

SOME CURRENT PROBLEMS IN THE VERITE APPROACH TO
FILM/VIDEO DOCUMENTARIES

By

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An essay which is comprised of a historical overview of the problems and concerns of documentarists working within the tradition of cinema-verite, and an examination of the effect of these problems and concern on the most current work being done in the field at MIT. As part of the thesis, three short cinema-verite pieces are included in the form of a 3/4 inch video cassette, which illustrate the the author's own attempts at dealing with these issues at a practical level.

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Introduction

This essay is the result of trying to put the classic examples of cinema-verite, the films of my colleagues and friends at the MIT Film Section, and my own film-making into some kind of theoretical and historical perspective. Theoretical - in the sense that this paper attempts to outline what I see as the real formal and conceptual concerns behind the work being done presently at MIT. Historical - in the sense that this paper attempt to link these concerns to those of our cinematic precursors of recent and not-so-recent past, in order to provide a sense of continuity and the possibility of establishing some kind of basis for comparison. The task, I felt, was a personal one, as since my entrance into the Film Section was at least partially dependent upon my experience in cinema studies, as opposed to film-making, I figured that I owe it to the place.

One depressing note that must be aired here about my experience studying and making films at MIT: almost every discussion about a film, classic or student-made, would always seem to avoid what I would call the real issues at stake in the films, particularly from our perspective as film-makers. All too often, it seemed as if the only criteria from which a film could be judged was

a kind of pseudo-Rex Reed or other daily newspaper standard of "entertainment value." Films were too often judged by the number of laughs they could muster, or the oddity of a situation. The reason for this, as I see it, lay partly in our lack of awareness of who we are as film-makers, and more crucially where we think we are going, and partly in a lack of seriousness towards our own work and the work of our colleagues. While I can offer no remedies for the former, let me at least state my view on the latter that it seems to me that cinema-verite, and especially the work coming out of MIT, constitutes to my mind the only significant avant-garde in the American cinema. Certainly the work of the faculty and staff, as well as a significant portion of the student work, is blazing new trails in the cinema, the effect of which is still to be felt.

A final not: I had originally intended to define cinema-verite in this chapter. As that grew more difficult than I imagined, I decided to face the fact that the only people who will ever read this essay will be those who have a fairly strong view of the beast, to whom my definition might serve as more of a hindrance than an aid. So...

Dziga Vertov

The term itself, "cinema verite," (henceforth referred to as CV) can be ascribed to the writings of a Soviet film-maker whose work bears many curious parallels and contrasts with what would become CV - Dziga Vertov. Vertov called his approach to film-making "kino-pravda" (cinema-truth), which the French film historian Georges Sadoul translated literally as cinema-verite while preparing an edition of Vertov's theoretical works on cinema. Vertov himself used the term to separate himself and his work from what he saw as the erroneous path taken by the rest of the nascent Soviet film industry, the "kino-drama." He railed against Soviet imitations of American or German models in cinema. Instead of a cinema structured around literary or dramatic models, Vertov proposed a model for a cinema which would deal directly with Soviet life, instead of through some formal proxy. He saw plots, screenplays, actors, sets, artificial lighting, anything that would set film-making apart from the real world as inimical to the essence of the medium. He brought his camera out on the streets, into the factories, on to the battlefields, anywhere he might uncover "Life as it really is."

Working only with his brother Mikhail on camera

and his wife Svilova as editor, Vertov made over sixty Kino-Pravda newsreels between 1922 and 1925, and several longer works before his fall from official favor about 1932. The newsreels especially are full of Vertov's recording of the everyday life of the Soviet citizens, from getting teeth pulled (no. 7) to the problems of collectivization (no. 53-57). Regretfully, only one film (no.22) from this entire series is available in the US, so that the real extent of Vertov's achievement can only be alluded to without the concrete evidence of the films on hand. It is interesting to note, however, that all the newsreels of this series would end with a statement printed on an intertitle to the effect that if you would like the Kino-Pravda group to visit your community, please write to Dziga Vertov, and then the address. The intertitle would then be followed by a short filmed sequence showing the Kinoks (as Vertov's group was called) arriving at a town, setting up projection facilities, and starting to film the local populace. Years later, a similar request would form the basis for Ed Pincus and Steve Ascher's Life and Other Anxieties.

Vertov's longer works, also largely unknown in this country, provide the most fertile ground for the speculation on the relationship between his work and the later CV. It is in these works that we can trace something

of the development of Vertov's view of his relationship to his filmed subjects and to his film audience. Vertov, like his great enemy Eisenstein, had great contempt for the notion of "movie star." Instead, he refused to focus on an individual subject, claiming that the star of his films was the Soviet people or the Nation. This led, in the case of Vertov, to an ever-felt distance between film-maker and filmed subject. Vertov is almost never interested in giving you a "you are there" feeling to his films, as we could sense in *Primary*, for example. Vertov as a film-maker and as an artist seems uninterested in particularity: his attempt is, at all times, to associate rather than to distinguish. This can be clearly seen in his second long film, The Eleventh Year; Vertov presents shots of factory workers in the Ukraine, then follows this with an intertitle which reads merely "and" then cuts to shots of factory workers in Moscow, followed by "and," and so forth. No attempt is made to show whatever problems or peculiarities might exist in each region. The camera not only "sees" a vision of Soviet reality, it "creates" one. The final effect of all this is a kind of mystification of the camera, as Vertov's editing structure takes on the authority of a narrator's voice on the television news.

