12. Documentarist as . . . Catalyst

Definition(s):
Cinema Verite—According to Barnouw, this term is reserved for films following Jean Rouch’s notions of filmmaker as avowed participant, as provocateur (what Barnouw calls catalyst), rather than the cool detachment of the Direct Cinema. In homage to Dziga Vertov, Rouch and others based the term on Vertov’s kino-pravda, film-truth. Like direct cinema, these documentaries try to “throw light on dark places, while avoiding editorializing.”

Key Concepts & Issues:
Interviews: Cinema verite/catalyst cinema “gave status to the interview, a device that had been shunned by most documentarists.”
Anthropological applications: Allowing subjects to do the filming (e.g., Navajos, black ghetto teens in Philadelphia; a hallmark of Challenge for Change, see below)
Video: By the late 1960’s, a more flexible, cheaper way to get “filmmaking” into the hands of ordinary citizens; used by Challenge for Change and of course AMC (see below).

Key Documentarists:
Jean Rouch (1917-2004)
His Les Maitres Fous (“The Manic Priests” or “The Mad Masters”, 1955) examined weird religious practices among the Hauka in Niger, Africa, apparently coping mechanisms in response to colonialism. “Stung by criticisms” of this film, Rouch tried new approaches that would become central to the cinema verite approach. He involved subjects to a greater extent, asking them to comment on his footage (Jaguar) or to improvise their fantasy lives (I, a Black, 1958) or respond ad hoc to probing questions (Chronicle of a Summer, 1961).

George C. Stoney (1917- )
Headed the Challenge for Change program at the National Film Board of Canada (founded 1967), then moved to NYU in 1971 and founded the Alternative Media Center (AMC), which started the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers; Stoney is called the “father of [American] Public Access.” His films include All My Babies (1953) and You Are on Indian Land (1969).

Marcel Ophuls (1927- )
Son of film director Max Ophuls, his childhood included time in Germany, France, and at Hollywood High! His major work is The Sorrow and the Pity (1970), which covers the German occupation of France during WWII, using a combination of archival footage and contemporary interviews with survivors. Much like Errol Morris later, Ophuls was able to get subjects to provide complex and deep responses.

[Further class example—Techniques of Errol Morris (1948- ), as shown in A Brief History of Errol Morris (2000)]