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Q&A: The Wonder and Awe of Louie Schwartzberg

Tod Hardin · Wednesday, September 20th, 2017

Louie Schwartzberg is a true force of nature in the world of visual storytelling. A game-changing pioneer. An icon. My gut tells me that he may cringe at those words, but sometimes the facts are simply the facts.

He is an award-winning producer, director and cinematographer whose notable career spans more than three decades providing breathtaking imagery for feature films, television shows, documentaries and commercials. Few have achieved his longevity, his accolades, and his ability to connect audiences so emotionally with the subjects he films. Those that have called on his talents include National Geographic, IMAX, Disney and Netflix – just to name a few.

He continues to break barriers, connecting with audiences, and telling stories that celebrate life and reveal the mysteries and wisdom of nature, people and places.

Louie was gracious enough to recently subject himself to several of my questions, which I share with you here, with the highest levels of pleasure:



Louie Schwartzberg.

You've been doing your thing for well over 30 years, and doing it a level of success that few filmmakers achieve. Tell us how you made the leap into filmmaking. What was that first moment when you knew this is what you were meant to do?

I started filming by documenting the anti-war protests while I was at UCLA. I was a history and political science major. But how could I study the French revolution when there was a revolution happening right outside my door. So I picked up a camera and I started to document the student protests. Having a camera protected me and my friends from the police brutality that was trying to prevent us from expressing our rights of freedom of speech and assembly as we were protesting an unjust and unethical war.

So I had to learn photography. There were no iPhones back then. That's when I found my voice. I fell in love with photography and filmmaking, and then I met my greatest teacher ... mother nature. She taught me everything about lighting, composition, texture, movement. She teaches you how to live a creative and sustainable life, because she doesn't waste a single molecule and always wants ecosystems to flourish

I knew I wanted filmmaking to be my life's journey because it led me on an adventure of self-discovery, touching the deepest part of my soul by trying to recognize and identify myself in the universal rhythms and patterns of nature. Looking back, I would say it has been my practice.

[alert type=alert-blue]**PLEASE SUPPORT LOUIE'S EFFORTS – BUY OR RENT HIS FILMS NOW**[/alert]

You are considered a pioneer in the development and usage of time-lapse cinematography. How did you get introduced to the concept? What was the ah-ha moment?

I got into filming time-lapse cinematography out of a sense of wonder and a necessity. I loved being able to compress time and scale, because that creates a portal through which you can broaden your horizons, expand your perspective, and change your world view. It also enabled me to fulfill my desire to shoot the highest quality film format I could at the time, which was 35mm movie film. Which I couldn't afford. Film and processing was \$100 a minute. But by filming time-lapse, it would take me a month to shoot a four minute roll of film.

So I was able to spend time filming and not spend a lot of money doing it. It sent me on a journey of chasing the light, fog, shadows in forests, shafts of light in desert canyons, flowers opening and closing. It made me more present and aware by being able to observe and forecast where light would be 3 to 4 hours from when I started a shot. That will truly ground you.



Honey bee worker nectaring on Zinnia.

Why nature? The majority of your work is highly associated with bringing us the awe and wonder of the natural world. What drew you to that?

Nature is my greatest teacher. She has been working on the art of beauty for 3.5 billion years, creating the ultimate form and function, elegant design, and systems that work and flourish. The beauty of nature is akin to observing the beauty of the universe. All the laws of physics, from the Milky Way down to the smallest protozoa are evident, similar, and connected. So when you are observing that everything is connected, it brings you into the present moment, and that is where we experience wonder and awe.

Moving Art is not only your company name, but also the name of your popular Netflix series that is now available on your website. What does that name mean to you?

Moving Art is a great description of the cinematography and films I make, in that they are in motion, not only visually, but also in the editing and music, which are also art forms through time.

There are digital display devices everywhere today. We are experimenting with creating programs that are inspirational and engaging by telling a new story, a story not based on the old formulas of conflict and tension, anxiety and redemption. They're more about being in a present moment and experiencing gratitude for the wonder and awe and beauty and energy that constantly surrounds us, that is constantly changing and enveloping our universe and our personal world view.

