, it's interesting, because the inside story of that is really quite fascinating.

As you know, she was married to Irving Thalberg, who was head of production at MGM. And, of course, he saw her, as he did in his personal relationship to her, as this drawing room comedy woman of manners and taste and breeding. And the movies that were coming up, in the freedom of the '30s, were frequently movies of women... How do you say? Loose morals? And she wanted desperately to play one of those parts. And they couldn't see her in that sense, so she tried first (I know this to be true), she tried first with the MGM studio photographers, and they took endless pictures but somehow or other—whether they were resisting because they knew Thalberg wouldn't like it, or whatever it was—they didn't get anything that worked. She even went to a few of the local Hollywood photographers at that time, outside of the studios. Nothing worked. When she saw the Navarro pictures, she thought "This man might be able to do it."

A. Yes. And so he was found by an MGM owned connection and then was brought into MGM.

Q. I should explain that she did get the part in "The Divorcee."

A. "The Divorcee," right. And that was what really... Because she got the part based on his photographs, she made sure that he was hired. That would come up later, politically, because he was then pitted against Clarence Sinclair "Bolt."
But I'm sure that will come out in your notes.

So, between 1930 and '31 he was at MGM, and he shot the top. Because Shearer had gotten him Garbo, Crawford, Harlow, Russell—everybody. The top stars were all shot by George Hurrell. But in '32, the political structure there, with "Bull" became too intolerable...

Q. Explain who "Bull" was.
A. Clarence Sinclair "Bull" was... He is known principally today for his exclusive shots of Garbo. His portraiture of Garbo. And there's an interesting notation that Hurrell was one of the very few photographers at MGM to take Garbo's photographs while "Bull" was on salary and head of the department. Personally, I think his photographs were much more like Steichen. That whole soft glow to a very hard core subject, whether it's a shell or a human being. Very popular with Mortenson, I remember, who was another photographer of the same type. And then suddenly Hurrell came along, who was a very stark light, and it was a very contrasting picture, and I think "Bull" was a little bit threatened by that. So, Hurrell very wisely left and opened up a studio on the Sunset Strip. And the note that I found was that it was not far from the Chateau "Miermont."

Q. It was small, too.
A. Yes, very small. Yeah. So he stayed there for two years, but he didn't lose. He was sort of the Barbara Stanwyck of photographers, because by going free lance, 20th Century decided to use him, and that's when he got a chance to
photograph little Shirley Temple and some stunning sets of Tyrone Power with Loretta Young. I have some interesting stuff about that for later.

After that, Warner Brothers wanted him. So, from '35 to '38 he was shooting exclusively for Warner Brothers. And, again, the top stars at that studio. Then the war years came and he joined the army. It was the first motion picture unit based in Culver City, California, and he was the staff photographer for the Pentagon for almost four years, I think, during the duration of the war. At the end of which, he came back in '46 and this time was picked up by Columbia, whose reigning queen was Rita Hayworth. So she helped define his image of sex and sensuality—the free hair flowing and lying back, seductively, on a couch. That continued on through Claudette Colbert and Mae West, and brought him up to 1954. And there's a little known fact about Hurrell: From 1954 to '56 he was working with Walt Disney Studios, and was photographing all the cartoon characters.

Q. I didn't know that.
A. You don't. And I think he tries to downplay that, because it doesn't hold with his Joan Crawford glamor image, but it was an interesting time for him.

After which it was just...I wouldn't say it was a downhill slide, but I think if you look at it in terms of glamor, it was. He went, in the '60s, into television. He was shooting stills for "Gunsmoke" and "Wagon Trails" and all that.
He was working. He never stopped working. But it wasn't the same image.

Q. It seems to me, when I talked to him--years and years ago, I guess during this period--he said that being a photographer in the world of television, in the world of the new movies, was like being a combat photographer. That in the old days, he said, stars loved to pose. You couldn't stop Joan Crawford from posing!

A. Yes.

Q. And they all took themselves very seriously and you got 3-4-5-6 hours with them, and they brought four or five changes of wardrobe and furs and...

A. And costumes, too.

Q. ...and costumes as well. He said, "Now, none of the stars want to be photographed. They all don't like the way they look. And they also don't think it has anything to do with their acting."

A. Well, I think that's a big point. And I've heard him, in different places, make that point over and over. That, because the stills served such a major purpose in the glory days of Hollywood...I mean, they really wanted to pose for stills then because they knew that the publicity department was sending them out by the thousands. Every week a new publicity shot went out. Nowadays, we don't...They do stills from the movies, so it's not a way of selling the glamor, selling the celebrity. It's a very good point, although he does make...
it over and over.

So, that was the '60s, that lasted for almost half a decade there. In 1965 came the beginning of his renaissance, because the Museum of Modern Art chose his infamous photograph of Joan Crawford to be the cover of their catalogue for a show called "Glamor Poses," in New York, and...

Q. Why do you call it infamous?
A. It's infamous to me because so many people refer to it in "Hurrell," but also because it's the one where you don't see all of her face. It's hidden behind her arm...And... Why did I call it infamous? I think because he is always associated with Joan Crawford, one always associates Joan Crawford with that incredible face, and yet this image is just that eye peeking from behind her arm.

Q. It's also interesting however, Matthew, that part of his real contribution photographically was that he understood the function of light and shadow, so he wasn't afraid to let shadow, to let the unseen support the image as much as the image that you could see....
A. Exactly.

Q. ...which is something that certainly, well, earned direction for young photographers today.
A. Oh, absolutely.

Q. It sets all kinds of possibilities. He was really quite extraordinary.

You know that wonderful story about Dietrich and him?
A. No.
Q. I just love that story. He had been photographing Dietrich for years, and apparently one day he took a set of photographs at her request and he was free lancing at that time and he was not cheap. His photographs...I think a sitting cost $3,000, for a whole set of pictures. And she looked at the pictures and she said, "George, you are not taking pictures as good as you used to take them." And there was a moment of silence and he said, "Marlene, you have to realize I'm 15 years older." And she said, "Oh, of course. You must continue to grow and practice," never identifying with the fact that she also was 15 years older. I just love that.
A. That's wonderful.
Q. Well, of course, he's made some extraordinary statements over the years about photography. But before we get to..... Are you finished with the chronology?
A. Just to sum it up: It was based on that catalogue cover that people like Joan "Cabal" discovered him and his interest in Hollywood photographs, and a whole resurgence in Hollywood memorabilia came up and the whole period, so that he was riding back on the crest and he again became synonymous with glamor photography. And what happened was that that led to the '70s where he was photographing a whole new crop of the top stars, not on TV but in the movies. His famous "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" photograph.
Q. He's still going on.
A. Oh, absolutely.

Q. This very weekend, in Palm Springs, there is a major George Hurrell exhibit.

A. No, he doesn't stop.

Q. Well, I think we ought to get to George before he gets too tired...

George, what is it that you were trying to do with your work?

A. Something less conventional than was being done. You know. I'm thinking of the beginning, the early days. Because I came out here, actually, to be a painter. To be a fine arts painter. Because I had studied in Chicago and I came out here with an artist and studied. I went to Laguna Beach and studied with the painters down there. Primarily, I was going to be a fine artist. And the photography thing, I got into on account of the business of having to make a living. One thing led to another and finally, when this MGM thing came about, I went out there and from then on I was so busy being a photographer I had no choice in the matter. My painting, which I would do from time to time, was only Sunday afternoon type things. And you can't do it that way.

But, primarily, the photographic interests I had were based on trying to do something original and different, and trying to design my own kind of lighting and even the posing, you know. I always went at it with a degree of determination about what they should do and how they should do it.
Sometimes I would meet with opposition because a star would feel that they knew how to pose, and let them pose themselves. Well, sometimes that worked out okay too. Like with Joan Crawford, for instance. She knew how to pose. So then I was ready to compose. And sometimes high shots, sometimes low shots. But get them into unconventional poses was mainly my objective.

Q. That's terrific. George, of course, one of the questions that will be asked by anybody who's first introduced to you (and we're talking about people who are 15-16-17 years of age and have not had the sense of identification with movies at the period that you were at your height of your contribution, and you mention Crawford, and the interesting thing to me is there are youngsters who don't know who you're talking about when you mention Crawford), but the question I was going to ask is, what's the essential element of your work? In other words, what distinguishes your work?

A. Different faces, I would say, to...Say the light... That's one thing that nobody else had been doing. It was a kind of dramatic look. Dark shadows, you see, under the eyes, under the nose. But you had to be very careful about the pose and the angle of your camera shot. To get something where ...Well, where the face just wasn't hidden in shadow too much. And I used to make that work. A lot of the things I did with Crawford were done that way, and with Dorothy Lamour. Even Harlow, some of the things. Say, light on her face, and then
everything would be black. I think most of it was due to my working with shadows more. In other words, having a face...
The shadows on the face, whether they were heavy shadows or just minor shadows, I kept them strong in design so that they designed the face. Instead of flooding in with all kinds of light from the camera source, so it would make it what we call flat. Or what I call flat. I didn't like flat planes. And mainly that was it. There would sometimes be shadows under the eyes and under the chin. It would be absolutely black, no lighting into it at all.

