11. Documentarist as . . . Observer

Definition(s):
[British] Free Cinema—A series of showings at London’s National Film Theater, 1956-58 with films by such filmmakers as Lindsay Anderson (primarily known for his narrative films If . . ., O Lucky Man), Karel Reisz & Tony Richardson (primarily known for his narrative films The Entertainer, Tom Jones), and Georges Franju (see below); characterized by filmmakers acting as observers, rejecting the role of promoter; made possible by new, light film equipment that allowed an intimacy of observation new to documentary (including both sound and image).

[American] Direct Cinema—A term coined by filmmaker Albert Maysles, this is another type of “observer” documentary that attempts to limit the apparent involvement of the filmmaker, using little or no voiceover narration, no script, and no “setting up” subjects (stagings) or reenactments. As David Maysles has indicated, “direct” means “there’s nothing between us and the subject.” Following the British Free Cinema, the American Direct Cinema took advantage of the new, maneuverable 16mm film equipment; after a series of experiments, a wireless synchronizing sound system for this equipment was developed by the Drew Unit at Time, Inc. The main Documentarists: Robert Drew, Ricky Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, David & Albert Maysles (and associates), Frederick Wiseman. The influence of Direct Cinema has been felt around the world (e.g., prominent films from Holland, Japan, India, Sweden, Canada).

[French] Cinema Verite—According to Barnouw, this term is reserved for films following Jean Rouch’s notions of filmmaker as avowed participant, as provocateur (as what Barnouw calls catalyst), rather than the cool detachment of the Direct Cinema. However, the term “cinema verite” is not uniformly applied by scholars.

Key Concepts & Issues:
A paradox—“that the cool stance of the observer-documentarist could produce. . . diverse and emphatic reactions” in the viewers.

The sheer presence of the camera—does it influence events? Barnouw notes various views:
- YES: Ricky Leacock, Louis Malle worried that it does.
- NO: The Maysles, Frederick Wiseman tended to minimize the supposed influence [and Wiseman still does, per his 2015 Cleveland Cinematheque appearance].
- YES, AND THAT’S A GOOD THING: Jean Rouch maintained that the presence of the camera actually made people act in ways truer to their nature.

Key Documentarists:
Georges Franju (1912-1987)
- Primarily known as a narrative filmmaker (e.g., Eyes Without a Face, 1959), his Free Cinema documentary Blood of the Beasts (Le Sang des Bêtes, 1949) uses “cruel” and “traumatic” images; as noted in the Sloniowski essay in the Grant and Sloniowski book, these images “assault the spectator. . . to chastise, morally improve, politically outrage, and more ambiguously, to provide pleasure and sexual arousal”—in sum, forcing us to
examine “the aesthetics of cruelty.” This documentary about slaughterhouses in Paris was one of a trilogy of documentaries he made that also included Hotel des Invalides (1952), a film about a veterans’ home and military museum. It includes rather ironic VO commentary written by Jean Painleve, and delivered by a female narrator (for scenes outside the slaughterhouse) and a male narrator (for scenes inside the slaughterhouse).

Denis Mitchell (1911-1990)
- Influenced by Free Cinema, he produced documentaries for BBC-TV, including Chicago: First Impressions of a Great American City (1960; about 60 min. in 4 parts), a “city symphony of a new sort—with speech.” Many Chicagoans did not appreciate the blunt treatment of their city.

Robert Drew & “Ricky” Leacock (interviews with Drew and Leacock (6:30)) (1924-2014 & 1921-2011)
- Recall that Leacock worked with Flaherty on Louisiana Story (1948)
- Drew developed the Film Unit at Time, Inc., in 1958, which eventually supplied documentary films to ABC Television; other Drew Unit filmmakers included D. A. Pennebaker and Albert Maysles
- Together, Drew and Leacock produced Primary (1960), which covered the candidates John Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey during the Wisconsin presidential primary; and Crisis (1963), focusing on President Kennedy’s confrontation with Gov. George Wallace

D. A. Pennebaker (1925- ) (later films with spouse Chris Hegedus)
- Check out Pennebaker Hegedus Films: http://phfilms.com/
- His engineering background allowed him to contribute to technical innovations
- He co-founded Drew Associates with Robert Drew and Ricky Leacock
Key films:
Dont Look Back (1965) (w/ Leacock) (Opening sequence with “Subterranean Homesick Blues” as the first music video? Not really…)
Monterey Pop (1967)
Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars (1973)
The War Room (1993, Academy Award winner)
Only the Strong Survive (2002)
Al Franken: God Spoke (2006)
Kings of Pastry (2009)
Unlocking the Cage (2016)

Albert & David Maysles (1926-2015 & 1931-1987) (with, at various times: Muffie Meyer, Charlotte Zwerin, Ellen Hovde, Susan Froemke, and others)
- Check out the web site for the Maysles Institute in NYC (includes Maysles Cinema, the only movie theater in Manhattan dedicated to docs, the Maysles Institute’s Summer Film Program for Youth, and Internships!): www.mayslesfilms.com
Key films:
What’s Happening! The Beatles in the U.S.A. (1964)
Meet Marlon Brando (1965)
Salesman (1968) (trailer on Criterion, 3:14)
Grey Gardens (1976)
The Love We Make (2011; Albert Maysles & Bradley Kaplan)

Frederick Wiseman (1935-
Check out the web site for his Zipporah Films (the only place you can buy his films (!), although they are supposed to be coming to Kanopy in 2018!: www.zipporah.com
-A lawyer-turned-film producer, he was motivated to make his first film after observing conditions in a Massachusetts institution for the criminally insane (the focus of the resulting film, Titicut Follies).
-Most of the Direct Cinema Documentarists concentrate on natural performers (politicians in Primary, musicians in Dont Look Back, Monterey Pop, and Gimme Shelter, salesmen in Salesman, formerly-wealthy eccentrics in Grey Gardens); Wiseman does not. As noted in Grant’s essay, “His work constitutes a form of ethnographic cinema that looks at the filmmaker’s own culture rather than another,” and, importantly, “the institutions will be the star.”

Key films:
High School (1968) La Danse (2009)
Basic Training (1971) Crazy Horse (2011)
Domestic Violence (2001)

Michael Wadleigh (1939-)
Woodstock (1970)

Additional Sources: