MITCHELL W. BLOCK

[12] *The Truth about* No Lies *(If You Can Believe It)*

It's July 2002 and I am observing a photo shoot for a new "reality" program that will air on TNT in 2003 called (working title) *The Residents*. R. J. Cutler, producer of *The War Room* (1993) and the Emmy Award–winning series (FOX and PBS) *American High* (2000), is the show's executive producer, and his company, Actual Reality Pictures, has been making this work for the past year. *The Residents* follows a year in the life of surgical and family practice residents at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)'s medical centers in that city. The residents allowed a film crew to shoot them at home and in the hospital. In most cases, they even recorded themselves on a portable video "diary" camera—"private" moments that, if selected, will be included in the television show possibly seen by millions of people. This is a publicity photo shoot of the "real" doctors who participated in sharing their real-life adventures with Cutler's two (sometimes three) crews. Gathered around a real hospital gurney, with the green leatherette pad, are nine doctors. Some are wearing scrubs and others are in nice office clothes. They have all been to the makeup and hair stylists working in an adjoining room. The PR staffers from TNT, coordinating with their photographer (who is shooting large-format still shots of the doctors on a large photo stage), carefully approve the look of each of the doctors, nodding as they are made up and their hair is styled. What is striking to this observer is that this multicultural group of attractive men and women could be actors playing doctors but they are actually made-up doctors playing themselves. They are real!

Cutler and his team of vérité crews are making reality television. A team of transcribers, story editors, producers, and editors supports the crews. They use terms such as "story arc," "beats," "the 'A,' 'B,' and 'C' story lines," to refer to the real scenes as if these were scripted, as they try to piece the events together into minidramas that will become the acts of

a television hour. Shoot first, then script. Sometimes instructions come to the crews from the story editors to shoot an ending to a dramatic arc. The crews oblige. The economic advantage of using real people is clear to program executives. One does not have to pay residuals (or actors) for what will be a season's series. Real-life dramas from real-life people present a solid economic model to network programming executives. This also can be first-rate programming. But what are the responsibilities of the filmmakers to the subjects? To the audience?

I have shared this experience with the reader because R. J. Cutler's work is taking place thirty years after I made *No Lies*. Cutler follows the pioneer work of Alan and Susan Raymond, who shot, and Craig Gilbert, who was executive producer of, the 1972–1973 PBS series *An American Family*, and moves stylistically from the earlier show's pacing and form toward what might be called an MTV look. I do not intend to imply one style is better than another, but rather to suggest that the pacing is a whole lot faster in recent reality programs. Many of *The Residents* crew and cast were not even born when *An American Family* aired. (*The Residents* flows from the success of R. J. Cutler's earlier work, *American High*. Many of the key crew worked on both projects.) *An American Family* also had press photos shot in a studio and 8 mm film diaries (home video was not yet usable on-air), and the crew developed relationships with the subjects; on first look, almost everything is the same. The new work is not being made in an intellectual or cultural vacuum. *The Residents*' filmmakers in many cases went to film school and have a solid grounding in film history; a number of the filmmakers involved with this program were my students at University of Southern California (USC). Despite the thirty years that have passed, there is almost no separation between Cutler and the filmmakers of the 1970s. Joan Churchill, one of the cinematographers on *An American Family*, is one of the two principle cinematographers for Cutler.

I share this with the reader because I made my work, *No Lies*, in response to *An American Family* as it was in production/postproduction thirty years ago. *No Lies* is a film about filmmaking (and filmmakers making films). *An American Family* was the catalyst. Eleanor Hamerow, one of my teachers at the New York University (NYU) graduate film program, was one of the original editors for the series. She is credited with editing its first hour. I understand she left *An American Family* because she was so concerned with the many ethical questions raised by the production process. How was the filmmaking process affecting the people who were sharing their lives with the filmmakers? How would showing the film to the public affect their lives? *No Lies* is a simple story with a simple narrative arc that explores these questions, as well as the relationships between filmmakers and their subjects. The big difference from the "reality" programs is that my work was scripted or story-edited before it was shot. It is a drama that is fictional rather than a drama that is real. No real people were exposing their inner lives to the camera or the public, since no real people were used. The idea for the work developed, in part, because of the tensions I observed between Hamerow and Craig Gilbert, the series producer. I did not see *An American Family* until many years later, in part because of the anger Hamerow felt toward the work that was going to expose this family to public scrutiny on national television (as well as my lack of access to television, and the work not being available on film or video). I wondered, "Is it possible to film reality without changing it?" or "Could one create reality fictionally and not worry about how filming it would affect the subjects, since in my work the subjects do not exist—they are actors?"

