Chapter Fourteen

Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité, 1960–1970

In the late 1950s major breakthroughs began to occur in the technology available to filmmakers. These occasioned what can be thought of either as something totally new under the artistic sun or merely as new ways of doing old things. What they permitted was the synchronous recording of sight and sound outside the confines of soundstages and studio back lots. Virtually anything that could be seen and heard could now be captured on sound film almost anywhere.

These new technical possibilities did not dictate the uses to which they would be put, however. One of those uses was that of the Americans who called what they were doing direct cinema. Another was that of Frenchman Jean Rouch, who coined the term *cinéma vérité* (film truth) to apply to his own work. These two contrasting practices and theories will be dealt with in a later section of this chapter.

Historical Background

Documentarians have always sought technological additions that would permit them to film more easily under difficult conditions and to convey more of the observed actuality to their audiences. The initial division between the creative impulses that led to documentary and those that led to fiction was caused at least partly by equipment. The first films made by the Edison Company in the 1890s were shot with the Kinetograph. This electrically powered camera was so large and heavy it was confined to a studio built to house it. Edison technicians recorded vaudeville and circus acts, and bits of stage plays performed in the Black Maria, as that studio was called, thus inaugurating the theatrical/fictional mode of filmmaking. Louis Lumière, on the other hand, designed a lightweight, hand-cranked camera, the Cinématographe, which permitted him to record life on the streets, thus establishing the documentary mode.

By the 1920s, when documentary proper began to evolve, the cameras used were portable but still cumbersome, requiring tripods. The comparatively insensitive film—all of it black and white—needed lots of light. No sound was available until after 1927, except that provided in the theaters by pianos, organs, or pit orchestra as films were being exhibited. Flaherty's descriptive sort of documentary, which showed the surroundings, physical appearances, and outdoor activities of unfamiliar peoples, was ideal for the limitations of that technology. Yet, though Flaherty's locations were far from the studios, he used studio methods of directed action repeated for change of camera position and lens. His shots were edited together to match the action in the usual long shot-medium shot-close-up sequence.

In the 1930s, with the optical sound track added, the production equipment became so bulky that synchronous recording of sight and sound on location was difficult to impossible. It was like Edison's camera all over again, and fiction filmmakers retreated into the studio. The standard documentary sound-film method became that of shooting silent, subsequently adding to the edited footage spoken words plus music plus sound effects. To have documentary "talkies," a voice-over commentary was obligatory. Though an artificial element, commentary did permit the addition of information and interpretation to visual surfaces and some analysis of complex contemporary issues—the Grierson and Lorentz kind of documentary, in short.

Black-and-white images accompanied by post-synchronized sound remained the visual-auditory representation available to documentary makers throughout the thirties and forties. The so-called classic documentaries—*Song of Ceylon, The Plow That Broke the Plains, Night Mail,* the "Why We Fight" series, and the rest—were all made within those limitations. Filmmakers kept trying to come closer to capturing the sound with the natural scene. This goal and the development of equipment to reach it were not confined to those with documentary interests (though they would win the race). Notable efforts occurred in realistic fiction filmmaking as well.

The Italian neorealists, especially Roberto Rossellini, made remarkable strides in adding audible reality to their images. Their sound was still post-synchronized, however; the dialogue was all dubbed. Jean Renoir was another fiction filmmaker who disliked the confinement of the studio and the rigidity of the large and heavy Mitchell BNC (Blimped Noiseless Camera) standard in studio shooting. In an amusing interview, Renoir likened the 35mm studio camera to a great metal idol to which humans are offered up sacrificially. Everything was done for the convenience of the camera. Actors had to move to chalk marks on the floor to be in focus, to turn their faces a certain way to catch the light. Renoir wanted, instead, the machine (camera) to be subservient to people (actors)—to follow them around, to attend to them (*Movie,* April 1963).

Early efforts to achieve such a technology/technique were made by Morris Engle, a former still photographer. In three independent fiction features shot in

New York City—*The Little Fugitive* (1953), *Lovers and Lollipops* (1955), and *Weddings and Babies* (1958)—Engle moved toward an increasing flexibility of equipment. The last film was the first 35mm fiction feature to be made with a portable camera with synchronous sound attachment.