Q. There's no question that when people are first exposed to your photographs that...And I've found this to be true in children, very young people, look at your photographs and the little girls get a little shy and boys look a little curious, and what it's all about is that your photographs ooze sex. Was this something that you did deliberately, or was it just that you are sensational, George.

A. Yes, and I had a plan for that, too, because I usually had them lying on their backs. That was a technique, to start with. If I was trying to get something with a sexy quality to it, the first thing I would do is put the gal on her back, that's all, with her hair flying. That's where that hair flying thing came about. She couldn't have her hair under her head or...You know...You had to just brush it back. And then, too, it was a question of getting her into a moody kind of look. Then it wasn't just a matter of staring at the camera.
It was eyes down, and a haviang a kind of sensuous quality to it. And that was on through....But by getting them on their backs and doing it that way...Sometimes it was on the floor. I'd have them lie down on the floor.

Q. Actually, George, when you place somebody in that position, particularly a star that's getting on a bit, if you think about it, it's kind of an automatic face lift.

Q. But then you had to shoot from a ladder. Most of the time. You were up shooting down. And then, too, you could twist it and angle it and...I don't know...You could do so many different things to make it less conventional.

Q. George, I've seen those big cameras that were used back in the early days of Hollywood, and they really are big. And when you look at your shots, and you realize that you obviously had to take some of these things from the top of ladders, from the top of stairs, fire escapes--all sorts of things--how did you do it?

A. Well, I was quite athletic in those days and so full of my own impulses that, I worked so fast...Really, I don't know how I did it now. If I had to think about it...I'd be up and down that ladder, focusing down and shoot the picture in maybe just two or three seconds.

Q. Really.

A. Really. I don't know how I did it, really. Somebody would load and unload.

Q. Yeah.
A. We always had an assistant. And the loading of those things, alone, was something that takes time. Great big rolls... And sometimes I would let the assistant focus, if there wasn't any great change. Let him check the focus on it. But I always had to set the image, because I never did it straight on. Unless it was just one of those straight one poses that had to be done that way. But most of the time it was a tilt.

Q. George, level with me. Were you a little star happy? Did you enjoy shooting the stars?

A. Yes. I enjoyed it personally, and I enjoyed working with them because they had such a wonderful feeling about being photographed. That's one of the things that doesn't prevail today. Today they don't... Stills are beneath their dignity, for some reason. I don't know why. It's because nobody promotes the still thing with them. I don't think it's just their own personal lack of interest. It's just that they've been made to think that shooting stills is beneath their dignity. You know, "What for? What are we shooting stills for? It takes so much time. Hurry up, do it, do it." And that's how come so much of it is done with a strobe. Because you shoot the strobe, pow, it's done. With other kinds of cameras, with the weight and the size and, as I say, they weren't maneuverable, because with a big camera like that, it was up to you to get the thing up and down. Sometimes the tilts wouldn't work the way you wanted them, and sometimes you couldn't get
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as high as you wanted. There were limitations to it. Today, with a small camera, you just climb a ladder and shoot from any angle, wherever you are--they're so maneuverable. It's better, really, to be able to work that way, but there isn't enough call for it being done, so nobody does it. The big film gave us the print quality that you admire in these prints, today. This is due to the big film that we worked with, see. Now, that kind of print, that you're going to make from a 35mm negative, you know, which is practically all that's used today, and not only 35mm...And most of it's shot with a motor drive. You know--ten shots or more than that a second--and you shoot this stuff with such speed that you're not thinking of the quality somewhat, because you don't have time. The whole idea is to get as many shots as possible.

Q. There's less thought.

A. Well, you might criticize the studied look of those old shots. Today, I think they could use a little studied quality in that photograph, you know, rather than that snapshot look. I think it's great to get this, you know, what they call the candid quality, but it doesn't have the dramatic values of those days.

Q. George, I don't know what your answer to this is going to be. I am only trying to communicate to you that I do think that your pictures, really, tell me all kinds of things about the people, but also something about yourself. Because I've literally been wallowing in Hurrell for the last
month. I have felt, my own kind of sensitivity, that perhaps, whether you know it or not, Garbo was the real favorite.
A. Well, let's say yes. Like that romance thing on Garbo, I always liked that sort of thing, although it wasn't following my usual technique when I did those. I did those in daylight, to get a kind of a realism quality to her, and not have to fool around with setting up lights and things. Because, already, that had been done with her, on the (?). So I was trying to think of a newer approach. And the old skylight thing. I had a skylight up there on that roof in that studio we had at MGM, and I thought well why not use that? Let one side go a little dark and if necessary, just have a light flooding in, and do a kind of thing like the artists did with their subjects. In fact, Vermeer used to work that way, with the light coming through from one side, and do it in that matter. It didn't look as theatrical, and it didn't turn out to be as dramatic, actually, but with those costumes I think it served its purpose. I would like to have done a different...Done all dramatic lighting with her, but...
Q. Of course, Garbo, to those of us who saw those movies when they first came out, and certainly to people who are re-seeing and having the experience of this living legend, and the incomparable beauty, did you...Well, I suppose you didn't select her. Did she select you? How did it come about? How did you get to photograph Garbo?
A. I really don't know. It's just that it was lined up
one day, "You're shooting Garbo next week..." You always like to be familiar with somebody, see, and she just came up to the studio, with all her clothes on her arm, too, and up two flights of stairs. Today you couldn't get a star to do that. She wouldn't walk up the stairs in the first place, and she wouldn't carry the clothes.

Q. George, I'm now in Hollywood working at two different studios, and I find it's such a territorial business, with such extraordinary...The politics are unbelievable. It's like the barnyard: The pecking order is incredible. People get emotional about parking spaces. And I guess I find it a little amusing, because it seems to me so unrealistic. But, was there a pecking order among the photographers, for instance, at MGM? I know that "Bull" couldn't have been thrilled that you were moving into his territory. But, did you feel that there was a pecking order?

A. Oh, there was...I didn't care in those days...It was just whatever happened happened and I never thought about it, and I don't know if "Bull" did, particularly. I know we weren't very friendly, because he kind of resented the studio bringing me in.

Q. George, I was a great fan of Norma Shearer's. As a matter of fact, I've always said that she and Robert Montgomery, in some ways, were my secret finishing school. And I remember the Hurrell shot from "Divorcee." Because it was all over the place. With the bushy hair and very sexy thing, and I
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remember it confused me at that time because I thought of her as this...As the ultimate lady, and I mean, so "rafinee," and there she was, looking a little like, you know, an expensive hooker. What was that all about?

A. Then, too, when I shot her, she came down to the studio, on Lafayette Park Place, a little place on that, and she liked the picture so well...Also, she got that picture she wanted to do, and Thalberg wasn't going to let her play it because he didn't think she was sexy enough, and I made her look sexy. Because I even did the leg thing with her too.

Q. It would seem to me that to get someone to look sexy, by your doing it, would really...I mean, you couldn't do it against their will, and obviously Shearer came for that specific purpose. But many of your pictures have that same quality. Can we assume that when you do that sort of thing that you have full cooperation from the subject?

A. Well, it helps. When they're cooperating with you and they will put themselves in your hands, and you're both bent on developing the same kind of thing.

Q. George, was that an erotic experience? Was that an erotic thing for you?

A. Oh, sure. What the hell. But that was another thing. Actually, you would just work so hard to...That's the nature of me too. And particularly in my younger years I was a real romantic sort of fellow. Actually, I think a lot of that came from being with these gals, so much.
Q. I would think, George, that it would be inevitable, in that kind of intimate situation, where you're dealing with hours with somebody in very sexual poses and very...Because there has to be a lot of stroking, verbally, to get them to realize and trust you and get them to feel that. Because it is a kind of lovemaking, in a way. Yes, George?

A. Well, after...As you pointed out, after a long session, where you just became so tied up that one thing led to another, you get to the point where you are almost making love to the gal.

Q. Obviously, of course, we've been talking about some of your fabulous photographs of some of the great lady stars, there are equally effective photographs that you did of the men. But the techniques were different, yes?

A. Because with men...First of all I lighted men differently, and more...More definite sublight. But I think, too, instead of saying it that way, I think it was pretty much the posing in the first place. I didn't influence them so much as just let them sit and be natural, and try to get them in a kind of natural state, rather than try to get them to pose. Just let them sit in a chair or something somewhere, where they felt natural. My first effort with a man was always to get him comfortable. And still, you know, not slouching or falling apart. But...You realize, I used to think that way, and that's how it would come about. Because you had to think. Now this guy, there are millions of women out there waiting to
see his picture, of this guy, and he's got to look like, boy, if I could just get my hands on him. And I felt all the time, even old rugged Bogey, and even shots of Robinson I'd pick—he'd have his cigar but he'd be lookin at you as if, "why don't ya come up and see me sometime?" That kind of thing.