Shelby Leverington and cameraman Alec Hirschfield during the shooting of *No Lies* (Mitchell W. Block, 1973)

Three years earlier, in the fall of 1968, I had the experience of seeing *David Holzman's Diary* at New York University. Jim McBride, L. M. Kit Carson and Michael Wadleigh's *David Holzman's Diary* is in many respects the staged documentary that started a movement. The screening was not part of a class but rather a thrown-together evening, a student-initiated event. Jim had been a graduate student at NYU. This screening forever changed my relationship with film. Without *David Holzman's Diary*, there would be no *No Lies*. I believed the film; I loved it. I was taken in by Carson's Holzman character. I wanted to be Holzman. Indeed,

what young aspiring filmmaker in 1968 would not want to be the waspy Holzman character? His life was falling apart before our eyes but we loved this character. In the end, David's Éclair camera and Nagra are stolen, leaving him without a way to work—so the film ends over black as Holzman tells us what has happened, and this was something we all could relate to; after all, our cinematography teacher Fred (Beta) Badka kept his 35 mm cameras in a bank vault. To reiterate, Carson/Holzman (the fictional character) loses everything in the process of making this work; the hero's downward spiral, so personally and painfully documented in the film, makes it so one can't help loving his character. The film, like the French New Wave works we were seeing, is so (I can say it) cool. (*Sex, Lies and Videotape* [Steven Soderbergh, 1989] some years later has a similar feel.)

McBride, Wadleigh, and Scorsese were all classmates in NYU's pre–School of the Arts graduate film school in 1966. Around that time, John Cassavetes' *Faces* (1968) premiered. Cassavetes influenced their work with his fictional reality. *Faces* was a gutsy "real-life" drama with a tour de force, in-your-face performance by its stars. A few years later, these works, combined with the relentless screenings and analysis of *Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1965), in the fall of 1973 in the graduate film program (where I made *No Lies* as my MFA thesis), created the intellectual atmosphere where one felt safe to challenge the conventional form of cinema. It made complete sense. We were studying with revolutionaries. Leo Hurwitz was the directing teacher in the program—our filmmaker in residence. His professional credentials were impeccable and distinctly left-wing. A one-time member of the Film and Photo League, Hurwitz had collaborated on pictures such as *Native Land* (1942), and we had the good fortune to have him as the chair and one of the master teachers in the program. Leo provided a remarkable standard for the program. Artistically, he was a powerful force; no one could doubt his ethics or integrity as an artist. He was deeply respected by all of the students even if they did not always agree with him. His take on filmmaking deeply affected me.

Finally, there was my experience working as the New York line producer of Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* in the fall semester of 1972. This made *No Lies* inevitable, since I needed to do a thesis work and had only limited time to write, shoot, and edit it starting in January 1973, since I was the sole graduate student in a prototype one-year MFA program: if I did not direct a film, I would not graduate.

I knew as a producer that I should do a work that would be "easy" to make. Limited locations, interior practical locations, a short shoot, few actors, low shooting ratio, no period costumes, no score, etc. Keep it really simple. The work was based on an unpublished video called *The Rape Tape*, in which a number of women who were raped talked about their experiences. This early video diary was produced, with three other women, one of whom was Jenny Goldberg, the sound person on *No Lies*. This work was never published and was only screened privately. The women in it insisted on their privacy. *The Rape Tape* was one of the first works to personally deal with the effects of rape and was a deeply moving work that provided much of the material for the actress Shelby Leverington, who plays the woman in *No Lies*. We used a Sony Porta Pack. The location selected was Muffy Meyer's apartment. Meyer was editing documentaries (*Gray Gardens*, Albert and David Maysles, 1975) with Ellen Hovde (who became her film business partner) at the Maysles'. They were close friends of Charlotte Zwerin (who was the original editor of *An American Family*, also resigned from the project, and was a resident filmmaker at the Maysles'). Although I did not know the Raymonds (or Gilbert) at this time, I was responding to their work (without seeing it): people who had a very strong emotional reaction to the ethics of this film surrounded me. The work was the talk at many a dinner. My concern about the nature of the documentary was ongoing because of my relationship with these filmmakers. This concern cut across a range of films and the expediencies of my required thesis forced me to think continually about *David Holzman's Diary* and another fiction film from the period, *A Safe Place* (Henry Jaglom, 1971).

