THEORY AND PRACTICE
OF THE PORTRAIT FILM

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Degree of
Master of Science in Visual Studies
at the
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

May 1979

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submitted to the Department of Architecture on May 10, 1979 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Visual Studies.

This essay addresses the question of what it means to film other people and other cultures. It divides the documentary filmmaking process by methodological lines of approach, analyzing cinematic approaches to the subject matter, attitudes toward the characters and problems of narrative structure.

More generally, this essay attempts to define an aesthetic of the documentary film through theoretical concerns and practical choices; it outlines methods of portraiture concentrating on those most effectively revealing individuals' form of life and social consciousness, and gives, as an illustration, the author's own experience in dealing with this problem.

As part of the thesis, a selection of scenes from the Roxbury film is included in the 3/4" video cassette submitted with this essay.

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Not to shoot a film in order to illustrate a thesis, or to display men and women confined to their external aspect, but to discover the matter they are made of. To attain that "heart of the heart" which does not let itself be caught either by poetry, or by philosophy, or by drama.

Robert Bresson
Introduction

When I saw Jean Rouch's *The Mad Masters* for the first time, I was preparing a thesis on the function and significance of the masks used by the Senufo of Ivory Coast during their rites of passage. *The Mad Masters* describes a possession cult within the secret society of the Haukas living in Accra.

I remember thinking that if a stranger with a movie camera was allowed to enter secret societies and film them, writing an academic paper would become meaningless. Though it was difficult to understand the rules of the ceremony, a fantastic impression of reality emerged from the footage and gave to the film an incomparable strength. This dimension of "being there," of participation was, I thought, the definite superiority of film over any other scientific method in the representation of social events; it was no longer possible to write and talk when the opportunity to visually communicate was offered.

This rather naive thought was, in fact, very close to Jean Rouch's naive definition of the ethnographic film, made in 1955:

> What are these films? . . . I still don't know, but I do know that there are a few rare moments when the filmgoer suddenly understands an unknown language without the help of any subtitles, where he participates in strange ceremonies, when he finds himself walking in towns or across terrain that he has never seen before but that he recognizes perfectly. . . . A miracle such as this could only be produced by cinema, but it happens without any particular aesthetic telling us how it works, or any special technique which provokes it. . . . More often than not, in the middle of the most banal film, amid the wild collage of random events, a mysterious contact is established. Perhaps it is the close-up of an African smile, a Mexican winking at the camera, the gesture of an European which is so everyday that no one would dream of
filming it. All of these force the crystallization of a bewildering facet of reality. ¹

Thus, I first regarded film as a tool for social investigation. In that perspective, cinema verite seemed the natural and only method to be used because of its basic observational attitude and its exploration of "uncontrolled reality," both very close to scientific approaches.

Claude Levi-Strauss recognized the efficacy of cinema verite in Anthropology, ² as a way to collect and pool data, but denied any other possible use of this filmmaking approach and especially its total inadequacy in revealing the mechanisms of our industrial societies.

But if "cinematic recordings of human life are unchanging documents providing detailed and focused information on the behavioral characteristics of man,"³ then film has a more universal value; it seems not only to document human conditions, but it is also a way to understand, interpret and give meaning to the lives of the people filmed, whoever they are, wherever they live.

The Roxbury film, my thesis film, is both the logical outcome of the intellectual process which led me from sociology and anthropology into filmmaking and a source of reflections on the methods of observation and representation of social phenomena. This essay will attempt to frame these reflections within the theoretical and practical implications of documentary filmmaking.

Two basic characteristics help define the human condition. These are that people must feel in order to act and that the acts and feelings of any one or number of people are comprehensible, perceptible,
to all other people. . . it could also be said that the critical faculty for each person's individuality is his capacity to experience the realities which he can sense, and that the critical faculty for each person's sociality is his capacity for sharing the experience of his fellows . . .

Thus, as Robert Gardner says, a person sizes up the reality which surrounds him and reacts to it according to his own total experience. This experience dialectically carries in it the personal feelings and the social meanings of any human behavior.

This connection between an individual's form of life and social consciousness is the very core of the documentary film. This essay is then an investigation into the aesthetic of documentary filmmaking; it will address the pivotal question of the meaning of the act of filming other cultures, other people. Therefore, this essay will not deal, at all, with a sub-genre of the documentary film, which are personal films, autobiographical and other diary films in which the filmmaker is at the same time the subject of the film. This category of filmmaking would deserve a complete and serious analysis as an aesthetic, a social movement; in any case, a thorough response to Randall Conrad's simplifications.

Today a certain stratum of America's petty bourgeoisie has the leisure and means to make films about itself. As it turns out, the subject isn't usually interesting. Someone has become a filmmaker and intellectual instead of a housewife, doctor or teacher. At some point, the filmmaker's lower-middle class background embarrassed them—perhaps too they felt a twinge of guilt at surpassing their elders or schoolmates—and they picked up the camera to make home movies with a vengeance . . .

You'd hope the resulting portraits . . . would begin to explore the class-related conflicts which accompany the smallest uprooting in bourgeois society, putting a bit of perspective on competitiveness, ambition and
anxiety. Instead, films like Miriam Weinstein's *Living With Peter* and *We Get Married Twice* and Liane Brandon's *Not So Young Now as Then*, never got beyond their own insipid cockiness.

Ill-digested verite techniques only serve these filmmakers' compulsion to ridicule the social class they are still uncomfortably close to, without either self-examination or compassion.

It would be interesting to discuss Conrad's positions which raise the question of the lack of awareness and social responsibility of the filmmakers he is referring to, but it is not the place here to do so.

Nevertheless I will take into consideration such fundamental questions in my attempt to outline a certain aesthetic of the documentary film, especially the portrait film, and to define a responsible and efficient filmmaking approach to the social self through a respectful revelation of human lives.

Within the stream of direct cinema, viewed in an historical perspective, this essay will attempt to divide methodological lines of approach; their respective significance and consequences through the whole process of the making of the film: the choice of a subject, the shooting (function of the camera and attitude toward the characters) and the editing (the narrative structure).
I. The Cinematic Approach to the Subject Matter

It is obvious to say that the choice of a subject is the starting point of a film; nevertheless, the question of the cinematic approach refers to the attitude of the filmmakers toward the subject matter, as well as the stylistic decisions involved before starting the shooting. This is a very important question and therefore should not be overlooked since the form, the very texture of the film, will derive directly from the treatment of the subject matter.

It is possible to do a film on Eskimo life, but it would be different from Nanook; another film on a Presidential election would not be another Primary. In the same way, Chris Marker's Cuba Si! and the Drew film Yanqui No! are two completely different approaches to the same subject matter; Chris Marker's Le Joli Mai and Jean Rouch's Chronicle of a Summer are two different and highly personal views of the Paris of the early '60s, affected by the Algerian War; and we could multiply the examples.

The basic difference between films having the same subject matter comes from the cinematic style of the filmmaker, the importance he gives to the subject matter.

In his analysis of Franju's short films, Noel Burch says:

It should be stressed that Franju's films are only apparently similar to previous documentaries. What the old style documentary-makers took as their subject—a passive subject by comparison with the active fictional subject—Franju takes as a theme, and his subject is, in and of itself, a development or rather an interpretation of this theme and it thereby becomes active.6

Though Burch calls Franju a "documentary-maker," it is obviously because
his cinematic attitudes and stylistic treatment of Le Sang des Bêtes and
Hôtel des Invalides are very close to those of a fiction filmmaker that
Burch gives some attention to Franju; his overall attitude toward documen-
tarists being, to say the least, condescending.

Historically Hôtel des Invalides represented the first
use in a documentary film of a formal approach that
previously had been exclusively employed in the fiction
film. This however does not actually turn the documen-
tary into . . . fictional narrative, as always happened
in Flaherty's films, with frequently disastrous results
. . . The aim of the old-school-documentary filmmakers
was an absolutely objective rendering of the world they
were filming. They sought to make what they filmed
beautiful and clear; for them, this sort of reproduction
of reality as judicious to the mind as it was pleasing
to the eye and ear was its own justification. Le Sang
des Bêtes and particularly Hotel des Invalides are no
longer documentaries in the objective sense, their
entire purpose being to set forth theses and antithesis
through the very texture of the film."

Thus, there is on one side an objective reproduction of reality and, on the
other side, a subjective treatment of reality; on one side what Frances
Flaherty calls "non-preconception" and on the other side what then can be
called "preconception."

It is interesting to note that Noel Burch, though born American,
studied in Paris, where he lives and works now; this can explain the very
French frame of mind of his analysis privileging the latter attitude of
"active approach to the subject matter," what we have called "preconception,"
which is the most widely used among French cinema verite filmmakers, for
example.

