TRUTH AND LIES IN CINEMA VERITE

by

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June, 1982

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE IN PARTIAL FUFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SCIENCE IN VISUAL STUDIES AT THE MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

September 1985

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture on June 18, 1985 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Visual Studies.

This thesis consists of two sections: Truth and Lies, and the making of Everything Must Change. Truth and lies traces several developments made in the evolution of the documentary cinema (both technological and ideological) and explores their effect upon the manner in which the world before the camera has been transformed onto film over the course of the past ninety years. During this period, the documentarian has labored under the constraint of having to present a more or less objective view of his subject, and historically this objectivity has been considered synonomous with "truthfulness"; the filmmaker has not been allowed to present subjective truth. In the eyes of critics, subjectivity and bias were lies. The premise throughout this discussion is that documentaries indeed are subjective statements, and that as the tools available to the documentarian become more and more transparent, this inherent subjectivity becomes increasingly masked. This paper contends that a possible solution to this dilemma might be for filmmakers to include contextual clues to subjectivity within the scope of their work.

The second section, the making of Everything Must Change, outlines the process of shooting and editing my thesis movie, and examines how a certain degree of contextualized subjectivity has been included specifically within this work.

The thesis is comprised of a written text and a 42 minute video copy of my thesis film, Everything Must Change.

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I

> ....The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other forms of picturemaking. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced.[1]
>
> --Andre Bazin

Although on the most basic of levels we may be forced (as Bazin claims) to accept the existence of the object photographed, we are by no means forced to accept the meaning which the photographer instills in the image. The camera may be a mindless tool of mechanical reproduction, but its operator is not.

Every documentary filmmaker has a defined world view. His political affinities, his social upbringing, and economic background all enter into the filmmaking process. From the moment he chooses a subject until the first release print comes back from the lab, the making of a documentary film is a constant and relentless process of selection. The selections of which scenes to film, what characters will appear on the screen, and which lens to use, all effect the final product. As a result of this long string of decision after decision, it is impossible for the outcome of this process to be an objective film.

Whether the individual filmmaker works from a detailed shooting script, or simply reacts to the situation at hand, whether the film is a piece of propaganda, or a visual essay, the product is no doubt a reflection of his own distinct world view.

All documentary films lie somewhere in the gray area between absolute truth and absolute lie. The documentary cinema is a result of the recording, translation, and subsequent reconstruction of the world in front of the lens. If we as an audience feel that this reconstruction is an accurate representation, that it is not merely a biased distortion, then we place our credence in it. It is a "truthful" film. If, on he other hand, we feel that this reconstruction is not an accurate one, if we do not believe in the plausibility of the events that have occured on the screen, then we see the film as lie. It is this distinct attachment to reality that is the documentary's blessing--as well as its curse.

Film is a wonderfully powerful medium in that we can rebuild the world according to our liking. We can create new people and places, with a few swift, simple tricks. This is the role, the delight of the filmmaker. It is by no means anything new. Melies gave us vivid pictures of the moon seventy years before man landed on it. Vertov

expounded in manifesto after manifesto about taking the eyes from one man, the arms from another, and the soul from yet another to create a new, superhuman cinema-hero. But one wrong move on the part of the filmmaker, one detail overlooked, and the illusion crumbles, the seams show, and the cheap devices fall apart.

An audience is constantly (and usually unknowingly) judging the veracity of a documentary film. With every sequence, every cut, we compare the information on the screen with what we know from our own life. If we have encountered similar situations as the characters on the screen, we use our experience to guide us. We gauge the actions of those in the film against our own. In addition, we also rely on second hand information from television, film, biographies, newspapers, and the like. If an event occurs on the screen that parallels something we have seen in a film previously and the outcome is greatly different than what we have come to expect, then we spend time assessing the difference. If the outcome is blatantly similar, then there is the danger that we will label the work as cliche or stereotypical.

We may say that all documentaries inhabit the area bordered by "absolute truth" and "absolute lie", but this domain does not include the absolutes; the terms are not

inclusive. While all documentaries must obviously contain some element of truth, (owing much of their existence to the veracity of the photographic process) they also must contain lies because of their inherent, undecipherable bias. What arises from all of this is the ancient objectivity/ subjectivity argument.

II

Unlike the painter, the poet, or the composer, the documentarian's raw material is inextricably linked with the real world. For some unknown reason he finds this link with reality to be the core of the work, rather than a tiresome constraint. For this reason, the filmmaker's work is in many ways closer to that of the biographer rather than to that of the painter or musician. The composer works with a series of sounds, pitches, and harmonies that rarely occur in nature. The most basic element, a pure tone--perhaps a B flat played by a clarinet--exists as a compositional option to him only because the instrument was created as a tool to interpret the work of the composer. The tone is a manufactured, rather than a collected, piece of information. It does not exist as raw, tangible material in the real world. Although it must exist as a tonal image in the mind of the composer, it is nonetheless

something that cannot be experienced by an audience until it has been transformed by the musician. The same is true for the painter as well as the playwright.