Obviously the lighter equipment of 16mm offered documentarians advantages over 35mm. Eastman Kodak had manufactured silent 16mm film since 1923. If desired, films shot on 16mm could be "blown up" to 35mm for theatrical exhibition. Lionel Rogosin made *On the Bowery* in 1956 and *Come Back, Africa* in 1958 in this way, with some remarkable sync-sound actuality set within semidocumentary narratives. In 1960 John Cassavetes, in *Shadows*, allowed actors to improvise while their actions and words were recorded on portable 16mm equipment.

New Technology and First Films

From that point on the key equipment that made direct cinema/cinéma vérité possible began to appear. As for the visual aspect, by substituting plastic for metal moving parts, 16mm shoulder-mounted cameras became even more lightweight and noiseless, no longer requiring blimps (i.e., casing containing acoustic insulation). The French Eclair NPR (Noiseless Portable Reflex), developed by André Coutant in 1961, and the German Arriflex SR (Silent Reflex) are cameras of this sort in subsequent standard use. Cameras with reflex viewing (looking through the lens while shooting) plus zoom lenses permitted cinematographers to alter the field of view—from close-up to long shot, for example—without having to stop to change lenses or to focus. The French Angenieux 12 to 120mm zoom lens was commonly used. Increasingly "fast" film stock (that is, with emulsion very sensitive to light, thus needing little light) permitted shooting without adding illumination to that available, first in black-and-white and then in color. Eastman Kodak 16mm color negative was in widespread use from the mid-1970s on, replacing the reversal processes (Kodachrome and Ektachrome) because of its superior qualities. Added to faster film stock was a laboratory "intensification process," which could push the sensitivity of a film to over 1000 ASA (an acronym for American Standards Association; the higher the number the faster the film; standard color negative had an ASA of 100).

As for sound, ¼-inch magnetic tape recorders were developed, which could be synchronized with cameras through use of an inaudible sixty-cycle pulse. The Nagra, developed by Swiss engineer Stefan Kudelski in 1958, became the tape recorder of this type in most common use. When crystal synchronization was added, there was no longer even the need for a cable between camera and recorder. Around 1960 vacuum tubes, which consumed a lot of energy, were replaced by transistors, and the weight of sound recorders was reduced from 200 pounds to 20 pounds. This new technology permitted recording action taking place in front of the camera and microphone without altering or interrupting it.

Les Raquetteurs/The Snowshoers **(Canada, 1958, Michel Brault and Gilles Groulx). National Film Board of Canada**

The first successful films using it were made between 1958 and 1961 in Canada, the United States, and France.

In 1958 at the National Film Board two young French Canadians, Michel Brault and Giles Groulx, using film left over from another project, shot more or less secretly *Les Raquetteurs* (*The Snowshoers*). The event with which the film is ostensibly concerned—snowshoe races in Sherbrooke, Quebec—seems mainly to be the occasion for a parade and a party. The film records these activities but concentrates on the people and their relations with one another. The filmmakers must have entered into the sociability and evidently were fully accepted by the townsfolk.

Les Raquetteurs raised some hackles in official Canada, however. Concern was expressed about the nonofficial way in which it was produced. More serious was the question about the motivation of the filmmakers. Though they appear to be in affectionate if amused sympathy with their subjects, some French Canadians were made uneasy by the unprettified view of robust conviviality presented. Such a portrayal, it was alleged, helped perpetuate the false stereotype of the crude and dull-witted "Canucks."

In 1960, in the United States, *Primary*, already mentioned in chapter 12, was produced by Drew Associates, Robert Drew being executive producer. Most of

Producer Robert Drew (left) and cameraman during the filming of *Primary* (U.S., 1960, Drew Associates). Drew Associates

the shooting was done by D. A. Pennebaker, Albert Maysles, Terence Macartney-Filgate, and Richard Leacock. Drew and Pennebaker recorded the sound. All of the crew worked on the editing; 18,000 feet (seven and one-half hours) of film was cut down to 2,000 (fifty minutes).

The film deals with the 1960 Wisconsin Democratic primary election contest between senators Hubert Humphrey and John F. Kennedy. Not only does it follow each candidate through his public appearances and activities, intercutting between the two men, as television news might do, it also enters into the more private times when the candidates are in their hotel rooms or in an automobile riding to the next engagement. Of the many remarkable moments the film contains, perhaps the most often mentioned is a seemingly uninterrupted shot with synchronous sound that follows Kennedy from outside a building into it, down a long corridor, up some stairs, out onto a stage, ending with a view of the wildly applauding audience. Maysles shot it. The novelty at the time was breathtaking. Another startling innovation—little remarked on—was the absence of interviews, no people talking to the camera—unprecedented for that sort of subject. We get a full enough account of persons and events just by observing.

