

An expatriate filmmaker captures  
the mystical side of Asian life.

# Robert Chappell

Profile



BACKGROUND, BALI  
COTTOBRT (FILM);  
ABOVE, JAKARTA  
COTTOBRT (FILM);  
BELOW, LOMBAN  
COTOHWA (FILM).





nominated documentary to his credit, Chappell thought the \$8,500 fee sounded like good money for what was described as only three weeks' work. But, as Chappell explains, what really drew him in was the exotic nature of the locale which appealed to "my romantic, John Le Carré, writer's side."

As an emerging economy still under Soviet influence, Indonesia more than lived up to Chappell's decidedly romantic expectations. In the waning hours of the Cold War he soon found himself drinking with Russian diplomats, hobnobbing with Indonesia's intellectual avant-garde, and even travelling within the circles of the country's reserved, professional political class.

Indonesia's complete lack of media infrastructure, however, was another story, neither avant-garde nor professional. As a result, the "three-week shoot" became an eight month improvisation, as he found himself without such basics as light stands or a pool of skilled local talent from which to recruit a crew. To his surprise, the challenge thoroughly agreed with Chappell, as did the possibility of becoming something of a pioneer who could play a significant role in creating a new media in an emerging economy.

Over the last dozen years, Chappell has been involved in producing television commercials for Indonesia's first commercial television network, directing a series of TV travelogues about the country, and writing and directing several full-length action features with Indonesian settings. He has also written an award-winning adaption of Joseph Conrad's *The Rescue*, and managed a company charged with developing international productions featuring Indonesian locations.

Such deep involvement in a nation's affairs at a time of tumultuous change does not come without a price: a tough-minded documentary filmed

by Chappell that explored the tragedies of civil war in East Timor, has been suppressed. Its balanced view, Chappell explains, has entirely infuriated both sides in the conflict.

Like many directors, part of Chappell's fascination with the craft of filmmaking is with the medium's technical and experimental aspects. Right now, it's claymation – the laborious animation technique popularised by Britain's *Wallace and Gromit* series – which intrigues him. Before this, Chappell says, he started exploring the unrealised creative potential of time-lapse photography – out of which came his memorable footage of Indonesian temples framed by night skies full of ghostly, rapid-moving clouds.

Chappell's romantic, John Le Carré side remains, however, and he now talks about a round-the-world trip he hopes to make later this year. Thinking like a real international man of intrigue, Chappell plans to use a small 1950s German "Robot" time-lapse camera which looks like a tourist's ordinary 35mm, but actually gives three seconds of footage with one roll of 35mm still film. "I'm interested in Istanbul, Dubai, Kuwait, India, Russia, Burma – places they won't let you in with a film camera. The idea fascinates me – you go in for a couple of days, buy film at the local store and then take it to the one-hour photo for processing."

More recently, Chappell has begun to reassert his ties to film making in America, and says his relationship with The Image Bank – which began two years ago – represents an important first step in his repatriation. Though Chappell jokes that The Image Bank sometimes asks him if he'll shoot footage of "men in business suits shaking hands in front of warehouses," he says that what is best about TIB's support is that it makes his experimental work possible. And who knows where this round-the-world trip will leave him for the next 12 years. —GL □

● new-yorkais réputé avec à son actif un documentaire nommé aux Oscars, estima que le salaire de 8 500 dollars qui lui était offert pour apparemment trois semaines de travail était fort raisonnable. Mais, comme Chappell l'explique, c'était plutôt la nature exotique du pays même qui séduisait "mon côté écrivain romantique à la John Le Carré". →

ABOVE: BALI  
COURT (FILM)  
BELOW: BALI  
40680XVI (FILM)





Un cinéaste expatrié capture le caractère mystique de la vie asiatique.

Un cineasta expatriado capta la vertiente mística de la vida oriental.

Um cineasta expatriado capta o lado místico da vida na Ásia.



ABOVE, TRIANIAYA  
B03KRG7 (FILM);  
BELOW, BALI  
C01TOAP8 (FILM).



■ At least once in every lifetime, there comes that unexpected call which forever and irrevocably changes your destiny. For the film maker Robert Chappell, such a call came the day before Christmas in 1986, shortly after he had finished work on Errol Morris's haunting study of a policeman's murder, *Thin Blue Line*.

"Can you come to Indonesia?" The production, a low budget action/thriller, was leaving for the other side of the world in a day or so. As a successful New York director with an Academy Award →

● Au moins une fois au cours d'une vie, survient un appel imprévu qui change notre destin de façon irrévocable. Le cinéaste Robert Chappell a reçu cet appel la veille de Noël en 1986, alors qu'il venait à peine de terminer *Thin Blue Line* réalisé par Errol Morris (une étude angoissante sur le meurtre d'un policier).

"Pouvez-vous vous rendre en Indonésie ?" La production pour un film policier/d'action à petit budget s'appretait à partir à l'autre bout du monde d'un jour à l'autre. Chappell, réalisateur →

◆ Por lo menos una vez en la vida, nos llega una llamada inesperada que altera para siempre e irrevocablemente nuestro destino. Para el cineasta Robert Chappell, la llamada llegó en Nochebuena de 1986, a poco de haber terminado de filmar el inquietante estudio psicológico de Errol Morris *Thin Blue Line*, sobre el asesinato de un policía.

"¿Puedes venir a Indonesia?" El equipo productor de esta cinta de acción y suspense iba a partir para el lejano archipiélago en uno o dos días. Como director muy solicitado en (*sigue en la página 63*)

▲ Todo mundo, pelo menos uma vez na vida, recebe uma proposta inesperada que muda o seu destino para sempre. No caso do cineasta Robert Chappell, essa proposta chegou na véspera do Natal de 1986, logo depois de terminar as filmagens do intrigante estudo sobre o assassinato de um policial, *Thin Blue Line*, de Errol Morris.

"Você pode ir para a Indonésia?" A produção de um suspense de ação de baixo orçamento estava de partida para o outro lado do mundo em um ou dois dias. Diretor novaiorquino de sucesso e com uma indicação ao Oscar (*continua na página 92*)

