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


*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 - a la Flaherty

unlike the expository, poetic or argumentative forms of pre-1960s documentaries
Attractive technique for television
pulled 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 verité 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 & Fimmakers  1960-1970

Jean Rouch  *Chronicle of a Summer*  1960  France

Michel Brault  *Les Raquetteurs (The Shnowshoers)*  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