

Title of the Course:

Film Studies

Week 1

Module 3

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Cinéma Vérité

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Cinéma Vérité

Cinéma vérité was one of the very important movements in cinema that began and flourished in France in the 1960s. Film scholars cite the French films *Chronique d'un été* (Chronicle of a Summer) directed by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin and released in 1961, and *Le Joli Mai* (The Lovely Month of May), directed by Chris Marker, and released in 1963, as perfect specimens of Cinéma vérité.

The French phrase Cinéma vérité means 'truthful cinema' or 'truth cinema'. Cinéma vérité was essentially a decisive departure from the very controlled filmmaking practices centred around the studio system which had perfectly choreographed staged events and a very strict pre-fixed script. The obsession with the notion of truth, and the desire to represent raw reality, with the least mediation, were some of the motivating factors behind the emergence of Cinéma vérité. 'Observational cinema' and 'direct cinema' are the two common alternative terms used to refer to the movement Cinéma vérité. At times, the terms like 'live camera', 'cinema manque', cinema banalite were also used to signify this movement.

The learning objectives of this module are:

- i. To trace the origin and development of Cinéma vérité as a movement in film

- ii. To watch and appreciate a few films belonging to the genre
- iii. To figure out the major filmmakers who practiced Cinéma vérité; and
- iv. To identify the major features of Cinéma vérité

When we trace the ideological genealogy and the praxis model of Cinéma vérité, we can understand that most of the principles of Cinéma vérité had already been anticipated and practiced by the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov through his Kino-Pravda, or cinema-truth movement in the 1920s. Documentary film historian Erik Barnouw notes that Cinéma vérité as a distinct sub-genre of films began with Jean Rouch's French film, *Moi, un Noir* (I, a Black) (253). The film was an experimental one, which had the filmmaker's black African friend as the subject. It was released in 1958. What are the defining methodological and stylistic features of Cinéma vérité?

Major feature of Cinéma vérité:

- i. The use of hand-held camera
- ii. Dependence on synchronous live sound recorded on location
- iii. Shooting in real places instead of dedicated sets
- iv. Shooting the situations undirected
- v. Filming real people doing ordinary things
- vi. Skippy or visible editing
- vii. Acknowledgement of the presence of camera
- viii. In-cinema presence of the filmmaker
- ix. Self-reflexivity on the process and the product of the film
- x. Aesthetics of discontinuity and surprise
- xi. Provide an idiomatic extension to the documentary form

A brief description of some of these features, with some telling examples from the rich oeuvre of Cinéma vérité tradition from the 1960s, is given below.

By the second half of the 20th century, cost-effective, lighter and highly portable hand-held professional cinematographic cameras were available to the filmmakers. This considerably increased cinematographer's mobility with the camera. Now, decisions to change the camera positions, angles and directions could be taken spontaneously, providing a scope for cinematographic improvisation. The portable camera could now penetrate into interiors,

subways and other narrow claustrophobic spaces. This factor also made possible capturing the cinematic subject unaware with a hidden or moving camera. *Titicut Follies* (1967), directed by Frederick Wiseman and cinematography by John Marshal on the mentally insane patients of the Bridgewater State Hospital in the USA makes use of a portable camera to follow the subject through flights of stairs and narrow corridors of the hospital.

In the glossary of cinema studies, synchronous sound means the sound track that matches with the visual track of the film. In cinema vérité, synchronous sound suggests the original live sound track recorded simultaneously and embedded organically with the visual content of the film. The invention of comparatively cheaper 16 millimetre film-stock, and the arrival of portable synchronous voice recorders also occurred around the same time. These factors also created a congenial ecology for the filmmakers to experiment. In cinema vérité rarely additional sound elements are incorporated in the visuals. Vérité cinemas were not confined to any pre-fixed scripts or locations. These filmmakers often took the film crew to conflict sites, participated in the clash in a provocative, catalyst mode along with the other participants in the tension. Christ Marker's *Le Joli Mai* (The Lovely May, 1963) follows this tradition.

Shooting in the real locations of actual events is also a convention in the cinema vérité style of filmmaking. One such a film is *Pamat* (Memory, 1969) by the Russian director Grigori Chukrai. It was a vérité film on the Stanlingrad battle. In this film, the filmmaker challenged the people in the streets of Place de Stalingrad in Paris with a series of questions on the war and simultaneously filmed their responses. Later on, Chukrai combined these new footages with the available stock footages on the battle. The stunningly fresh result was the film *Pamat*. Here, shooting in undirected situations becomes very prominent.