One could say that French cinéma vérité began in 1959 at a Robert Flaherty Seminar—an annual event started by Flaherty's widow, Frances, and brother, David. On that occasion ethnographer-filmmaker Jean Rouch saw *Les Raquetteurs* and met Michel Brault, who would become principal cameraman for

Jean Rouch (left) and Edgar Morin in the conclusion of *Chronicle of a Summer* (France, 1961). Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive

Chronicle of a Summer (1961), directed by Rouch in collaboration with sociologist Edgar Morin. *Chronicle* was first shown in the United States at another Flaherty Seminar, in 1963, along with Drew Associates' *The Chair* and Albert and David Maysles's *Showman* (both 1962). (Curiously, Robert Drew, working his way toward film, had earlier crashed a Flaherty Seminar looking for Ricky Leacock to help him execute his ideas.)

Chronicle of a Summer broke from the Griersonian/Anglo-Saxon tradition in ways even more basic than did *Les Raquetteurs* or *Primary*. Its subject matter consists of a sampling of individual opinions, attitudes, and values of Parisians in the summer of 1960. What the film offers is a chance to understand something of the interviewees and of their culture, of their positions within it, and their feelings about it.

The filmmakers' purpose and approach seem, like Flaherty's, to be that of discovery and revelation. These natives played at least as large a part in the creation of the film as did Nanook or Moana. They are sophisticated (at least modern urban) and articulate, however. Their concerns, as well as those of the filmmakers, are about their feelings rather than about the work they do and how they do it. (In this respect *Primary* is more Griersonian: It is about people

John F. Kennedy on the campaign trail caught in a famous shot by cameraman Al Maysles in *Primary* (U.S., 1960, Drew Associates). Drew Associates

working—what they do rather than what they think and feel.) In fact, work is viewed negatively—one has to be dishonest to make a living, one tries to earn enough money to be oneself; work is boring, repetitive, mechanical—and we see very little of it, only hear about it, for the most part.

Like Flaherty's films the overall structure of *Chronicle* is a loose chronological narrative, as the title implies. It also resembles, however, an anthology of essays and short stories. Through it we get to know more about Parisians—Marceline, who survived a Nazi concentration camp; Angelo, a Renault factory worker; Marilou, an emotionally troubled Italian working in Paris; or Landry, a black African student—than we do about Humphrey or Kennedy in *Primary*. We are told by the filmmakers that part one of the film is intended to deal with the "interior," personal lives of the subjects; part two is about the "exterior," more general world around them as they see it. (The Algerian war was still being waged.) Narrative links among the sequences are made through groupings of persons and topics of conversation; and there are some startling contrasts—a cut from newspaper headlines about the murder of whites in the Belgian Congo to a shot of a young woman waterskiing off Saint-Tropez. The approach is persistently reflexive: The people on camera and we in the audience are continually

reminded that a film is being made, that we are watching a film. The penultimate scene is of the persons the film is about discussing themselves as they have appeared in the film they and we have just seen.

Here the new sync-sound technology is used primarily for discussion and interview. There is even a soliloquy as Marceline, strolling by herself in the Place de la Concorde and Les Halles market, recalls painful episodes from her past. Angelo, the Renault worker, gives a kind of improvised performance for the camera, pointedly ignoring its presence. He pretends to wake in the morning, to get ready for work, to go off to work, to work, and later to return home—all this so that his actions might be recorded on film, as Nanook's were.

Throughout the film the cinematography of Michel Brault, Raoul Coutard, and A. Vignier, though different from Flaherty's in its spontaneity, is equal to his in skill and certainty. The filmmakers' ability to move smoothly and seemingly effortlessly with their subjects is astonishing. Unlike Flaherty, however, the two directors are frequently on screen, engaged in conversation with their subjects. This is a film being made by Rouch and Morin, they seem to be telling us, and here we are so you can see how we are going about it.

The final scene is of Rouch and Morin talking to each other about their expectations in regard to the film and about their subjects' reactions to it. As they leave the Musée de l'Homme, where the screening has just taken place, Morin expresses disappointment that not all the participants liked the persons and scenes he liked. The final words on the sound track are those of Rouch saying to Morin, "We're in for trouble," as the two separate.

