

A Revolution in Documentary

1960 A Revolution in Documentary Film Making as seen by a participant. By Richard Leacock January 12, 1993

Today, when I look at the documentary or journalistic films made for television in the early 1960's it is hard to see them as having been "revolutionary". You must recall that up to this time documentary films had been made on 35mm film. As a result, most action, or news footage was shot with spring driven hand cameras with no synchronous sound; narration and music took care of everything. Rather than take the sound equipment into the field it was more practical to bring people into the studio and interview them; there was Edward R. Murrow speaking for CBS as he puffed away on his cigarette, skillfully interviewing subjects with occasional images of what they were talking about, cut in. No problem, it worked.

However, some of us were uncomfortable with this way of making "films". They were almost entirely verbal, illustrated radio programs whose effectiveness was almost entirely governed by the viewers trust in the man smoking the cigarettes. It certainly was not cinematic. My prime objective as a documentary film maker had always been to try and convey to an audience, what it was like "to be there". To achieve this you had to go back to the original object of documentary: to observe; to replicate aspects of your own perception of what you saw and heard going on around you.

In 1958 I had been sent to Israel, with my friend Lenny Bernstein and his wife Felicia. I was to make a film record of his conducting tour. Obviously I needed synchronous sound for this project, and I needed mobility because things were going to be happening fast. So I made a big concession and took 16mm equipment, frowned on by the people in charge but at least marginally lighter than the customary 35mm equivalent. We had a wonderful time and made a nice film but I missed every exceptional and revealing event that happened. We were always too late. It doesn't matter whether you are a second late or an hour late; late is late! You missed it and it doesn't help, after the maestro has lost his temper during a rehearsal, to go up to him and ask him to loose his temper over again "for the benefit of the camera"!

This experience gave me a goal with clearly defined standards. I needed a camera that I could hand hold, that would run on battery power; that was silent, you can't film a symphony orchestra rehearsing with a noisy camera; a recorder as portable as the camera, battery powered, with no cable connecting it to the camera, that would give us quality sound; synchronous, not

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just with one camera but with all cameras. What we call in physics, a general solution. Filming an orchestra with two or three cameras, all in sync with a high quality recorder and all mobile... This became a goal that took another three years of intensive effort to achieve. Remember that the transistor, without which none of these goals could be achieved, was still in its infancy. In the meantime I had met and started working with Robert Drew, an editor at Life Magazine who had an obsessive need to reform Television Journalism; to get rid of the interviews, to get rid of the narrators and to get the camera back to what it should be doing; observing.

While I thought in terms of a "project" Drew thought in terms of reforming an industry and he had both the vision and the contacts to do it. We were able to have equipment built for us and we did. We made several small films such as BULLFIGHT AT MALAGA where our new equipment failed to work. The same was true on PRIMARY where we had a weird mixture of equipment but by sheer hard work we managed to achieve some of our goals, it was a beginning. Pennebaker, who was trained as an electrical engineer, joined us and spent much of his time in a hotel room fixing our equipment. Al Maysles and Terry McCartney-Filgate were filming with noisy old Arriflex cameras while Drew and I had the only "synchronous system" a modified Auricon which took 100 ft. reels (2 1/2 minutes) of film and had a cable connecting me to Bob Drew's recorder. We were breaking all the rules of the industry. We were shooting and editing our own footage on location. The people taking sound were not "sound men", they were reporters, journalists, trained in finding and telling stories. It was a collaborative work, filmmakers and journalists; not cameramen and soundmen.

There were no interviews and little narration. Bob Drew was executive producer and had final say; he bore the burden of responsibility for the outcome, he worked with us and took sound and sweated over the editing. PRIMARY was shot in about five days with four two-man crews; no script, no lights, no tripods, no questions, no directions, never ask anyone to do anything. Just watch and listen. Then the same people that shot moved into a hotel suite and edited with little film viewers and sound heads. We worked hard and fast, I think we had a cut of the long version in about two weeks. Many people who have seen the film think that we were "pro Kennedy". I can only speak for myself with assurance, but I would say that we all knew of Humphry's liberal voting record and we didn't know much about Kennedy except that he was too rich and that "his father was a fascist". We were New York "liberals". The greatest thrill for me and for Drew was when we were able to walk into the little photographers studio and film Senator Kennedy having his portrait made; we were able to just walk in shooting and go right on shooting, and make a sequence. In