The method of capturing the subject unaware is highlighted and appreciated for its realism in this style of filmmaking. Henry Breitrose defines cinema vérité as “an attempt to get at the nitty-gritty of the world by observing people in the process of some crucial interactions with each other” (1964: 36). The transparency of cinema vérité is that people are captured in live action in real life situations. This allows the audience reach at their own conclusions without any external/explicit commentary. For instance, such a situation is captured in the 1962 Canadian cinéma vérité film *Lonely Boy*, directed by Wolf Koeing and Roman Kroiter.

Editing is a post-shooting process in the production of films. During editing normally a sequential, coherent, structured form and meaning is attributed on the selected audio-visual footages. Editing ensures continuity in film narrative, clarity in film's didactic elements and an emphasis on the dramatic element based on suspense and surprises. The editing of the film does involve some amount of shaping of the material shot, as is inevitable in the process. However, as far as possible, the cinema vérité filmmaker tries to recreate the events as he witnessed them. He does not violate the sequence of shots as to create incorrect impressions. Though one cannot rule out the fact that editing does involve a process of selection, the cinema vérité filmmaker is careful not to have a preconceived mould into which the material he has filmed is cast forcibly.

In cinéma vérité, music and additional soundtrack are not added almost as a general principle and narration is kept to the minimum, to that which is essential to follow the events on the screen. In a cinema vérité film, the selection of material, the shooting and editing processes do not remain separate functions; instead they are integrated as continuous steps in a single effort. Editing is done by people who participated in the filming process. Meaning is sought in the materials themselves, rather than it emerging in the act of editing. There is no imposition of external priorities and prejudices after the events are filmed. In order to suture the discontinuous visuals, often continuity in soundtrack is maintained in cinema vérité. However, in principle, editing as a process for giving the film a clean, polished look was not followed in cinema vérité. Instead, even the breakdowns during the shooting, distorted camera angles and imperfect frames could be incorporated in the final cut version of a vérité film.

Such deliberate editorial decisions take the film closer to reality. According to Hubert Smith, "a cinema-vérité film is a film that always minimizes the limitations that film imposes in transferring reality. It is a film that gets as close as possible to the visual, aural, and kinesthetic sense of actual presence. And, it is a film that while compressing, re-arranging, and juxtaposing the bits and pieces of reality, adheres to the truth of the story" (1967: 58). A clearly detectable acknowledgement of the presences of camera in the film, the obvious in-frame presence of the filmmaker, often as a provocateur, the incorporation of the filming process, incorporation of screening sessions in the main body of the film etc. highlight the self-reflexive nature of the cinema vérité tradition.

Cinema vérité deliberately follows the aesthetics of discontinuity, distortion and deviation as one of its foundational principles. The larger aim of cinema vérité is to apply, on the audience, an aesthetics of shock and surprise by deviating from norms of mainstream cinema, and by extending the already well-established documentary film conventions to the fiction-film territory.

The ideological conditions together with the technological innovations of the late 1950s and early 1960s contributed to the genesis of cinema vérité. In France, the 1960s witnessed the end of the French colonial occupation of North and Sub-Saharan Africa. In the US the 1960s marked the rise of civil rights, anti-war and feminist movements. Cinema vérité is a form associated with anthropological cinema. The social, political and ethical implications involved in documenting the lives of people in other, often colonised, cultures were of crucial concern to ethnographic filmmakers of the mid 20th century. These filmmakers championed the ideology of realism in films. The movements of race and gender politics were also catalytical in the evolution of cinema vérité. Issues of colonialism and racism figured prominently in cinema vérité films like *Chronicle of a Summer*. Feminist cinema vérité films such as *Jill Johnston October 1975* were produced in the 1970s.

Cinema vérité filmmakers approach their subjects as people rather than mere objects, as flesh and blood figures with inconstant, irrational mental states. The director is privy to intimate personal details about his subjects, which are hidden from even their immediate relatives. He must exercise a great deal of caution in dealing with the lives and feelings of his subjects, while involving himself intensely emotionally with these. Hence the investment that the director and crew of a cinema vérité film make can be exacting; nevertheless, it is exhilarating as well. The exhilaration consists in the satisfaction of having captured a subject revealing his innermost self, its anxieties, fears, pains and joys. As a purveyor of truth, the cinema vérité director will have to dispense with some of the appealing elements of traditional cinema such as an exquisite piece of photograph or an exciting sound sequence. Often the unpleasantness of a scene or situation may have to be retained. Stereotypes that are the staple of traditional film forms are abandoned.