Q. Listen, we've made so many references to Garbo. Who else of the stars did you enjoy?

A. Well, I enjoyed working with Dietrich. I don't know if I mentioned that. And Harlow and Crawford. But they were all different in such a way...It's just like when anybody asks me who was your favorite, there just can't be, because you have to feel...The cooperation thing. Now, sometimes I wouldn't get it. Now, you mentioned "Morley." I don't know. "Morley" would always have a chip on her shoulder. She was just that kind of a gal. I think that's why she wasn't such a great success as an actress, because she never went into it with her full interest.

Q. Recently I saw it on the Late, Late Show, Helen Hayes in that first "Farewell to Arms," and I found myself thinking, in some ways, she was just contrary to all of the forces that operated in Hollywood in terms of standards of beauty. Because Miss Hayes unquestionably is a fine actress, but beautiful? How did you solve that? What did you do?

A. Well, now, with her, that's where I used that soft, front light, most of the time. Because her face is kind of fuzzy and kind of childlike, and not with any character. She
just didn't have it, without lighting her in a very flattering way.

Q. Frank, you've been very quiet and very patient, and I know that you've heard all of these stories before, because you've been with George for a long time. But, somehow I sense that there's something that you're aching to say; that the eyes are beginning to bulge and there's that pulsation in your neck, that blood vessel. What is it that you want to say, Frank?

A. I remember (?) . . Gable, I wouldn't say Robert Montgomery, maybe a little bit of Gary Cooper. Men (?) were very difficult to photograph. I think Robert Taylor was the first really handsome...

A. He was one of the first, too. You're right about that. Because I remember when he came to the studio. He had just signed with MGM, and they sent him over and...God, what a handsome guy. At long last, a matinee idol instead of these rugged characters. He was an actor, and he would act, and he would propel himself somehow, and he had a look about him, but it wasn't the matinee idol type. But Taylor had it, without any effort there. In his simple way, he had a glamor look.

A. They looked for beautiful girls and they made them stars, but they went to the theatre for to get men, to act, with him. And then with Taylor they were impressed with the beautiful man. And the other one that followed him was Tyrone Power, and then Alan Ladd. Alan Ladd, did you photograph him?
A. No.

A. He was very good looking.

A. There was a cover on him, on one of the fan magazines, he looked very...(?)

Q. I suppose, when you've had a full life, and such a long, successful career as you have had, George, somewhere I suppose you yourself have come to some conclusions as to what the summation of this is. What's the key thing?

A. That you enjoy working with these people. Of course, you've covered that already. These people fascinated me because they were so automatically photo subjects; because they related to the camera, through their movie work. And, as actors, they were always presenting themselves, in a dramatic sort of way. They didn't just come on like you or I--impersonal people.

Q. I know, George, that you've made reference (and acres of stuff has been written about it) about your use of the one light, but there was that sort of strange, marvelous, almost fairy-like, gossamer like glow that seemed to hit up from the bottom of the face. What was that all about?

A. The single light. That's all that was on there, was just that light. Now, there's just a little reflection from here. And another thing too, is you could work it to better advantage if you had some light material that would reflect on the face a little bit, just so it wouldn't go completely black. And everybody would worry about that except me. You could only see on side of the face.
Q. You have to realize that George Hurrell is 83 years of age, and we don't want to tire him out. So that we did have a chance to talk without the tape machine being on, because he tapes with a certain amount of tension. He's concerned that his voice is strong enough—and of course, it is, it's wonderful—but in talking with him, I raised the question . . . Because he had two careers, he had a career working for studios, but he also had a career as a free lance photography, in which he had non-studio star types, but he had just people who wanted to be photographed—corporate types and dowagers and people's mothers for Mother's Day—all sorts of things of that nature. And, he made a very telling point, that I made a note about; that in movie work, the studios decided on what kind of a personality the sitter was to have. And, therefore, the subject—the person being photographed—didn't have anything to say about whether she was going to be good and clean cut and 100% apple pie, all-American...What's her name? Doris Day sort of a lass. Or, a glamor girl or a heavy. And however the opposite is, the result is that Hurrell, knew exactly what kind of photograph he was to take, and produce. And he could proceed in a very direct fashion, because this was a real skill for him. This was the skilled technologist; the technician, who knew exactly what he had to do. You told him what image you wanted and he could produce that image. And he never had to worry about what the sitter herself was thinking about the product. That's a very different thing
than when you have most private customers, who have to be pleased. And it's kind of interesting, because he told me a wonderful quote about when James McNeil Whistler, the great wit and painter, and Whistler said that a portrait is a picture with something wrong with the mouth. I loved that.

Of course, you see, you have to recognize that he made some reference to publicity stills. And that's what most of that portraiture was all about. We have a tendency to think that, today, these famous, glamorous sittings that... The Ramon Navarro picture was sold for, I think it was $9,900, at a gallery auction. That's a lot of money to pay for a photograph. And I think that Hurrell started that whole sense that photographs were worth buying and investing in in the same way that other levels and other types of art were worth buying and investing in.

It's interesting that the studio system... There were of course... In the early days, they all had real photographic studios and they had a half a dozen photographers who were snapping away. Because the number of pictures that were taken weekly was extraordinary. I mean, you were responsible for 150 sittings in one week. I think it really became somewhat of a chore for most photographers. But it's also interesting that stars would make up their own minds. They knew the image they wished to project. For instance, you mentioned Loretta Young at some earlier point. And Loretta Young, although she was under contract to Fox at that time--and there were perfectly good
photographers there—but she would pay, herself, to go to Hurrell, to go to his studio. And when asked about why, "Why would you do that?" She said, "Well, I liked the way he photographed me. It was the way he made you look so glamorous. And your skin looked so shiny. I know the secret with him. He was the first man who said he didn't want any makeup. What you used to do is put a little oil on your face, and that was all. You could wear eye makeup if you wanted to, but no greasepaint, no pan—no panstick or pancake—and it always looked like you could touch it. It looked like skin. It didn't look like chalk."
And it's interesting...Of course she makes references to her double career. We all remember her for her television series, as she swirled through the door, week after week....
A. In pancake and panstick...
Q. ...and lace. Lots of lace. Anyway, she did comment that when she started on, her television series she had the most awful time for the first two or three years, to get the make-up off the men. And if she played a nun, or something like that, obviously she refused to wear any makeup. And she said they would die when she walked on the set and said, "This is the way I'm going to look." And, of course, it was marvelous.
A. And that was based on Hurrell.
Q. And Hurrell had done all of that for her.
A. So, look at the far reaching consequences...I mean, it was more than just in the studio. It changed the face of an actress in a whole series. And because...You know...Just to
continue on with her...Because she, of all actresses, was so tied up with the way her character looked. She was always forever...Loretta Young...I've heard her comment that she would go and build her character around her costume. So, for her to be so influenced by this fact of whether you do or do not wear makeup, by one photographer. And also because she is so identified with being the glamor clothes horse of Hollywood...

Q. Yeah. Well, you know, I think the thing you have to realize...And I think stars like Shearer and Loretta Young, who made a career out of themselves— they were more than just people who went to perform; it's like Crawford. I mean, Crawford invented herself. You talk about "the night they invented champagne." Think of all those four decades where she continued to invent Crawford. But...It's...You know, when you look....Oh, when you look at those star shots, they demonstrate the potency of the art. And the potency of popular arts. Because what you really do is you make a stereotype become a fact. It's really why so many people fight so desperately to control the image-making process in recent years. If you can control the image... Because the truth of the matter is, when all the stars were getting older—when Gable was getting older, all of them—we continued to think of them in those first images of the early photographs presented to us.

There have been various descriptions of Hurrell's techniques. I've always felt that his technique...That is stuff
is really quite manneristic. You know, like "Brogzino." Any portrait of that particular period. Because the photographs have the feeling of an intimate collaboration, in which Hurrell carefully works his forms and dramaics--suppressing certain areas in shadow, dramatically highlighting others--and it's interesting, because if you know "Halzman's" work. He did acres of things for "Life" Magazine and "Vogue" magazine...But the contrast between the two of them...Because I saw, at the International Center for Photography a setup in which both of their photographs were being shown...And it really brought to mind...There is a distinction between two kinds of stereotypes. In the case of "Halzman" I felt it was the cliche'. In the case of Hurrell, I felt it was the arche-type. (End Side 1; start Side 2)

Q. The sine qua non of photographs was the crucial force by which the features of the sitter were literally shaped into existence. I mean, if you think of Crawford's face, Dietrich's face as photographed by Hurrell--he's like a sculptor using light to cut away, to hide, to build up.

