

A New Way of Film-Making:

Cinéma-Verité

Tryg Sletteland
Documentary Film
June 6, 1967

Cinema-verité is a term which has been used with increasing frequency during the past seven years to describe a kind of film-making that has come out of the classical documentary. The method involved in this film-making takes great advantage of the portable cameras and sound recorders that were developed at the turn of this decade. This new equipment is sufficiently light to allow the camera to go literally anywhere and record everything, to catch life on the fly. The aim of Cinema-verité is to do just that, using editing- not editorial comment- to eliminate the inessential and illuminate the essence.

The term was first used by the movement's most famous figure, Jean Rouch, whose film Chronicle of a Summer is one of the first and most famous examples of Cinema-verité. A qualification which would apply to both Rouch and the other self-proclaimed practitioners of Cinema-verité is a technical one, here explained by Richard Leacock, the most famous American film-maker working within the form. "We are working now with equipment which is sufficiently light to make it possible for us to record both sound and image at the same time, and it is portable. And no lights, no tripods, no wires, no plugging in; you can film synchronous sound anywhere, any moment. It is this technical aspect that is the basis for a fundamentally different approach to filming." This approach, according to Leacock, is a sort of scientific journalism- a means of reporting which extends the personal into personal terms. As Leacock's producer at the time of the above statement put it, "...the filmmaker's personality is in no way directly involved in directing the action. It is

completely and totally absorbed in recording..."

Reuch, on the other hand, becomes unusually involved in his subjects to the extent that he puts himself in Chronicle of a Summer as the motivating force for the words and actions of the characters. Why this personal involvement? "It was necessary in Chronique. Merin, (who is given credit for Chronique, along with Reuch) who was odious to so many spectators of Chronique, was for me indispensable, because he was the one who asked questions and the one to whom one could ask questions."

Reuch even planned and rehearsed many parts of Chronique: the scene of the conversation on the jetty at St. Tropez, or the scene with the woman walking through Paris remembering her deportment during the war. This is as far from Leacock's desired objectivity, which forms the opposite pole of the Cinéma-vérité approach, where the goal of film-making is the complete self-effacement of the director who tries to be the ideal witness.

Leacock often attacks Reuch's approach, saying, "We don't go around asking questions like Reuch. We simply observe the situation and follow it through to where it leads us." Leacock's hostility to Reuch's mixture of genres is shared by his former partner Robert Drew. With Drew and Don Pennebaker he made films for Time-Life (The Living Camera Films), until he and Pennebaker withdrew to set up life on their own. Their approach was generally to film twenty-four hours in the life of a newsworthy person.

They recorded Jane Fonda's preparation for her first starring role on Broadway. The show was a flop and Miss Fonda received bad reviews. Drew's camera caught the tension, the exhilaration, and the letdown of the opening night as lived by Jane Fonda.

Eddy, or On the Pole, recorded race driver Eddy Sachs' race at Indianapolis in 1962. He lost. Crisis was the 1963 Governor Wallace-Kennedy integration battle, while Primary covered the Kennedy-Humphrey confrontation in the 1960 Presidential campaign. Susan Starr concerned a young piano player's efforts in a contest and The Chair centered on the struggle to get a Negro a reprieve from going to the electric chair. Three of the less successful Living Camera films were David, about a drug addict in California's Synanon House, Pete and Johnnie, which filmed the struggle between a youth worker and a juvenile delinquent, and Nehru, the observation of a typical day in the life of the Indian Premier. A glance at the Drew-Leacock films reveals that they work only when the subject matter structures itself naturally. When the filmed matter is structured by the film-makers, it seems artificial and obvious.

Chronicle of a Summer was started with the Leacock approach in mind. The term cinéma-vérité was drawn by Reuch from Dziga Vertov's 1924 Communist Manifesto on the cinema, which advised shooting reality realistically upon the assumption that material reality is the only truth. This materialistic philosophy lies at the base of the documentary approach and perhaps sheds light on the fact that many of the famous documentarians are avowed Marxists. Chris Marker's Cuba Si! is a lucid and passionate essay on a Castroite; his work will be mentioned later.

Reuch's interest in film was at first ^{as} an auxiliary to his profession- anthropology. It is hardly surprising that his concern would at first be with cinema as a means of recording.

