Direct Cinema

ABSTRACT

Direct cinema is a movement within documentary filmmaking that emphasizes observational methods, often described with the rhetoric of objectivity as attained by the use of the unobtrusive yet mobile synchronous sound camera. Beginning in the 1960s, with the advent of portable, synchronous sound 16 mm motion picture equipment, a group of innovative filmmakers, notably in France and North America, started developing their own methodologies and principles to come to terms with reality via the capacities of the cinematic medium. The inception of the direct cinema and cinema vérité movement coincided with a larger phase of cinematic modernism around the world.

Aspects of these documentary movements can also be traced in other nations such as Japan, as part of a new cinematic phenomenon that surfaced simultaneously with little regard for national frontiers.

BODY OF ENTRY

In the 1960s, the sphere of documentary filmmaking experienced a pivotal transformation. With the advent of portable, synchronous sound 16 mm motion picture equipment, a group of innovative filmmakers, notably in France and North America, started developing their own methodologies and principles to come to terms with reality via the capacities of the cinematic medium. Such practices, which made a decisive leap from the earlier expository documentary tradition, were given such labels as “direct cinema” and “cinéma vérité”. While these two terms are interrelated and share common aspects, direct cinema emphasizes observational methods, often described with the rhetoric of objectivity attained by the maximal use of the unobtrusive yet mobile sync-sound camera. Cinéma vérité, on the other hand, stresses a more participatory approach that undermines the boundary between the filming and the filmed. The distinction between the two has also been partially attributed to the nations in which these practices emerged and developed: the United States for direct cinema, and France for cinéma vérité. However, aspects of these documentary movements can also be traced in other nations such as Japan, as part of a new cinematic phenomenon that surfaced simultaneously with little regard for national frontiers.

**Direct Cinema and America**

Direct cinema, also referred to as American cinéma vérité, was initially embraced by documentarists working at Drew Associates, a production company formed by Robert Drew in the early 1960s. Names associated with the movement include D.A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, Albert and David Maysles (also known as the Maysles Brothers), Joyce Chopra, Hope Ryden, James Lipscomb, and occasionally Frederic Wiseman. The first milestone film was *Primary* (1960), a documentary produced at Drew Associates, featuring two Democratic candidates at the Wisconsin state presidential primary: John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey. This overtly political subject-matter indicated the journalistic impulse behind direct cinema. Indeed, the filmmakers continued to favour pubic figures as their documentary subjects, from the legendary Indianapolis 500 car racer Eddie Sachs in *On The Pole: Eddie Sachs* (Drew Associates, 1960), to the movie star and activist Jane Fonda in *Jane* (Drew Associates, 1963) and the singer Bob Dylan in D.A. Pennebaker’s *Don’t Look Back*  (1966). Another principle behind their choice to follow celebrities was a trust in the ability of their method to “reveal” the supposedly real faces of the subjects. The filmmakers' rigorously observational mode enabled them to capture unusual images of these public figures, arguably creating a more intimate and direct representation than carefully constructed footage would provide. In *Primary*, the portable camera (operated by R. Leacock) famously captures the candidates preparing themselves before posing for the media. However, the direct cinema practitioners were by no means naïve, nor unaware of the fundamental performativity of general human behaviour. Their interest did not lie in breaking the external surface of the subject to uncover an internal or true self. Rather, the camera studied the individual’s multi-layered spectrum of actions, performances and self-presentations, with which the spectator would engage critically. Whether this approach is genuinely “objective” or not can be debated, but minimizing interference with the subject of the documentary still remained a consistent doctrine behind their practices, and this strategy was often used by filmmakers following their subjects for lengthy periods of time and establishing stable relationships with the filmed individuals.

**Cinéma Vérité and Feedback Loop**

The term cinema vérité was first coined in 1960 by Edgar Morin, an influential Marxist sociologist in France. Referring to Soviet filmmaker and theorist Dziga Vertov’s notion of “Kino-Pravda” (film truth), Morin advocated the possibility of cinema vérité (true cinema), whose documenting process would capture human life as it is lived. In contrast to direct cinema, cinema vérité hailed a methodology through which the filmmaker would actively participate in or even provoke the subjects and events in the profilmic reality. The filmmakers themselves occasionally become the subjects of the films (for instance, by literally appearing in front of the camera), so that the distinction between the filming subject and the filmed subject gets blurry. The embryotic form of this participatory mode of filmmaking could already be found in the field of ethnographic documentary, most notably in the work of Jean Rouch, a French anthropologist and filmmaker: *Moi, un noir* [*I, a Black Man,* 1957], *La Pyramid humaine* [*The Human Pyramid*, 1958-9], and others. Morin and Rouch co-directed *Chronique d’un été* [*Chronicle of a Summer,* 1960], a landmark cinéma-vérité documentary that portrayed “characters” from various backgrounds – factory workers, students from Africa, an Italian émigré, a Holocaust survivor, and so on – conducting participant observation on Parisians. The subjects of *Chronicle*, not as objects of observation but as accomplices of the directors, adopted and evolved their interchangeable roles as interviewers, respondents, actors acting out their everyday lives and most notably as critical spectators commenting on themselves after seeing a rough cut of the film. Interestingly, this feedback loop, through which the acting agencies (including filmmakers) would turn into self-reflexive spectators (including ourselves who watch *Chronicle* today), had been a method partially explored in the earliest feature documentary, Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), which greatly inspired Morin and Rouch.

**Case Study: On a Margin - The Neglected Legacy of Hani Susumu in Japan**

The Japanese filmmaker Hani Susumu is best known for the experimental feature films that made him one of the central figures in the so-called Japanese New Wave. His directorial debut, *Kyoshitsu no kodomotachi* [*Children in the Classroom,* 1954], however, was a sponsored educational short film originally designed for schoolteachers. Using uniquely observational methods to film real children in a real school, the film was utterly different from the educational films that were dominant at the time, in which child actors played the role of students. The film scholar Abé Mark Nornes argues that *Children in the Classroom* is the first appearance of cinéma-vérité, one that predates the movement in France and the United States. While Hani’s early documentary did not leave a decisive mark on the international film scene of the time, his neglected achievement is evidence that the emergence of new documentary in the 1950s and 1960s was a global phenomenon. The inception of the direct cinema and cinema vérité movement coincided with a larger phase of cinematic modernism around the world.

Reference and further reading

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Paratextual Material

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTqMmA9bycM

(Clip from Drew Associates’ *Primary*)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6EfYpP1Jdc>

(Clip from Morin/Rouch’s *Chronique d’un été*)

Takuya Tsunoda

Yale University