Direct Cinema vs Cinéma Vérité

The American use of the new equipment, largely with an approach called direct cinema, was pioneered by Drew Associates in the *Close-Up!* series on ABC-TV discussed in chapter twelve. Its tenets were articulated most forcefully by Robert Drew and, especially, by Richard ("Ricky") Leacock. The Drew-Leacock approach falls within the reportage tradition, stemming from Drew's "picture story" background in photo-journalism and Leacock's experience as a documentary cinematographer.

Their technique assumed the possibility of an objective observer. While acknowledging that subjectivity occurs in selecting persons and situations and aspects of them, once those choices are made the filmmakers do not direct or participate in, or even influence (they contended), the scene in any way. They felt that the presence of the camera was soon taken for granted by the subjects—ignored mostly, sometimes forgotten altogether. In their approach, the relationship between filmmakers and subject persons had to be relaxed and trusting in order for the filmmaking to fit into the ongoing action without affecting it. Leacock was particularly adept at winning confidence from the people he was shoot-

ing; a warm and engaging person, he could be casual and unassuming with his camera and the people in front of it.

In the course of their work Drew Associates discovered that their method functioned best if something important was happening to their subjects—if they were involved in an activity demanding their full attention and evoking a certain unalterable behavior. This was the case in *Primary*. Humphrey and Kennedy were much more concerned with winning an election than with how they would appear on screen. They were attempting to charm and influence people in order to obtain their votes, and public appearance was a normal part of their lives, which the presence of a camera and microphone would scarcely alter. *Mooney vs. Fowle* (1961, aka *Football*) builds up to the climaxes with a high school football game in Miami, Florida, between two rival teams. It concentrates on the players, coaches, immediate families—those most completely preoccupied with this contest. *The Chair* (1962) centers on the efforts of a Chicago attorney, Donald Page Moore, to obtain a stay of execution for his client, Paul Crump, five days before it is scheduled to take place. *Jane* (1962) concerns Jane Fonda in the production of a play, from the rehearsal period through the negative reviews following its Broadway opening and the decision to close it.

As these examples suggest, Drew Associates also discovered that their method worked best if the situation they chose had its own drama (with a beginning, middle, and end), which would come to a climax within a limited time. This conforms to certain characteristics noted by Aristotle as common to Greek drama. Stephen Mamber, in an analysis of the films of Drew Associates (*Cinema Verite in America*), identified this as the "crisis structure." When such a situation did not exist the films lacked point and force, Mamber felt. He gives as examples *Showman* (1962), about movie mogul Joseph Levine, and *Nehru* (1962), about the then prime minister of India. Though these are interesting and significant figures, the days shown are cluttered and formless—nothing very dramatic happens, and we don't really gain much in our understanding of either man or of why he behaves as he does.

Nowadays the term cinéma vérité is frequently used generically for nondirected filmmaking (and in the United States usually without the French accents, as in the title of Mamber's book), but originally it was applied exclusively to the Rouch/French approach, to distinguish it from the Drew-Leacock/American direct cinema. The differences between the two approaches are clear and significant and worth discusssing.

The term *cinéma vérité* was first applied by Jean Rouch to *Chronicle of a Summer*. It refers back to the Russian equivalent, *kino pravda*, used by Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov forty years earlier. Rouch subsequently said on numerous occasions that what he was attempting was to combine Vertov's theory and Flaherty's method.

Rouch denied that the filmmaker can achieve objectivity or that the camera can be unobtrusive. Since it is, finally, the filmmaker rather than the subject who

is making the film, Rouch felt that he or she must have a strong attitude toward the subjects and must plan what to draw from them. In Rouch's films (and those of others following this approach) the subjects are not necessarily occupied with something more important to them than the camera and microphone. Virtually everything we see and hear in *Chronicle* is occasioned by the making of the film. Rouch argues, and many instances can be seen in his films and those of others (Chris Marker's *Le Joli Mai* [*The Lovely May*, 1963], or Michel Brault and Pierre Perrault's *Pour la suite du monde* [English title *Moontrap*, 1963], or the Maysles's *Grey Gardens* [1975], for example), that the camera acts as a stimulant. It causes people to think about themselves as they may not be used to doing and to express their feelings in ways they ordinarily would not. Perhaps there is an appropriateness in this approach coming out of a Catholic culture; there is a strong element of the confessional in Rouch's films. It also bears some relationship to psychodrama and to group psychotherapy.