In Chronicle, the means became the end. Rouch's first films were on Africa. The inclusion of Landry, the African student, in Chronicle is symptomatic of his concern with anthropological problems. What happens when two cultures meet? Such is the point of questions addressed to Landry. Rouch later made a film for the National Film Board of Canada named Rose and Landry. His earlier Fils De d'Eau combines several separate segments made in 1947-1951 on the various customs of a tribe which lives along the Niger. It concerns rainmakers, circumcision rites, and a hippopotamus hunt- totally objective traditional documentary. Mad Masters is a record and an interpretation of a horrible ceremony practiced by the members of a secret society in Ghana. Mei, Un ^{noir} Meis is the story of three men who come from the interior to an Ivory Coast town looking for work.

The objectivity of these works was at first attempted in the essay of the people of Paris during the summer of 1960-Chronicle of a Summer. However, the off-the-cuff method of shooting and the seduction of the film-makers by their material soon led them to abandon this approach. Rouch first filmed his subjects, then filmed them again as they discussed their reactions to seeing themselves. Continuity was provided by the overlapping of a character from one sequence to the next.

The contention of Rouch and his admirers is that the subjectivity involved in his method gives the humanity to a film which can turn it from mere reportage into a work of art. There can be no art without an artist, an "auteur," and thus Leacock's approach is a false one. Besides, they insist, one can never be totally

objective- even Leacock selects his subjects, selects what to shoot, and then again selects which footage will be incorporated into the finished film- which is subjectivity whether he admits it or not. Jean-Luc Godard expresses his feelings on the falsity of Leacock's approach in succinct terms: "Leacock and his team do not take account (and the cinema is nothing but the taking of account) that their eye in the act of looking through the viewer is at once more and less than the registering apparatus which serves the eye...Deprived of consciousness, this, Leacock's camera, despite its honesty, loses the two fundamental qualities of a camera: intelligence and sensibility. His lack of subjectivity, in the last analysis, leads Leacock to lack objectivity."

So does the most famous auteur demolish the new mysticism in which unvarnished reality is sacred; the auteur is the anti-Christ. In the above statement, Godard expresses the thought of Karl Jaspers in Reason and Existence when the philosopher speaks of the basic unsurveyability of human existence. One cannot know oneself, let alone all that lies around one. You cannot stand outside the world to obtain objectivity and knowledge in the scientific sense because you are right in the midst of the world. There is no satisfactory vantage point which includes everything. Thus is existence ununderstandable and unsurveyable.

Yet history tries to survey existence and journalism is the basis of history. History and journalism are thus absurd- we can know things about society, but this is not the same thing as knowing it in its totality. Thus Godard made Vivre Sa Vie the way that he did; thus Rouch abandoned the anthropological

film with its search for objectivity to make Chronicle of a Summer. Thus both attack Leacock and the type of Cinéma-vérité which he represents.

Yet I do not feel that Chronicle is the way out of the dilemma. I find it boring- no questions are raised which do not come up in ordinary conversation. One might as well spend ninety minutes in the Grill. It was Rouch's aim to see whether he could work his way past the formula truth of the exterior life of the usual documentary into some unexplainable truth of the interior life, and he did not make it. Rouch's feeling that the presence of the camera acted as a stimulant for the people to think about and express themselves, to bring out their hidden emotions, in a way they had not previously done was negated in Chronicle and the school of Cinéma-vérité it has come to represent. Neither art nor journalism, Chronicle of a Summer seems to inhabit a sort of filmic limbo which avoids the objectivity (?) of journalism at the cost of artistic significance, achieving none of the virtues of either form while incorporating the possible faults of both.

While what happens as a result of the camera's presence is Rouch's central concern, what happens in front of the camera is Leacock's. Leacock records events, Rouch does not. Leacock, who began his career with Robert Flaherty, has always espoused the documentary tradition- the camera as a tool for relating man to his society. For Leacock, that tool was sharpened with the development of the portable equipment which allowed his approach

to Cinéma-vérité to develop as it has. Leacock seeks to avoid making comment in the old documentary sense. His defense against the criticism of Rouch centers around his attempt to achieve objectivity. He has said that Rouch, "...gives carefully thought-out answers to problems, and we if anything attempt to give evidence about which you can make up your own mind.... We're presenting the film-maker's perception of what happened."

Because actions can be filmed by Leacock and others whose approach is like his, ^{spontaneously,} there is no need for staging. Ian Cameron asserts the validity of Leacock's approach in saying, "For the documentarist, the direct sound equipment means that he is no longer faced with the awful choice between the artificiality of a post-synchronous sound-track and the artificiality of bending "real" situations to fit the requirements of immobile recording apparatus. It is this choice that has prevented documentary from rivalling the fiction film in the one respect in which one might expect it to be predominant: in conveying experiences...With the Cinéma-Vérité equipment, the documentary can now compete by presenting real events with the immediacy which has previously been lacking." Rouch does not present many events; those that he does are staged and sometimes rehearsed.