Marker, Rouch, Ruspoli, Reichenbach and a new generation of television
documentarists like William Klein, Jacques Krier or Serge Moati, all of these
French filmmakers are characterized by essentially theoretical concerns, as well as a basic mistrust in raw reality; in their films, the idea is always the most important.

Chris Marker, for instance, is the pure mind, in the best cartesian tradition... He is always seeking the truth behind the surface; organizing and bending his visual materials to illustrate his own philosophy, his own ideas on what "really is" (his idea of Siberia, of Cuba, etc. . .).8

Jonas Mekas is right when he sees in Eisenstein, Grierson, Pare Lorentz, or Joris Ivens the precursors of such a preconceived approach to the subject matter; they composed their views of people lyrically and used them afterwards as an illustration of a definite social theme.

Chris Marker certainly offers the purest attitude of preconceived approach to the subject. Thus, if the theme of Le Joli Mai is Paris in 1962 in the aftermath of the Algerian War, Marker knows exactly what he wants to say and to prove through the film; if the basic idea of the film is to interview Parisians in the streets, it is Marker's own vision of Paris and of the time which prevails. The same attitude is seen in Cuba Si! or in Lettre de Siberie, which are more political and poetical essays than objective accounts of a certain reality.

Chris Marker does not believe in objectivity; for him, filmmaking is the clear expression of a personal engagement, and that is the way he approaches his themes and defines the stylistic elements of a camera-created reality.

This attitude of preconception could be found in most of the political films where the message is usually pre-existent to the actual shooting
of the film. Louis Marcorelles devotes in *Living Cinema* a whole chapter to the Political Essay; this term essay, which can characterize Marker's films, stresses the literary and verbal aspects of this kind of filmmaking. Fernando Solanas' *La Hora de los Hornos* (The Hour of the Ovens) is a perfect example of this trend, but many others can be enumerated, like Patricio Guzman's *Battle of Chile*, Igaal Niddam's *We are Arab Jews in Israel*, Robert Kramer's *Scenes of the Class Struggle in Portugal*, or Robert van Lierop's *A Lotta Continua* (The Fight Continues), etc.

In fact, one of Chris Marker's most famous statements can summarize this preconceived approach to the subject matter: "Verite n'est pas le but, mais peut-être la route" (Truth—but also cinema verite—is not the aim, it is more likely the way). Another quotation, from Richard Leacock this time, will help to establish the second approach to the subject, the non-preconceived attitude, and clarify the basis of their fundamental differences.

Tolstoy envisioned the filmmaker as an observer and perhaps as a participant capturing the essence of what takes place around him, selecting, arranging but never controlling the event. Here it would be possible for the significance of what is taking place to transcend the conceptions of the filmmaker because essentially he is observing that ultimate mystery, the reality. Many filmmakers feel that the aim of the filmmaker is to have complete control. Then the conception of what happens is limited to the conception of the filmmaker. We didn't want to put this limit on actuality. What's happening, the action, has no limitations, neither does the significance of what's happening. The filmmaker's problem is more a problem of how to convey it. How to convey the feeling of being there...

Obviously, for Richard Leacock, as well as for most of the American cinema verite filmmakers, the ultimate aim is truth; the supreme ambition, to capture the spontaneity of human beings filmed in their natural settings; the
basic philosophy, to follow the flow of events without preconceived ideas, without provoking or arranging the situations. The "classical cinema verite" is characterized by the absence of the idea of direction; people are going about their lives as if no one was observing. As far as cinema verite approach to the subject matter, a quotation from James Blue will help us to understand it better.

[Cinema verite filmmakers] have an unshakable faith in a kind of objective truth rooted within the subject . . . Something close to a modern religion was born . . . and if "truth" is the god of this religion, "authenticity" is its prophet. If the spectator cannot believe that what he sees has really happened, is authentic, then he has the right to suspect the truth of the film. Every effort of the filmmaker then, both in the shooting and in the editing, is directed toward assuring the spectator that what he is seeing is not the result of an imposed point of view . . .

Therefore, the non-preconceived approach is clearly the basis of cinema verite aesthetic and, as James Blue points out, it explains the shooting style and the editing decisions, as we shall see later on. Generally, successful cinema verite themes or subject matters are those which already have a structure permitting the story to unfold itself "naturally"; this explains why most of the Drew films deal with "crisis structure" and with moments, events of great intensity in which a man involves himself totally.

The choice of the subject matter is then absolutely crucial in cinema verite films, since it contains the elements of the narrative structure; there is a beginning and an end in a car race, and a man is trying to win it for the first time. All the elements of a good drama are present, all the ingredients of a good cinema verite subject exist; the shooting will
just have to record the reality of the event, and the editing will be faithful to it.

But there is another important parameter in the choice of a subject matter in cinema verite: that is the choice of the character. Since the crew will follow him without preconception, recording his story as unobtrusively as possible, we must be interested in his personality or in his activities; he cannot be somebody completely inarticulate or inert, he must be a "hero," as Mamber says, or a "champion," as Bringuier characterizes him, in any case somebody pursuing the "American dream." According to Jean Luc Godard, it is not by chance that cinema verite found its best ground in the United States, because "it is hard to imagine an American doing nothing."

Then what we mean here by non-preconception in the approach of the subject matter is the basic cinematic "philosophy" which defines a specific attitude, essentially "non-interventionist," in the treatment of the subject matter; it is not the choice of the subject matter itself.

Obviously, Franju's films are different from Leacock's ones because Franju analyzes the idea of the film and then imagines a situation for it, while Leacock starts from the situation and tries to reveal its structure without intervening in the events.

In the preconceived approach, the preeminence of the filmmaker is reinforced by what Noel Burch calls an "active treatment" of the subject matter and a strict control of all the elements of the film. In a non-preconceived approach, on the contrary, the filmmaker gives up such controls, and the development of the narrative rests entirely on the evolution of the characters and the unfolding of the events.
Preconception and non-preconception are the extreme poles of the problem and a number of films are not pure examples of either one attitude but rather a delicate balance of both. Of course, perfect examples of preconceived approaches can be found in the making of propaganda films, as well as in most political films using an over-simplified Marxism. In the same way, good examples of non-preconceived approaches are most of the cinema verite films from the Drew period; but it is not easy to classify Barbara Kopple's Harlan County, Thomas Harlan's Torre Bella, or Yann Le Masson's Kashima Paradise.

Nevertheless, I think that such a distinction between preconception and non-preconception in the approach of the subject matter can be very useful, not only at a theoretical level, as a film criticism device, but also at a practical level by being aware of the real issues at stake in films—-aesthetic decisions bearing specific functions in the process of making the film.

The cinematic approach of the subject matter is perhaps the most crucial stage in the decision-making process, since this choice predetermines the content and the structure of a film, the shooting style as well as the editing.
II. The Attitude Toward the Characters

We have seen that the supreme ambition of cinema verite would be to capture life as it is and people's behavior in their natural settings. There is, from the start, the belief in an objective cinema and in a totally observational approach that could be capable of rendering an account of the reality and of the totality of an event. Moreover, as William Rothman says:

The formal corroboration of the film's claim to be an authentic document is complemented by the continuous look of unself-consciousness on the part of the filmed subjects. 13

What William Rothman calls the "look of unself-consciousness" or "look of candor" of the characters is the very condition of the belief in an objective rendering of reality; the "candid camera" goes unnoticed, and everything within the frame is authentic.

But it is precisely in this "look of candor" that Claude Levi-Strauss, for instance, refuses to believe; for him, it is a complete mystification because when the film starts, characters are witnesses, but as the shooting goes on, characters and filmmakers obviously become friends; but in the film itself, the shift in the relationship of filmmaker-character is never acknowledged in a cinema verite film.

Claude Levi-Strauss raises here a very important point, perhaps the basic contradiction of the observational attitude that William Rothman underlined perfectly.

We cannot take for granted the authenticity of what is in the frame, because our means of access to it may be deeply implicated in its appearance. For example, the
look of non-directedness to the camera may itself be directed to the camera (with the filmmaker taken in by that look or in secret complicity with it). If that look of candor is authentic, the camera may nonetheless be implicated in it (its expression of human isolation may be seen as a mark of the filmmaker whose role calls for him to withhold his humanity from the people he takes as his subjects). Cinema verite rests its authority on the reality of the act of making this film—but pictures the world as if this act has no tangible effect...15

It is the very intention of cinema verite to picture authentically the world which is in question here; this twinge of doubt and sense of exploitation that emerge from looking at films like Joan Churchill's *Tattooed Tears*, Wiseman's *High School*, or the Maysles's *Showman*.

But this "pretense not to be there," as Richard Leacock said, or this look of authenticity are not the only problems that arise from a strictly observational attitude. The capacity of rendering objectively and entirely the reality and the meaningfulness of an event is also questionable, especially in anthropological films.

