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In spring 1980 Professor Jay Ruby, of Temple University, in association with Linda Stryker and Susan Samuels, organized a series of lecture-screenings on the television documentary at the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia. The object was to generate debate and discussion, using the experience of the filmmaker-lecturers as the starting point. In this issue of *Studies in Visual Communication* we have brought together some of the key lecture papers in the hope of broadening the discourse.

As can be imagined, the documentarists spoke with many diverse voices. Some had had years of television experience. Some were virtual newcomers. Some argued for one method of approach and production, others maintained exactly the opposite. Whatever the conflicting viewpoints, all voiced a concern for the present and future of the television documentary.

This worry and concern is familiar to most people in the field. Today one approaches documentary with a distinct feeling of unease. Fewer and fewer are being produced and aired by the networks. Here and there something surfaces, but more often than not it is pseudo-topical, lacking in analysis, and largely irrelevant to the main concerns of the day. While drama documentary thrives, and Cousteau swims and the National Geographic roams, the documentary of social concern struggles for survival.

The last few years I have spoken extensively to nonfiction filmmakers. The concerns they raise are always the same, and without meaning to be exhaustive, I have listed a few below:

- 1 *Funding*: How does one raise money for films, and what is the place of the networks, foundations, business, and so on, in all this?
- 2 *Networks*:
 - (a) Who decides what programs are to be made? What is the rationale for the decision?
 - (b) What censorship procedures are in force, both formal and informal?
 - (c) Why is the quality of documentary programming so low?
 - (d) How can the independents gain access to the networks, and what is the worth of alternative distribution systems?
- 3 *Method*: What is happening with documentary style, method, innovation, and experiment in form?
- 4 *Materials*: What are the pros and cons of film versus video?
- 5 *Responsibility*: What is this thing called documentary responsibility and what does it involve?

Some, but not all, of these matters are touched on in papers collected in this issue. Some of the discussions, such as form and style, are the perennial diet of documentary self-questioning. Other matters, such as documentary responsibility, are too seldom talked about. None of the papers except one are theory papers. Few of the views have been bred in the warmth of the ivory tower. Most arise from the gut experience in the field and cover the broad spectrum of documentary practice and problems.

In many ways the paper of Robert Drew, one of the founding fathers of *cinéma vérité*, provides the ideal start. Drew, of course, is well known for pulling together the first practical and intellectual framework for *cinéma vérité* in the United States, and this has been well documented (Mamber 1974). What Drew provides afresh in his paper, however, is a glimpse of the original thinking behind early *cinéma vérité* and an inside view of the Time Inc. and Drew Associates collaboration.

Drew's self-questioning starts off from square one. What has documentary done, what can it do, and what should it do if it is to be of relevance? At the time, the stumbling blocks of the fifties seemed to be burdensome equipment and documentary practices based on a *lecture* and *word* logic. Drew saw the answer to these problems in the form of lightweight equipment and moving to a *picture-oriented* documentary focusing on the *drama of ordinary lives*.

The first result of the extraordinary collaboration of the Drew team was *Primary*, later to be followed by *Nehru*, *On the Pole*, *Susan Starr*, and others. In *Primary* the Drew team recorded the primary election battles between Hubert Humphrey and John Kennedy. They also started a filmic revolution and blazed out a path for the filmmakers of the sixties. In other words, an event of major significance that nevertheless was almost totally ignored by the networks.

Of all the major commercial companies only ABC seemed struck with Drew's pioneering efforts and commissioned him to do a film that eventually came out as *Yanki No!*. Yet Drew had drive, staying power, and a powerful track record, and in fact worked consistently for the networks, in an independent capacity, throughout the sixties. The facts of this relationship Drew outlines in a few broad strokes. Evidently it was a relationship that started with hope and promises and ended with bitterness and frustration owing to the increased timidity of the networks.