In 1963 in Lyons, France, a memorable meeting devoted to cinéma vérité and direct cinema was sponsored by Radio Television Française (the French national broadcasting system). In *What Is Cinéma Vérité?* (see Books on the Period), Issari and Paul offer an account of the most important aspects of this event, and much of what follows is drawn from it. Two of those present had contributed importantly to the technology that made the technique possible: André Coutant (Eclair camera) and Stefan Kudelski (Nagra tape recorder). While Coutant was displaying his camera he withdrew a fountain pen from his pocket and said, "The camera is still not as simple to use as this, but we're working on it." Filmmaker attendees included Jean Rouch, Mario Ruspoli, and Edgar Morin from France; Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, Albert and David Maysles from the United States; Michel Brault from Canada. The greatest excitement was generated by a lively ongoing debate between Rouch and Leacock.

Both of them were hoping to find "the reality of life," "the truth in people" hidden under the superficial conventions of daily living. Rouch sought to pierce the observable surface to reach this underlying truth by means of discussion, interview, and a fictional sort of improvisation. Leacock thought he could capture this same obscured reality by photographing people without intruding; that subjects would reveal what they really felt and were like when unself-consciously relaxed or deeply involved in some activity. Rouch attempted to unmask truth through a process of deliberately encouraged self-revelation. Leacock tried to expose this reality through capturing unguarded moments of self-revelation in the movement of actual life. Rouch wanted to explain the *raison d'être* of life, whereas Leacock wanted to let life reveal itself.

During the arguments animosity developed and the two positions remained essentially unresolved; perhaps they are not resolvable. Leacock claimed that Rouch prevented people from being themselves, that he forced meanings from them according to a pattern he had arbitrarily set. Rouch faulted Leacock for being too uncritical, for accepting whatever came along as part of "the American

way of life." It could be said with equal justice that Rouch's view seems especially "French." That is to say, as Issari and Paul in fact do, "Their sharp exchanges of opinion at the Lyons conference may be explained by their different national and cultural backgrounds. The individual style of each is a reflection not only of his personality—and *cinéma vérité* [and direct cinema] probably reflects the personality of its author more faithfully than any other style of film making—but also the society of which he is a part" (p. 172). Rouch and Leacock, however, did eventually become close, so much so that when Rouch died in 2004 at the age of eighty-seven, Leacock was occupying Rouch's Paris apartment.

Effects on Documentary Subjects and Styles

It seems quite appropriate that Ricky Leacock would be one of the pioneers of direct cinema/cinéma vérité. A scene in Flaherty's *Louisiana Story* (1948), on which he was cinematographer, made a profound impression on him early in his career and served as a foreshadowing of what was to come. The scene is the one in which the father tells a story about a man who had his jaw bitten off by an alligator.

According to the recollections of some of those involved, this occurred while the crew was setting up to shoot a scripted scene. Camera and recorder were turned on merely for testing, but Flaherty let them run to preserve the telling of the story. He was so taken with the results that he included it in the film, though its nondirected verisimilitude is quite different in style from the rest. This was truly the thing itself, for its own sake, which is what Frances Flaherty said her husband was after. Leacock became committed to trying to arrive at portable synchronous sound equipment that would permit the recording of actuality in this way generally—without script, without direction, with scarcely any editing.

The technology that did evolve has pulled documentary filmmakers back to Flaherty—Rouch and cinéma vérité as much as Leacock and direct cinema. It permits continuous takes even longer than those characteristic of Flaherty. Reflex viewing through a zoom lens requires no pauses for lens changes or refocusing. A camera loaded with four hundred feet of 16mm film can simply be kept running for ten minutes. Of course, the act of cutting the 18,000 feet of film that passed through the cameras for *Primary* down to the 2,000 feet that appear in the final version suggests that a highly selective point of view is operating. Still, sync sound prevents the breaking up and manipulation of shots as freely as is possible with footage shot silent and sound added later. Within scenes the filmmaker is bound closely to the real time and real space of the events. With film, it is difficult to cut into a continuous sound track without the cut being noticeable; sound locks images into place.

This technique not only permits but encourages coming in close, in selecting and concentrating on individuals (like Flaherty, unlike Grierson). In the National Film Board film about Paul Anka discussed in chapter eleven, *Lonely Boy*, there

Frederick Wiseman editing film on a flatbed eight-plate Steenbeck machine. Zipporah Films

is a scene in which Anka is singing before a huge audience at Freedomland amusement park in the Bronx. The camera panning a crowd of teenage girls screaming in adulation catches one face that seems to be dissolving in emotion. Just after the camera passes her it stops, pans back, zooms in, and refocuses on a close-up. You can almost hear the cameraman saying to himself as this image registers on his consciousness, "Wow, look at that!" In *Welfare* (1975), a subject that would have been treated by earlier documentarians with attention to institutions and processes, Wiseman instead attends to individuals and their relationships in a particular New York City office—those applying for financial aid and those dispensing it.