David McDougall says, for example, that "in his attempt to make us into witnesses, the observational filmmaker often thinks in terms of the image on the screen rather than his presence in the setting where events are occurring;" he refers then to this particular ambiguous position of the observational filmmaker having to communicate his experience, the facts and meaning of an event through a selective decision-making process.

Therefore, if the filmmaker has a previous experience and/or a scientific knowledge of the events he is filming, he will pre-edit the elements of reality according to their respective significance; otherwise, he will go to the most spectacular, unable to recognize among the myriads of un-
known gestures, the most meaningful ones. In both cases, the audiences will have no other frame of reference than the filmmaker’s one, and the central question of the belief in the authenticity of what is shown on the screen arises again. Let’s take some examples.

Somebody wanted to prepare some poison for his arrows; he arrives with a vase but his arms are crossed. This is extremely important because by this, he represents the position of the animal when killed by the poisoned arrow, and lying dead, legs crossed. I know that, so I can take the decision to zoom in to get a close up of his arms crossed . . .

Being an anthropologist and a filmmaker, Rouch understood the meaning of the hunter’s gesture, but he had to think of a way to convey such information. In the same perspective when in The Mad Masters, Rouch showed Hauka adepts possessed by spirits, cooking and eating a dog, dancing frenetically and foaming at the mouth, he was violently attacked for racism by many Africans. These problems arise mainly because of the ambiguity of the image, in general, and especially when it shows remote areas and strange ceremonies, and the only way to clarify the scenes is usually the use of a voice-over. We will analyze more thoroughly this problem of the narration in the next chapter, but first let us take a last example which will help us to appreciate the loneliness of the anthropological filmmaker in the field: the example of the making of Timothy Asch and Napoleon Chagnon’s The Ax Fight.

The film begins with scenes of everyday life in a peaceful village of the Yanomamo Indians of southern Venezuela. Then, all of a sudden, we see somebody passing quickly from left to right with an ax. Somebody else runs away, the whole village gathers, there is a brief fight with axes. Everybody
seems very excited, and a great confusion prevails in front of the camera. Then, as rapidly as it got excited, the village goes back to its daily routine. The whole event lasted around ten minutes, and it is recorded in one take.

We do not understand anything of what happened, but Napoleon Chagnon, Professor of Anthropology at Harvard University, arrives. He shows us the film again, slowly this time, and stopping regularly to give us the necessary information. So we learn the names of the protagonists, their kinship. Drawings and diagrams are used in order to situate the characters in the village and the significance of their behavior.

Then, it is the beginning of the third part of the movie; a short version of the footage is presented. It is an edited version, as opposed to the rushes that we saw before, and the whole event that shook the village is now perfectly comprehensible.

But should such films be considered as cinema? Are they interesting filmically? What is the function of the filmmaker in these situations that he is unable to understand if he is not himself an anthropologist? Do we have to assume that an anthropologist understands the situations? In *The Ax Fight*, the film is obviously used as a way to gather data and an explanation of the events comes afterward. But is it possible to respect what Roger Sandall calls "the structural integrity of events," through real time in very long rituals, as in the possession ceremony described in *The Mad Masters*?

By eschewing direct intervention or participation, at the shooting stage, the observational filmmaker is often obliged to intervene afterward,
by adding a commentary, for example. We shall study later the functions of such a voice-over, but besides informational purposes, it has an obvious role of scientific authority certifying that the events are not created by the presence of the camera and "assuring the spectator that what he is seeing is not the result of an imposed point of view."

Some filmmakers recognize the impossibility of recording the reality as it is and, instead of minimizing the influence of the camera, they have tried to find a way of acknowledging its presence in order to address, within the film, the question of the act of filming.

Contrasting with the objective quality of the observational film, this attitude attempts to stress the subjective point of view of the filmmaker entering the world of his subjects, giving them access to the film and allowing them to express their own perception of the world. The making of the film becomes a process of learning in which subjects, filmmakers and audience are involved. The camera is used as a "catalyst," as Erik Barnouw says, or a "provocative agent," as Jean Claude Bringuier characterizes it; all possible ways in order to reveal the "inner truth" inaccessible by an observational method.

Jean Rouch opened this new avenue by starting in 1960 the experience of Chronicle of a Summer. He was soon followed by a number of filmmakers, especially French, fascinated by this new method of revelation of the human condition.

Rouch maintained that the presence of the camera made people act in ways truer to their nature than might otherwise be the case. Thus he acknowledged the impact of the camera but instead of considering it a liability, looked on it as a valuable catalytic agent, a revealer of inner truth. This idea propelled documentarists
Filmmakers like Rouch, Marker, Krier, or Ophuls use a direct cinema not for the sake of preserving the natural order of the reality observed but, on the contrary, to disrupt it, to provoke, "strangle the reality," as Godard once said, in order to reveal a more profound and true level of reality.

The interview was the main technique used by these filmmakers to interact with their characters; it became a miracle remedy and was used at random. An opinion like Gian Vittorio Baldi's was very common in France in the early '60s, the idea that it is really through the language and not through images that truth can be revealed.

I think it is possible to let the camera steady on a tripod, framing in close-up a man talking; the action is the expression of the man's feelings; it is what appears on his face, the ideas he is expressing. . . .

It is amazing that the term cinema verite was given to that new trend, so different from the films of the Drew period. Even in France, Chris Marker's approach has almost nothing to do with Jean Rouch's attitude as far as the interview technique, the use of a voice-over, and their approach to the subject matter.

Other French filmmakers, though using the interview as a way to reveal "inner truths," created their own style where the interview wasn't used as a mere device but was an integral part of their cinematic approach. Besides Jean Rouch, I am particularly referring here to Mario Ruspoli and Marcel Ophuls.
Mario Ruspoli, in Regards sur la Folie (Looks at Madness), wanted to directly confront the tranquility of the spectator, in the starkest way possible, with the problem of madness. The film is a series of interviews, very much in Baldi's way. The physical presence of the inmates talking close to the camera is transmitted without any distortion (no voice-over), and one cannot help being extremely uncomfortable and, finally, very moved by the testimonies.

Marcel Ophuls, in The Sorrow and the Pity, intercuts interviews with survivors of World War II in France and archive footage of the war and the Resistance. This approach, attempting to put in opposition various statements and comments from the people interviewed contributes to demystify the attitude of most French people during the war as far as their role in the Resistance. The efficacy of the film comes mainly, of course, from the ability and intelligence of Marcel Ophuls in the conduct of the interviews but also from this method of confrontation, especially when certain tensions are surrounding the questions and when the interviewers are really prodded by them.

But the use of the "maieutique" type of interview was not only very common among French documentarists, it was also widely spread in Canada with the Challenge for Change experiment and in the United States. Emilio de Antonio techniques are very close to those of Marcel Ophuls and films like Peter Davis's Hearts and Minds and, recently, the Mariposa Group's The Word is Out are good examples of this trend.

The interview technique can be successful if used with discretion and intelligence, but it was too often utilized without rhyme or reason, at
random, by many filmmakers, especially in France, and there would be no problem to enumerate a whole page of such examples; but most of these films do not usually get to be shown outside France, and there would be no use for the purpose of this essay to give these examples. Nevertheless, it is worth describing the way the interview is used in such films and showing that this is not a dying device.

It is possible to take the characteristic example of Igaal Niddam's We are Arab Jews in Israel, because this film received several nominations in different European festivals and came to the United States with a good reputation. 

The thesis of the film is that in Israel, Jews coming from Arab countries are exploited and do not have the same opportunities as Jews coming from Eastern Europe, though they form more than sixty percent of Israel's population. This is a widely recognized fact, but Niddam wanted to prove that if Arab Jews had adequate representation at the political level, peace would become possible in the Mideast because, for example, Arab countries would rather negotiate with Arab Jews than with Russian Jews. This is what I called earlier a preconceived approach to the subject matter. Furthermore, in Israel, Niddam interviews pre-selected people, all Arab Jews or Palestinians, and asks them almost invariably the same leading question: "Do you think that if Arab Jews had the political representation they deserve, if, for instance, the Israeli representative at the United Nations would be an Arab Jew, do you think that peace would be easier to settle in the Mideast?" This question, corresponding to Niddam's pre-conception of the problem and formulated in a way that influences the answers,
brought each time a "yes" answer. So, I guess Niddam's thesis or hypothesis is verified, but why a film and not a pamphlet?

Some American filmmakers like Ed Pincus and David Hancock discarded such methods. They considered the interview technique a way to distort reality and manipulate people and preferred to explore the flow of real events, leading to a less formal interactive technique. Ed Pincus's Panola and David Hancock's Chester Grimes are certainly the first attempts to break the illusion of the camera as unnoticed observer and the "unself-consciousness" of the subject. Both Panola and Chester Grimes acknowledge the camera's presence and feel free to address it directly.