My fascination with this form is directly connected to my interest in the relationships between: (1) the filmmaker (Block) and the subjects—the

No Lies (Mitchell W. Block, 1973)

"camera person" and "the subject"; (2) the filmmaker (Block) and the audience; (3) the audience/viewer and the film (from the point of view of the audience). This tripartite relation is clear to see in *No Lies,* I (1) abuse the subject with an insensitive filmmaker, (2) undermine the audience's relationship with the filmmaker by making the latter unlikable and unethical, and (3) abuse the spectator by pretending to present the truth but lying. In this case (unlike that of a real documentary), I am not in the film but am manipulating it by using a nonfictional form to tell a fictional story. The filmmaker/camera person who is very much a part of the *No Lies* story is actually a character playing the filmmaker. In the traditional "real" work the filmmaker is—well, the filmmaker. While we are used to talking about the filmmaker and the subject (1), and the audience and the film (3), *No Lies* is really about the filmmaker manipulating the audience (2).

All filmmakers, in both dramatic and nonfiction forms, do this. However, in the nonfiction form, the filmmaker has an assumed responsibility to the subject. By manipulating the film, the filmmaker is manipulating reality. In a nonfiction work, the subject is a real person and not an actor. But real life is not "dramatic" within the convention of film time. It needs to be structured and edited into film form; the lack of action in real life needs to be accelerated. The structure of film allows for this manipulation of time through editing. Although picture logic allows us to see events as they really happen, this is usually not acceptable to audiences because reality is seen as slow and not usually dramatic, and filmmakers are almost never filmmaking at the "right" moment. Filmmakers therefore need to use the device of telling us what happened rather than showing us what happened. The nonfiction film is formed in the editing room to tell the story in a dramatic fashion from the mundane material shot. The editor pushes the narrative elements of the footage to make it flow in a cinematic way—faster. Editors depend on the filmmakers to be there at the key moments to film the story as it happens. If they miss filming the story, the filmmakers have to reenact the story, have the subjects tell us about what happened (voice-over or interview), provide a card, or perhaps tell us in their own words what happened. Since, most of the time, filmmakers miss these key moments, the documentary film is always rushing to catch up with the story.

The paradigm shift between Gilbert and Raymonds's *An American Family* and Cutler's *American High* and *The Residents* is that contemporary filmmakers use story producers and story editors and generally no on-site director. They radically break up their footage and there is no attempt made to show it as a whole. The sequences are diced and split by the editors into fragments that are intercut with other fragments so that the hour has a more intense pacing caused by the fragmentation of the stories. As soon as the action (or story) slows, the filmmakers cut to another story, and later cut back to the previous story. The multiple filmmaking crews become part of an industrial process—making a collective story rather than allowing the filmmakers to create a story simply of what they shoot. There is no director but only producers, directors of photography, editors, story editors, and other supervisors.

The Raymonds are credited as the filmmakers of *An American Family* but the authorship is difficult to pin down. There is no "director" credit given. *An American Family* runs the shot sequences far longer than the newer films, stays with the action/characters, and allows the pacing to be far less frenetic. Its frame is also smaller, focused on one family, not on a dozen or so high school students. Both works are character driven: *American High* focuses on the students and their interrelations; *An American Family* focuses on the lives of the family members. *No Lies* is a sequence that could be in any of these films—except the filmmakers would not be part of the action. The "fly-on-the-wall" film crew, in reality interacting with the subjects, is the hidden secret of both the *American High* and *American Family* series. The subjects tell the crew when something is going to happen and the crew apparently happens to be there to film it, or, if they miss it, they either stage it or interview the subjects about what they missed. The crew is alerted to the coming drama; the results are covered. They know what is going to happen before it happens, and sometimes nothing happens until the crew is present.

No Lies follows the strategy or style of *An American Family* for two reasons: this style gives the work the appearance of being a reality, and the story line is very simple. (My 1974 work, *Speeding,* predates the fragmentation style of *American High,* since it is an intercut story of real people and of actors playing real people.) The audience does not want to observe the two edits that cut together the three shots in *No Lies*. Like the work of Cutler, *No Lies* was actually shot on video, at least through the rehearsal stage, using now-primitive Sony Porta Pack video equipment; the *No Lies* rehearsal tapes are included in the Direct Cinema Ltd. (www.directcinemalimited.com) DVD version. The use of film for production was mandated by the unavailability of high-quality handheld video equipment. The sense of reality is captured by the conceit of the work: the whole work is presented as a single-take truth (or a nonedited work) and hence *could* not be a lie. Audiences believe single continuous shots. Meanwhile, the docu-series is always presented as the truth despite its fictional—highly edited—style. Reality uncut for fifteen straight minutes is apparently not interesting for today's MTV-style (or VH1, etc.) documentaries.