Robert Drew's pioneer work was done in the late fifties and early sixties. At the same time experimental *vérité* work was being carried out in France by Jean Rouch and Chris Marker, and in Canada by Wolf Koenig, Roman Kroitor, and Terrence McCartney Filgate. Later, through the work of other pioneer photographers and producers such as Fred Wiseman, William Brayne, Richard Leiterman, Allan King, Joan

Churchill, and dozens of others, *cinéma vérité* reached out into a myriad of directions. Today some filmmakers still use "pure" *cinéma vérité*. Others use elaborate scripts, interviews, and commentary. Is one method better than another? Which approach should be used and when?

The choice of approach and method is crucial, but there are few rules, and the papers of Julie Gustafson and Craig Gilbert are doubly intriguing because of the diversity of approach they show to similar themes. Gustafson's series is called *The Pursuit of Happiness*. Gilbert was the creator and mind behind *An American Family*. Both series tackle the same questions: the meaning of family life today, the truth behind the relationships of parents, children, husbands and wives, and the search for individual stability, happiness, recognition, and fulfillment. But if the questions discussed are similar, the two approaches are light years apart.

In *The Pursuit of Happiness* Gustafson and her colleague John Reilly are for order and methodology. Using video, Gustafson wants to film various families typifying the American situation and show ordinary family events such as marriage and death. The *vérité* filming is set in a framework of interviews and discussions that Gustafson calls an experiment toward a cinema of ideas. In reaching toward this goal, she involves many scholars and undertakes sociological research. Eventually the views and advice are sifted and analyzed and a model is set up for each film. At the time of the Walnut Street Theatre discussions the work was still in progress, but the ideas of production were very fully described and the procedures for editing particularly well brought out.

By way of contrast Craig Gilbert comes across as a much looser and more intuitive filmmaker—a filmmaker working more from instinct and emotion than intellectualized theories. He eschews the route strewn with academic advice and helpful pundits. Though the filming and editing is done with a team, we know clearly at the end that *An American Family* is the vision of one man, and one man alone.

While Gustafson of necessity has to be speculative about method and outcome Gilbert is able to be very open about the nitty-gritty of the filmic development. His method was to observe one family almost daily over 7 months. Certain questions motivated Gilbert at the start of the filming, and the final series was seen as a partial resolution or clarifying of the questions, even if no answers were provided.

Little seems to have been left out by Gilbert in his paper. He provides one of the most complete descriptions of a filmmaker's journey that one can hope to read. Everything is prized open, sometimes very painfully, from matters of financing and preproduction through National Educational Television (NET) policy to questions of crew organization and peace-keeping. Later Gilbert leads us through the intricacies of the filmmaking itself and the editing process till one is left with a very full understanding of both the complexities and the agonies of doing the series.

One area raised in the lecture—leading to many discussions and of deep concern—was the role of the networks in doing analytical documentaries for and about social change. A series that did consistently provide penetrating films was the *NET Journal* of the late sixties. In films such as *Banks and the Poor*, *What Harvest for the Reaper*, and *Hard Times in the Country*, writer-directors such as Mort Silverstein and Jack Willis showed brilliantly what could be done with the investigative documentary. After the demise of NET Silverstein moved over to WCBS and as Executive Producer of *Eye on New York* blazed new trails with the investigative documentary at local level.

Few networks have felt the urgency or the necessity of following the path of investigative analysis in recent years. CBS tends to plead that needs are met by *60 Minutes*. NBC has made a few half-hearted attempts but has recently been backing off such controversy-fraught areas. Thus, for the moment, ABC's *Closeup* series stands relatively alone in dealing with documentary of a social nature in prime time. *Closeup* started under the guiding hands of Av Westin and Pam Hill. Richard Richter for many years has been a senior producer for the series. In his paper Richter analyzes the background and production problems of *Youth Terror* and *The Uranium Factor*, and other *Closeup* presentations.