David McDougall stressed that the observational cinema deprives subjects and filmmakers from their own personality. The character is not "allowed" to look at the camera or talk to the filmmakers; he must pretend to ignore their presence and act in a way that conforms to the principles of observational filmmaking. On the other side of the camera, the filmmaker must film without letting his own feelings or reactions interfere in the middle of the process. The paradox of the observational attitude is precisely that the making of the film determines the type of character-filmmaker relationship, but the filmmaker pretends that the act of filming has no effect on the reality captured.

Ed Pincus's approach, for example, differs strikingly from the traditional cinema verite attitude toward the characters. A non-mystifying attitude, for him, must make a clear reference in the filmmaking process to the process of making the film; characters and filmmakers must be aware of each other and feel free to communicate and interact. No rules are
imposed on the characters, no preconceptions determine the attitude of the filmmaker.

Thus, in this chapter, we divided along two different methodological, aesthetical attitudes toward social subjects in documentary film and precisely toward characters in portrait films: an observational philosophy which never questions the act of filming, and a "self-referential" one, as Ed Pincus would say, or a "participatory" one, as Jean Rouch would define it, which takes strength from the filmmakers-characters relationship. We saw how the choice of a certain approach to the subject matter leads to a particular type of shooting style; a preconceived approach to the subject cannot be anything else, at the shooting stage, than a non-observational attitude for the simple reason that the filmmaker tries to control every element of the film at every stage of the making of the film.

Inversely, a non-preconceived approach to the subject matter would normally lead to an observational attitude during the shooting. This was the attitude of the American cinema verite filmmakers, as well as the one of most anthropological filmmakers. We stressed, in this chapter, the problems that such an approach raises and the solutions brought by different filmmakers opting for a more participatory attitude in the making of the film. We shall see now how, at the editing stage, the problem of the narrative structure refers back to the earlier stages of the conception and shooting of the film.
III. Structure and Narrative

How to organize the footage coherently in order to convey, in the most efficient way, certain information or feelings is certainly the main question which arises at this stage of the decision-making process of a film. It requires the adoption of a certain number of principles concerning the exclusion or inclusion of certain shots or sequences; the arrangements of the shots within a sequence and the organization of the sequences in order to create the narrative structure of the film.

However, the term "narrative structure," which comes from a long tradition of film criticism, mainly dealing with fiction films, does not really help to describe the cinematic reality of the documentary film.

One of the problems comes from the fact that the structure and the narrative merge in a fiction film where the sequences create the narrative and the narrative determines the order of the sequences to form what Christian Metz calls the diegesis of the film. 23

The diegesis is then the fictional universe of the film and therefore is a self-contained world formed by the spatio-temporal development of the narrative, through a particular organization of the sequences which is what Metz calls "the sum of the denotations." But in a documentary film, the organization of the sequences, what can be called the structure of the film, does not always build up a narrative. In a documentary, sequences can have different functions, they can have their own narrative, and in general the whole is not only the sum of the parts.

The basic uncontrolled nature of the documentary does not always permit a narrative structure to emerge naturally from the footage and sometimes has
to be imposed from the outside, for example, by adding what is precisely called a narration. Therefore, when, in a documentary, the formal organization of the sequences, the internal structure of the film, does not succeed in shaping a coherent narrative as a spatio-temporal development of the diegesis, it becomes the support for an external narrative.

In an excellent article, Bill Nichols locates what constitutes the main difference between the diegesis of fiction films and documentary films, in the use of the sound track as an autonomous element in the documentary film.

Christian Metz, in attempting to specify part/whole relations within the narrative film, does offer in his *Grande Syntagmatique* a definition of the sequence as a syntagm, or unit of narrative autonomy. But for Metz, the controlling force in film is the narrative, and his grande syntagmatique is a catalog of sequences constituting a paradigm of narrative choices. But if the sequence is an element within the expository whole, the narrative framework that Metz employs will have to be replaced. Perhaps more significantly the sequences (or any syntagmatique of them) should no longer be thought of primarily as categories of the image track, as they are for Metz. This corresponds to a shift in the meaning of the diegesis and requires locating the sequence primarily in relation to the verbal sound track.

It is exactly the same criticism that Louis Marcorelles addresses to Metz's work.

... It immobilizes the film, shows it as flat, romantically continuous, and dominated by the visual; sound and particularly sound as it is used in Direct Cinema, is really not considered.

Then Metz's theories are helpless in the theoretical description of the process of the making of a documentary film, whose diegesis works at
two different levels: the internal structure or organization of the sequences as "units of narrative autonomy" and the external narrative. It is precisely the complex interaction between structure and narrative which constitutes the motive force of a reflection on the "narrative structure" of the documentary; this distinction should help not only to differentiate documentary films from fiction films but also to distinguish between documentary films, the special organization of their structure/narrative relationship.

This relation between structure and narrative will certainly be different in a strictly controlled documentary started with a preconceived idea and in a cinema verite film attempting to capture the authenticity of an event by eschewing any participation whatever its goal. Therefore the organization of the sequences in a cinema verite film has also to be faithful to the reality described and the basic rule governing the structure of a cinema verite film must be the chronology; a sequence comes after another one because, in reality, it happened like that.

Drew films, for example, are characterized by a crisis structure, but it is in fact a chronological ordering of the sequences which leads to a crisis narrative; but this comes more from the choice of the subject than the attitude of the filmmakers during the shooting. A subject matter is chosen precisely because it contains a crisis moment, but the footage does not always correspond to what is expected and does not always fit into the traditional narrative of the dramatic conflict. Among the films of the Drew period, Primary and On the Pole are certainly the most successful in that respect, because they succeed in telling a comprehensive and exciting story. Many critics and film historians have already stressed the close
connection between this chronological structure of the fiction film, and there is no need to insist more here.

Nevertheless, the use of a voice-over narration in these films of the Drew period (also very close to a narration in a fiction film) seems most of the time inappropriate, redundant and useless and therefore raises an interesting question related to their function within the narrative of the films. But before analyzing this first example of structure/narrative relationship, we need to define more precisely what we mean, in this essay, by narrative.

Bill Nichols calls "direct address" this use of an external narration which ruptures the "internal plane" of the diegesis by directly addressing the viewer.

Inversely, in the "indirect address,"

The viewer is not explicitely acknowledged as the subject to which the film is addressed: characters do not look at the camera, nor speak directly to us, nor does a narrator speak directly to us, as the classic voice-of-God commentary of a film like *The River* (Pare Lorentz, 1937), for example . . . 28

Therefore, "direct address" is for Nichols not only commentaries and voice-over, but also interviews, on/off camera dialogue and, in general, any interaction between the characters and the film crew. If the distinction of indirect/direct address seems like a very useful one, it is not refined enough to give justice to the complexity of the documentary film and the multiple combinations possible between sound track and image. Indeed, according to Nichols's classification, there would be no difference of structure between *The Chair* and *Triumph of the Will*, or between *A Lotta*
Continua and Grey Gardens. So in this essay, the distinction of indirect/direct address will be used but as part of different other parameters forming a comprehensive corpus.

Now, as far as the function of the voice-over in the cinema verite films of the Drew period, the problem can be simplified in these words: why a filmmaker who strives during the whole process of the making of the film to preserve the essential authenticity of the reality he attempts to capture; who avoids any participatory technique which can disrupt and spoil the natural order of things, who considers the chronology as the only faithful ordering of the sequences "because things happened that way"; why would such a filmmaker want to use any type of voice-over narration which necessarily imposes an exterior point of view to the narrative?

Pat Jaffe thinks that Drew films use the voice-over only "to keep the audience at a constantly high level of excitement." This can explain the very common statement that "it is impossible to imagine a Drew film without a narration," but there are at least two other functions that this type of voice-over can fulfill.

Pat Jaffe, again, talking about the editing of cinema verite films, notices that very often it "wishes to tell a story not present in the material itself." This is a very common problem in cinema verite films, since in following the "flow of events," it is difficult to have an exact idea of the way these events will articulate themselves. This is especially crucial in films which are not about single portraits, but have a bigger scope, and all Drew films which do not rest on the chronology, on the dramatic structure of the
events, had to face this particular problem. The examples of Yanqui, No!, Kenya, Nehru, or Petey and Johnny tend to prove the difficulties that arise in trying to be "faithful to a subject, which does not fit neatly into the structural patterns of conventional drama," and the solutions have often to be found in the creation of an artificial dramatic structure like in Nehru, or a fabricated voice-over like in Petey and Johnny.

Thus, holding the principle of chronology as fundamental and therefore applicable to any cinema verite films seems completely gratuitous, since they can be dealing with subtle things like the conveyance of a certain mood, the expression of certain feelings, the recreation of a certain atmosphere which cannot really, or not always, be expressed through the development of a chronological structure. Henry Breitrose seems to be right when he stresses a contradiction between the non-preconceived attitude toward the subject matter and a preconceived attitude at the editing level.