Some of the human complexity of persons being zoomed in on can now be suggested. They can tell us what they think and feel as well as show us what they do. Now we have a seeing and hearing machine that could film Nanook straight through while he is catching a seal, with Nanook's shouts to his family coming to join him and the thumping and bumping on the ice accompanying the images. Even more important, this new technology/technique permitted the filming of a sophisticated, urban Nanook in some psychological depth. In *The Chair,* for instance, there is a moving scene in which the attorney breaks into tears and expresses his incredulity after he receives a phone call from a stranger offering support for him in his efforts to save his client's life.

An even greater innovation is the way in which the action is determined and who determines it. In *Nanook* (and virtually all documentaries dealing with

Paul Crump faces execution in a shot by Ricky Leacock in *The Chair* (U.S., 1962, Drew Associates). Drew Associates

individuals up through the 1950s), Flaherty observed what Nanook did. Subsequently—days, weeks, months later—he had him redo it for the camera. Flaherty might ask Nanook to do it a slightly different way, to do it again for another take, or for a shot from a different camera distance and angle. These shots would then be cut together to create an illusion of continuous action. In short, though Flaherty did not use written scripts, he "scripted" in his mind and "directed" *Nanook* according to that "script" in a way not fundamentally different from the creation of fiction films. In *The Chair*, Donald Page Moore was essentially "directing" himself in action that could not have been scripted or even anticipated. No one had ever phoned him in that way before; neither he nor the filmmakers knew how he would react to the call.

Some people today think documentaries made before 1960 should not be called documentaries at all, that they are patently fabricated and false. A counterproposition might be that the predominance of the cinéma vérité/direct style (cv/direct) has brought losses as well as gains to what is called documentary. While it does seem possible to say that if cinéma vérité (and related forms) is not necessarily the cinema of truth, it does keep one from lying so much. But lying in this context may merely mean being as selective or as subjective as

filmmakers or any creators may need to be. Cv/direct is less efficient or effective for some subjects and purposes than other techniques. It is not as good for propaganda or poetry, for example, which require forms that are carefully controlled and fully shaped. *Night Mail* and *O Dreamland, The Quiet One* and *City of Gold*, have a clarity and force in representing their makers' points of view and conveying them with heightened feeling. In Frederick Wiseman's films—which have become increasingly long, well over two hours in every instance—the accumulation of detail, rather than steadily adding to what we know about the subject, at some point may return the viewer to the uncertainties and confusions of life itself. On occasion Wiseman may even get an audience response opposite from the one he had hoped for and expected—what sociologists would call a boomerang effect.

Less shaping, less personal statement may mean less art—in the traditional sense, certainly. On the other hand, the cv/direct pull toward individuals, toward continuous recording of their words and actions, is a pull toward narrative—toward telling the sorts of stories that are true, the kinds of stories Flaherty tried to tell. Cv/direct is closer to narrative forms, in any case, than to the descriptive, expository, argumentative, or poetic forms that documentary earlier concentrated on and developed in unique ways.

The technological bias of zoom lens and directional microphone that pulls cv/direct in on the individual has made it an attractive technique for television. Notable successes of early television included intimate realistic dramas about ordinary lives (*Marty, Bachelor's Party, A Catered Affair*), game shows (*You Bet Your Life, What's My Line?*), and talk shows (*Tonight*, which began with Steve Allen and became a smash hit with Jack Paar and later Johnny Carson and Jay Leno) in which real people played themselves. If television is the cool medium Marshall McLuhan thought it to be, with its message completed by the viewer-listener, if it favors personalities and gossip, as Lyman Bryson suggested, these characteristics are shared by cv/direct. Perhaps it is no accident that cv/direct arrived after television and that its first substantial successes, Drew Associates' in the *Close-Up!* series, were designed for exhibition on what was then "the tube." The rough-edged sights and sounds of cv/direct may be better suited for television than the refinements of theater projection. (It is interesting that at about the same time cv/direct was developing, and in response to the competition of television, wide screens and stereophonic sound offered a theatrical equivalent of life more fully caught, of less editing, and resultant ambiguity. For all its formal polish and care in the making, Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* [1960] resembles cv/direct in the looseness and irregularity of its narrative structure.)

