Cinema Verite - Film Truth

Truth- this simple word has been studied and pondered since the beginning of time. It is but one from a long list of abstractions which are considered universally desirable by all men. Love, peace, truth, freedom...each of these abstractions may have different meanings within each culture, yet all are considered desirable.

The quest for this elusive truth has taken many shapes and forms. During the age of Socrates, the orator and philosopher contended that truth was one of the universals, a "mold" by which all forms were created. To Odysseus and the other heroes of the quest, truth was the unreachable goal which they strove to find during their odysseys. Even today, philosophers and theologians, musicians and artists strive to find what they consider the "true way of the world."

In 1918, a Russian artist, Dziga Vertov, began to experiment with a new type of film making approach which he termed kino eye or kino drama (true eye). These films were similar to the newsreel films of the time but were "...a purer form of factual film, for [their] aesthetic intent was to separate and to preserve the more permanent aspects of everyday life from the
Transient stuff that makes up newsreels." In fact, these films were a celebration of everyday life. Vertov was the first to use the movie camera strictly as an observer, a recorder of events and happenings as they occurred without a script or scenario.

It is from Vertov's early experiments in kino eye that the style now known as cinema verite or direct cinema originated. Perhaps a note of clarification is in order. Of all the different styles of film making, none has more names for the same basic premise as cinema verite. Verite, direct cinema, film truth, living cinema, mobile camera, film inquiry, synchronous cinema, cinema of common sense, personal documentary, telle-verite... are just a few of the terms I found for this approach. Throughout the remainder of this discussion, I will use cinema verite and direct cinema interchangeably.

Whatever the term, the basic desire of all of the films of this type is the same. Richard Barsam, in his book Nonfiction Film explains:

"To use lightweight equipment in an informal attempt to break down the barriers between film maker and subject, to oversimplify procedure to get to the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and to catch events while they are happening, rather than to question events that have happened in the past. The technical characteristics of the new approach are simple: impromtu interviews, hand held cameras, direct sound recording, and conscious informality."

The first obstacle which had to be overcome if cinema verite was going to succeed, was the mechanical problems brought about by
the large, cumbersome 35mm movie camera and the necessity of
direct sound recording. Vertov's first attempts at these films
were produced using large cameras on tripods and of course these
films were silent. As technology advanced, the modern film
makers felt that independence from the tripod as well as
synchronized sound were the elements which were missing from
Vertov's early attempts to catch "the truth." Modern
documentarists believed that the necessity of the still camera
forced the subjects to behave abnormally... to act rather then to
simply be themselves. Also, without the use of natural
synchronized sound, or "nat-sound", the editor and director could
manipulate the footage, again destroying the element of truth in
cinema verite (film truth). Erik Barnouw explains: "The
non-talking people tended to be puppets, manipulated in the
editing. Their silent gestures and looks always had various
potential meanings, which context or the sound track could
credulate." 4

The conquering of synchronized sound is generally attributed
to the work of Richard Leacock and Robert Drew. In the 1950's,
the 35mm camera and tripod were quickly being replaced by the
16mm hand help camera. However, for editing flexibility and
optimum quality, sound and image had to be recorded separately.
"This meant that a synchronized-sound shooting team was, at best,
an awkward four-legged creature" explains Barnouw. 5 For the same
reason that the mobility of the tripod free camera was essential.
namely not to interfere with the natural occurrences of the subjects, Leacock and Drew felt that independent sound and image recording was essential to eliminate the presence of the documentary crew.

Through research funded by Time Inc., Leacock and Drew were finally able to develop a synchronized sound-image recording system which allowed the camera and microphone independent movement and freedom. In technical terms, the work of Leacock and Drew peaked in 1961 in the film Eddie, about race car driver Eddie Sachs, in which camera, recorder and microphones became independently mobile elements.

With technology no longer the problem it once was, cinema verite began to flourish, especially after World War II. During the war, audiences became accustomed to the newsreel films prior to all of the features. These films brought the war back to the home front. After the war "...Audiences with a background of personal involvement in the horrors of war, and exposed to newsreel films that presented the realities of the conflict, had a tendency to reject any presentation of war subjects packaged in the style of the studio film.6 This rejection of the studio production enticed many directors to try their hand at cinema verite.

Although the premise of these films in all based on the same idea, to capture the "truth" as it occurs, directors found many
different areas to scrutinize with the camera. Many of the first attempts at direct cinema were films about everyday people. Films with such titles as *The Salesman*, *The Chair*, and *Happy Mothers Day* explored the everyday lives of not so famous, fairly ordinary people. Others decided to record the "true person" of such notable personalities as Bob Dylan in the film *Don't Look Back*, or Jane Fonda in the film *Jane*. Still there were others, notably Frederick Wiseman, who felt cinema verite was best suited to explore the truth behind society's institutions with such films as *Hospital*, *Basic Training*, and *Law and Order*.

Despite the wide variety of topics to concentrate on, it is of little importance to note who or what the subject is, if that subject is not not interesting and full of life. Each of these which are now considered successful, were films about someone or something which was interesting. D. A. Pennebaker, the award winning documentarist of such films as *Jane* (1962), *Don't Look Back* (1966), *Monterey Pop* (1968), and others, believed that in order to succeed, these films..."Needed to capture the spiritual energy..." of the subject. Barsam continues: "It is the subject and not the treatment that matters. No amount of camera work can create an interesting film about a dull person, but, on the other hand, an unimaginative film maker make a dull film about a great person."7

So while these films attempt to capture the "truth," to record a piece of a persons or groups spirituality, there is a
grey area as to whether or not these films can actually record
the truth. By the very choice of the topic, the director is, in
effect saying, "I think this is interesting."

