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The Still-Life Mentor to a Filmmaking Generation

By [RANDY KENNEDY](#)

For much of a half-century of taking quiet, subtly powerful pictures that demand and reward long looking, Jerome Liebling has been known as a photographer's photographer. The label is both a high compliment and an acknowledgment that Mr. Liebling, now 82, has not enjoyed the acclaim accorded to many of his contemporaries who first took their cameras to the streets of New York after World War II.

But a more fitting way to describe Mr. Liebling would be as a documentarian's photographer. And judged by that standard, his work has rarely suffered from a lack of attention. In fact, spend any time watching the films of [Ken Burns](#), or those of the legions of documentary makers he has inspired, and you will see Mr. Liebling's work, in a sense, even if you have never laid eyes on one of his photographs.

His influence on a generation of nonfiction filmmakers — what Mr. Burns describes as “all of us coming within Jerry's radiational sphere” — will be the subject of a tribute tonight at the [Museum of Television and Radio](#) by several of the students taught by Mr. Liebling, starting in the early 1970's.

While Mr. Burns is probably the best known of the group, Mr. Liebling also taught Buddy Squires, the cinematographer who has helped to shape many of Mr. Burns's films, as well as the directors Roger Sherman, Kirk Simon, Karen Goodman and Amy Stechler, who have several Emmys and Academy Award nominations among them. Sometimes called the Hampshire Mafia, they all attended Hampshire, the experimental college in Amherst, Mass., which has produced an unusual number of successful filmmakers and photographers.

Interviewed this week in a Midtown Manhattan studio as he was editing “The War,” an epic soldier's-eye view of World War II that is to run next year on [PBS](#), Mr. Burns described how he set off for Hampshire College in 1971 with youthful Hollywood dreams of becoming the next [John Ford](#). But under the tutelage first of the photographer Elaine Mayes and then of Mr. Liebling, and no doubt also propelled by Hampshire's Age of Aquarius idealism — no grades, no departments, no tenure — he fell in love with the power and relative purity of documentary filmmaking.

Mr. Burns recalled how he and his fellow students were terrified of Mr. Liebling. A gravel-voiced Brooklynite who had served with the 82nd Airborne Division in World War II before studying with Paul Strand and joining the Photo League, Mr. Liebling had founded one of the first college-level photography and film programs at the [University of Minnesota](#), where he spent 20 years. The fear was fueled less by Mr. Liebling's gruffness, he said, than by the fierce honesty of his teaching and by his pictures, which were firmly rooted in the social documentary tradition but seemed to have a resonance that transcended their genre.

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“He was so authentic, in a way that a lot of us had never experienced,” Mr. Burns said. “You wanted to be like him. You wanted to tell the truth. You’d go out to take pictures with him, and we all saw the same things he did, and then we’d come back, and he’d put up his prints, and you’d put up yours, and you were devastated.”

He added, still seeming to wince all these years later at the memory: “Sometimes you’d do some work you thought was really great, and you’d show it to him, and he’d stand there for a while and then say, ‘Well ...’ And it was like, ‘Oh God.’ That was all it took. That ‘well.’ You knew you hadn’t done it.”

Mr. Liebling is often mentioned in the company of other photographers with cult followings among their peers, like Frederick Sommer or Dave Heath, whose classic 1965 collection, “A Dialogue with Solitude,” has long been out of print. But Mr. Liebling’s interest in documentary filmmaking — which he has also pursued through the years — has embedded his legacy deeply in the American documentary style that has emerged over the last 30 years.

On the most practical level, Mr. Burns said, Mr. Liebling led him to realize how still photographs could be incorporated powerfully into documentaries. It’s a technique that has become so closely associated with Mr. Burns’s style that Apple’s iPhoto software now offers a feature called the Ken Burns Effect, which incorporates slow, portentous zooms and pans into otherwise ordinary slide shows of family snapshots.

“The essential DNA of all my films issues from still photography,” Mr. Burns said. But Mr. Liebling’s influence on his work, he said, reached much deeper, to a personal and ultimately philosophical level that has guided many of his choices of subject and approach.

“It was this broadly humanistic mantra that he instilled in us,” he said, adding: “Jerry turned me and made me look inward, and it was not always a comfortable thing. I changed as a result of it. It was like molting.” He also taught, Mr. Burns said, that “all meaning accrues in duration — sometimes you have to just slow down and look.”

Mr. Burns smiled and added: “Of course, when you ask Jerry about this, he’s not going to cop to any of it. He’s just going to say, ‘What’s Kenny talking about?’”

But in a telephone interview Mr. Liebling actually did cop, at least to some of it. He said that when he was a child of the 1930’s in New York, his photographic impulse from the start was to “go figure out where the pain was, to show things that people wouldn’t see unless I was showing them.”

In doing so, his subject matter was often dark and uncompromisingly noncommercial: the blood-drenched workers at a Minnesota slaughterhouse; mental patients in a state hospital; cadavers used by New York medical students.

In teaching, he said, he tried mostly to impart a deep suspicion of dogma, of piousness and of the compromises that can lie just beneath the surface of American culture. “I wanted them to see that there are no shortcuts,” he said. “It’s too easy if everything is soft, and you can just buy your way and live well.

“I kept asking: ‘Where is your work coming from? Why are you doing it? What is it you see?’ And after a while they started to really look.”

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Mr. Liebling, interviewed as he was preparing to drive from Amherst to New York for the tribute, part of the museum's annual documentary festival, was asked if it bothered him that his work was not better known (though it is in several major collections, including those of the Museum of Modern Art and the Corcoran Gallery in Washington).

"Would I want to sell more?" he said, laughing. "Well, yeah. Who wouldn't?" But he added: "Basically, I just hope that what I have to say in the photographs has validity and that I did it as well as I could."

Though age has finally begun to slow him, he said, he is still hard at work with a camera and has in fact just returned to printing a series of pictures he first began in 1979 in an apple orchard near his house.

"I guess that's a long time to be working on an apple orchard, isn't it?" he said. "But the apples still keep growing each year."