The manner in which we critique works of art has "progressed" to a point where we no longer question the validity of a portrait if its resemblence to the subject is somewhat tenuous. This would be an absurd restriction to place upon the painter. Blue hair, a green face, or destruction of normal perspective all don't bother us too much. We assume that the artist is in command of his medium and uses these facets of his painterly vocabulary to tell us something, to create a mood, or to evoke. If the documentary filmmaker should take should take such liberties with his subject, we no longer label him as a documentarian, but rather as an experimentalist.

Because of the restrictions that the documentarian allows to be placed upon himself, his work often claims a greater affinity to that of the journalist rather than to that of the artist. In the case of the journalist, we can in part gauge the validity of his work by testing the veracity of his report. Although in many cases this is no easy task, we at least we have a very tangible criterion by which to judge the importance (meaningfulness) of his work. The same is true of the biographer (although we

probably allow the biographer slightly more interpretational leeway than we do a correspondent of the New York Times; the biographer is probably within the parameters of his field if he fictionalizes a small piece of his subject's life, if he inflates an otherwise trivial event).

III

No sooner had Kant declared that the objective must be distinguished from the subjective, concept from intuition, and therefore science from art, than advances in chemistry made possible the invention of photography. The advent of the photographic process--this wonderful new creation that crossed previous disciplinary boundaries--now threw a rather large wrench into the works. It equally effected the painter as well as the physicist.

By the end of the nineteenth century most photographers fell neatly into one of two distinct schools: the pictorial photographers and the photographers of record.[2] A photograph of record was expected to provide a maximum of precise detail (clarity of information), whereas a pictorial photograph demanded clarity of composition (a selection of the significant, rather than an accumulation of the

insignificant). The photographers of record felt that in order for a photograph to exist as a piece of scientific or sociological datum, every detail of the image must be equally weighted: every piece of information included within the frame was necessarily significant. For them, knowledge depended almost exclusivly upon an accumulation of facts.

The pictorial photographers, on the other hand, believed that a multiplicity of information must be reduced to a uniformity of vision, and that this reduction must be present in the work, rather than take place later through critical analysis. As a result of the pictorialists' stand, most of their photographs avoided uniform sharpness of focus and overall illumination. Instead, they produced soft, diffuse prints, with highly defined areas of light and dark.

By the early twentieth century, there was a great deal of antagonism between the pictorialists and the photographers of record. While the pictorialist's work was beginning to closely resemble that of the painter, with the inclusion of brush strokes, multiple images, fuzzy focus, and the like, the photographers of record were calling for less and less intervention by the hand of the artist in order to create a more accurate transcription of reality--a purer image. Paul Strand, one of the most influential

photographers of the time (and later a documentary filmmaker) concluded in the avant-garde periodical "Broom" in 1922:

> ....and so it is again the vision of the artist, of the intuitive seeker after knowledge, which, in this modern world, has seized upon the the mechanisms of a machine, and is pointing the way.....In thus disinterestedly experimenting, the photographer has joined the ranks of all true seekers of knowledge, be it intuitive and aesthetic, or conceptual and scientific. He has once over, in establishing his own spiritual control over a machine, the camera, revealed the destructive and wholly fictitious wall of antagonism which these two have built up between themselves.[3]

Strand ended his dissertation by pleading for the integration of science and expression, before science developed into the destructive tool of materialism, and expression became mere "anemic fantasy".

IV

The documentary cinema is not only inextricably linked with reality, but also with a continuous stream of technological developments. The manner in which the world in front of the lens is both transformed and depicted is heavily dependent upon the tools available to the

translator. Bazin argued that the concept of cinema existed in men's minds long before moving pictures were invented.

> .....The religion of ancient Greece saw survival as depending on the continued existence of the corporeal body. Thus by providing a defense against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life. It was natural therefore to preserve flesh and bone.[4]

The first visions of cinema were not that it would exist as a silent, flat, black and white world, but rather as a complete and total representation of reality: a reconstruction of the world in full color, sound, and relief. In Bazin's mind it is startling that it took man centuries to create a mechanism that could crudely imitate reality; something that would prove itself slightly more versatile than mummification. Following his ideal, it stands that true cinema has not yet been invented--we are still in its infancy.

V

As of the mid eighteen-nineties, two men were on the verge of creating machines that would be able to record and

sculpture in modern museums. An archive was needed for depositing the rapidly accumulating footage of the changing faces of the cities. He realized that in the future the camera would often desire to penetrate where it was not wanted, yet in doing so it might shed a valuable ray of light. Film evidence, he suggested, would be able to shut the mouth of the liar.[6] What he did not realize was that it might also open the mouth of yet another liar.

Until 1907, most of the films produced in America were "factual" films. The documentary had gotten off to a strong start but its popularity was quickly waning and the form began to stagnate. After an initial fling with audiences around the turn of the century, documentarians began to seek royal sponsorship, and theaters were saturated with images of coronations, parades, royal parties etc. The cameramen had become "purveyors of royal performance, agents of imperial public relations"[7], but by 1910 the novelty of these events had worn off and it was now lure of fiction that could entice audiences to the theatre. These sophisticated audiences soon wanted all of the wonderful, new, narrative devices included in their films--beginnings, middles, ends, climaxes and denouements--and so it was the special effects of Melies and the editing techniques of Griffith that posed a serious threat to the continued success of the "factual" film. In an attempt to regain

the camera--dancers, mimes, and jugglers--Lumiere and his cinematographe operators were roaming across Europe, and later the world, recording events of state, coronations, and troops departing; almost anything that might catch the interest of the nightly audiences.