The subject matter of the films runs from juvenile delinquency through uranium mining to prison treatment and reform. Much information is new, but a lot has a familiar and depressing ring as when Richter outlines the evasions and stalling of officials whom they want to film and the lack of access to official sources once word gets out about a story. After describing the film process *per se*, Richter comments on the relationship of the networks to independents. Like others before him, he cites the need for ultimate network responsibility as one of the reasons for limiting free-lance work. In other words, the network has to be trusted to speak with a voice of authority and has to be above political bias or party alignment. Though the issue is debatable, there is a lot to be said for this stand—a view largely followed in England and Canada by the BBC, ITV, and the CBC.

From the sidelines, however, I have always been curious as to how much that vaunted voice of God and independent authority and majesty was really worth. I thought one of the ways of looking at the subject might be to examine how television documentary treats controversial history, where the filmmaker has to make his or her way through a minefield of biases, prejudices, and partisan viewpoints. Thus my own paper, *Israel Television Documentary and Pillar of Fire*, is a small initial attempt to look at the concepts of authority and objectivity in a few network films.

The subject of history and documentary is raised in a different way by Erik Barnouw in his discussion of *Hiroshima-Nagasaki* in *The Case of the A-Bomb Footage*. His central themes here are matters of censorship, issue avoidance, and access to audiences. The film deals with the aftermath of the atom bomb raids on Japan. Material about the effects of the bomb was shot by a Japanese crew shortly after the events but was then held in secrecy by the American government for over 20 years. In 1968 the censorship was lifted and the footage returned to Japan. Shortly afterward Barnouw gained access to the material and together with colleagues from Columbia University made the film.

Though Barnouw outlines the discovery of the material and the shaping of the film, his interests are broader, and he raises a number of critical issues. First he questions the whole system of censorship of the Japanese footage. He theorizes that one reason for the secrecy was American governmental fear that publicity of the material would be detrimental to attempts to develop the H bomb. This raises the whole question of who censors what, and under what pretext, and what democratic safeguards, if any, are in existence to question the matter.

Barnouw is also fascinating when he details the ambiguous attitude of the Japanese government to the film. Altogether, the use of the film in Japan appears to have been a ticklish matter, particularly where Barnouw had to tread a wary path between rival Japanese interest groups wishing to use the film for various diverse propaganda purposes.

Barnouw's discussion of distribution is revealing. Although the commercial networks were invited to a preview showing of the completed film, not one representative turned up. Later the commercial networks refused to have anything to do with the film, though NBC changed its position once the film had been committed elsewhere. Eventually the film was broadcast in August 1970 on NET to an audience which though huge by NET standards was minuscule when compared to the commercial outlets.¹

The issue raised by Barnouw is central to any documentary discussion. Here was a film of absolutely fundamental importance to contemporary society totally dismissed by the commercial networks. If this is typical, which I believe is the case, then where does network responsibility start and end? Who are the gray men who shape our viewing habits and determine what we can see, and why are they so consistently out of touch?

This is not just Barnouw speaking here but almost every serious independent documentarist. In his paper Drew touches on the timidity of the networks that rejected *Storm Signal*. The film, on drug addiction, was sponsored by Xerox and won first prize in Venice, but was refused by all the networks. Eventually the sponsor itself paid for network time, and the film became the most-viewed documentary of the year. Gustafson's series calls for a network showing but will probably never get to first base. Richter, speaking as an ABC employee, has a partial answer—the networks must not get too far ahead of the general public. Given the large NET viewing for *Hiroshima-Nagasaki, August 1945* and the overwhelming response to *Storm Signal*, the answer strikes one as being slightly inadequate.

This network unease is not the sole property of the American networks. One recalls only too well how the BBC refused to screen Peter Watkins' *The War Game* because it might disturb people. In that case the film, itself financed by the BBC, was never shown on TV but achieved a wide audience through theatrical bookings.

