

Cinema Vérité & Direct Cinema

1960-1970

Historical context

Cinéma vérité:

French film movement of the 1960s that showed people in everyday situations with authentic dialogue and naturalness of action. Rather than following the usual technique of shooting sound and pictures together, the filmmaker first tapes actual conversations, interviews and opinions. After selecting the best material, he films the visual material to fit the sound, often using a hand-held camera. The film is then put together in the cutting room.

Encyclopedia Britannica

Direct Cinema:

The invention of relatively inexpensive, portable, but thoroughly professional 16 mm equipment – and the synchronous sound recorder – facilitated the development of a similar movement in the US at just about the same time.

Sometimes called *cinema verite*, sometimes simply ‘direct cinema’, its goal was essentially the capturing of the reality of a person, a moment, or an event without any rearrangement for the camera.

Leading American practitioners were Ricky Leacock (*Primary*, 1960), Frederick Wiseman (*Titicut Follies*, 1967), Donn Pennebaker (*Monterey Pop*, 1968) and the Maysles brothers (*Salesman*, 1969)

Encyclopedia Britannica

Technological changes

Until 1960s synchronous recording of sight & sound
on location – difficult to impossible

Standard documentary sound-film method

- shooting silent
- subsequent addition of sound – words, music, sound effects
- voice-over commentary (almost) obligatory
adds information & interpretation
e.g. Grierson, Lorentz

This style characterizes documentaries in 1930s & 1940s:
Song of Ceylon, The River, Night Mail, Why We Fight series

Visual/sound changes

Italian Neorealism - adds audible reality to its images (Rossellini)

Jean Renoir – striving for realism

British ‘free’ documentaries of the 1950s

Morris Engel – independent features 1950s – flexible equipment

John Cassavetes - *Shadows* (1959) uses 16 mm portable equipment

Lionel Rogosin – semi-documentary narratives

New technology

16 mm shoulder-mounted **camera**

light-weight & noiseless

did not acoustic insulation (blimp)

brand names: Éclair, Arriflex

Has 'reflex' viewing – looking through the lens while shooting

Zoom lenses - no need to change lenses to alter the field of view

Fast film stock - needing little light b&w color

superior quality of Eastman Kodak 16 mm

intensification process at laboratory – pushing film sensitivity

Sound - magnetic tape recorders - synchronized with cameras w/cable

brand name: Niagra

later – crystal synchronization – no longer need for cable

light-weight – 20 pounds

First films

Now action can be recorded

taking place in front of the camera & microphone
without altering or interrupting it

First successful films in Canada, US & France 1958-1961

Les Raquetteurs (The Snowshoers) Michel Brault & Giles Groulx
Canadian Film Board – Office National du Film 1958

Primary 1960 Drew & Associates shown on ABC

Chronicle of a Summer 1961 Jean Rouch & Edgar Morin

Direct Cinema vs. Cinéma Verité

American approach – **Direct Cinema**

Pioneered by Drew & Associates in the *Close-Up!* ABC series

Articulated by Robert Drew & Richard Leacock

Came from reportage tradition – Drew, photo-journalism

Leacock, cinematographer

Predicated on the possibility of the **objective observer**

filmmakers do not participate in, or influence, the scene
they are 'flies on the wall'

Method functioned best if something important happened to subjects – e.g. *Primary Jane* 1962 *The Chair* 1962

The situation had its own drama (beginning, middle & end)
w/ climax - 'crisis structure'

Other key films

Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment 1961

Football 1961

Showman 1962

Monterey Pop 1968

Salesman 1968

Cinéma Verité

Term first applied by Jean Rouch

translation of Vertov's **Kino Pravda** - **Film Truth**

Rouch wanted to combine Vertov's theory & Flaherty's method

KEY CONCEPTS

Filmmakers cannot achieve objectivity

The camera is obtrusive & acts as catalyst

The truth is 'unmasked'

through a process of deliberately encouraged
self-revelation

Effects on documentary subjects & styles

The new technology pulled filmmakers back to Flaherty
by permitting continuous takes

without pausing for lens changes or refocusing
camera loaded w/ 400 ft of 16 mm – ten minutes

Impact of synch sound

shots are less freely manipulated – visual & sound, bound
filmmaker also bound to real time & space

Technique encourages coming in close

concentrating on individuals

Uncontrolled effect of unscripted action

The predominance of the cinéma vérité/direct cinema style
has brought losses & gains

It is more 'bound' to reality than reconstructions of events
staged for the camera in pre-1960s documentaries

Less effective or efficient for some subjects & purposes

Not as good for propaganda or poetry – requiring control
or as a means of personal expression

The pull toward the individual & continuous recording
is a pull toward narrative - à la Flaherty

unlike the expository, poetic or argumentative
forms of pre-1960s documentaries

Attractive technique for television

pulls to individual - zoom & directional microphone

intimate realistic dramas game shows talk shows

Favors personality & gossip

Cinéma Verité/Direct Cinema has blurred the distinction
between documentary & fiction

Many verite documentaries use techniques of the fiction film
to build their story - *Eddie* 1961

Many fiction films use cinéma verité techniques
to give the impression that we see life as it is being lived

The Jackal of Nahuel Toro 1969 *Tout Va Bien* 1972

The Blair Witch Project 1999 *Catfish* 2010

Aesthetic & Ethical Considerations

Aesthetic challenges:

How to express a personal p.o.v. through uncontrolled actuality

How to offer an aesthetic experience

Ethical challenges:

What happens when the camera records criminal activity

Gimme Shelter 1971

or intrudes in the private sphere of individuals/families

A Married Couple 1969

An American Family 1973

Key Films & Filmmakers 1960-1970

Jean Rouch *Chronicle of a Summer* 1960 France

Michel Brault *Les Raquetteurs* (The Snowshoers) 1958 Canada

Robert Drew & Associates *Primary* 1960 *The Chair* 1962

Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment 1962

Richard Leacock *Happy Mother's Day* 1963 *A Stravinsky Portrait* '66

D.A. Pennebaker *Don't Look Back* 1966 *Monterrey Pop* 1968

Albert & David Maysles *Salesman* 1968 *What's Happening?* 1964

Frederick Wiseman *Titicut Follies* 1967 *High School* 1968