In a sense, the difference in mobility between these two cameras helps to capsulize the fundamental dichotomy in the later evolution of the narrative and documentary film. On one hand we have the fiction filmmakers who felt they could convey the essence of life by dissecting it, rescripting it, and later having automatons re-enact it in a sacrificial ceremony before the camera. On the other, were the documentarians, who found constructing their films a process of exploration (it is not suprising that many of the early documentary film cameramen were actually explorers), using the camera as a notebook with which to record the nuances of action, the unexpected events, and the unpredictable personalities that the scenarist could never dream of. The documentary filmmaker found his home on the expanses of the dust bowl and in the arctic climate, rather than within the claustrophobic boundaries of the studio.

In 1898, cinematographe operator Boleslaw Matuszewski prophetically asserted that the work of the documentary cameraman deserved a place beside the paintings and

reproduce moving pictures: Edison and Lumiere. Although the medium (celluloid) the two used was identical, the recording mechanisms differed greatly. The Edison camera weighed upwards of one thousand pounds and six men were required to move it.[5] It ran on electricity and was anchored in a tar-papered studio called the "Black Maria". Edison hoped to later link the camera with another of his inventions, the phonograph, and this partially accounted for the machines designed immobility. Because of its weight, his device could not go out to explore the world--rather, bits and pieces were brought before it to perform in isolation in front of a black background.

On the other hand, the Lumiere camera--the cinematographe--weighed about eleven pounds (less than most synchronous sound 16mm cameras of today) and could be carried as easily as a small suitcase. It was handcranked, and therefore not dependent upon electricity. The outdoor world, which offered no lighting problems, became its home. It was adept at catching "life on the run". With several adjustments, its operator could easily convert it to a printing machine, and then later to a projector. This gave the cinematographe operator the opportunity to record events in the afternoon, and then project them back that very same evening (much to the delight of audiences). While Edison was stuck recording performers brought before

lost territory, "factual" filmmakers began to incorporate fictional techniques in order to make their product more marketable. As a result, the documentary was infected with increasing fakery.

When the rushes came back from Roosevelt's famous charge up San Juan Hill, filmmaker Albert Smith realized that the material was actually somewhat boring and lacked the acts of heroism as heralded by the U.S. newspapers. His "innocent" solution to this problem was to stage a dramatic table top battle complete with cigarette smoke and a cardboard ship sinking in an inch of water.[8] The re-creation was completely successful and was later mimicked with a rendition of the San Francisco earthquake staged on a small table top in the center of New York City. There were numerous other instances of events that were staged in order to heighten the dramatic content of these films. Despite the documentarians dying efforts, the popularity of the factual film was easily surpassed by that of the fiction film in the mid teens.

VI

With the advent of sound in the late twenties, came the opportunity for documentary filmmakers to come one step

closer to fulfilling Bazin's myth of total cinema. Again, in response to a development made in the fiction film, documentarians felt that they must incorporate a soundtrack or be left irrevocably in the wake of the narrative. Interestingly, the addition of a soundtrack did little to enhance the illusion of reality, and if anything, it actually detracted from it. The original synchronous sound recording machines were bulky devices and made field recording almost impossible. Just as the narrative film artists and the theorists of montage claimed that the invention of sound recording would destroy the advances made in editing techniques and weight the previously untethered image by locking it to a synchronous soundtrack, the documentarians realized that the use of a huge sound camera would inevitably be a setback in mobility to the days of Edison and the little tar-papered studio in New Jersey. Their simple answer to this dilemma was to post-dub asynchronous sound in order to "enhance" the images on the screen.

The early products of this approach include much of the work of the British GPO unit which in turn includes films such as Night Mail and Song of Ceylon.

Night Mail exploited a voice over by W.H. Auden and a score by Benjamin Britten to create a rhythmic, entrancing

soundtrack. Song of Ceylon also relied on a heavily collaged track edited by Cavalcanti to create a contextual base with which to read the images. Other works such as Lorentz's The River, were operatic in nature and relied on repititiously poetic voice overs and grandiose scores in order to get their propagandistic messages across. Filmmakers were discovering that they could completely change the way in which an audience would "read" their work by manipulating the soundtrack--that they could impart new meanings to otherwise vague images.

Just as the documentary had previously gone through a poetic or symphonic stage it was now going through a propagandistic one. Partially as a result of the political atmosphere, and partially as a result of technological developments, filmmakers were discovering the importance of creating works with overt messages. The addition of sound decreased a filmmaker's need to depend on "reality" for source material by which to tell his story. Now a voice-over could tell us what the coal miner on the screen was thinking, how much money he made, or what type of house he lived in. Instead of a long sequence of shots showing him working in the mine, getting paid, and playing with his children, we could be given the same information with one shot and several lines of voice-over. Instead of wasting valuable production time attempting to capture visual

information which would reveal the story, a director could now easily provide the context with which to read the images by post-dubbing a heavy-handed voice over.