Access to network air time is the crucial question for the independent documentary. Simply put, the filmmaker wants an audience, and if the film concern is national social or political change, the filmmaker wants an audience of millions, not thousands. This inability to gain access is the bane of independent filmmakers. They do not want films such as *Harlan County* merely to preach to the converted in Union Halls or colleges; they want to reach a national audience and provoke comment and possible action.

The short-term answer in the past for independents has been to broadcast on public television, as Barnouw did with his *Hiroshima-Nagasaki* film, as well as Gustafson and Gilbert. They all mention in passing the insidious device of the public network, the *group discussion* following the airing which is used to quell controversy and limit the impact of an unusual film.

Many years ago, writing in *Film Library Quarterly*, the noted documentarist Arthur Barron deplored network concentration on issue-oriented films and news and called for the documentary about simple human beings and their everyday concerns. Unfortunately this kind of documentary is still an infrequent visitor to the main channels despite the crop of films on feminism and the women's movement and on the family

and family relationships in recent years. When these films do surface, it's for a moment of glory on daytime public television, and then oblivion—a solution that satisfies no one.

The Pursuit of Happiness and *An American Family* clearly answer Arthur Barron's call. Both Gustafson's series and that of Craig Gilbert are important not just for how they are made, which was discussed earlier, but because of what they attempt to do in widening the boundaries of film.² Both deal with the issue of happiness and the American dream, and the hopes and failures of human relationships in America today. *The Pursuit of Happiness* is still in the finishing stage. By contrast, *An American Family* was released in 1971. Although it was done for what was then NET, it achieved a huge national audience and was both garlanded with praise and blanketed with abuse. Gilbert's paper does not avoid the problems of the series, nor does he shrink from facing up to the very unfair abuse. Instead Gilbert looks at the issues square on as he attempts to explain his background, position, and goals as well as the whole situation seen from his side. His paper is angry, frank, bitter, and intensely revealing. It is also, to my mind, one of the most provoking, honest, and important pieces I have ever read on the practice and theory of documentary.

The question that generated Craig Gilbert's explorations was "Why are men and women in the U.S. having such a hard time today?" The answer, or part of it, he thought might come from a long and intimate study of one family.³ After various trials and tribulations, which he chronicles, he settled upon the Loud family of California and then spent 7 months shooting and a year editing.

Although Gilbert is very informative on the everyday process of the filmmaking, he is possibly even more interesting when talking about some basic ethical questions raised by the series. There are, for example, the very thorny questions of involvement, responsibility, and subject exploitation. Like most filmmakers, Gilbert tried to distance himself from the lives of his film's subjects and maintain a strict policy of noninvolvement in their dilemmas. The difficulty for both Gilbert and his crew in pursuing this course makes challenging reading. He is also brutally frank in presenting the dilemma of the filmmaker who knows that in one sense he is using people as guinea pigs for his own ends and cannot be totally open about the objectives of the film. The situation of consideration for the subjects battling against film objectives comes up all over the place and is especially intriguing when Gilbert discusses his desire to film the divorce announcement of Pat Loud.

Finally Gilbert discusses, at great length, the reactions of both the Loud family and the press. From the beginning Gilbert was open with the family about the filming. He mentions the limitations and boundaries discussed between them—their hesitations and then their approval. He showed them the rushes. They approved the final films—even loved them. And yet afterward, and particularly from Pat Loud, came accusations of exploitation and betrayal of trust. What more could Gilbert have done!

I think the problem was that the Louds saw the film out of context without an audience reaction. Neither they nor Craig Gilbert foresaw the public response and were simply not prepared for the hostile and vitriolic reactions of some of the critics. In short, Gilbert fulfilled what were seen as his responsibilities as a filmmaker, but in retrospect that may not have been enough.

Why were a few of the critics so savage? Gilbert thinks part of the answer for the hostility lies in the shock of recognition of themselves by the critics, and I think he is right. The critics recognized their own lives up there on the screen, and the threat was too great to stand.