As has already been suggested, with the arrival of cv/direct the sharp distinctions between documentary and fiction (on which the first part of this book are based) have blurred. Offering a close relationship to life as it is being lived, the cv/direct films are preponderantly, almost automatically, narrative in form. They show something happening, followed by something else that happens, followed

by yet another thing, and so on. People in cv/direct are presented acting and reacting to one another in ways analogous to the behavior of characters in fiction and drama. *Eddie* (1961, Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, Albert Maysles, D. A. Pennebaker [the original version entitled *On the Pole*]) is about a race-car driver before, during, and after a race (which he did not win). So is the fiction feature *Red Line 7000* (1966, Howard Hawks). *David* (1961, Drew, Gregory Shuker, Pennebaker, William Ray) is about an attractive jazz musician who has sequestered himself in Synanon, a sanatorium on the beach in Venice, California, in an effort to rid himself of his addiction to drugs. *The Man With the Golden Arm* (1956, Otto Preminger, from a novel by Nelson Algren) is about a similar topic and person. Also, cv/direct films suggested techniques and styles used by John Cassavetes in *Faces* (1968), Jean-Luc Godard in *Tout va bien* (1972), and fiction films coming from the third world (*Blood of the Condor*, Bolivia, 1969, Jorge Sanjines; *The Jackal of Nahueltero*, Chile, 1969, Miguel Littin) and innumerable subsequent filmmakers.

Aesthetic and Ethical Considerations

Aesthetically, one of the central issues of direct cinema and cinéma vérité is the one just raised. In their narrative structures, the forms of these films are analogous to those of fiction. The stories they are telling may be truer (or may not be, for that matter), but they are in many ways stories all the same. A second crucial matter is the extent to which cv/direct filmmakers can express a personal point of view through this increased amount of uncontrolled actuality. Ethically, the central questions involve the honesty and responsibility of the filmmakers toward their subject persons and their audiences. These matters of form and authorial point of view, of art in relation to reality, of fact in relation to fiction, present intriguing perplexities.

The musical *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933, Mervyn LeRoy) seemed a known and classifiable aesthetic-ethical object when it was released. But what are we to make of *Gimme Shelter* (1971, Albert and David Maysles, Charlotte Zwerin), a record of an ill-fated rock music concert by the Rolling Stones at Altamont, California, in which a real murder becomes the climax of a film which is, at the same time, used as courtroom evidence? Or, consider attaching camera and sound recorder onto a real family and filming the course of their relationships with one another over weeks or months. With this new artistic possibility a whole new set of ethical problems were raised. In *A Married Couple* (1969), Allan King made such a record of two friends of his. He chose them at least partly because he sensed their marriage was breaking up.

The best-known instance of this sort was the twelve-hour series *An American Family*, produced by public television veteran Craig Gilbert, camera by Alan and sound by Susan Raymond, and aired on PBS in the spring of 1973. It raised a lot of questions and caused considerable controversy along ethical lines. Did the Loud family of husband, wife, and five teenage children living in Santa Barbara,

The Louds of Santa Barbara, California, the subjects of *An American Family* (U.S., 1973, Craig Gilbert and Alan and Susan Raymond). Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive

California, behave differently than they would have if the camera and mike had not been there? Were they performing for it? Did the filming exacerbate, perhaps even cause, the strains and ruptures we witness? Did the filmmakers distort, through selection and arrangement, what actually occurred? What is "true" in it; what is "story"?

Along with these ethical considerations is an odd aesthetic aspect. At the time *An American Family* was being aired, members of a college documentary class watching it complained that the big scene—when Pat Loud announces to hus-

band Bill that she has decided on a divorce—was not done well. What they meant was that it was not sufficiently dramatic; i.e., the Louds didn't give good performances, they were too casual, and the episode did not build to a climax. This is rather starfling, when you think of it: viewing life as art. As art it was expected to follow the conventions of dramaturgy and performance one would find on *Days of Our Lives* and other afternoon serials.