Although the addition of non-synchronous sound brought the documentary further away from "reality", this is by no means to say that it made these films any less truthful. In the early Lumiere films the camera operator was an almost transparent figure. The films were never edited, and if the various operators were attempting to instill their political attitudes into the works they are hardly decipherable today. With the social documentaries of the thirties, and later the wartime movies of the fourties, the world view of the filmmaker was hardly sublime: these were films with a message, and it is because of the sheer blatancy of this message that these films were in some ways quite "truthful". With every shot the audience was given verbal (or even musical) information with which to contextualize the images on the screen. This was an extremely didactic approach, (and often a tiresome one) but at least it was always obvious where the filmmaker stood--and how many grains of salt to take his message with.

Obviously not all documentaries of this period took the non-synchronous sound approach. In Flaherty's Man of Aran, we hear the relentless sound of the wind and waves beating

against the cliffs of the Aran Island. The sound is a constant reminder of the ocean's violence. Flaherty also made use of fragments of post dubbed dialog that have the appearance of being in sync. There is no voice-over.

In the GPO's Housing Problems we are treated to interviews in which residents of run down tenements tell (in sync) of the problems of day-to-day living in these dilapidated structures. At one point a woman faces the camera and tells of a rather long and drawn out battle with a rat.

VII

Interestingly, the least "truthful" films of this period were often not the propagandistic ones. Propaganda by its very nature usually reveals itself as such. When we see Triumph of the Will (to take the most blatant of examples) we are aware of how we are being manipulated; we are aware of Rhiefenstahl's relationship to the Third Reich. There are internal clues (Hitler descending upon Nuremburg from the heavens in his private plane) telling us that this is not quite a wholly unbiased report of what was going on in Germany at the time. The grand choreography and the multiple camera angles tell us that this is not simple reportage in the guise of an extended newsreel. The

world view of the filmmaker is very definitely the guiding force in the work.

Oddly enough, footage removed from the sequencial context of this film provided some of the most condemning propaganda that the allies could come up with during the course of the war, therefore indicating that much of the subjectiviity was manifested in the editing of the raw footage. Films such as Triumph of the Will elicit polar emotional responses when viewed by audiences of antithetical political backgrounds, and much of their power comes not so much from the work itself but rather from the fact that they act as a catalyst in the political climate in which they are shown. In a nation that has been so heavily propagandized into believing that Hitler is going to save the German State, even the smallest stimulus (his silhoutte in a convertible Mercedes) is enough to cause a strong emotional response in a sympathetic audience (and a violently negative one in a hostile crowd).

The films that are often the most dangerous are the ones in which the degree of subjectivity is masked. The biggest lies are often those which are sublime.

VIII

In 1929 Esther Shub wrote in The Arrival of Sound in Cinema:

> ..... for us documentarists it is crucial for us to learn how to record authentic sound, noise, voices, etc. with the same degree of expresiveness as we learned how to record authentic, non-staged reality. therefore we have little interest in what now goes on in film studios, in those hermetically sealed theatrical chambers dotted with microphones, sound intensifiers, and other technological props. We are interested in the experimental labs of the scientists and the true creators who can function as our sound operators.[9]

Among American documentary filmmakers in the nineteen-fifties the use of 16mm equipment gradually displaced the bulkier 35mm cameras, but mobility was still hampered by the lack of a means of independently recording synchronous sound. One of the few positive outcomes of World War II was the German development of magnetic sound recording, but even with a lightweight sound recorder the problem of synchronization was still unsolved. One early system developed required that the camera and tape recorder be connected by an umbilical cord. Another system utilized a single system magnetic stripe camera (such as the Auricon) to record the sound directly on the film, but these cameras produced inferior quality sound, and also posed editing

problems beause of the track delay.

During the late fifties the Drew Associates came up with a system that used a watch tuning fork to generate a continuous sync pulse for both the camera and recorder. By 1960, with the shooting of Primary the system was more or less functional and for the first time both the camera and tape recorder could function as fully independent information gathering devices. The freedom created by this new equipment now allowed filmmakers to shoot in almost completely uncontrolled situations, and to place new credence in "reality" by shunning the previous devices of voice-over and music.

With the advent of cinema verite, (direct cinema, observational cinema) the ancient objectivity/subjectivity argument once again gained new steam. Critics of the "new" documentaries mistakingly assumed that the practitioners of this form were claiming to show us the truth--that these filmmakers thought they were finally able to take a completely objective stance in the depiction of their subjects. Because these films were completely unscripted, because they were devoid of music, sound effects, montage and (more often than not) voice-overs, audiences somehow felt that they must inherently be more "truthful". This was not the case. What had actually had occured, was that the

language of the documentary had made a quantum leap and audiences (as well as critics) were having a difficult time catching up. The best of the old documentaries told stories, and the best of the new documentaries told stories as well. What these audiences refused to understand was that cinema verite was not so much the product of a group of filmmakers professing to show us the truth, but rather a well-defined working methodology that might allow us a glimpse into the lives of those before the camera, without the relentless didacticisms of the earlier documentaries. This methodology required that there be no re-enactments. Nobody in front of the camera would ever be asked to repeat anything. No interviews.