The problem is really whether the subject fits the form, which is the reverse of looking at the form/content relationship from the more traditional and perhaps more sensible point of view of fitting the treatment to the subject. The 'truth' of an event, then, can be seen using the cinema verite technique only when the event is such that its meaning is externally evident and self-structured. . .

Thus, when a film fails to fulfill these conditions, "it does not really work"; the main reason for that being the lack of information that would permit logically connecting sequences between them, and the use of a voice-over for that purpose. When a narration is used in these conditions, it appears externally to the structure and tends to become dominant; for the viewer, the only way to understand the film is to listen to the voice-
over, which provides the necessary information. On the contrary, the "most successful" films of the Drew period, like On the Pole and Primary, use the narration at the beginning, essentially as a sort of introduction which "promises to gratify a desire to know. Thus as it begins it proposes an ending: the film's temporal trace will fulfill the wish to possess the truth . . ."32 Therefore, this type of narration is an "audience-grabber" that gives momentum to the film, which usually afterward unfolds itself, without any other intervention of the voice-over, in the purest indirect address. These films are then characterized by a chronological structure (the temporal organization of the sequences reproduces the temporal march of the events) and what can be qualified as a direct/indirect address type of narrative.

When no clear dramatic structure emerges from the footage, the voice-over narration is usually promoted as the connecting element of the events recorded, and it becomes the motive force of the narrative, providing what Bill Nichols calls "the viewer's point of entry" to the film. But, obviously, such use of a direct address narrative, through classical voice-over (Yanqui, No!) or characters' comments (Petey and Johnny) was a makeshift device for the films of the Drew period, a device that had to be used because of either lack of dramatic tension or lack of explicit contextual information emerging from the chronological structure of the events.

The second function of a direct address narrative, added to the chronological structure, is the denying of any influence of the presence of the camera, reinforcing the strictly observational approach. It attempts to establish our belief in the authenticity of the events recorded. We ex-
plained the problems raised by the observational attitude toward the characters at the level of what Christian Metz calls the cosmophania, and it is not necessary to develop this idea much further, except by quoting Roger Sandall's comments on Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds*, which can clearly illustrate the question.

*Dead Birds* shows that even the simple wish to tell a story can cause trouble. This explicit ethnographic opus takes us into the mountains of West Irian where a dozen tribes, united by unstable alliances, are intermittently at war. But the director is not content simply to show us such things. He wants to tell the story of the tribesman Weiak as well. We're told that Weiak is engaged in some of the battle scenes and, at other times, we see shots of him walking along paths, or close-ups of him gazing into the distance. At such moments the narrator informs us that Weiak is on his way from A to B or is meditating his next move. And perhaps he is. It's hard to tell... We might ignore this but for a curious declaration at the start of the film claiming that 'no scene has been directed.' This seems odd because no one would for a moment imagine that the scenes of tribal warfare could have been directed. It must have been added to try to influence our response to other scenes whose validity is less self-evident; to try to make us believe that if the narrator says truthfully of a battle scene: 'a fight took place,' he is being equally truthful when he says, 'Weiak is thinking of his son.'

This ill-concealed strain between the exigencies of reality and the needs of the storyteller is a common enough documentary fault...

Thus, a strict chronological description of the events with an omnipotent direct address narrative is especially well suited to scientific discourses, and anthropological films, for example, use it extensively: Jean Rouch's *The Mad Masters*, John Marshall's *The Hunters*, Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds*, Timothy Asch and Napoleon Chagnon's series on the Yanomami
and many more can all illustrate this attitude. All these films are believable as long as the voice-over narration, establishing the scientific base of the interpretation, is convincing; the images or the music sometimes only serve as an illustration or reinforcement of the argumentation exposed in the narration.

There is a last category of films to be studied within the same group of films organized according to a chronological structure that we analyzed until this point. These are the films strongly attached to the tradition of cinema verite and using a pure indirect address narrative. Showman, by the Maysles, is certainly the best example of this category. As Stephen Mamber says,

[Showman has] no real story or dramatic character change. Levine (the character) is no different at the end of the film than at the beginning, and he has not passed through a particular climactic period. Showman is an almost pure form of revelation through situations: each scene looks as though it was selected for nothing more than insight into the film's main character.

The film is not structureless, however. Its prime unifying force is the simple convention of the chronological continuity.

Therefore, chronological structure/indirect address is a narrative form perfectly well adapted to the portrayal of individuals caught in their daily life and their dreamy world.

Besides Showman, another Maysles film, Salesman, can illustrate this genre, as well as many others, such as Pennebaker's Don't Look Back and Richard Leacock's Stravinsky, A Portrait.

But the very force of this approach based on unobtrusive "cohabitation" with the characters can also be its weakness and sometimes its failure. We
partially touched on this point with the analysis of the Drew films to underline the difficulties of such an approach, in particular in their dependence on the nature of the characters. The films are then "successful" as long as their subjects are "interesting," i.e., when they try to achieve something or, more simply, when they are likable, funny, ridiculous and, especially, "sort of weird."

Besides the discovery of engaging characters, this chronological/indirect approach to the events is also well suited to the description of short manifestations, limited in space and time, and not altered by any editorial device, the event being recorded in its entirety. A classical use of such an approach would be the filming of performances like dance pieces (Richard Leacock's *Tread*), rock concerts (Leacock-Pennebaker's *Monterey Pop*), etc.

As can be noticed, the idea of the essential preservation of the chronological structure of the events is an idea coming directly from the Drew period and the American cinema verite; all the variations and examples we gave are almost entirely connected with this period. It is the primordial contribution of cinema verite to the history of cinema to have brought a highly fresh and innovative approach to reality.

Historically, however, most documentaries have used a non-chronological structure and a direct address narrative; this approach is still largely preferred by television documentary and most political films. I am referring here to dogmatic films, those which tried by all means to convey a very specific political statement or to describe the line of a political organization. These types of films are not preoccupied by chronology be-
cause more than events to describe, they are dealing with ideas to express, and a strict direct address narrative is the most suited for such a purpose.

The narration used can be straightforward, like in Flaherty and Grierson's *Industrial Britain*, Robert Kramer's *Scenes of Class Struggle in Portugal*, or Robert van Lierop's *A Lotta Continua*, and many other "third world" documentaries. These films are all centered on the ideas and argumentation expressed in the narration, and the images are either illustration or extension of the voice-over; illustration, for example, when the commentary stresses the necessity of education in new revolutionary states, and the images show young children going to school; extension of the voice-over, when "American imperialism," for instance, is associated with striking images of dead bodies lying in the mud. But, of course, the images can be both illustration and extension of the voice-over within the same sequence, as in *Scenes of Class Struggle in Portugal*, when the narrator names different members of the fascist government of Portugal, and we see each of them starting a speech, intercut at each time by images of pigs. This kind of extremely dogmatic use of narration is not the only type of direct address narrative in political films; another approach can be found in Emilio de Antonio's films, which are characterized by heavy editorial devices establishing relationships between different characters and confronting them with the contradictions of their own public statements, for example, concerning the possibilities of a conspiracy in John Kennedy's assassination (*Rush to Judgment*) or about the problem of Vietnam (*In the Year of the Pig*). These films, though using a direct address narrative and presenting a manipulated reality, somehow succeed in presenting a fascinating view of
the political system, leaving to the spectator a little more freedom to decide for himself and interpret the reality offered. De Antonio's attitude goes in a direction which tends to avoid the view imposed from the outside; a recent trend in political films aspires to present the reality and the legitimacy of the revolutionary movements or workers' mobilization through the testimony of the very people involved in these struggles.

Films like Igaal Niddam's *We are Arab Jews in Israel*, Mariposa Group's *The Word is Out*, or the collective film, *Winter Soldier*, all involve direct witnesses of the situation described; they can relate their own experience, the effect of a situation upon themselves (Vietnam War, homosexuality identity, etc.) or the evolution of their political consciousness. This type of film has been very popular since 1968, and many of them are realized through collective production houses. The precursor of this genre is certainly the famous *Return to the Wonder Factories After the Strike*, which was shot in 1968 in France, when the work resumed at the Wonder factories after the uprising of 1968, and constituted by shots of different workers expressing their bitterness about what happened and their feelings about the future of the movement.

All these different aspects of the direct address narrative are commonly used in most political documentaries still produced today. In the same way, public television, according to the quality of their funding and their programs, tends to favor documentaries in which the direct address narrative is characterized by a formula mixing interviews of witnesses, public statements, and didactic voice-over. The connective tissue between all these
elements is the presence within the film of somebody representing people's common sense and inquiring into an affair for them. Examples of journalistic investigation type of films are numerous on public television; Song of a Canary, about pollution in mill towns and Paul Jacobs and the Nuclear Gang, on low level radiation after nuclear experiments, are typical of the genre.