A. Well, it was not just the features...Those...But also, I'm thinking of Crawford...There's a very famous photograph of her with this idea of not wearing the makeup, all of her freckles came out. And it was the one thing that, through her life, in every area....

Q. She tried to hide.

A. ...she tried to hide. And this is a very beautiful,
vulnerable photograph of Crawford, with very, very little eye makeup on, and these little freckles, that give her a very small, little girl quality. She's almost biting her finger which adds to the Shirley Temple, and yet it's got that brooding sexuality that Crawford had. There's also, on the bone structure, there's also an image that he shot of Ethel Barrymore in the Barrymore profile, and he's gone to the point even of putting highlighting light on her nose—that incredible nose—and this wasn't a Norma Shearer remake or a Garbo nose—this was the behemoth of a Barrymore nose. And yet it was her. It's what made it. And he was not afraid to go in and really give highlight to it. So the lighting on it is extraordinary.

Q. He told me that that shooting took place in the morning and she walked in and said, "I have to have my breakfast before I sit down," and her breakfast was a double Scotch.

But, you know, when you think about...Going back to the use of light...Because when you go on a quest for an image that conveys seemingly....The seemingly effortless perfection. I mean, I always think of Louise Brooks's great line about Dietrich: "Oh, Dietrich is a concoction." Yes, but it all comes across as though it's just there. You know. And even though we are aware that she dieted and she did all of these things (as did most of the stars), but there is a seemingly effortless perfection. The result is that...You talk about poetic license or dramatic license...There's no illusionistic trickery that's
out of bounds in terms of the star photographer. Because... Whether they carefully paint the face with makeup or they ...Which is designed to enhance the manipulation of light... Or to direct dark room manipulation of the negative itself. If everything else fails. And Hurrell is not above doing any of that. I mean, he did all of the things. Because I think he had a great sense that what the photograph should end up establishing was the core and the essence of this particular kind of beauty. It's one of the reasons why I think the Shirley Temple pictures were...You know...Here was this little girl. And you couldn't apply the usual glamor techniques, and so forth and so on...But he got to the essence of the charm of that child. The fact that she had her hand on practically all the hearts in America. Anybody she didn't have was a Scrooge. Because you have been more involved in doing research on Hurrell than anybody probably in the last 10 years, I would be interested in your...I'm going to hand you a group of stills, and you tell me how you feel about them. They're all Hurrells of course.

A. Well, each one takes on its own life, it's own characteristic, and that's what's amazing. And when you get down to the substance of it, there are only two elements: light and sex. Light and sex. And I'm looking now at the ones of Garbo from "Romance" in 1930, and I think these are the ones he commented on in your interview, about using the skylight.

What gets me about this one photograph of Garabo is that it
looks like it's an old family heirloom. It doesn't look like a studio still. It looks like... In fact, I can think of a photograph of my great-grandmother, taken in very similar light. And yet, nobody's great-grandmother looks like that. There is this classic, gorgeous beauty, with something going on beneath those eyes, and all of your attention is directed there because of the light. And yet, the light is very natural. It's amazing how he got it to come together.

The Norma Shearer--this other image that you have. The first one that he did with her is exquisite in its own simplicity. It's just the face. And then, suddenly, the images become all of her trappings, and you get the sense that he realized about her that she wasn't secure just with her own self. And that first image of her face is brilliant, because it's all face. Now, suddenly, it's about strapless gowns and floating gardenias and the costume for "The Barrett's of Wimpole Street." And yet he gave the subject what she wanted.

Q. He also had a problem with her. You know, Norma Shearer had a strabismus, which is one eye that suddenly slips out of focus and moves to the side. And sometimes you can see it...

A. Right.

Q. But it was wonderful that he knew how to handle her. Because she was the largest stockholder at MGM. Power. And not above using it.

A. Oh, absolutely. And not too bad connected, marriage wise.
Q. Yes.
A. Well, I mean, even this image of her here, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Very dextrously handled. Again, based on using the light. One side of her face is just glowing with light, while the other side (and particularly the eye, the lazy eye) is very dark and shadowed. So it looks very even and is very moody. It fits with the character, and yet it solves his problem. Here again, a picture...This was just a publicity shot from '34. But again, the face is bathed in light on one side and the lazy eye is in shadow. So he's completely taken care of that.

Q. Well, I love...It seems to me that somewhere in my notes...Yeah...If you go back, and..I was going through notes and talking about the famous bushy photograph of Norma Shearer. And what he really said was that she wasn't that type. As a matter of fact, she didn't have any of that kind of sexuality. In fact, it was George's idea to get her hair bushy. She never wore it that way. First of all, she had such a high forehead. She always looked too intellectual for the kinds of roles she wanted to play. But by pulling the hair down and getting the head down, and getting some mood feeling into her....

For instance, George always played records and he always had a phonograph in the studio, and he played records. And he would select the moody music as he began to understand what they responded to and what they liked. And he also would jump around a lot, and he would act the ape and the clown and
anything to get them to smile, anything to get them to laugh, even to get them to reject what he was doing, so he'd get a stirring look that would come out as being sophisticated and dignified.

You know, it took me a while to realize that... Remember the movie that was the famous one with the yellow Rolls Royce? With Ingrid Bergman? Anyway... Did you know that Norma Shearer, all the years in which she was queen of the Mgm studio, had a yellow Rolls Royce?
A. No, I never did.
Q. Yes. And as a matter of fact, when she went to her first visit to George, she arrived with a total entourage. She never traveled alone. With a total entourage. And, of course, the thing that I don't think he mentioned in his talking with us, about another thing that happened because of Shearer...

Now, her power was enormous, because of the stock that she held and the fact that she was married to the head of production, and she made a simple little comment one day. It had to do with the "Barretts of Wimple Street," and she said, "Oh, the set is so lovely. So appropriate for the costumes. It would be wonderful if we didn't have to shoot in the studio, if we could shoot on the set." Well, this had always been against the union rules, and it was just not done, because it would interfere with the shooting of the movie, or with the set designers and the set decorators would get very disturbed
and very upset because of that. But nobody dared cross Miss Shearer, so George Hurrell was the first one to be able to go to a set and photograph it. And, of course, it's true, when you are surrounded with the appropriate background and all the (?) and everything else, even the mood of the sitter comes more into the mood than if they were sitting in a studio, no matter how closely related it was to the actual studio.

A. Of course.

Q. Where they were shooting. And there were some extraordinary stories about the various problems that that created.

For instance, Shearer one day said to him, "Oh, I just love the clothes that I'm wearing, that Adrian has done for me. And I also love the extravagance of my drawing room for this particular film." Well, what she didn't realize was that the set had been struck, and she made arrangements for George to come down and shoot her the next morning. Well. Do you know that they rebuilt the set, overnight. Do you know what that must have cost? To say nothing of the energy and everything else that was used. And she looked around and she said, "Oops. Well thank you."

A. And they did it.

Q. And they photographed it.

Of course, there's so many things that you feel about the Hurrell photographs. They're...In some ways they seem dated. In some ways. In other ways, I find that they are like magical
portraits. When you see....When you go in to John "Cabal's" home in New York, for instance, where he has some of the great original prints of the stars, it's just breath takingly beautiful. You know...There are shots of Hepburn and shots of Garbo and shots of people that you look at and you think, "Who is that?" You know. And then you have to get to the essence of it...They're not all Hurrell, but many of them are. But the one thing I've always felt, that still comes through in the most active way is the most dynamic force of all of our lives, and that's sex.

A. It's true. And you can see it all the way through his career. And it changes. The sex that he found in...Or at least that he represents in his photographs, represent the tone of the time. I'm thinking in particular of a photograph of Clark Gable and Joan Crawford, during the filming of "Love on the Run" in 1936. And, of course, they were having love on the run, but he was able to capture all of it in this very, very free flowing image of the two them. Gable's got his hands wrapped securely around her waist, and the fan machine is blowing as if they're on the prow of a ship, blowing, and Gable has got this very dark, brooding look. And she looks as if she's just had one night of love. You know. And is singing to the gods in praise of what's been going on; innocent, and yet unmistakable about what it is. There's the deep brooding sexuality of Talullah Bankhead, that he did also in 1936. Very intimate, because it's a woman in her boudoir, looking
in the mirror. And again, just the single light from overheard. Very dark, very late at night. She's in a peignoir, so it's intimate sex. Still a lovely naivete.

Now, two years later, he shot Anna May Wong, and it's a photograph that's startling, even in 1987, for the directness of the light--straight overhead--picks up only the upper part of her face. Very Oriental, makes it even more pronounced Oriental. And then the focus of the light is on her left breast, which has part of her left nipple exposed.

Q. That picture has always fascinated me, because it looks very much like primitive sculpture.
A. Yes. Exactly. And that is...Right next to it you see a picture of Anna May Wong made up for the movies, and it's a little China girl made up in Kabuki makeup. It has nothing to do with this image. It is very primitive.