This faith in the spontaneous required that the camera be able to follow the action wherever it went--without any technical hindrances. Leacock said of Primary (1960), "for the first time we were able to walk in and out of buildings, up and down stairs, film in taxi cabs, all over the place and get synchronous sound"[10]. What is missing from most critical responses to the early cinema verite films is the recognition that this new ability to shoot anytime, anyplace, was a tremendous joy to those who were making these films. This new freedom to capture previously unfilmable events, to validate events that before were too trivial for the "serious" documentary, must have been

wonderfully exciting. Unfortunately, most of the critics became bogged down in the objectivity argument and completely missed much of the "insignificant" beauty in these new films.

As Bazin said of cinema in general--that the idea necessarily preceded its invention--cinema verite also had its own group of prophets. The work of Flaherty, Vertov, Renoir, and the Italian neo-realists all contributed to ideology behind the cinema verite film. Interestingly, this new form was not only predated by works in the motion picture medium, but also by a tradition born in still photography. The early work of the Drew associates was as much influenced by Drew's affiliation with Life magazine, as by Leacock's previous film work. The stylistic thrust of the previous Life photojournalism required that the photographer be constantly present with his subject so that he could capture the "climax" moment at the exact time and place where it occured. Although this capturing of the exact key moment was not quite as critical in film as it was in still photography, it nonetheless set the tone for the early work of the Drew Associates.

Drew saw this climax, or crisis moment, as both the ultimate goal of the shooting, as well as the conclusion of the film. The use of this crisis structure had several

advantages. Firstly, it was a storytelling device that audiences were already familiar with. With this new form of documentary came the possibility that audiences might have a difficult time "reading" the images on the screen without the aid of some sort of structural device that explained what was happening. Without it, a succession of "slice of life" images might have little meaning to the uninitiated audience. In a sense this structure eventually became an element of filmic vocabulary just as narration and music had in previous decades.

The crisis structure was also advantageous in that it defined a limited period over which the filming would take place. Instead of filmmakers spending months shooting a portrait and later having to worry about continuity while in the editing room, the crisis film was shot in maybe four or five days and provided its own internal continuity. This structure simplified the editing process in that it was almost reduced to making the events in the film unfold in a manner that closely corresponded to the way they had occured in front of the camera.

This structure obviously dictated the type of material that was chosen for the early films. A portrait of an artist going about his daily tasks, or talking about the meaning of his work was not likely to become the basis of a

Drew film. Instead, the topics chosen were more often than not crisises or contests: a primary election, a musical competition, an auto race--events that had the ability to excite an audience, that had a defined objective, and ones where we would be able to empathize with the characters on the screen; with their personal victories, their frustrations. The titles of these films gave away their structural origins: Primary, Football, Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment.

The fact that most of these films revolved around a crisis structure obviously limited the manner in which cinema verite initially looked at the world. These films presented a world filled with important men--leaders and heroes--making grave decisions, facing life and death situations, and taking it all in stride. With these films, the so called insignificant events, the moments of respite, could only be looked at in the context of the larger, overall crisis structure. A good portion of a subject's diversity and ambiguity was overlooked because it had no bearing on the conflict at hand. The crisis was at the core, and everything that was revealed was revealed through it.

Because the critics felt that this new form should convey both truth and objectivity in order to be valid, they

also demanded that those in front of the camera be acting in a "truthful" manner. A supposed advantage of the crisis structure was that the person before the lens would be so engrossed in the situation at hand, that the effect that the camera had on the way they acted would be almost negligible: but the inevitable question that arose after viewing a cinema verite film was how much did the filmmakers influence the action? What was the relationship of pro-filmic to filmic events?

After a screening of Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment, television station WNDT in New York aired a discussion about the film called "Presidency by Crisis". Editors from Time and National Review, CORE director James Farmer, and documentary filmmaker Willard Van Dyke gave their views on the film. Farmer considered the whole event staged and said that Wallace was play-acting for the camera. Others claimed that the technique made actors of everyone, and that cinema verite filmmakers should not be allowed to edit the material that they shot.[11] Leacock replies...

> .....Although we have reduced as much as possible the impact of the filming process on the situations we go into, we are obviously effecting them. When you make an electrical measurement you do it with a voltmeter, so you design your voltmeter so that very little goes through it. And in a very sensitive situation you need much less going

> in ways that are comfortable, rather than increase the discomfort by trying out new roles. This means that they will act in characteristic, rather than new ways. I couldn't suddenly act like an accountant or affect a factory workers speech if I didn't know anything about being an accountant or a factory worker. People are unable to assume a histrionic role just because the camera is present.[13]

In order to make a "truthful" film one s faced with one of two options: either completely eliminate the influence of the camera (a somewhat zealous critic once told Esther Shub that she should mount her camera in a wall so as to counteract its operator's influence[14]) or include within the film some type of contextual information giving the audience an idea of just how much the filmmaker was effecting his subject during the shooting. The first solution is probably impossible: the second rarely practiced.

It is not enough to simply minimize the filmmaker's effect in order to create a more "truthful" film, it is necessary to (furthering Leacock's voltmeter analogy) give us some additional kind of information, some sort of plus/minus measurement, to use as a reference by which to gauge the veracity of the work. This is not only an almost impossible problem for the filmmaker, but also a challenge for the audience. The "language" of the documentary has

changed with each film released, and the clues to subjectivity have become more and more sublime. Whereas the grammatical tools available to the documentarian in the thirties may have consisted of scores of easily detectable blatancies including voice-overs, emotional music, and the like, the selections available to the practitioners of cinema verite were often limited such subtleties as the choice of a prime versus a zoom lens.