In sharp opposition to this direct address narrative, filmmakers attached to cinema verite ideas of non-manipulation and total commitment to an uncontrolled approach to reality attempted to deal with subjects of social relevance on a strictly indirect address narrative. They wanted to show rather than tell, to evoke rather than prove.

Fred Wiseman's films are certainly the best illustration possible of this approach. The structure of Wiseman's films is non-chronological; sequences follow each other consecutively but without a clearly marked temporal and causal relationship; there is no chronological context but rather accumulation of autonomous units. In Welfare, for example, we see people succeeding each other at a social worker's desk, but there is no information related to either their connections or the time span of their passage or the order in which they talk to the social worker. The chronology here is, by no means, essential to the comprehension of the sequences and it is in that sense that the structure of Wiseman's films is non-chronological; not because the sequences are shuffled, which is obvious, but rather because the chronology has nothing to do with the logic of these films which do not rest on a dramatic structure but on a mosaic structure.

Moreover, Wiseman's conceptions clearly mark a departure from the traditional cinema verite subject matters; Wiseman does not attempt to
portray individuals but collective groupings like institutions. Wiseman's
techniques are too well known to bring anything new on the matter, and it
is not exactly the topic of this paragraph dealing with the consequences
of a non-chronological/indirect address narrative structure.

Nick Broomfield and Joan Churchill's *Tattooed Tears* is the "heritier
spirituel" of Wiseman's films. The film attempts to show the influence of
an institution, the prison system, on human behavior. Therefore, what
becomes important is the way the institution functions, what are its prin-
ciples, its laws and codes, as well as the repression apparatus which
characterizes it. So we follow search brigades, attend disciplinary
meetings, and "participate" in a long and painful punishment of a refrac-
tory inmate, the film ending on this scene. We never come close to any of
the inmates, we never penetrate their world; the film appears to be cold
and distant and it is, maybe, what the filmmakers are trying to say: no
warmth and love is possible in a repressive environment; but the message
is extremely ambiguous and the look of "unself-consciousness" of the inmates
forced and unnatural, and especially mystifying, considering the fact that
the filmmakers affirm that they were good friends with many of the inmates.

Moreover, this pure attitude toward the world of attempting to reveal
the untouched reality does not always deliver an objective account of a
situation and the indirect address, when used with a non-chronological
ordering of the sequences, often contributes to the creation of a "hidden"
direct address to the viewer. Thus, in Wiseman's *Law and Order*, for exam-
ple, Nixon's speech at the beginning of the film, coming after we saw
images of delinquents and before seeing police patrols in action; this
speech, by its place in the structure, is promoted to a certain value as a sort of direct address narrative, representing the filmmaker's own position and therefore not free from political implications. It is remarkable to notice that the beginning of *Tattooed Tears* is almost identical to *Law and Order*; it starts with a group of inmates penetrating the walls of the prison for the first time, and then there is a speech by the director of the prison stressing a change of the disciplinary regime from rehabilitation to repression, followed by the first argument between an inmate and a guard, in which the inmate does not come out in an especially sympathetic way, to say the least. Such an ordering of the opening sequences has a political implication that perhaps Nick Broomfield and Joan Churchill were not aware of, because they were interested in recreating in the film their own experience inside the prison.

This approach, leaning toward a personal rendering of what it was like to be there, seems to be perfectly adapted to a non-chronological structure and an indirect address narrative. The different sequences, put together, take their value not by the simple fact that they come one after another in the real unfolding of the events, but by a poetic coexistence attempting to evoke the "feeling" of a place. Inversely, such an approach seems unable to give insight into the characters' emotions, and privileged the filmmaker's own attitude and reaction to the events observed.

It is, of course, difficult to talk about a film which is not yet finished, but it seems that the example of Robb Moss's *River Film* will contribute to enlightening the implications of such an approach.

Robb Moss opted for an observational approach at the shooting level;
he then had the choice of a chronological or non-chronological ordering of the different sequences, and it seems that he chose a non-chronological structure. The choice of a chronological ordering would have stressed the natural structure of a river trip and stirred the film toward a travelog or a diary-journal, when a non-chronological structure will liberate him from any convention and help him to create a new poetic reality formed by the confluence of the actual recording of the events and his rememberings of the place. The river film would have been completely different if Robb Moss had chosen a participatory attitude during the shooting, but instead he preferred to have this outside/inside type of presence, more capable of capturing the inner world of a river trip through a group dynamics to the detriment of individual motivations.

This is a clear example of how the shooting style affects the possible choices at the level of the narrative structure. This is the same attempt to go to "the heart of the heart," but, this time, by a highly personalized approach that explains the adoption of the last category of narrative in our classification; an approach characterized by a non-chronological ordering of the sequences and what could be called an open address narrative.

There is no need to explain the purpose of the adoption of a non-chronological structure, since we already analyzed its function, but as far as the narrative is concerned, an open address refers directly to the way the film was shot; it is the consequence at the editing level of the participatory attitude toward the characters at the shooting level.

An open address is a narrative which takes strength from the filmmaker-character relation and leaves open the possibilities for anybody to inter-
vene, address the camera or ask questions. It is an essentially revelatory, approach, in the sense that it is entirely oriented toward the portrayal of individuals, rooted in their social environment; it assumes that social events are multiply-caused, and attempts to faithfully recreate, in the narrative, the complexity of the characters' contradictions and actions, "the matter they are made of"; it acknowledges the fabrics of everyday life as a web on interconnecting influences. This participation as the base of this approach can be camera-created or not; Marcel Ophuls's *The Sorrow and the Pity* is certainly a brilliant example of the first approach, and the Maysles's *Grey Gardens* a sample of the second attitude.

The example of the Roxbury film, which we will analyze in the next chapter, will contribute to clarify the way an open address narrative can be used and functions.
IV. The Making of the Roxbury Film

When the project of the *Roxbury Film* took shape, Steven Ascher and I rapidly came to the conclusion that it was impossible to capture the reality of ghetto living as outsiders. We did not want to do an issue-based film or study the mechanism of an institution; rather, we wanted to depict everyday life in Roxbury through personal experiences.

We decided very soon that the only way to do a film truthful to the complexity of the community and respectful to its inhabitants would be to give them the opportunity to choose what they would like to have filmed in their lives, to let them present their own reality. From the beginning, the nature of the film imposed a close interaction between us and our subjects.

Moreover, as we noticed before, an observational approach often leads to seeing different people in the same situation, when a participatory method follows the same people in different situations; therefore, the former approach is more suitable for the description of institutions, rites, or general social issues, the latter for the portrayal of human lives. Indeed, Fred Wiseman presents the welfare office and all sorts of people coming in; he is not interested in them as individuals, but rather in how the welfare-institution functions. People are interchangeable. In *The Police Tapes*, the Raymonds follow a police division in its dealings with South Bronx delinquents. People here, too, are shadows; what remains are the processes of the police-institution; and similarly in John Marshall's *Three Domestics* or Wiseman's *Law and Order*.

Personally, I am not interested in the mechanism of an institution
but, on the contrary, in individuals who are dependent on them. My resolution to start a film in a black ghetto came precisely from my frustration at looking at **Welfare** or **Three Domestics** and being unable to identify human beings behind the elbow of a social worker or the shoulder of a policeman. Thus, as far as the approach to the subject matter is concerned, there was no preconceived attitude from our part. We wanted to avoid any issue-based film and aspired to follow individual lives of four men living in Roxbury. We hoped that through their portrayal, a broader picture of everyday problems of ghetto living will emerge.

We started the shooting with Butch Adams. We gave him "carte blanche" to show us what he thought was interesting to film. When we met Butch for the first time, he was just released from jail and was very enthusiastic about getting a band together. He accepted easily the idea of the film and, in the beginning, was even proud to be in it.

At the same time, we were following Al in his attempt to go back to school. Al is a very engaging character, extremely articulate, worldly, and funny, and he appeared to us as a perfect character for a movie. Then, through Butch, we met George and Calvin, and the film was actually shaping up; it became clearly a film about individual change in a sluggish environment. Each of the characters was attempting to achieve something, to bring about change in his own life. Butch wanted to form a band; Al was struggling to go back to school; George was fighting against his landlord to bring improvements in his conditions of living; and Calvin was working at promoting change at a community level.

We concentrated on Butch first, and we spent days with him, hanging
out, meeting friends, sitting on the porch of his house, or watching soap
operas on television. We had total access, and we were able to shoot whenever we wanted. There was no other filmic attitude than a highly participatory one; presenting to us his own reality, Butch would almost always address us, encouraging us to film, suggesting scenes or, on the contrary, refusing, from time to time, to be filmed.