It also has another meaning, which is **emotional** art, because many people are moved to tears by being connected to the pure power and spirit of beauty which is nature's score, orchestrating the dance of life.



A stunning shot from season two of Moving Art: Koh Samui.

Of all the places you have filmed, which have provided you the most pleasure, and why? Feel free to pick a few!

Of all the places I have filmed, I must confess that warm tropical islands do give me the greatest pleasure. I love to swim. Swimming is an immersive experience, because the water envelopes every inch of your body. It changes your sight and sound, and puts you into another world, especially snorkeling.

Snorkeling is like a Fellini movie underwater. Characters come and go, and you follow multiple storylines and you have no idea how it is going to end. And miraculously, you don't get tired.

We all crave immersive experiences, more than stuff or money. We crave immersive experiences because we want to have a transformational experience. Anything else is just acquiring a commodity, which does not change your life. Life is change.

We've seen quite a few comments from your viewers about how your work has a healing effect. Can you expand on that a bit, as far as why you think that is and how it makes you feel?

A lot of people have claimed that watching my films has a healing effect. I think it may be because it is like looking into a mirror and experiencing a profound homecoming. When you're observing the beauty of nature or celebrating the human condition, it touches the deepest part of your soul. When you observe nature, it is a reflection of all of the energy and mass that is out there in the universe, being replicated inside every cell of your body. Getting in sync with that flow and pattern puts you back on that grid of life.

I love the way that people commonly express the same words when they see my films: "Oh my God".

Have you ever thought about what that means? The "oh" means that it makes you present. The "my" means it touches the deepest part of your soul. And "God" is that universal energy and love that we all want to be connected to.

So when I hear that, it warms my heart.

You've won awards, received the highest levels of praise and have worked with some amazing creators. What have you found to be the most rewarding aspect of your work?

I love capturing magic moments, either in nature, or celebrations of the human spirit. These are ephemeral moments in time, it's like capturing lightening in a bottle. There's a challenge to that.

But when you do it, when all of the elements come together, and you've captured the fantastic, it feels great.

When you continue to amplify and intensify that moment by editing, color correcting, music scoring, adding language, all to accentuate the emotional high point that you experienced in the past, as you shape a creative moment into the future, you grow. You gain perspective, sometimes referred to as wisdom.



Louie filming in Big Sur.

Are there any new technologies or techniques in filmmaking that have you really excited?

I've always been a fan of filming in the highest quality resolution, which may seem old fashioned. Guys like Ansel Adams, Edward Weston shot 8×10 and 4×5 inch negatives in order to capture every detail, which is astounding and is nature's pallet.

What I do enjoy is seeing that today the biggest breakthrough in technology is the advancement of resolution, as the cost of creating it goes down. It's like Moore's law. It's happening regardless of whether Hollywood wants it to happen. Once the engineers figured out how to do it, they are racing ahead of the delivery systems and libraries that the studios and cable platforms provide. Which is why Netflix was the first to come up with 4K streaming, and we were the first shows available in 4K.

But now that you have high resolution on these digital display devices what do you want to watch? Soap operas? Reality TV? Commercials? Toxic Poison, or imagery that is inspiring, healing, and entertaining.

What motivates and inspires you outside of your filmmaking work?

I love to garden. It's like a three dimensional time-lapse sculpture. Plus the plants speak to me and tell me what to do. I can putter around the garden all day, picked dead flowers, water those who need it, being a total servant, and enjoying every minute of it.

How can people see your films?

I'm happy to announce that we are now offering a large portion of my library directly from my website. Individual films or full seasons of *Moving Art* can be rented or bought at MovingArt.com. Pricing is just \$1 to \$10, so it's very accessible, and more importantly, the direct purchases will help us bring our next feature film to life.

An on that note ... what's next for Louie Schwartzberg?

I'm currently in post production on my latest film, *Fantastic Fungi*, a film about mushrooms and mycelium, which can heal you, feed you, clean up toxic waste and shift your consciousness. I finally found an organism that utilizes my skills at being able to film the largest, smallest, fastest, and, oldest creature on Earth.

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