

THE  
PHOTOGRAPHS  
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A STRANGER RINGS ME UP FROM CALIFORNIA IN MY office in New York and says he is David Fanning, from WGBH-TV, Boston, and wants to have lunch with me at the Algonquin Hotel the following Friday. "I'm talking to a lot of people about doing this new documentary series called 'World,'" he says. "I'm the executive producer and would like to get your ideas."

I'm leery of the invitation, and I tell him so. I am a writer whose experience of television is limited to talk-show interviews and panel discussions. I find the title of the series somewhat off-putting; I have a dry-biscuit rather than a plum-pudding temperament, and California phone calls, television, "World" all seem to conjure up the plummiest of plum puddings. Moreover, I had once received a similar call from a television producer from Montreal. He, too, had wanted to talk to me about a television-documentary program over lunch at the Algonquin. I had accepted his invitation. He had eaten his way through three courses; drunk white wine and red wine; helped himself to brandy and cigar; chattered amiably but disconnectedly about travels in Africa, Asia, the Middle East; hastily scrawled something across the back of the bill; and left—mentioning the documentary program, the ostensible reason for our meeting, only *en passant*. I had ended up settling the bill, because the producer had neglected to put his address on it and in searching for him I had nothing more concrete to go on than an in-

trusive trunk call and a quickly given French name. (He was a French Canadian.)

Fanning is, however, gently persistent. I try to get him to meet me in my office, but he says disarmingly that he has nothing specific in mind and would prefer a social setting. I reluctantly agree, and wonder who will pay the bill this time.

## September 16th

FANNING IS UNLIKE THE FEW TELEVISION PEOPLE I have met previously. He is a soft-spoken man in his thirties, with curly brown hair, a mustache, and a goatee, and has the cozy manner of a family lawyer. He tells me that he is from South Africa. "I am a sort of refugee from the government's apartheid policy." He's white, of course. "I've knocked about in TV Land in London and in Southern California. I'm married to a Californian, but now I'm settled in Boston."

He orders a modest lunch—chopped steak and a glass of wine. "The BBC is invading the American market for good television, and WGBH has been trying to do something about it, but so far we really have only one long-running series in the same league as the BBC stuff—'Nova.' In fact, 'World' will be modelled on 'Nova.' But the focus of 'Nova' is science; the focus of 'World' is to be the whole planet. Like 'Nova,' 'World' will be in the grand tradition of the best American commercial television series—'Omnibus,' 'See

It Now,' 'CBS Reports,' and 'NBC White Paper.'" He hands me a copy of a brochure that was prepared by WGBH to raise money for "World." It states the aims of the series in grandiose terms:

WORLD will present political, social, and economic reporting, analysis, and prediction in the field of world affairs. . . . Over all, however, a subject will be chosen for exploration because it meets certain basic tests:

- it is in the terrain of global interdependence
- or it explores shared problems or solutions to shared problems
- or it touches upon the potential for a world conflict of arms
- or it challenges a widespread misperception where perception itself is part of a problem
- or it concerns the global problems of human distress, overpopulation, underdevelopment, hunger, poverty
- or it explores global environmental limits—pollution, resource exhaustion, etc.
- or it shows how the United States is perceived by others, or how the U.S. domestic actions or policies affect other countries
- or it helps define the rivalry between the developed world and underdeveloped or emerging nations.

WORLD may only incidentally offer the satisfactions of the travelogue, but the seriousness of its purpose does not mean viewers won't be entertained. The struggle of a single man may hold a story worth telling by any of the criteria enumerated above; even the most complex international issues have a human facet. NOVA has demonstrated that it can enter abstruse areas of science without leaving its viewers behind: WORLD will aim to do no less.

"The series sounds very ambitious," I say.

"So far, we've been able to raise money only for one trial season. It will have thirteen hour-long programs, in alternate weeks, and will get under way early next year. Because of lack of funds, we will have to buy or co-produce ten of the films wherever we can—France, Finland, the Netherlands—and perhaps recut them for our own broadcasts. We do, however, plan to do three original WGBH productions, and we are considering India as the subject of one of them. We would like it to be a sort of metaphor for the whole country. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Not right off the top of my head," I say. "One hour for all of India sounds like a bit of a tall order. It took Louis Malle seven hour-long documentaries to get down some of his impressions of India."

"You must have some ideas," he says.

Though my adult life has been spent in the West, I was born and brought up in India, and have written extensively about the country. In fact, it is constantly on my mind. I tell him that I can think of several "worthy" subjects, and we both laugh.

"Such as what?"

I suggest an essay on the Indian sanitation problem, as a metaphor for the chaos, indiscipline, and ignorance of the Indian poor; a study of village India and city India, to highlight the contrasts between old and new; a "Letter from New Delhi," about the cultural and political life of the capital; a portrait of Prime Minister Morarji Desai and, through him, of the country, or, better, of Mahatma Gandhi and his influence on modern India; a personal travelogue of

people and places in India that mean something special to me.

He listens without comment. Then he asks me, "Do you have any writing projects about India on the back burner which could possibly be filmed?"

"I don't think so," I say.

He presses me, and so I say that one day I plan to write about an elderly first cousin of my father's, the proverbial poor relation, but that I don't see how such a subject could suit Fanning's purpose.

"What does he do?"

"He is a clerk and a peon for a chemical-supply store."

"Why is he poor?"

"He's had one misfortune after another. His mother died when he was nine, in a plague epidemic. He didn't like school and didn't do very well. Then he couldn't get a decent job. Then his wife told him that three of their four children were not his. Then she ran away with their lodger."

"How well do you know him?"

"I know him very well," I say. "Ever since I can remember, he's been coming to our house to cadge old razor blades from my father."