But soon, Butch felt uneasy and weary about having a film crew, even of two people, following him all the time. We were showing signs of nervousness, too, because of the fact that although talking about his plans for the future, Butch didn't seem to undertake anything to realize them and soon, abandoning any stray impulse, he became almost amorphous, staying home most of the time. We tried to prod him, to interact with him on film but we had, finally, to stop filming him.

Our approach to Butch proves the difficulties that arise in any portrait film. First, as we stressed before, it is not only a question of filmic approach; observational and participatory attitudes are, after all, equally trapped into the dependence on the character. A single-portrait film is possible as soon as a character accepts being filmed, but it is interesting as long as the character is interesting or, at least, involved in a certain work or activity. It was impossible to go on filming Butch precisely because Butch was not doing anything.

This raises a corollary question related to the give-and-take of the act of filming. What are the advantages for somebody to accept being filmed? What will he get from the film?

It is, indeed, a real commitment to be in a movie, especially in a
cinema verite type of portrait film, because the characters often think that they have to come up with a new story every day, which often leads the character to perform instead of being himself. Moreover, if that person does not understand the purpose of the film or does not believe in its goals, if a clear and trustful relationship does not exist between filmmakers and characters, then that commitment is not granted, and it is impossible to establish a serious, respectful working relationship.

Thus, we spent several months talking to Calvin, explaining the advantages and merits of the film, trying to convince him to participate, but he never thoroughly engaged himself in the project, for two main reasons. The first was racist prejudice: Calvin never felt completely comfortable with us; he never really understood why two white filmmakers would want to do a film on a black ghetto, and the whole project always appeared rather suspicious to him. The second reason was superstition: Calvin believes that when one films or photographs another person, he steals part of the other person's soul; thus, his grandmother never accepted having a photograph of her taken, and Calvin had an immense respect for her wisdom. He definitely refused to participate in the project when his grandmother died last spring, seeing a sign between his grandmother's death and the film. In fact, we were both very disappointed and relieved by his decision; the film would have been very difficult to realize with him because of the serious tensions existing between us.

At that time, we were filming George and Al. However, we still felt that Calvin was indispensable to the film and, when we had to write a proposal for the The Film Fund (see proposal in Appendix), our idea of a film
about the process of change in an urban poor environment, we could not think how such a movie could work without Calvin, when it did not raise any problem to not include Butch.

Thus, we started this film in March 1978 and, in autumn of the same year, the film had lost two characters. We were still filming George, and we wanted to devote most of the fall to filming Al's return to school.

Both George and Al were using the film to vent their tensions and articulate their frustrations; they never questioned our filming and, on the contrary, accepted us as a positive force on their side. Al, for example, knew that we were with him in order to film his dealings with the school system. It was a difficult battle for Al and, in a way, he assimilated us to the positive change he attempted to bring about in his life. The film was a support for him, as well as for George.

However, objective conditions of filming in the ghetto rendered our shooting more and more difficult. It is impossible to openly carry equipment around the dangerous and difficult area where Al lives. In fact, Al felt less and less comfortable having us around in his neighborhood; he was obviously receiving a lot of nasty remarks from his neighbors, who characterized us as the police, the CIA, the FBI, drug dealers, and "unidentified objects," etc. . . . Their jealousy, suspicion, and slander was putting a lot of pressure on Al, who consequently restricted our filming to our car or his apartment.

Moreover, for different reasons, Al felt less and less compelled to return to school; his sluggishness became more apparent as he failed to fill out and return his applications for registration at the University of
Massachusetts and for financial aid at the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Center. He soon completely dropped the idea of returning to school, and our very presence became disturbing to Al, since we were somehow the personification of what he was yearning to do and was unable to achieve. As far as we were concerned, we really wanted to film a positive process of change, and Al seemed a good example but, since he was not returning to school, there was no purpose in trying to film him more.

As we started to edit the footage we shot with George, Al, and Butch, it is not surprising that we came to the conclusion that neither Butch nor Al developed as characters; on the other hand, George came out much stronger than we thought, emerging as a very complex and rich character, and the film naturally organized itself around him.

We first arranged the footage in a strict chronological order. One reason was that the whole court process was directly influencing George's everyday life, and it appeared important to us to preserve this connection, as well as to be faithful to the evolution of his feelings during that time. A second reason was a consequence of our shooting style and the development of a real friendship between George and us; we felt it necessary, then, that the film acknowledge this process.

But, at that stage, the fundamental problem of finding the delicate balance between information and mood was emerging each time we attempted to cut the movie. The dependence on the chronological order forced us to leave in scenes which were not interesting or revelatory of George's attitude, only because of the fact that they enlightened some events and helped in the comprehension of the court episodes. In the same way, we were often
unable to cut down the length of a scene because several lines contained important information. At last, a chronological ordering of the sequences was stressing the court period events over the revelation of George's personality; in that respect, every projection of different chronological cuts we made was leaving the viewer very frustrated because it was impossible to thoroughly understand what happened with the landlord and the processes of the court system.

We did not want to do a film on the "arcana" of the judicial system, but rather attempted to give an account of how George's social experience affects the way he perceives the world and how he arms himself to deal with it. Therefore, we had to deemphasize the court-related events by breaking away from the chronological structure and organizing the film as a mosaic of sequences giving an insight of George's character.

The choice of a structure was, then, the first decision we had to make at the editing stage, and we organized the sequences in a dialectical rather than in a mechanical way. One sequence is edited next to another one, not only because there is a causal or temporal relationship between them, but because there is an emotional or poetical shock created by their juxtaposition. In the film, for example, the first confrontation at court, with the landlord, and the scene at Janet's, George's sister, are consecutive, but it did not happen that way in reality. These two scenes shot at different moments are brought together because their juxtaposition succeeds in putting George's behavior in perspective.

Then all the editing is leaning toward attempting to present George at two different levels, dialectically related. In the first place, in his
everyday life conditioned by social and economic conditions, and then through his dealings with his landlord, with the judicial system or with the "world" in general.

I have not yet seen Alfred Guzzetti's Family Portrait Sittings, but from William Rothman's criticism of the film, there seems to be a strong similarity between the way Guzzetti portrays his family and the way we tried to portray George.

An individual's consciousness, reflected in the way he understands his own story, is limited and threaded with contradictions, which in turn are bound to the conflicts and tensions integral to the fabric of his social life . . .

William Rothman is underlining here a very important element of the portrait film, which is to attempt to present people dialectically related to their environment, and people's behavior anchored in their social context. But, inversely to an indirect address narrative, an open address is centered on individuals; it attempts, in a personal way, to give insight into the character's motivations and to present the events as a web of multiple influences.

As we stressed before, an open address approach reestablishes the character's right to affirm his view of the world and the filmmaker's latitude to interpret it, the relationship of character to filmmaker being central and becoming the motive force of the narrative.

It is through our relationship that an immediate comprehension of George's personality is made possible; it is through the way George presents himself in front of the camera, reacts to certain events or simply tells a story that his "form of life and consciousness" is clearly revealed.
It is because we are outsiders that, in a sense, George is forced to articulate his contradictions and freely address the world; it is because we are friends that he is sincere and natural and makes his problems accessible.

The Roxbury film is, then, the multi-level portrait of a man deeply rooted in his environment; it is also the building up of a friendship.
Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to try to define a specific theory of the documentary film; to show that a semiotics of this type of filmmaking was possible and can be studied not only in opposition to fiction films but as an independent system which has its own codes and its specific features. It is an attempt to put together, in a coherent and global way, these main characteristics of the documentary film and to contradict Christian Metz, who explicitly excludes documentaries from theoretical analysis.

Non narrative films for the most part are distinguished from 'real' films by their social purpose and by their content, much more than by their 'language processes.' . . . It is by no means certain that an independent semiotics of the various non narrative genres is possible other than in a form of a series of discontinuous remarks on the points of difference between these films and 'ordinary films' . . . Now it was . . . precisely to the extent that the cinema confronted the problems of narration that in the course of successive gropings, it came to produce a body of specific signifying procedures. 37

I precisely wanted to establish in this essay that a semiotics of the documentary film was not only possible but also indispensable. It was, of course, difficult to present here a thorough and comprehensive theory of the documentary film, but I tried to outline the lines of force of the textual system of such films and present them precisely as "a body of specific signifying procedures."

The problem with film semiotics is that it analyzes the film once it is finished, as a dead body; a theory of the documentary film, as we presented it, is, on the contrary inextricably connected with its practice. It is through the making of the film that the filmmaker's choices have to
be made, and these choices bear a meaning limiting the possibilities at the next step of the process.

We have seen, for example, that a preconceived approach to the subject matter leads to a participatory method, generally based on camera-created events like interviews, and a direct address narrative at the end of the chain. There seems to be no other alternative because in the premises of the preconceived approach is contained the very texture of the film.