Q. It's also fascinating, what you just said. Because the image of the movie photograph is totally replaceable. It's a pretty China girl. But the image of the Hurrell strong use of light and shadow is totally irreplaceable.
A. Totally. And knowing...I mean, having that face, you would not, from the pretty China girl in the publicity still from the movie, necessarily notice those cheekbones and the way the light would fall on her eyes. But clearly, in this other photograph, you have nothing but cheekbones and eyelids--very broad eyes. And, of course, as I say, the focus of the light is on the breast. It isn't fully exposed, but it's
enough and just a hint of the nipple showing, to make it a very erotic photograph.

Q. Well, of course, the thing that you recognize when you look...You know, these are vintage portraits...And you look at them and, of course, you recognize you're not looking at people who eat or sleep or catch colds or chew their fingernails. These are porcelain icons. But the wonderful thing is that Hurrell loved them.

A. Yes, he really did. But there's even more. I mean, Hurrell runs the gamut of sexuality. There was this intimate, naive sexuality. There was also the interim sexuality of Mae West, who was...Who never was blatant. She was never nude. She never brought any of those aspects of sexuality. She always talked about it, she always rotated about it, it was always insinuated in her walk, in her talk, in her manner, and he photographed her at several points in her very long life and career.

Q. Do you know that he also photographed her in the nude?

A. That's right.

Q. And the interesting thing is that he said that in the nude, she was the most magnificent piece of sculpture. And she had extraordinary skin (well, we always knew that in terms of the film itself), but...Like the Queen of England...That kind of marvelous unblemished, untouched skin...But, of course, I said, "You could have made a fortune selling those pictures," and he said, "She claimed the negatives." See. She
George Hurell

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was the shrewdest business woman.

A. Oh, of course.

Q. She actually... Also, you know, Hurell is in quite a good position financially... But part of it was Mae West's advice. She advised him to get into real estate. Because she had made millions in property in this town.

A. And probably now... How many years after her death? Still is. With all of her holdings. But, then, the other aspect of that... Beyond Mae West... If we can go beyond Mae West, there is Jane Russell. And one thing... Maybe with the Disney forgotten is the fact that Hurell took the infamous straw shots-- Jane Russell in the hay-- for "The Outlaw." And here we just have cheap, tawdry sex. No question about it. No intimacy, no naivete... It's just Jane Mansfield barely keeping her breasts...

Q. Jane Russell.

A. Excuse me. Well, they're interchangeable... Just laid out there... I don't know. What is your feeling? To me, there's nothing striking about the lighting in it.

Q. No, I think he recognized a simple truth in terms of what he was doing. Howard Hughes literally wanted her to be treated as a breast girl.

A. Sure.

Q. His attitude was, I mean, you know... The running gag at that time was there were two very good reasons Jane Russell is a star. I mean, she was internationally known before the movie was ever released.
A. It's true.
Q. It was two years before they did the Hurrell pictures, and he was the one that... In the movie, there's no stack of hay. I hope you realize that.
A. Yes.
Q. The scene never occurs. He just... You know... Recognized that...
A. Well, here we have the support of your commentary about the photograph of the person vs. the photograph of the character in the film. This is the tawdry girl in the haystack, and that's what we see. There's another image that Hurrell did of Jane Russell, and here we have that goddess who does not have bodily functions, because the lighting is incredible, and draws out the parts of her face that I'm sure even she didn't know she had.
Q. I asked him one time, what's glamor to you? Because the word glamor is always applied to his photographs. And he said, "Well, you know, glamor to me was nothing more than just an excuse to take sexy pictures." In other words, his interpretation was entirely one of saying "Come on, we're gonna make some sexy pictures." The shimmery fabrics that they would wear, that would highlight their body shape. I mean, think of the Harlow pictures, which are extraordinary. Then he told me that one of his great finds was that he latched onto a big white bear rug, and he remembered that when he was a child, traveling photographers used to take baby pictures. They carried the
bear rug into the house and then you'd put the little baby on the bear rug, and they were photographed. And he recognized that, well, if you can get anyone to lie down on that rug, and every once in a while he'd just get carried away and say, "Lie down."

A. Well, there is a thing about Harlow, too. She made her whole career based on the little girl-childlike vamp who had the woman's sexuality but the child's aura. And I'm thinking of the lighting. He talks about bathing the face in shadows. He bathed that body in shadows. This is, I'm sure, one of those where she... There's the famous story of Harlow asking her assistant to go get ice cubes before the shoot began so she could ice her nipples. And this is definitely one of those images. She wearing a very tight and slinky satin gown. There is not much that the shadows do not reveal about her face or her body. And again, you, feel that not only from the subject, but you get that from the photographer.

Q. It's interesting, because I asked him about this thing that we talked about before. The image of pure perfection. And he started to laugh and he said that he had to retouch everything, because the rules were very strong, and the rules were that there could not be a freckle, or a pimple, or a wart or a blemish, or anything. And even the men. If they had a little crow's feet. A little crow's feet! It had to be removed. And he said every negative was loaded with lead on both sides. It was expected in those days. And they'd get the proof back
and one of the people that he had a great deal of trouble retouching was Rosalind Russell.
A. Really?
Q. And...Because she would retouch and retouch and retouch and maybe have six different sets of proofs, you know... Well, you never retouched them, enough, obviously, to change their features...Now, with actresses, if the light or something...Maybe an eye looks small on one side, or maybe there was too much shadow, they didn't like a certain thing about that...He'd work on it.

I asked him if he was ever called in by a studio head and informed, for instance, that they did have plans to build somebody as a star, and asked him if he could give me a prime example of this. And what he talked about was fascinating, a gal that I enjoyed thoroughly in films and felt very sad when she died of cancer, and that was Ann Sheridan. And Norma Shearer, in the way in which he changed the direction of her career. And that's where, as he said, he felt the right to change the look. Ordinarily he would not have the power to do that. And, you know, working for a studio, there were rules and regulations and he could easily be...

And he would get carried away sometimes, out of his, you know, whole thing. He would get a little impatient, and he'd get called in by Harry Cohn when he was at Columbia, saying, "George, you're getting too big for your boots. I got a complaint from a star." Because he would order them around a
George Hurrell

bit.

A. Well, that went for the men and the women. As you say, especially with the retouching, and that sexuality was not non-existent in the men. I mean, there are images of Johnny Weissmuller that are god-like, as though they are... I mean, it is beyond statuary. It is some netherworld, between human and marble. And, again, you can see the oil on the skin and you know that's what it is, but it doesn't look like it.

Q. Well, it's always fascinating to recognize it, and, of course, he had--Hurrell had--the fortunate position of being able to legitimately photograph Johnny Weissmuller practically nude, you see...

A. Uh huh. And did.

Q. As he was a swimmer. And, of course, the role that he played was Tarzan. And in the photographs, for instance, he even removed the lower loin cloth--jock strap actually--to get, in the still photograph, the sense of real sensuality. And it comes through, of course.

A. And, it does. Again, he uses the light to subtly draw your attention there. There are these wonderful shadows on the upper part of the body, and yet the light is quite definite in showing that the loin cloth is with no visible means of support, as it were. But also, I know that Weissmuller was popular...The photographs of Weissmuller that he did, as Tarzan, were, thanks to Norma Shearer--a point that you made earlier; the fact that she broke all the rules about photographing
on the set. That is directly responsible for his being able to be photographed there. In fact, the production manager on one of the Tarzan films said, "What? Tarzan being filmed in the studio?" He couldn't understand that.

Q. When you think about it, it's a very funny idea. "Excuse me. Me Jane, me go. Me sit still."

A. I'm wondering about.. Now we can get into the psychology of the stars. If you were not necessarily the A-star on your lot, but were the B, and you knew that Garbo and Shearer and Crawford were going to be photographed by Hurrell, I can imagine there must have been some insistence on their up and coming stars to go and be photographed by the stars' photographers. And so that must have carried over into the style. If Jean Harlow was going to be photographed all free and breezy, with her hair and her underthings, were some of the other, less lovely stars going to ask the same thing? Someone like Constance Bennett, whose hair was never out of place, trying to get her hair windblown, must have looked...

Q. Well, of course, Bennett had that extraordinary quality known as style. Moreso than most people, most of the stars. And because in her own way she was a class act and it came through...

A. True.

Q. Always. But, you know, going back to his role in recent years, as the grand seigneur of Hollywood portrait photographers, during that extraordinary era, but Richard
Avedon, who himself is no mean photographer, and certainly has a remarkable position today. I keep thinking of Dick as being a young man, forgetting that we first met something like 40 years ago. And you know, you have to think of Hurrell as being on a par with any painter or sculptor, and it's kind of wonderful. You know. Hurrell's work is hung in museums, along with Steichen and "Manree" and Cecil Beaton and Avedon. Now Avedon receives $1,500 or more for each photograph that he takes, and in a way the Hurrell portraits seem astonishingly reasonable, because most of them only cost about $600, and $6,000 for a portfolio of ten.