The cv/direct technology/technique seems to offer an ultimate possibility of show-and-tell—of telling a real story as it is happening rather than sitting back and creating it out of remembered experience and imagination. At the same time, it seems that cv/direct is closer to life than to art, that it can seem unselected, formless, dull—a mere record. "At such a point," Louis Marcorelles observed (in an article in *Image et Son*, April 1965), "cinema has disappeared." Even at its best cv/direct does not offer an aesthetic experience culminating in a final act as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, with all the threads tied together, or Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, with its transcendental final movement. And what about the people whose lives have been invaded and used as material for the creation of this lifelike art object? Can we in fact trust the filmmakers' representation of them?

If the cv/direct filmmaker-artist is able to work directly from ongoing life, he or she shapes and refines the presentation of real people and events. Through selection and arrangement "characters" and "actions" are "created." This creation may be different from that in the traditional arts, but it is still creation of a sort. It could be the "writing with the camera" French filmmaker-critic Alexandre Astruc called for with his phrase *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen). What Astruc sought was the possibility of creating the fiction of a film in its making rather than merely supplying images and sounds for a fully realized and prefixed conception. If we aren't yet able to write with the camera in this way, it does seem a potential that cinéma vérité/direct has built within it. Eventually mightn't little distinction be made between documentary and fictional/dramatic forms? In documentary, if not in fiction, it is presently possible to create films as we go—with some of the freedom of action painting and jazz improvisation—without detailed scripts and resultant rigidities of preproduction planning. Perhaps this is full circle to Flaherty. "Non-preconception" isn't so much an issue as the possibility of recording and shaping actuality to fit a personal vision, as Flaherty in fact did. The technology that has become available simply brings film closer to life as it is being lived.

Films of the Period

1958

Les Raquetteurs (*The Snowshoers*, Canada, Michel Brault and Gilles Groulx)

1960

On the Pole (U.S., Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, William Ray, Abbot Mills, Albert Maysles)
Primary (U.S., Drew, Leacock, Pennebaker, Terence Macartney-Filgate, Maysles)

1961

Football/Mooney vs. Fowle (U.S., Drew Associates, James Lipscomb)

1962

The Chair (U.S., Drew Associates, Gregory Shuker, Leacock, Pennebaker)
Lonely Boy (Canada, Roman Kroiter and Wolf Koenig)

1963

Happy Mother's Day (U.S., Leacock and Joyce Chopra)
Pour la suite du monde/Moontrap (Canada, Brault and Pierre Perrault)
A Stravinsky Portrait (U.S., Leacock)

1966

Don't Look Back (U.S., Pennebaker)
A Time for Burning (U.S., William Jersey)

1967

The Anderson Platoon (France, Pierre Schoendorffer)
Portrait of Jason (U.S., Shirley Clarke)
Warrendale (Canada, Allan King)

1968

Birth and Death (U.S., Arthur Barron and Gene Marner)
The Endless Summer (U.S., Bruce Brown)
Monterey Pop (U.S., D. A. Pennebaker)

1969

Salesman (U.S., Albert and David Maysles, and Charlotte Zwerin)

1970

A Married Couple (Canada, King)

Books on the Period

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Chapter Fifteen

English-Language Documentary in the 1970s: Power of the People

The documentary impulse has always been linked closely to its social and intellectual environment. In the 1920s Flaherty's films were set within the beginnings of anthropology and interest in comparative cultures. Vertov and the Soviet filmmakers attempted to meet the needs of a new state, the first communist society. The continental realists were part of the avant-garde, experimenting with artistic means for expressing concepts coming from the physical and psychological sciences.

Documentaries in the 1930s were connected with economic and political upheavals and innovations. Totalitarian regimes employed them to gain the allegiance of their peoples. In Britain and the United States they were used to try to strengthen democratic societies in the face of ailing economies at home and imperialist aggression abroad.

The 1940s were the years of World War II and its aftermath. During the first half of that decade documentaries were used in unprecedented numbers by the English-speaking countries in their fight against the Axis powers. In the second half of the decade, the United States, and to some extent Britain and Canada, employed documentary in the cold war against communism.

The 1950s, in the United States at least, were marked by conservatism and complacency; and, as it would subsequently appear, hidden uncertainties. It was not a significant or innovative decade for documentary except as new types of subjects and forms compatible with distribution nontheatrically and over television were explored. The 1960s saw the beginnings of direct cinema and cinéma vérité.

For documentary, the transition from the 1960s into the 1970s was a vital era, a time of fruition and fullness. It was the peak of independent 16mm-movie funding and production, distribution, and exhibition. The nontheatrical 16mm marketplace—schools, libraries, colleges and universities, film societies, art the-