When Leacock is working, on the other hand, he must make immediate decisions on what he will shoot. Robert Drew explains the way they work thusly, "There is a tremendous effort that goes into being in the right place at the right time.- to get it as it happens- and being ready and sensitive enough to get it at the time of happening." In this form of shooting, as opposed

to Rouch's, the film-maker's personal feelings would seem to have a much greater effect on what is being shot and how than on the nature of the event itself. The subjectivity of the film-maker, then, is found in the recording of the event, not in the direction of it.

Drew and Leacock, acting as a highly flexible two-man team, must establish a relationship with the people they film in which they and their equipment are not regarded as intruders. They generally pick a situation where something significant is going to happen to the person they are shooting. Thus their presence is more likely to be forgotten. "We are reporters trying to convey the feeling of what it was like to be there," explains Drew, and indeed he and Leacock did convey that feeling in such previously mentioned films as Jane, Eddy, and Primary.

The approaches, subjects, and aesthetics of Leacock and Rouch are widely different from one another. If both are to be considered as practitioners of Cinéma-vérité, which they both are, then a definition of the term which includes all of the common characteristics of both must be found. And the only thing the two have in common is the equipment they use. Thus, Cinema-verite, taken in terms of the films to which the name is applied, must be considered as a blanket phrase which covers the work of these film-makers who use equipment which can record reality with ease. Perhaps it would be helpful at this point to look at a few of these film-makers other than Rouch and Leacock.

In the films of the American artist William Klein, one sees a great similarity to the work of Jean Rouch. Klein employs the interview technique, basing his films on the conversations he records. He agrees with Rouch that his subjects are affected greatly in what they say by the presence of the camera, so he rehearses the people he interviews, thus attempting to reach truth through contrivance. This sort of method would not be called "contrivance" in other approaches to film-making, but in Cinéma-vérité the viewer expects to witness spontaneous action, as he should, and any preplanning can be considered, ^{as} not only unfair, but dishonest. The dishonesty involved here is not as insidious and morally objectionable as that in Denis Mitchell's Ed and Frank, which contains many instances of Cinéma-vérité technique and approach, but it is dishonest nevertheless. Mitchell deceives his subjects, creating a false friendship in order to stab them cruelly in the back, while Klein deceives his audience, at least in terms of his methodology. One need only look at Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will to arrive at an instant understanding of just how dangerous deception of one's audience can be.

Albert and David Maysles fall into the Leacock school of Cinéma-vérité. Their first major film was Showman, an essay on movie czar Joseph Levine. Like Drew and Leacock, the Maysles refuse to influence or direct the action they film in any manner. They even go as far as rejecting the interview, which is at the basis of Rouch's technique, as a valid instrument. Like Leacock, they depend on being accepted by their subject and act as observers only. For Showman, they shot thirty thousand feet of film, using only two thousand in the final

film, yet it failed anyway. This failure can be attributed to the same cause that had to do with Leacock's unsuccessfulness in David, Pete and Jhonnie, and Nehru- the material itself. The life of Joe Levine simply lacked any self-structuring elements. As Leacock says in his definition of what he knows he can make a film about, the film must be, "...about a person who is interesting, who is involved in a situation which he cares about deeply, which comes to a conclusion within a limited period of time..v"

Leacock's defense against this fault in his method of approach is perhaps a valid one. "...people in a real situation will produce drama if we're smart enough to capture it, if we're smart enough and sensitive enough in our filming within the discipline that we have established and stick to-of never asking anybody to do anything."

"As we get smarter and our equipment gets better, we shall be able to deal with situations of far less intensity, because it's our conviction that every aspect of life contains its own drama." There is no doubting the truth of Leacock's last phrase, one just hopes that film-makers will get smarter and more sensitive, for the future of Cinéma-vérité might depend on it. And if one subscribes to the belief of Arthur Knight that is Cinéma-vérité is "...the brightest hope for America's young film-makers today," then that future is very important indeed.

The future of Cinéma-vérité depends on other things as well. One of these is the work of Jacques Rezier, whose first feature film, Adieu Phillipine has been called "...the Nouvelle Vague's finest achievement to date," by by Movie's Mark Shivas. The film

incorporates Cinéma-vérité methods of shooting into the area of the feature film, using exclusively improvised dialogue to establish a feeling of genuineness and truth. Rozier also used light cameras and sound equipment in making the film.. Like Leacock's camera, Rozier's appears to have been accepted unselfconsciously, in this case by actors, and to have been neither controlling the film's action or making a comment on the characters, as Rouch's does.