(Are there any interesting fifteen minutes without cuts in any film in our canon?) We require fragmentation to heighten the drama of the moment, fragmentation so that the work presents multiple plots to intercut. Since I was trying to make a point about making films about real people, *No Lies* suggested it is possible to craft reality without hurting anyone. This is the point of the film. One can be "personal" without begin hurtful. In my current network series, we have to deal with the choice of allowing a sailor to reveal his or her sexual preference. If the sailor does this in our series, his or her Navy career ends. A huge responsibility and choice for the filmmakers—real can have dramatic consequences. I am not comfortable ending a career for show, even if I have a release.

I love what Cutler and company are doing to the nonfiction form, and share Cutler's work to show that the form is continuing to evolve. His work, for me, is still ethically provocative. In the last thirty years, one would think, given the dominant media, real-world subjects have become more accustomed to the media intruding on their lives. They allow their trials, their arrests, and their lives to be captured. With Winona Ryder's real-life adventures captured on store video surveillance cameras, alleged criminals caught in the act on shows like *Cops,* and a host of programs like *Survivors,* we see hundreds of hours of "reality" programs. In addition, the genre is being expanded in works like *Frontier House* where real people play roles. Unlike Michael Moore's fake nonfiction works, my work has the camera person/filmmaker allowing the character to be truthful (within the context of the fiction), and, as is not the case in his works, we are intentionally betraying the audiences' trust. We are, after all, fiction, and, although we are pretending to be nonfiction, we are not nonfiction. The other extreme of this can be seen in Michael Moore's films, where a fiction is created using real people but distorting who they are and what they say. Moore is using the technique of *No Lies,* but is telling the spectator (and the subjects) that he is being truthful. If *Roger and Me* (1989) were a fiction, with actors instead of real people, it would be fine. Alas, Moore is a documentary liar; his work holds up its subjects for ridicule and scorn. We laugh at these real people who, in some cases, are being presented in a false light by Moore. Compare this to the respect with which the subjects are treated by Cutler or the Raymonds and Gilbert.

What then is "fake"? *Roger and Me* has a number of "fake" scenes and/or depictions of characters, but the filmmaker tells us that this is a documentary. My work rings true but is a fiction. It is a fake carefully built as truth (but is labeled as fiction in its credits). Although the actual rape is a fiction, and the two characters are a fiction, the emotions and feelings the woman shows in her interview, even though acted, read as truth to the spectators and to experts. Even the New York City police, when using the work in training in the 1980s, asked me for the "name of the officer who interviewed the woman in the film." Clearly, there is (or was) a training problem in police departments with the officers who interview rape victims; this came out repeatedly in researching the film. Thus, the New York Police training group wanted to interview the officer(s) on video who interviewed the actress in *No Lies* and use the interviews with the film for training purposes. (I would love to have a copy of that interview tape.)

For the past six months, I have been working on my third work in this genre. What is interesting to me is to continue to play on the relationship among the filmmaker, the subject, and the audience. I want the camera-person to again cross the line and hone in on the subject who clearly does not want to expose her feelings. He, like the television newspeople and Mr. Moore, wants to get his "Roger" on film regardless of how "Roger" feels about being on film at any moment of vulnerability. I want that moment I experienced once in a UCLA film class after a screening of the *No Lies* sequel *Speeding*? when a student asked, "How do you happen to film movie stars getting speeding tickets?" It is the moment of "aha!" in the audience, wanting to believe that the actor is the real person getting caught on film, rather than the actor playing a character who is in a fictional work.

What is critical is that spectators become more sophisticated reading the film text being presented. They need to understand how easy it is to manipulate the form so that it appears to be the truth when it is not. *No Lies* should have been called *All Lies*. We all believed the fiction of the dot-com boom or the MCI/Worldcom or Enron reports. We wanted to believe that the auditors, the government officials, the bankers, the brokers, and the analysts were telling the truth. Trillions of dollars have disappeared. The investors, like the spectators, want to believe what they are told. Everything has changed since I made *No Lies,* but I feel that everything is still the same.