A strange thing happened in some of the early crisis films. In some cases the actual conflict took a back seat in importance to the events that led up to it. One of the most revealing moments in Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment occurs in the beginning of the film when Wallace is giving a tour of his study and points to a portrait of a confederate general quoting something to the effect that, "It is better to die young rather than to live a life of compromise", he then looks at the filmmakers and says "of course that may not mean much to you fellows". Another of these moments take place in Happy Mothers Day when we see Mrs. Fisher in the barn with her older children and the five newly born kittens. It is a quiet, tender glimpse of the family, and one of the few moments where we get to see the family in its natural context--it is also a moment that does not fit neatly into the crisis structure.

During the mid to late sixties, the cinema verite film began to gradually drift away from the crisis or event structure. Proponents of the crisis film had previously functioned under the premise that the conflict event revealed something vital about an individual's character because the crisis itself acted as a catalyst which caused an individual to verblize or act out ideas and emotions that would otherwise remain internalized over the course of a normal, non-crisis day. The theory was that the emotional intensity of such an event would cause conflicting ideals to come to a head and situations would arise that were indicative of the people, institutions, or cultures, that were before the camera.

The inherent drawback with this type of film was that it could only provide a very narrow viewpoint. Although we were shown people engaged in bold, revealing action, we often weren't given enough information to infer what their motivation was for acting the way they did. The exciting, vibrant portrait we were shown was often a superficial one. The trend was now shifting. Instead of focusing their cameras on one event intensely for a few short days, filmmakers were expanding the technique to capture things that might take a longer time to reveal themselves. The main advantage of this longer shooting period was that it in

effect gave the audience a chance to witness the subject reacting to a wide variety of situations rather than just one singular event.

This abandonment of the crisis structure led to problems in the editing room. Whereas previously the structure was more or less dictated by the real life unfolding of events, the editor was now allowed a much freer hand in the restructuring and juxtaposing of scenes. The rushes from one of these films might have consisted of thirty hours of apparently disparate events that had little obvious relationship to each other, and the role of the editor was to distill this film down into one concise hour of meaningful material. If the crisis films were sometimes guilty of forcing footage into a conflict structure that it wouldn't always fit neatly into, these new films were guilty of not having enough of an explicit structure. Typical of the more popular of these non-event films were: The Maysles' Salesman and Grey Gardens, Leacock's A Stravinsky Portrait, and Petey and Johnny, and all of the Wiseman films.

Ellen Hovde, editor of Grey Gardens, comments...

> .....The difficulty in condensing reality is that it is not written as neatly as O'Neill. It is not as economical. And when you try to

> condense it into film time, you often find that the whole scene is falling apart. If the audience would sit there and watch thirty hours of material it would be wonderful, but they won't. So the first problem is to condense real time into film time without losing the quality that you liked so much about it. It is hard to make a film about psychological process rather than events.[15]

Fred Wiseman seems to feel that it is not so much a matter of simply condensing reality, but rather of completely restructuring it:

> .....It's the structural aspect that interests me the most, and the issue there is developing a theory that will relate these isolated, non-related sequences to each other. That is partially related to figuring out what each sequence means and then trying to figure how it either contradicts, or adds to, or expands some other sequence in the film. Then you try to figure out the effect of a particular sequence on that point of view of the film.....You are creating a fiction based on non-fiction material that these things are related to each other in your mind. The success of the film depends on the extent which the whole film creates the illusion that these events have in effect some connection to each other.[16]

Vertov saw pieces of film as bricks.

> with these bricks one can build a chimney, the wall of a fort, or one of many other things. And just as good bricks are needed to build a house, in

> order to make good films one needs good bits of film.....so there is no one truth, editing can serve to support any truths (or lies) that one wishes.[17]

There was (and still is) no clean solution to the editing problem. The more skillfully these films were made, the the more they seemed to mask the fact that they were subjective statements. The cleaner the cutting, the less evident the degree of reconstruction. This is where the sublime danger of cinema verite lay.

Unfortunately, most critics refuse to judge the documentary film with any of the criteria they apply to the narrative. When speaking of fiction films, they often write of how the director has elegantly translated his world view into filmic language by utilizing specific filmic techniques to help to convey his message, but this is rarely mentioned of the documentary (except for the occasional jab at the "shaky camerawork"). These same critics insist that documentarians are blindly attempting to make fully objective statements that re-create life "as it really is", but this is simply not true. Cinema verite films are obviously biased films, and it is this inherent subjectivity that gives them their life. As long as audiences remain unwilling to understand this it will remain a problem.

One possible way for filmmakers to combat this problem is to include contextual clues to subjectivity in their work. I am not speaking of a disclaimer telling audiences that they should look at the following film with several grains of salt; this would be a far too simplistic solution to a complex problem. We need to let audiences know why what we are filming is interesting to us, but this subjective information musn't hinder the unfolding of the story. It musn't be academic. It must in no way clutter the film with qualifying statements. It can't be allowed to in any way detract from the beauty of the film--it must enhance it. We must find a way to create a balance between the world view of those in front of the lens and those behind it.