It was also fascinating that Bette Davis, for instance, when ordered by the studio to go to Hurrell for a portrait, at first refused, saying, "I don't want to be prettied up. I don't want to be made into a glamor girl. I want to be an actress. I am an actress and I wish to be photographed that way." And, of course, she was ordered to go and she went, and after the first sitting she became his greatest fan. They remained friends all of their lives, you know. Which is a tribute, I think, also, to his sensitivity and his ability to understand the kind of client that he is dealing with. He said Davis always liked to kid around and Rita Hayworth would do anything that you asked her to do. She was like, you know, that same relationship she had with her father, who directed her career--Mr. Cansino, the dancing Cansinos--and she was, you know, the dutiful daughter. And Garbo, he said, was curiously happy all
the time. It's so funny when you think about it, because here's a man who had this close relationship to these people, all of whom to all of us are these legendary forces that sort of float around in our heads.

A. Well...Speaking of happiness...I know that he had at one time commented on the fact that because of his roots, because he came from a painting background, because the first time he used a camera was for his painting, to get an image to paint from...That doing portrait work in the studio every week, he felt he was in a rut, and that's why he always experimented. That's why he was good about change. And...Just think about some of the numbers...I was able to locate the fact...We talked about how many stills had to go out. The studio expected 25 approved shots every week. So, to get that, you had to have 50 plates that they could approve from. Which meant that the photographer--or Hurrell--decided that he had to shoot 100. And the next week, you had to do exactly the same thing over again. And they all had to be original, because each one had to grab the fancy of the public in a way that the ones last week hadn't. So, yes, I can how you would get in a rut. But...

Q. Well, I think that at the height of his success at MGM, for instance, he left, because I think it became a chore. And once it becomes a chore, you stop enjoying...

A. And then you're not expressing the way...

Q. Then you're not creative. But he's not above a little
dish and gossip, you know. I asked him about Gary Cooper, and he said, "Well, actually, Gary Cooper was very quiet and very shy. The love of his life was his open topped roadster. And he was absolutely crazy about Lupe Velez." Remember lupe Velez?

A. Uh huh.

Q. And, of course, she in turn was desperately in love with Johnny Weissmuller. And then he quietly leaned forward and said, "But Lupe always said, "But believe me, there never--never--was a lover better or that could match Gary."

Now, Lupe (this is the image he gave me of her), I said, "Well, when you think of Lupe Velez, what is the image?" And he said, "Well, it's very simple. She liked to lay naked in bed with a pet white rat running under the bed linen, that every so often would pop up from under the sheet," and that's an image. I asked him about Dietrich, and he said, he said, "Well, Dietrich had to have a mirror. Whenever we photographed. Not a hand mirror, mind you, but a full length one to see her body. She had a mirror on every movie set." And I loved what he said about Tyrone Power.

A. What was that?

Q. "Tyrone Power should have been British, he had such good manners." He said he was the most beautiful face, artistically chiseled--long eyelashes, black eyebrows and hair. He never used makeup. Hepburn was all spunk and spirit, the brainiest of all the actresses, trying to get you unglued with her
knowledge about everything. Whereas Tracy was stolid and steady and just playing the role. And Mae West. I asked him if he had any idea how many negligees Mae had. One of those questions you grow out. And he said, "Well, she had," to his knowledge, "over 50 negligees at Paramount--pink, black, flesh colored, transparent." And once she dropped her negligee on the floor (that's what I was referring to before) and asked him to photograph her in the buff. He took the pictures and then she said, "All the film please, George. All of it." And he tried to hide one negative. Forget it. She knew exactly how many times that thing had clicked. And good for her. I wonder if...She owned them...I wonder if they will show up.

A. Well, the other one he spoke about was Joan Crawford and he had quite an insight into her, because...Of course he loved working with her because she posed so easily, but he also said of her, as in her life, that practically everything she did was a picture.

Q. Oh, that's interesting.

A. Yes. The ultimate poser.

Q. Yeah...Yeah...

A. Yes. And I suppose from some of the things we've heard recently, that would be true.

Q. And the ultimate poseur.

A. You know, there's an interesting twist and irony in the length of his career. It just occurred to me. He photographed, back in the '30s, the very young, the very new Clark Gable. He
photographed Carole Lombard at her height, and at the height of her beauty. And then years and years and years later, he was photographing Jill Clayburgh and James Brolin, who were portraying Gable and Lombard.

Q. Of course, of course. Or, the fact that he photographed Mae West when she did "She Done Him Wrong," and then photographed her when she did "Myra Breckinridge." A span of what, 40 years? And, of course, the fact that people would...

Well, the wonderful thing, also, is that at 83, he's still working. And it's unheard of.

A. I mean, at one time he did say he wanted to slow down a little bit, but I think that was when he was 76. So...

Q. The set that they tore down and had to build up again...I just remembered what it was...It was that wonderful set...Gibbons' penthouse in "Strange Interlude." I mean, you'd kill to live in that penthouse right now!

A. The money. The money that was flowing around anyway, that people were willing to spend. I know that Hurrell was employed by Sam Goldwyn, who was going to make a star out of Anna Sten. And, of course...This gets back to the psychology that I was talking about before. Just because the big stars did good photographs, could they do it for the B stars. And Goldwyn pumped millions into Anna Sten and had her photographed by Hurrell and the others, and nothing could happen. It just wasn't there.

Q. Well, Sten...He wanted her to replace Garbo, obviously,
and he was stuck with it because of Louis B. Mayer. I mean, he was angry that MGM had Garbo and...
A. ...he didn't.
Q. He didn't have her.
A. Well, he paints the image of Goldwyn with about 60 or 70 of the oversized prints that they did the portraits with. And they did 60 or 70 of Anna, and he would spread them out on the floor of his office and he would walk around, sometimes on them even, trying to figure out which one was going to make her a star. And, of course, I guess he never found it.
Q. Well, you know, I asked him one time how he...Did he get fired from MGM, or what happened? And he told me the truth, he said what happened was (and I just happen to know this lady--Maggie Ettinger--Maggie Ettinger was a very solid free lance press agent. Really quite good, as a matter of fact. Very nice, very intelligent, very bright. She was a relative of Louella Parsons, as a matter of fact, which gave her an immediate in with everybody.) And Maggie had Joan Bennett as a client, and she asked Hurrell to take a glamorous photograph of Joan, and she was a friend so he did it. And Howard Strickling, who was the head of press in those days, at MGM, found out about it and felt that that was free lance work, and he wasn't allowed to do that, so they canned him.
A. He did...Well, at least he learned though. He did learn from each...That was the thing about Crawford. He may
have loved her because she was a poseur, but he had to learn
the hard way, because the first time she was in there, you
know, she practically had him fired at that point because he
tried to tell her where and how to pose. And she said, "No,
no, no, Mr. Hurrell. I decide." And they then of course became
good workers together. She was...Well, he was another one.
Over the years...He worked with Crawford even up to the end.
I know he mentioned some little TV movie she did at Universal,
and he was there, and he said it was all coming apart at
that point. It wasn't as much fun, because she was drinking
a great deal. I know the way he described it was...How as it
he said? She used to drink 100% vodka. Not the regular stuff.
But the stuff that's got hit to it. He used to say, "Boom!"
Just pour it over the ice. Nothing in it. Just booze over the
ice. She'd come in and have one of those, two of those in
the morning, and then all of a sudden she'd start "gooing"
over him. "Oh, George?!" And he didn't seem to like that at
all.

Q. I asked him about Garbo's face. You know, we think
of Garbo as being the greatest screen beauty, and I tell you,
he starts to talk about her and you realize that, he may not
know it, but he really loves that woman.
A. Oh, yes.

Q. And he describes...He said she was the most photo-
genic human being that he had ever met. That there wasn't an
angle, there wasn't any place, there wasn't...No matter; up,
down, light, lit, side--it didn't make any difference. The beauty always came through.

When he went into free lance, I asked him...Because he took all those society pictures and he became the darling of all those ladies...

A. Eleanor Roosevelt.

Q. Well, it's also...I think it's most all the ladies that the streets are named after here. The "Dohaneys" and the Chandlers and...All those wonderful women. Anyway, I asked him whether those people, like the corporate artists of old, who would in their own way idealize the subject, and he said that he had his own techniques. He discovered of course that the one thing they didn't want to see, ever, was a wrinkle. So you just had to absolutely use his entire key light on the face and a single spot light...It was low...He used about a 250 watt globe. And so close to the camera that...You put it as close to the lens as you could get it, and that would be the light for the face, and there wouldn't be any shadow, except for the definite line that the spotlight would make. He said he could have used a diffused light completely, but then there wouldn't have been any definition, just too flat. And with that spot and a little key, he could turn out and iron practically everything. Much moreso than any makeup artist ever did.