We studied the differences between this preconceived approach and a non-preconceived one, as well as between observational and participatory attitudes toward the characters at the shooting stage. These differences are fairly clear, and there is no need to explain them further. The choices at the editing level are, on the contrary, much more complex, and it might be helpful to summarize what we have said in Chapter III by reestablishing with a chart the possible choices of a structure and a narrative for a film and the meaning of their combination.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Narrative</th>
<th>Genres and Examples</th>
<th>Type of Process</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>chronological ordering of the sequences</td>
<td>direct address</td>
<td>scientific &amp; anthropological films</td>
<td>didactic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>indirect address</td>
<td>pure cinema verite films</td>
<td>discovery</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>direct/indirect address</td>
<td>Drew films: On the Pole, Primary</td>
<td>expository</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-chronological ordering of the sequences</td>
<td>direct address</td>
<td>political and journalistic films</td>
<td>dogmatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>indirect address</td>
<td>Wiseman films</td>
<td>evocative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>open address</td>
<td>Grey Gardens, The Sorrow and the Pity, The Roxbury Film</td>
<td>revelatory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As we can see, the formal system of the documentary film is essentially dynamic. Its semiotics is not constituted by the theoretical implications of aesthetic choices during the writing of the screenplay but emerges through the filmmaking decisions and the editing possibilities, as an aesthetic of the film practice.

It is precisely this continuum of selective choices during the filmmaking process and their possible combinations which differentiates the documentary aesthetics from any other type of theoretical analysis and constitutes its formal system.
Footnotes


4. Ibid., p. 347.


7. Ibid., p. 159.


21. It was even shown several times at Center Screen, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

22. See William Rothman's insightful remark on p. 17.

23. Diegesis means "narration" in Greek. It was used, as Metz says, "To designate one of the obligatory parts of judiciary discourse, the recital of facts... It designates the film's represented instance (which Mikel Dufresne contrasts to the expressed, properly aesthetic instance)—that is to say the sum of the film's denotations: the narration itself, but also the fictional space and time dimensions implied in and by the narrative," etc. See Christian Metz, *Film Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).


25. What Metz means by "grande syntagmatique" is simply the temporal organization of the sequences.


27. In a fiction film, the linear- causality of the sequences is the building up of a narrative; sequences have almost no autonomy. Multiple camera rules and art direction principles strive to reinforce the notion of continuity, central to the aesthetic of the fiction film. Therefore, a camera movement, a certain object or costume, or a certain lighting at the beginning of the film, if repeated at the end, will bear a certain meaning given by the narrative. The sound track in a fiction film is never autonomous; synchronous sound, personal voice-over of one of the characters or expository narration, such as: "There are a million stories in the cities!"—all are used as an integral part of the narrative.

On the contrary, in a documentary film, sequences are usually shot at different times and have their own autonomy and meaning; therefore, their organization obeys different rules, which have to be explained in relation to the sound track's own structure.

It must, however, be noted that recent trends in fiction films are using documentary devices in order to disrupt "the internal plane of reality by directly addressing the viewer." Jean Luc Godard's uses of titles, actors addressing the camera, and all sorts of interview techniques indicate such an intention, as do recent structural films made
Marguerite Duras (India Song, Le Camion, etc.), Jean Marie Straub (Othon, or Chronicle of Anna Magdalana Bach, etc.), or Marcel Hanoun (Spring, or Winter, etc.), and many others. But it would be difficult to defend that these films constitute the mainstream of fiction film production.


29. Pat Jaffe, "Editing Cinema Verite," Film Comment, no. 3 (Summer 1965), p. 43.


33. The word "cosmophania" comes from the Greek words cosmos and to show. It indicates, then, the faculty to present, show the world in its entirety, to show everything.


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Appendix

Proposal Submitted to the Film Fund

Film Description

The film is an account of the process of change, of initiatives taken and obstacles met by three men living in an urban poor environment.

George Wilkins, 31, came to Boston from North Carolina in the early sixties and held a variety of jobs. He spent seven years in prison, where he learned to read and write, became certified in small engine repair, and created and sold many sculptures. His income today is derived entirely from welfare and disability payments.

George asked us to film the condition of his apartment. When we met him, he was paying $35 per week for a space that had no heat, one light fixture, no door and several broken windows. He decided to withhold the rent and, through housing court, try to force the landlord to make improvements. According to George, the landlord responded by sending a henchman whom George challenged, resulting in a charge against him for assault and battery. His refusal to pay the rent was a conscious act of revolt for George. He knew he might lose the apartment, but he had to show how powerless he was to change his degrading living conditions. George got little support or understanding from his friends, family, or the court-appointed attorney, who urged him to vacate the apartment in exchange for having the assault charge dismissed. At that point, the housing court issue became moot.

The film clearly was an outlet for George's accumulated frustration at being unable to influence or even communicate with those who had the power to decide his fate. Our presence and interest became a real source of comfort to him. This intimate involvement enables the film to reveal how George's social experience affects the way he perceives the world and how he arms himself to deal with it.

The court events bring into clear focus the daily problems of ghetto living for George. We filmed him in encounters with people on the street, meeting with his attorney and with a community service worker, passing the time of day with us, and bringing friends home to the apartment. Time and again, George argues his position to anyone who will listen, describing his current conflict as one battle in a life-long series. The strength of his conviction that he is right and his acceptance of his eviction as a momentary defeat testify in the film to his will to persevere and his strong belief in a better future.
The bulk of the shooting with George is finished now, and our experience with him strongly affects our filming of Al Burrel and Calvin McLean. Unmistakable echoes of George's struggle continue to resonate as we share events with these two men. In the same way, both Al and Calvin use the film to vent the tensions that accompany change.

Al felt he needed his own bass back from the pawnshop before he could resume playing professionally. He had been deeply involved with the New York avant-garde jazz scene, performing with Yusef Lateef, Sam Rivers, Oscar Peterson, and Esther Phillips, but time in prison and increased domestic responsibilities due to his wife's illness prevented him from working for several years. Formerly a student at the New England Conservatory of Music, he now feels that by going back to school he can get himself together professionally and renew contacts.

Al's life has revolved around taking care of his family and not much else. He visits neighbors, drinks, and plays the lottery. He thinks that his creative abilities have been dormant with his present group of friends and he knows that returning to school will mean coping with their jealousy. Since he needs some of the household money for his music expenses, he's under a great deal of pressure from his wife to become successful. Once confident of his playing, he is not sure he can accomplish what he must; he's been hesitating for years. Al is worldly and highly committed to getting back into music, but his motivation gets diluted by his own doubts and the stagnancy of his surroundings.

We have been filming Al as he takes care of the complicated business of launching himself: applying for a grant from the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, negotiating with the pawnbroker, agonizing over the curriculum of his required music theory class, fighting with his wife.

Like George, Al gains momentum from the film as witness both to his efforts and to his reluctance to make efforts. Our interaction has helped to tap his creative energy. When we first talked together, he was excited by the idea of the film and wanted to write the music for it. His pleasure at "thinking on the positive side" is evident in the footage.

Calvin McLean has been a welfare caseworker and high school social science teacher. He felt that his work in these institutional settings was continually obstructed by bureaucracy or racism. He came to Urban Gardening as a way to design his own projects and have more direct and free relationships with the young people he wanted to work with. The program brings unemployed adolescents together to jointly plan and take responsibility for a garden. Calvin believes these activities can be a meaningful model to help teenagers to organize their lives.

Calvin is well respected as an organizer and is a popular figure in the neighborhood. A steady stream of friends drop in at his house and spend hours. At Calvin's we have met and filmed people from throughout the
community; in fact, it was Al who first brought us there.

Calvin is not isolated in the same way that George and Al are. For him the film serves more to document the nature of what he is up against than to state his own case.

We have recently begun filming Calvin as he trains groups, recruits workers, and persuades landowners to donate plots to the Urban Gardening Project. He meets a tremendous amount of resistance everywhere; many kids disdain the idea of gardening, the city is sluggish in providing funds, Roxbury soil requires a lot of hard work to make it arable. Accompanying Calvin on his rounds, one is made aware of what barriers must be overcome to transform attitudes and to develop concern for the community environment.

He has invested himself in a long-term struggle which constantly calls on his resourcefulness; he feels, however, that his strategies are making some headway. Calvin has been campaigning for a significant parcel of land for the project. If it comes through, he will immediately be faced with finding even more workers for this spring's planting.

These portraits, still incomplete, will provide not only specific personal stories but a deeper comprehension of the obstacles that impede change. George is confronting not only his landlord but an entire power structure. Al and Calvin face the conflict between their urges to reestablish and organize and the many influences which serve to stultify. The film raises the question of what the possibilities are for individuals to bring about change in their own lives when they must counter the weight of institutions and an unresponsive social environment. In an intensely personal way, it brings the viewer into the immediate circle of three individuals caught in the urban struggle and makes possible an intimate understanding otherwise inaccessible to audiences outside the community.