Another element which is of major concern to the director of
a cinema verite film, is the degree by which the presence of the
film crew is altering the realities of the situation which they
are recording. Many critics of this style of film maintain that,
although these films may be interesting, to state that they are
capturing the truth is a fallacy.

Nazareno Fabbretti, in the book *What is Cinema Verite*, is
one of the many who voice objections to the style. "The
characters who accept to play themselves in front of the camera
are the first [to] modify themselves." Some of the directors,
namely Leacock and Mallees, worried a great deal about their
presence and were always always attempting to be as inconspicuous
as possible. Others, such as Maysles and Wiseman did not feel
the camera had a significant effect on the subjects once they had
gotten used to the crew and the camera. Still, another
philosophy, held most noteably by the french director Jean Rouch,
felt that the camera was a "valuable catalytic agent, a
reflector of the inner truth."9

Rouch's belief that the camera was a catalyst, provides the
only real division of this genre known as cinema verite. In
very broad terms, there can be considered two schools of thought
in direct cinema film making; the American School and the French
school. While each of these two schools attempt to capture the truth, their approach toward the subject is completely different.

The French verite is best represented by the films of Jean Rouch. Rouch's approach to verite was quite different from others because he used the camera to stimulate his subjects...to make them "act" as they normally would given a certain scenario. Rouch believed that the camera was more like a mirror than the window of the American documentarist. Rouch was still interested in capturing "real" people and telling their story, but he believed that the camera forced his subjects to reveal more of themselves than they ordinarily would. Rouch would use realistic "on the scene" shooting, ordinary people (not actors), would introduce situations or stimuli to them, and then record the reactions and interactions of the subjects. The subjects and the director developed a rapport and trust thus making these films more revealing and, according to the French documentarist, closer to the truth. Rouch explains:

You push the people to confess themselves and it seemed to us without any limit...its a very strange kind of confession in front of the camera where the camera is, lets say, a mirror and also a window open to the outside.10

Rouch, and other documentarist of the French school even set up fictitious scenarios to stimulate and probe their subjects. Although the scenarios were set up, the responses, how these subjects react and deal with the situation, reveals the true
In stark contrast to this approach, the American school of thought strives for complete anonymity. Where the French documentarists sees the camera as a mirror, the American sees the camera only as a window. To the French, the camera is a catalyst to probe the subjects of the documentary; to the American it is merely a recording device to capture the real truth as it naturally occurs. Another very important difference in these two styles is the difference in the way the director and/or film maker interacts with the subjects.

To the American, rapport with his subjects would lessen the chance of revealing the objective truth. Rather, the American documentarist wishes to "feel comfortable" with his subject, to blend into the background so that with time, the subject forgets he is being filmed. To Rouch and the French documentarist, the camera is an instrument of communication between the film maker and the subjects, among the subjects themselves, and between the audience and the camera. The French documentarist believes that without rapport, without friendship and understanding, the subject always feels "on", will always hold back and reveal only what they want others to see.

The final difference between the French and American verite is the intervention into the events of the subject. To the French, to intervene to probe, to set up scenarios is essential to reveal the truth. To the American to record the facts, as
they occur with no stimulation is the only method to the truth. James Blue as quoted in *What is Cinema Verite?* summarizes the differences.

The Europeans are eclectic, unitarian. All ways lead to the Truth-God. They intervene, probe, interview, provoke situations that might suddenly reveal something. There is an attempt to obtain from the subject a kind of creative participation. The Americans are, for the most part, fundamentalists. They eschew all intervention whatever its goal. They cultivate an alert passivity. They seek self-efficiency. They want the subject to forget they are there. "

I have just completed my first attempt at a cinema verite film which I have titled *We've Come So Far*. The video is an attempt to reveal what it is like working in a small, non-professional theatre group in a midwestern college. As I began my project, it was my hope to stick to the strict guidelines of the American school of verite. However, I found that a combination of these two philosophies emerged during the editing process.

The early footage has a coldness about it, a feeling of simply observing. But, there is also a feeling that all of the actors are acting off stage as well as on stage. However, as time passed I began to mold into the background of the theatre as the actors and actresses began concentrating on their roles. By the third week, an interesting phenomenon began to occur, which I never noticed while shooting. During the editing, however, it was obvious from the footage that my friendship and rapport was
growing with my subjects as I began to influence them, and them me. A large portion of my footage was unuseable because most of the audio was from this "talking window!"

Having read about the French verite I used this friendship and rapport to build dialogue with the actors and crew. It was my hope that this dialogue could be used in place of voice over narration to tell my story. It was my hope that this method would reveal more of what theatre was really like because members themselves would be telling the story.

Throughout the course of the six weeks of shooting, an interesting combination of the two philosophies occurred. During the blocking, or notes, or when the director was giving notes, my camera was simply a recorder. The cast was so use to me and my camera, and they knew me well enough to trust me, that I was able to catch true emotion...anger frustration and happiness. However, other times, skits and antics by the members of the cast and crew were performed just for me just so the could be on TV!!

As to the success of this approach? I do not yet know. It is my hope that the spirit os this group...the work, pain, fun and happiness can be shown in a creative and entertaining format which is called cinema verite.
Endnotes


5. Ibid., p. 235.


9. Barnouw, p. 253

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10. Issari and Paul p. 73.

11. Ibid., p. 105.
Bibliography


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