There is a feeling of reality to Adieu Philippine the likes of which is seldom if ever seen in the feature film. About the film Rozier has said, "I used the methods of Cinéma-Vérité for fiction, and although they were applied to a fictitious story, they remain the same methods." Since Cinéma-vérité can only be defined in terms of its methods and the equipment which makes them possible, can Rozier's approach not be considered as Cinéma-vérité? If so, his statement that he even thinks "that the future of Cinéma-Vérité lies in this direction,"² along with the success of Adieu Philippine, must be taken seriously by documentary and fiction film-makers alike.

Another film-maker who uses the methods of Cinéma-vérité, but whose films do not quite fall within its established boundaries, is Chris Marker. His documentaries impress upon the viewer Marker's personal feelings ^{about} countries he has visited. His films include Sunday in Peking, Letter from Siberia, Cuba Sí, Description of a Struggle (about Israel), Keumike Mystery (about Japan), and Le Joli Mai. The last of these is his account of Paris, his home. Here he uses the technique of Rouch- interviews with people about their lives and the

events which influence them- in dealing with the same subject as Rouch's Chronicle, yet the result is very different. In Le Joli Main, Paris itself plays an important role in the film, narrative is used frequently, and though Marker's view is intensely personal, he avoids the extreme self-consciousness of Rouch. From the film one gets the impression of what Papise is like, not the impression of what a neurotic is like as in Chronicle. This ability to capture the flavor of a place is Marker's greatest ability; through Keumiko, the viewer becomes familiar with the very unfamiliar Eastern atmosphere which still influences industrial Japan today.

Although the style and approach which is witnessed in a Marker film discourages its consideration as a possible future direction for the development of Cinéma-vérité to take, his "semi-Cinéma-vérité" approach is an interesting and exciting one. Far more in the mainstream of the movement is Home for Life, a recent film by Gerald Temaner. The story of an old age home and the problems encountered by those who people it, Home for Life is as closer to the traditional documentary as anything yet produced by the Cinéma-vérité movement. In dealing with a social problem, like the British documentaries of the Thirties, the film introduces perhaps the most exciting possibility which has yet come out of Cinéma-vérité. It demonstrates that the methods of Cinéma-vérité can be used with nearly complete objectivity in dealing with the type of subject that documentary should deal with. And it can deal with them better as a result of its methods and approach.

The camerawork in Home for Life is simple- the camera pans walls and empty spaces between people and zooms in and out in capturing their expressions and reactions. The sound is technically far from perfect, yet adequate in serving its purpose- not to charm or entertain, but to communicate.

The possibilities of the Cinéma-vérité method are great indeed. They range from the journalism of Leacock to the poetry of Marker, from the realistic treatment of a fictional narrative by Rozier to the objective treatment of a social problem by Temaner. All four are tied together by the nature of the equipment they use, but each is able to break out of his bondage to treat reality creatively in a new and excitingly different way. What Jean Renoir was trying to prove ten years ago- "...that the camera finally has only one right- that of recording what happens."- is being proven today by Cinéma-vérité.

Sources

Books-

Film: A Montage of Theories, Richard Dyer McCann

The Cinema As Art, Ralph Stephenson and J.R. Debriz

Magazines-

Movie, issues #'s 3, 8, Sept. '62, Ian Cameron and Mark Shivas

Sight and Sound, Winter '58-'59, Andre Bazin

Film Quarterly, Summer, '64, Peter Graham

Film Culture, issue #22-23

Saturday Review, Dec. 28, '63, Arthur Knight

New Republic, May 15, '65, Stanley Kauffman

New Yorker, May 8, '65, Brendan Gill

Quotes-

Jean Renoir- Sight and Sound, Winter '58-'59

Robert Drew- Film Culture, #22-23 or Film: A Montage of Theories

Ricky Leacock- Movie, #8 or Film: A Montage of Theories

Jean-Luc Godard- Cahiers du Cinema

All Others from- Movie, #8

A -
Interesting and
good work. It will
be fun to read this
paper in ten years, to
see how kindhearted
that now seems to
(in some ways) complex
understanding. The young French
Canadians should be added to your
roster. They are moving into features
surely. This technique more
the & Galenty will be at
this summer, did you
know?