Melodrama and suspense also have no room in cinema vérité films. According to Stephen Mamber, cinema vérité eliminates as far as possible all types of barriers – technical (studio sets, tripod-mounted equipment, special lights, costumes and make-up), procedural (scripting,

acting, directing) and structural (standard editing devices, traditional forms of melodrama, suspense etc.) – between the subject and the audience, thus refusing to “tamper with life as it presents itself” (1972: 81). Colin Young’s characterisation of movements like cinema vérité and direct cinema as a reaction to “didactic educational films” and “highly manipulative classic melodrama” is in line with Mamber’s observation about cinema vérité . The 1999 Canadian documentary film *Cinema Vérité: Defining the Moment*, directed by Peter Wintonick is a film about the genre, cinema vérité.

Cinema Vérité and Direct Cinema:

Is there any difference between Cinéma vérité and Direct cinema? Film theorists like Stephen Mamber consider Robert Drew and Richard Leacock as the proponents of cinema vérité in America (1972:82), whereas most documentary film scholars associate the two with the Direct Cinema movement, which mostly made films for the television. The terms cinema vérité and direct cinema are often used interchangeably. However, there are theorists who point out significant distinctions between the two. Film historian Eric Barnouw, for instance, distinguishes the two types thus: The direct cinema artist aspired to invisibility; cinema vérité artist was often an avowed participant. The direct cinema artist played the role of the involved bystander; the cinema vérité artist espoused that of provocateur. Direct cinema found its truth in events available to the camera. Cinémavérité was committed to a paradox: that artificial circumstances could bring hidden truth to the surface (1983: 255).

Yoommy Nam also argues that while Direct Cinema adopted an entirely observational approach, Rouch’s Cinema Vérité combines observational and participatory filming techniques. “Essentially, there is an awareness of the camera that is filming the scene, thus establishing a connection between the cameraman/filmmaker and those who are being filmed”. According to Nam, the degree of the filmmakers’ intervention is greater in cinema vérité than in direct cinema. The filmmaker subjective involvement is pushed to the extent of causing provocation to the subject.

Rouch has defended the filmmaker’s stance of a provocateur, saying provocation helps reveal people’s true selves. The guiding principle behind Direct Cinema was minimal intrusion between the film maker and the film subject and between the film subject and the spectator. But it is practically impossible to have completely unmediated reality. Cinema Vérité aims at a new film truth, truth in lies, i.e., telling the truth by lying. It deploys film techniques in such

a way as to create a new reality that is more real than the truth. Rather than pretending to present truth, cinema vérité poses the problem of truth in documentary filmmaking. In sum, both direct cinema and cinema vérité attempt to unfold truth, but in alternative ways. While the former adopts more of an observational method, the latter resorts to any means possible to tease out truth, revealing it gradually as an internal process.

Chronicle of a Summer as a Cinema Vérité Film:

Chronicle of a Summer (1960), directed by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, may be regarded as one of the earliest experiments in cinema vérité. The film documents a Jewish person's experience of Auschwitz in his own voice. It develops as a series of interviews; the interviewees are a motley group, selected from the filmmakers' circle of acquaintances. The film is centred on the spoken word. The technical innovation that enabled Rouch and Morin to capture the spoken word was the Nagra, a portable sync-sound tape recorder, that could connect to a silent and lightweight 16mm movie camera. Rouch explains how he and his team "were able, with the camera housing, to walk around anywhere, to film with synchronous sound in the subway, in the bus, in the street." There is perfect synchrony between image and sound. People speaking in sync alternate with "day in the life" scenes of people waking, walking and at leisure.

There is a sequence in the film of Marceline Loridan walking alone on the Place de la Concorde and the covered markets of Les Halles, while she recollects her exile to and return from a concentration camp as a teenager some sixteen years earlier. In filming this sequence, Rouch and Morin use portable recording technology to convey a sense of immediacy, giving an impression of unrehearsed action. The film employs self-reflexivity, as opposed to complete objectivity, the ideal in early documentary films. Towards the end of the film, for instance, the interviewees get together, watch and discuss the film in which they have been featured. Rouch and Morin themselves are not detached figures; they play with their own roles within the film, going to the extent of including responses from all of the characters in the edited film after showing them the original.

Web Links:

<http://web.mit.edu/candis/www/callison_truth_cinema.html de>

<<https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.1989.9966516>>

<<http://screen.oxfordjournals.org/>>

<<https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/cinema-vérité-vs-direct-cinema-an-introduction/>>