A. Well, he took special pains to add wrinkles to Bette Davis in "The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex," because she was trying to appear 60, and she was a very beautiful
actress in her own way, the way youth can be. So there he played the light directly on her and took out all of the filters and shot her dead on. I know that he claimed that that was the hardest shooting that he had with Bette Davis, because of the rigors required for the shot. They both worked together, and he did make a point of saying that together, to develop the character of this queen, she... Apparently he made the note that she had lost quite a bit of weight while making the film because of the stress she was putting herself through, but also because of the way the costumes... The weight of the costumes. She would sweat underneath it. So they began shooting at one weight. By the time they finished doing the shots on the film, she was a completely different weight, and he had to use the light... Again using the light... to counteract the change in her physical appearance. But it was on one of those... One day when he was shooting on the set (of course, thank you Norma Shearer, they had still photographers on the set), he had gotten his lights set up and had all the principal actors there and they were all in makeup and costumes and they were all standing around and he was talking to them, how he was going to have them arranged and what he was going to do, and Jack Warner walked on the set and sort of took a look around and saw that there was an audience and walked straight up to Hurrell and said, "What the hell are you doing out here?" And he said, "Well, I'm taking photographs." And he said, "I don't pay you a god damn thousand dollars a week
to stand around talking. Take pictures!"
Q. And then walked out.
A. And then walked out.
Q. He figured he earned his $50 out of it.

But, you know, it's interesting, I asked him about the men, and were they that concerned about the way they looked and did they use makeup and so forth, and he said, "Well, some of the men insisted on coming in with full makeup," and sometimes he insisted that they didn't. Bogart for instance. He wouldn't put makeup on even in front of a movie camera. And Robert Montgomery was totally stiff in front of a still camera. Errol Flynn...Now, he would insist upon makeup because he wanted to change his eyebrows and do tricks to his eyes. Cagney always had makeup because he thought he wasn't good looking enough. It took him a while to remember what they did, and he said usually it was nothing more than some pencil work with their eyebrows. Cagney worked on his eyes a lot. He was conscious of his eyes, how they looked.
A. Really?! That's amazing.
Q. Well, again, you're dealing with pros. These are people who recognize that their face is their fortune, and if they see a fault, or if they're made uncomfortable because they believe there's a fault, you know. I mean, think of the number of people who cancel engagements because they suddenly have a large pimple on their face. Nobody would care one way or the other.
A. No. Well, the one that got me was his...How much he
was impressed with Susan Hayward, because when he shot her in '42 she was just up and coming. And to hear him talk...Well, actually, it was a quote. He once said that Susan Hayward was the first starlet who was openly impressed with his reputation. In fact, when she came to his studio she supposedly cooed: "Oh, Mr. Hurrell, I'm so lucky to be photographed by you," and at that point he was feeling down on his fortunes and feeling quite lucky to have a job to do at all, and here she was, playing up his reputation. So he said that his job was to get her unimpressed with him. And that's when he pulled out some of those monkey antics that you were talking about before. He was jumping up and down, and that sort of startled her into being more herself. In fact, what came out of that sitting was a beautiful and tawdry portrait of her that you would come up and see later in some of her later films. It was for "Esquire" magazine and it definitely looks like the cover of a dimestore novel. The Tenth Avenue dame slightly tarnished by her boyfriend after a boozy night. And it is an omen of what was to come with "I Want to Live" and...

Q. It's true. She looks as though she's been hit everywhere except in the face.

You know, he did tell me one thing about Mae West I'd forgotten until this very minute. He said most of the retouching on Mae West was not that she was heavy, but that she was so short and they had to try to give her a longer waist. And he said, "You know, everybody thinks her walk is this
brilliantly designed thing." He said, "The woman couldn't walk, her 'stilts' were too high." She really had to sort of do that side by side crawl.

When I asked him about...What was it I was going to say? I asked him about...What? Oh, I know what it was. I asked him when he stopped using the 8" X 10" camera. That was the large camera. The "big one," as he called it. And then went all out for the 35mm. And he said the transition started with the 4" X 5" and that happened about 1950, and he said they still had galleries in the studios, photo galleries, and they were still using 4" X 5"s in the gallery, and they'd do more work on the set, inasmuch as that happened to have been established earlier for him. But the magazines began to ask for candid pictures, and the word "candid" was being used all the time. That's when the studios decided that the gallery shoots weren't desirable anymore. So you had to get it on the set and everything becomes candid. Then, too, if you're going to shoot portraits why not shoot them on 4" X 5". They'd blow up the prints and then retouch those.

The original concept, of course, with all that was to create a mood. Now the mood is entirely different, because they take them out, with grass blowing in the background and the trees and the shadows--the conditions of natural light--it's a very different kind of thing. So there was a period where he felt a little lost. He did say he had great admiration for Richard Avedon. He thinks that he was the top man
in the '50s during his period. And of course Richard is still....
(End Side 2; start Tape 2)

Q. ...by thinking through creatively what the total concept was, and what the purpose of the message was and how it was going to be used. He had great respect for him as an artist.
A. There was...His "liner" notes for the exhibition in 1976, for the Los Angeles Hall of (?) Photographs...He summed it up so beautifully...I mean, it's a little rhetorical, but it is a lovely thought. He said, "I loved photographing the stars. There was such a dramatic quality in those days, and I was such a romantic too. The stars were electric, full of sexual qualities--alluring--Our world was a storybook, a romantic fantasy. We were talented, we were working, we all assumed we'd make money so we didn't worry and fret about it like we do today. We were too busy being alive. We were children of the gods."

Q. Well, it's fascinating. You know, when he came out to California, he came out with a landscape painter, and he thought he'd do landscapes as well. So I got around to asking him whether indeed he had done anything with landscape photography, and he said (it surprised me because I wasn't really totally aware of it), "Quite a bit. I used to go out on weekends just to get away from the portrait thing, and the people. I always hated the routine at the studios. I always felt I
was getting into a rut and every week I felt like I had to change it. There's something about shooting portraits that automatically makes you feel like you're in a rut. There isn't enough variety. If you think about shooting people day in and day out, two years at a stretch--especially with the same kind of people--to keep getting variety is maddening."

And, you know, he goes back to the Norma Shearer, for instance, when she was married to Irving Thalberg, the head of the MGM studio, "I shot her many times, and I always had to come up with a new angle. And she was the first female star I had ever photographed. The most distinctive thing that I did then was not to flood the photograph with pure light. I left shadows. I put a light on the face, and if I liked the light I wouldn't keep throwing light in around the background. I think you can design the light using that one light first."

I was fascinated to find out whether or not he had associated with the other photographers in Hollywood at that time, and that's fascinating, because he said...

A. What did you find?

Q. What?

A. What did you find?

Q. Oh. What he said was that early on, when he first had his tiny little studio...You know...When he left and set up a little studio...in Laguna...Steichen walked in one day and said, "I want you to develop these pictures," and he rather embarrassedly explained that he had very limited facilities
and Steichen looked at him and said, "Oh, relax. Some of the best pictures I've ever taken were developed under a rug." I love that image.

But he also said that he got along well with him. That he himself photographed Cecil Beaton and "Hoynian Huna" and that he knew Steichen quite well, as a result of that original meeting, but he never got a shot of Steichen. He said, "I don't think Steichen trusted me as a photographer." And he said, "Photographers are very hard to photograph, because they're more inclined to just get set." You know, it's interesting...You ask him about the kind of publicity that Hollywood sends out now, you know, and they certainly don't reflect any relationship to an art form at all. And, of course, you get some sense of bitterness in George when he talks about the current crop. And he was telling me about some young...One of the young rat pack who came to be photographed by him and immediately was telling him how to light and photograph, and he said he was furious. He said, "I've spent my life developing this and this little shrimp (was what he said) came in, telling ME...Can you imagine telling ME? How I should light it."

A. Can you imagine?

Q. I sensed, of course, that he had strong feelings against the 35mm camera. When he talks about candid pictures, and so forth and so on, that's where he makes references to combat photography--you dash in and dash out, quick, quick,
quick, quick," and trying to press him as to what that was all about, what he said was that he just felt that the 35mm camera...You hold it up to your face when you're photographing people, and it's one that you can't communicate with your subject that way. And...But, I think the truth of the matter is that eventually he got to the point where he really was...He almost always using the 35mm, so he solved that problem. He said...I liked what he said about it...He said, "You see with your eyes, but you don't see the way a camera does. One doesn't see all the details in the single, two-dimensional view the way a camera does. The question of real reality is subjective, and has never interested me in photography."

