12. Documentarist as . . . Catalyst

Definition(s):

Cinema Verite (2:00)—According to Barnouw, this term is reserved for films following Jean Rouch’s (and his co-filmmaker Edgar Morin’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 “cinema verite” on Vertov’s kino-pravda, film-truth. Like direct cinema, these documentaries try to “throw light on dark places, while avoiding editorializing.” Unlike Direct Cinema documentarists, they tried to precipitate a crisis.

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 George Stoney’s 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)

Jean Rouch was an ethnographic filmmaker who first became known and respected for his documentaries in Africa (see Jean Rouch and His Camera in the Heart of Africa (16:30 excerpt; entire film may be found on Kanopy), 1986, D: Philo Bregstein). His Les Maitres Fous (“The Manic Priests” or “The Mad Masters,” 1955), a visual anthropological study of “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, 1955) or to improvise their fantasy lives (I, a Black (Moi, un Noir) 1958; online version in French only) or respond ad hoc to probing questions (Chronicle of a Summer, 1961, with co-director Edgar Morin; 2 min. featurette online). This last film was to become his most influential.

Films to follow that were directly inspired by Chronicle of a Summer include The Lovely Month of May (1963, D: Chris Marker; trailer), about the end of the Algerian war; Inquiring Nuns (1968, D: Gordon Quinn; Karemquin intro online); Memory (1971, D: Grigori Chukhrai);

George C. Stoney (1916-2012)

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.” He was a professor at NYU at the time of his death at age 96. His films include All My Babies: A Midwife’s Own Story (1953) and You Are on Indian Land (1969). Also see George Stoney: A Life in Film (13:00; 2009).

[Perhaps a quintessential example of Public Access of the 1970s and 1980s is Uncle Ernie TNT True Adventure Trails from East Lansing, MI. A cult favorite at Michigan State University during those times, it showed how any person could use federally-mandated public access to bring their personal vision to a mass audience. (Episodes from Ansible Network; episode from Dr. N.)]

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 example—Techniques of Errol Morris (1948- ), as shown in A Brief History of Errol Morris (2000, D: Kevin Macdonald) and examples from his documentaries]