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order to be sure that we had access, Bob Drew and I had spoken to Sen. Kennedy before, in Washington. He had agreed that I alone, with no lights, no tripod, asking no questions... could film discretely in his private suite when election results were coming in... a first (and probably a last). I was very much involved in the final editing of all these films. For me the art of filming is inseparable from that of editing. Clearly we are selecting when we shoot and also when we edit, I am trying to convey "aspects of the film makers perception of what took place..." For example: we had a shot of the large audience waiting for "the Senator" to arrive, a lady announces that "someone smoking a cigar has burned the dress of a lady..." we found a shot of a man smoking a cigar, we found a shot of an irate looking lady, we put them together, it is fun and true to the sense of the occasion, this is film making. Condensing, creating sequences that generate tension, expectancy... the art of storytelling that is essentially true to its source. PRIMARY does not tell you much about the issues of the time except Humphry's insistence that he represents the farmers and Kennedy's warlike stance in "we can see the eyes of the enemy on yonder hill and we shall give the same affirmative answer..." this film gives the feel of the campaign process, and after thirty years it still works for me.

Filming THE CHAIR, we again had problems of access. David Page Moore, the lawyer, welcomed the publicity that we might give his anti-capital-punishment stance, though he thought that all we wanted was a brief interview. But getting into the prison, access to Paul Crump, access to the Parole Board, the Governor, the prosecutor? All precedents were against us. In all likelihood, we faced an execution without access. We were also confronted with a very delicate situation. Paul Crump's appeal based on wrongful conviction had twice been rejected by the Supreme Court. Now, with the execution date only days away, Moore was about to concede guilt (a very dangerous tactic) and argue that Paul had been rehabilitated during his nine years wait in prison and should therefore not be executed. This was not only unprecedented, it was dangerous. Louis Nizer, one of Americas leading trial lawyers joined him. In no way could they argue that Paul was not guilty. They succeeded. Paul Crump is still in prison. The Prosecutor in this film, Jim Thompson is now Governor of the state of Illinois. As Attorney General of the state he prosecuted and jailed both former Governor Koerner and the prison Psychiatrist who testified in Paul's favor. We had to tread a very careful line to keep from prejudicing the case. Drew and I went into Moore's office, he asked what he could do for us; we said "nothing" and dumping our equipment, went out for coffee. When we returned, Moore was on the phone... we started filming and stayed for two days. Meanwhile Pennebaker and Shuker were at the prison getting to know the warden and

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avoiding the press. Again, the film is a condensation of a massive event. HAPPY MOTHERS DAY, was made after Pennebaker and I had left the Drew organization and were minimally equipped and broke. I got a telephone call from a friend who was editor of the Saturday Evening Post, a then, highly successful magazine. He wanted to know what it would cost for us to make a film about the Fisher Quintuplets in Aberdeen South Dakota. I had not heard about this, in those days, exceedingly rare event... he told me that his magazine had purchased the rights to "exploit the Quints..." and that a TV film was part of the "package". I named a price and asked for an advance which we sorely needed. Joyce Chopra and I left immediately and spent three weeks on a story that I found to be intrinsically idiotic. However, as we got involved we became more and more aware of the "exploitation" of which we were a part. We debated what we should do; we could leave and loose the money we had already spent... we decided to tell the Fisher family that from that point on we would only film them in public situations, which is what we did, and made exploitation the theme of our film. My editor friend loved our film but his boss, the publisher did not. They made another film from our material which was full of love and music. What has changed in the "Industry"? Thirty years ago we were the only people that could work this way but it was not long before everyone had similar equipment and swarms of "media" people were surrounding the politicians. Today no one can get the access that we had then. If they let one in they have to let the whole mob in! None of our other principals are observed: you have Camera-people, Sound-people, Light-people, Producers, Directors, editors... they ask questions and endlessly interview, they tell people where to sit, where to look... and as on the beaches of Mogadische the media lights the arrival of the United States Marines in all their glorious war paint... tant pis!