A. I loved the comment he made about sex and where it was coming from with different actresses. How Mae West really had a sexy nature. He said that Garbo was probably the sexiest of the female actresses...of the actresses he photographed, but she didn't project it because that wasn't her job to do to do. In fact, his image was that sex was probably something that didn't take place until it got dark around Garbo's house. So, again, he was picking up exactly on what was there, bringing out only as much as...

Well, he said that too about Crawford. That as the years went on, he stopped trying to make the emphasis on sex and just concentrated on a movie star, which of course is what she was doing.

Q. He shot the most film, you know, on Joan Crawford.
And he said he always felt that she preferred... If she had her choice, she would have preferred to have just been allowed to model for stills, rather than do the movies themselves. That she loved that. I don't know whether that's true or not, it might be the way he fantasizes her relationship to him. But it might be true. It goes back to what you said before, that everything she did was a picture.

Well, of course... You can't resist, anytime you talk to any of these people who really were around and active in the Hollywood scene in the '30s, and I asked him if he was part of the Hollywood scene, and he said, "Well, you have to understand that it was very different than it is today. In those days," he said, "everybody felt they were members of a big, happy family who made movies for the rest of the world to react to."

A. Sure.

Q. And he said there was a lot of partying, but he wasn't too happy with it. He said, "I don't like to stand around. I prefer..." He said, "If I had to get drunk, I'd rather sit down, with a couple of friends, and get drunk. I would just play at it, keep chattering away, being non compes mentus about the things I didn't even want to talk about." And I think that simply supports the fact that so often you deal with people who have enormous genius and talents in their particular art, but when you take them out of that milieu, they're really uncomfortable and unhappy. I mean, you don't
get the feeling that whatever conversation might have gone on at some smart cocktail party in Hollywood, George would have fled.

A. Oh, sure.

Well, and too, there were still...I'm sure he must have been thinking that if he could spend time drinking and carousing with the crowd, he could also be out photographing landscapes, you know, since that's what got him away from all that. He was a big fan of those...In fact, he did have a love for Edward Weston and Ensel Adams. I think there's something in him that probably still would have loved to have been able to shoot landscapes all his life, but it's that same thing. He couldn't stand around, he had to go do something else. He had to be the monkey. And he couldn't do it.

Q. Yeah...Well, I suppose, if he had true financial freedom (and who does?), but if he had, and if you asked him what sort of pictures he'd take if he had that, I think that...It's interesting, because he...Of course he admired Ed Weston. Weston was the landscape man, and that was his original drive. He fell in love with California when he arrived here, Laguna, the beach and the mountains and the whole thing. It was just absolutely gorgeous.

A. Well, have you found anywhere in your notes found anywhere where he talked about where he saw photography going? Because, I mean, obviously he did change. You know, in the '30s he changed the look of photography.
Q. Well, you know, his feeling, even at 83, is that they haven't scratched the surface with photography yet, or that... And that's what's so silly about it all. It's just that the demand for things is so limited today, and you've got to be stereotyped in order to sell the photographs. And anybody who's in it to make a living or make anything out of it has got to do what he's told.

Well, I suspect, you know, that every culture, every decade, every century, produces people who break the rules, and those are the people with that indefinable thing called style, and will come forth and create their own worlds, thus becoming desirable for other people to seek them out and use them, as he was sought out by Shearer and Ramon Navvaro and then eventually Shearer and that started the whole thing going. But he's... I think he's pretty honest about photography. He recognizes that it's not considered a work of art, or you'd have everybody maintaining that they were artists. He said even the portrait business is pretty much gone because everybody has their own Kodak. The truth of the matter is that when you think of the cameras that have been developed today, you can't take a bad picture. It doesn't mean that you're going to take a fascinating picture, but you can't take a bad one. Because it does all the focusing and all the work and you can't cut off the head because it does something... I don't pretend to understand it, but... And, I guess... He did recognize that there are classic images that people don't even realize they
fall into, like Whistler's Mother. He said it's amazing the number of people who take pictures of their mother at her 60th or 70th birthday, and they'll place her by a window, sitting in a chair, to get that framed quality that Whistler achieved in the portrait...

A. His fascination with the painter.

I suppose that was it too. I'm sure you came across it in your notes, and even in your talks with him... He wouldn't talk just about a painting, he would talk about a painter. And I think this is a big difference. You'll find a lot of photographers who will talk about trying to achieve the effect of lighting from the painting, whereas he is very knowledgeable about how each one used it. Vermeer, and Whistler, as you said.

Q. Well, of course, it's fascinating. I asked him if there was anybody today that had the old type glamor, and he didn't hesitate. He said, "Well, I'd bet on Raquel Welch."

And I said, "Oh, really?" And he said, "Yeah. But you know, like Claudette Colbert, the two of them were a pain in the neck in terms of their attitude toward their faces." And he said that Colbert just adored retouching, and she'd never let you shoot her except from her... What is it? Her right side? And would absolutely get emotional about it. "Ah, don't!" You know. And Raquel Welch has a strong feeling that she cannot be shot in profile. That something terrible happens. And I asked him if he could in any way compare Raquel Welch to any of the great faces, and he said, after a moment of silence, "Nah." And I
said "Why not?" and he said, "Well, gee, she makes up her face, it takes two hours. And she does it every morning."

Essentially, Raquel's face is much more manufactured. And he gets all emotional about this. He says, "She spends two hours making up her face in the morning! That's every morning! Not just "a" morning. Every morning." And he said, "She fixes her nose, and she does so much shading. She fills in her cheeks with shading, and even this..." And this he refers to (it's so amusing when you get to talk to a person like this, he's shy about sex, despite the fact that he has shot all these pictures)....

A. Oh, sure...

Q. ...and he's pointing to what obviously referred to her cleavage, and... And he said, "And they all have different tops, these ladies, depending upon what kind of dress or what kind of bent." I love that. And he has favorite people that he would like to photograph. Joanne Woodward was one of them. He said she had a Carole Lombard quality.

A. Sure, sure.

Q. He would love to photograph her, and...

A. Oh, one of the ones that I loved was when he photographed Gloria Vanderbilt, who had this overwhelming hairdo--bouffant--and this overwhelming dress, and he said it was so overwhelming and there was no way he could make her change it so he put her in this huge wingback chair that was even bigger and more overwhelming than the hair and gown, and then
the sitting went very well, but at the very end, when he was leaving he went to thank her and shook her extended hand, and he said, "I had the distinct feeling I was standing in a reception line."

Q. That's funny.

Oh, this is interesting. This is interesting. Because he was such a...Well, what's the word? So involved with Crawford's whole career (he photographed her more than anyone else), I asked him, of course, about "Baby Jane," where Bette Davis and Joan "let it all hang out," as it were. And I thought his perception was quite extraordinary, because he said, "Unfortunately, Davis came out the winner, because she played it sort of gothic, grand guignol. She was laughing at herself. She understood this was total camp."

A. Oh, sure.

Q. And he said, "Crawford was in dead earnest. She 'was' gothic, and therefore very out of fashion."

A. It's true.

Q. George is a smart man.

A. Oh. And speaking of Crawford, you know she got him to photograph Franchot Tone when they were married. Obviously she knew what he was doing for her; she was going to try to do it for Franchot. But he makes a very interesting point, and maybe this says something about their marriage, I don't know; that he was an intellectual. He was very well schooled, very well mannered, but he compared him to Shirley Temple, by
saying if you didn't keep him interested, he would become bored and distracted.

Q. Well, you know, Franchot Tone was a social figure. He came from a very good family, a wealthy family, had terrific schooling. And I suppose the boredom also came because some of it would make him feel silly. But it is interesting. Like Shirley Temple, indeed!

Well...I think, it seems to me that we've covered with George's actual voice and what he has to say. And your kindness in sharing some of your research with us. I think we've done a pretty good job of capturing Mr. Hurrell and what he's all about.

A. Indeed. I think it's remarkable the amount of research you've unearthed about him. I know, in my own course of searching, it's been a little difficult to unearth some of it, so you have remarkable resources.

Q. Well, it's also interesting to talk to people like Barbara Stanwyck, you know, who's still around, about George. And she said that what he did for her in photographs was he always gave her the confidence to sit still and appear sexy. Which is interesting to me. That she could do it in a motion picture, but she never felt she could do it just in a still. But he managed to make her feel that. She also said he was also not jumping around the room, and he would make you laugh and then you'd get irritated, but you'd get wonderful pictures.

A. Indeed he did.
Q. Actually, he influenced me in that sense. Because in the years I was fashion director for "Playboy" magazine, I had to direct and set up things with Dick Avedon in terms of the fashion shots that we took, and I developed the same technique. I realized that to keep a line of six girls, for instance, or six guys, with a happy smile and a happy, carefree--head tossed back, hair flying, good teeth showing--you had to act and create a whole thing for them. And somebody once said to me, "Where did this all come from? How did you decide on that technique?" And I said, "Oh, it's been copied. It's very George Hurrell."
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