Leacock sums it up nicely:

> ....."In a funny sort of way our films are the audience--a recorded audience. The films are a way of sharing my audience experience."[18]

EVERYTHING MUST CHANGE

My thesis movie (EVERYTHING MUST CHANGE) is about a group of four people--all of whom are over sixty-five, two of whom are blind--who create and perform an original play. Since much of the material for the play came directly from the combined life experiences of the group, I chose to document not only the entire process of writing, rehearsing, and performing the work, but also to film them outside of the playmaking environment. After several months of discussions and meetings, a script emerged that in some strange way reflected the ambitions, fears, and insights of those in the group. In many ways the performances we eventually see on stage are very close approximations of events that actually happened in these people's lives.

The idea of making a movie about the play "Heavenly Discourses" originally appealed to me because I felt that the creation of a play would provide a wonderful vehicle by which to create a multiple portrait film, and that by depicting the play's development, I could create a context in which to view these portraits. In a sense, the finished film is a cross-bred bastardization of cinema verite. On

one hand I rely heavily upon the crisis structure (the rehearsal and final performance of the play provide the structural core--the cohesiveness--for the work). On the other, the film is about a non-event in that it spends much screen time exploring the central characters outside the realm of the crisis structure.

In creating a central core based on the on-going progress of the play, I was allowed to pursue tangents that in a less defined structure might not make sense. This allowed me a great degree of freedom in terms of continuity. By setting up a matrix in the beginning of the film in which it is made clear that the film is going to jump into one persons life, and then into another's--all in the course of fourty-five seconds--I gave myself much more interpretational leeway than if I began the film by simply documenting the events in a linear manner. Because of this initial set up, I could easily cut directly from Marie shopping, to the actual performance of the play, to one of the early rehearsal sessions, and then to Eleanor at the beach--in this process completely destroying chronology of the events as they originally occured.

The question arises--how ethical is this kind of editing? On one hand we can say that this style of cutting is so convoluted that it makes it impossible for the

audience to see the individuals on the screen in any context other than the one the filmmaker has placed them in; that this type of editing does not allow for multiple readings, that in some way we have violated the integrity of those we have chosen to film. On the other, we can say that with this structure the filmmaker makes no pretense of showing the audience anything more than his solitary perception of the events that happened before the lens. The finished film is little more than a piece of interpretational fiction.

Marie is probably the most vibrant individual in the group. She prides herself on her prowess as a shopper and can sniff out bargains blocks away. She used to drink heavily, but no longer does. She used to be quite domestic, but now she is a firm believer in using paper plates 365 days a year. She is also probably the best improvisationalist of the group.

Eleanor is the dilettante. She plays the piano, (sort of) paints, (sort of) and likes foreign films. She went to college, and later taught grade school. She doesn't have to worry about money and often talks about her nephew who lives in Texas.

Bill is the oldest of the group, he claims to have been

the only black man in his graduating class from Harvard back in the twenties. He spent most of his life as a chef and lost an index finger to a resentful lobster about to go into the pot. He has also almost completely lost his vision, but he can still read half-inch high letters from about two feet away with the aid of thick glasses and a high power magnifying glass. He is probably the most articulate, yet the most reclusive of the group.

Louise always wears red lipstick and goes nowhere without her dog Posie. She is blind from birth, and is deeply in love with her husband Bob, who is also legally blind. She sings and tap dances.

Mark is the director, and is twenty-five years younger than the youngest actor of the group. He is the prima donna. He treats the members of the group the same way he treats his drama class at Princeton. This is real theatre; not a senior citizen activity class. They all respect him immensely.

Everything Must Change is a record of the ten months of preparation that these people put into the making of "Heavenly Discourses". The play is loosely structured around the arrival of of the group in a mysterious cafeteria that contains a coffee machine, a telephone, a telescope,

and a questionnaire with seventy questions. As the play progresses the telephone rings and an unfamiliar voice tells them that they have an hour to finish their questionnaires. During this final hour they sing, get drunk, reflect upon a few of the questions, and eventualy surmise that they are in some sort of ante room awaiting the hand of death to sweep them away.

My involvement with the project began in the fall of 1982 when Diane Pansen and myself shot a three-quarter inch video tape of an earlier show the group performed ("Sailing Along"). Unfortunately we didn't begin shooting until the script was completely written, so the material we shot consisted solely of the final rehearsals and early performances. By the time we began taping, the script had become crystalized in players' minds and the remaining process of putting the play together became a very mechanical one. Our original hope of capturing the group in the active process of creating a work that somehow reflected their lives remained unfulfilled. Although the tape was at least successful in showing mechanics of what went into the production of the play, it did little to reveal anything meaningful about the personalities of those who appeared on the stage.