In recent years Americans have been more than zealous in investigating their inner selves. Indeed a veritable industry has grown up around the subject, evidenced by the success of such books as *Pasages*. But this is an industry of the printed page, a medium that maintains a certain distance from us. The medium of film, however, is dimensionally different, more powerful, more threatening, more immediate. In *Scenes from a Marriage* Bergman dealt with much of the material of *An American Family*, but this was *fiction* and therefore safe and removed. Suddenly, in *An American Family*, there was no distancing. The critics and reviewers saw themselves and their problems on the screen and unable to face the reality of their lives turned some of their bitter reactions on Gilbert.

I'm sure this is part of the answer, if not all, and it is interesting to recall the reaction to *Gray Gardens*, a film about 79-year-old Edith Beale and her daughter. In this case, too, the critics claimed the Beales were exploited and that too harsh an exposure was presented on the screen. Here too, I think, little exploitation was involved; it was a case of the critics being unable to face facets of themselves they saw revealed in the Beales.

At the moment of writing these paragraphs my newspaper boasts an advert, "Discover the film and video revolution." At the same time my desk is covered with articles on cable systems, Home Box Office, 50 channel possibilities, video discs, video tape recorders, satellite dishes, and home-retrieval systems. Seeing all this, I wonder what it all bodes for television documentary. My instinct is that, with the

technological revolution and particularly with the growth of channels and outlets, more will be lost than gained for documentary.

What television did at its best, and radio before it, was provide at certain times a national cultural unifier—a communal experience shared by millions at the same moment. Some of these national media events are still with us, such as the Royal Wedding, the Pope's visit, the Presidential inauguration, and maybe certain national sporting events. But these media events are almost purely entertainment whereas in the past there were programmatic unifiers of substance.

What comes to mind besides Roosevelt's fireside chats? Well, I would like to think that the Fred Friendly-Ed Murrow program on McCarthy was such an event, gaining a huge audience and having a significant impact on the times. Other programs in the past years such as *Cathy Come Home* on the BBC in England, and maybe *The Selling of the Pentagon* in the U.S., were, in a much more minor sense, the unifiers of which I speak. But with the superabundance of media outlets the audience for each program will inevitably diminish. In brief, the national impact documentary as we knew it—and if it ever existed, which may well be my wishful thinking—will be a thing of the past.

Luckily, for a few years or so we still have a chance to use documentary on the commercial channels to reach a mass audience. Thus the matter of access discussed so much in all the papers becomes even more crucial because of the time element. Besides access, the other message from all the papers is the need for relevance. One after another the papers stressed the need for network documentary to face the real burning issues of our time and provide something more than moving wallpaper in the living room.

What is this concerned documentary? Probably the one that shakes us out of our tranquillity and leaves us uneasy and disturbed. My old friend and teacher George Stoney put it very succinctly. For years he ran the Canadian NFB *Challenge for Change* experiment. He clearly wanted you to know where things were at so that when you walked into his office his motto was there for all to see: "The good documentary is the one that rocks the boat." Happy rocking days!

Alan Rosenthal

Notes

- 1 Besides *The Case of the A-Bomb Footage* there are a number of other films in recent years that have dealt with various aspects of atomic warfare. In England, Robert Vas's *Survivors of Hiroshima* (BBC) asks in the most poignant way what it means today to have lived through Hiroshima. More recently, John Else's *The Day after Trinity* deals with the making of the atom bomb and the controversial career of Robert Oppenheimer, while *A Is for Atom, B Is for Bomb* centers around Edward Teller and the development of the H bomb. Both latter films dealt with the past but carry heavy implications for the present and were presented on public television.
- 2 Strangely enough Gilbert seems totally unaware of Allan King's film *A Married Couple* (Canada 1969), in which King follows a marital crisis for 8 weeks.
- 3 See in this context Allan King's *A Married Couple* and the recent series *Six American Families*.

Reference

- Mamber, Steven
1974 *Cinéma Vérité in America*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press.