Two years later, (this time equipped with sixty rolls

of high speed Eastman color negative film) MJ Doherty and myself went in to begin filming a new play, only this time from the very first rehearsal. We arrived at the first session about ten minutes late, and after shooting one roll I became thoroughly confused. Mark was talking about immortality and asked Eleanor if she thought that film had the power to immortalize someone. Eleanor replied that she had seen a film about Caruso, and that he was probably immortal, but that she didn't think it was because someone had made a film about him. Marie replied, saying that there was no such thing as immortality because one-hundred years ago you were nothing, and one-hundred years from now you'll again be nothing ("except maybe for worms"). Eleanor started in on something about the Taj Mahal being immortal because it was built as a monument to love, and that she gave money to the Catholic Charities Fund out of love, and that that might serve to imortalize her. Marie thought that if she was in a film and the TV station ran out of things to show then they could always dig up the film with her in it and put that on (but that still wouldn't mean that she was immortal).

Somewhere around this point I got completely lost. These initial discussions were difficult to shoot because everything that happened was strictly verbal. The sessions were a mixture of Mark's prodding, Eleanor's admissions,

Marie's improvisations, Bill's bad jokes, and everybody's gossip. The conversations hopped from subject to subject so quickly that I often found shooting a sequence extremely difficult; by the time I had figured out where a conversation might be heading, I had usually missed filming the beginning and it all ended not making too much any sense anyway.

Some days Mark would come in and be in his prodding mood. He'd start out by questioning Bill about his sex life, and then go on to ask Eleanor about what it felt like to be old--having her examine the wrinkles on her hand. At times these sessions seemed more like group therapy than the rehearsal for a play.

The one thing that Mark was insistent about was the role of the mask, and much of the early work centered around him attempting to get everybody to understand this point. His claim was that the only way he could understand what someone else in the group was thinking was by what they showed him with their mask; that the mask we present to the world is the only way that others have to understand us. The basic premise was that in order for an actor to utilize a theatrical mask, he must first understand how he uses the mask in everyday life, so much of the rehearsal time was spent playing with the mask; manipulating it,

seeing how it related to real life masks, creating new ones, and changing it in a split second.

As the rehearsals progressed, Mark came in with bits and pieces of script. The first run throughs were usually awkward, but occasionally something magical happened. In one scene we see Marie reading a piece of material for the first time. At first she stumbles over the words, just trying to get the idea of what is on the paper.

> I knew a woman once, always brave, always laughing, she protected her brood of four like a lioness. But, late at night, long after the others had gone to sleep, she laid there and trembled till exhaustion carried away.

When we see her run through this we realize that Mark has written these words expressly for her; this is Marie's personalized mask. On her second reading she dramatizes the lines heavily, with an emphatic "trrrrrembbled". Mark laughs, Marie laughs. This time he tells her to visualize the woman on the bed. All of the energy of the day has gone away, she's all alone, she's scared. Marie runs through the lines again, this time she doesn't need the script. She changes the wording around, but this time it is real. This time she reveals something of herself--and we see a piece of Marie's life transformed into the words of a script, and then back again into a part of her life.

One of the central scenes in Everything Must Change is of Eleanor at the beach letting her hair down, taking her stockings off, and falling asleep. For all practical purposes, this scene doesn't belong in a cinema verite film. It is completely contrived. Eleanor hasn't been to the beach in thirty years--she never even liked to go as a child. We dragged her there. It is a lie.

I think this a beautiful scene. Without her speaking of what it was like to be a young girl--without her recounting a single story--we get a vivid picture of who this woman was in her younger days. We see her long hair in the breeze. The scene gives us information that would be almost impossible for us to infer from footage of Eleanor in rehearsal, or in an interview, or eating breakfast or whatever. It is completely fictional; but does that mean that it's not valid? I don't know.

I do know that much of the joy a filmmaker derives from his work is based upon the telling of stories--of creating things that couldn't exist before he put them on film. Denying him any of the the wonderful possibilities that this can allow is probably a big mistake. As long as the person with the camera treats the subject with respect, as long as

the integrity of those before the lens is in no way violated, as long as there is some sort of balance between the ideology of the filmmaker, and the world view of his subject, then I don't think he can screw up too much.

FOOTNOTES

1. Andre Bazin, What is Cinema? (University of California Press, 1976), p. 13.

2. Peter Wollen, Semiotic Counter Strategies (Verso Editions, 1982), p. 179.

3. Quoted in Wollen, Semiotic Counter Strategies p. 181.

4. Bazin, What is Cinema?, p. 9.

5. Erik Barnouw, Documentary (Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 6.

6. Barnouw, Documentary, pp. 26,27.

7. Barnouw, Documentary, p. 22.

8. Barnouw, Documentary, p. 25.

9. Thomas Waugh, Show Us Life (Scarecrow Press, 1984), p. 34.

10. Stephen Mamber, Cinema Verite in America (MIT Press, 1974), p. 30.

11. Mamber, Cinema Verite in America, p. 111.

12. Lewis Jacobs, The Documentary Tradition (Hopkinson and Blake, 1971), p. 407.

13. Richard Barsam, Non Fiction Film: Theory and Criticism (E.P. Dutton, 1976), p. 300.

14. Nicholas Pronay, Propoganda, Politics, and Film (Macmillan Press, 1972), p. 250.

15. Alan Rosenthal. The Documentary Conscience (University of California Press, 1980), p. 384.

16. Barsam, Non Fiction Film: Theory and Criticism, p. 303.

17. Dziga Vertov, "The Writings of Dziga Vertov", (Film Culture, Summer, 1962), p. 114.

18. Jacobs, The Documentary Tradition, p. 406.

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