The mystification of the camera is precisely the concern to which Vertov would next turn his attention in

his third and best-known work, Man with the Movie Camera. Here Vertov attempted to depict both his vision of the film-maker as a member of the new Soviet society and the act of film-making within that society. The film-maker, as portrayed by one of the actual cameramen of the film, Mikhail Kaufmann, is throughout the film presented as another worker, in appearance, lifestyle, and function within society: one worker among many, a negation of Vertov's vision of the Hollywood-type film-maker. Film making itself is seen as composed of different types of physical labor which are further paralleled to the work activity of machines and hand laborers. Finally, the tricks of film-making are exposed: a dynamic shot of a fast-moving train is immediately followed by a shot which illustrates how the former shot was accomplished. Throughout, workers go on with their labors, seemingly undisturbed by the presence of the camera; we see both the worker involved with his job, and the cameraman filming him. The only ones who seem to notice Vertov are those who aren't working - derelicts and members of Moscow's new bourgeoisie. The implication here is clear: the film-maker, portrayed as simply another member of Soviet society, finds opposition to his work only from those who aren't true members of it.

To sum up, then, the work of Dziga Vertov in the

silent cinema presents an awareness of problems, and even a similar odyssey of speculation on those problems, strikingly like that of CV in the 1960's and 1970's. Vertov moved from a fascination/interest in the everyday activities of his fellow citizens to a reflection on his role as a film-maker living -and working - amongst them.

Robert Flaherty

The name of Robert Flaherty has been much more widely linked with the origins and development of the documentary genre than had Dziga Vertov, who in recent years has regrettably been critically assumed into the camp of the so-called avant-garde, or New American Cinema. Flaherty, both as an American and as an intimate of Ricky Leacock, has particularly been seen as the forerunner of at least the major tradition of American CV.

As in the case of Vertov, Flaherty's own words certainly show that his aims and ideas about cinema were close to the ideology behind the CV movement. Unlike Vertov, however, an abundance of Flaherty's work is popularly available, and as the saying goes, "the proof is in the pudding." With the exception of Nanook of the North and perhaps of The Land his films seem quite far away from any idealized notion of "simple observation." It's difficult to believe in what Mrs. Flaherty refers to as her husband's "nonpreconception;" his sound films especially emanate the strong sense of calculation and bias with which he approached his work. This, of course, does undercut the value of his films otherwise: even as phony a work as Man of Aran still seems to me awfully moving.

Despite the many shortcomings of Flaherty's work,

certain crucial aspects of his films are what clearly remove his work from a strict adherence to the conventions of popular film-making of his day, and furthermore make his work especially relevant for our topic. Just as Vertov might have claimed that the subject or star of his films was Soviet society, Flaherty might have claimed that the true "star" or subject of his films was the world itself. Despite the references to humans which exist boldly in his titles (Nanook of the North, Moana, etc.), the main focus of his concern in these films can be more accurately be seen as the environments in which they occur (the Arctic; the South Sea Islands). It is the memory of the places in his films which remains with us long after we forget the individual characters. The humans in Flaherty's films serve, in a sense, as proxies, as our guides through these natural realms; they live the experience for us. The individual personality of any of his characters is never a real factor in any of his films: Nanook might have been easily replaced by any other Eskimo, with the resulting film being pretty much like Flaherty's.

Along with the lack of individual characterization, there is also a lack of narrative development in Flaherty's films. In Nanook, especially, there is a kind of randomness to the events and actions depicted, a sense that even their ordering was rather arbitrary, as opposed to having been pre-ordained by the needs of a plot or even of some

logical chronology. By the time of Louisiana Story Flaherty would be adopting far more conventional narrative structures; in Nanook, however, the narrative never seems to go beyond the level of a simple assembly. At their best, the narratives in Flaherty's films have an open-endedness to them which implies to the viewer that the action we see contained within the film went on long before and long after the camera was at the scene.

In line with the arguments presented above, Flaherty's work, especially in Nanook, seems rather close to the work of Fred Wiseman in several respects. Both Nanook and, for example, Hospital, feature the predominance of an environment over individual characters. Both are made from the same type assembly-structure, with a sense of arbitrary ordering of individual scenes. Wiseman's films are of course far more clinical and less passionate than any of Flaherty's, but here we sense more of what might be called a difference in personal styles than in methodology.

The Flaherty film which is perhaps most akin to the spirit of the Drew films is The Land. In 1939 and 1940, Flaherty travelled through the American midwest to film the effects of the dust bowl years and the effect of new agricultural machinery. Due to the necessity of almost constant travel, Flaherty was never able to stay very long in any one place to begin to shape his material

as he had been able to do in his previous films. (1)
The result was a kind of pastiche which, as Stephen
Mamber points out, serves as a kind of diary or personal
record of his journey, rather than the report on
agricultural conditions which it was meant to be.
Curiously, it is exactly when Flaherty lost the control
over his film-making situation to which he had grown
accustomed that he was able to expand his work into a new
area. This "lack of control" over the film-making
situation would later be referred to as the very goal
of the early CV film-makers in America in an article
by Ricky Leacock, who in a certain moment would be the
spokesman for the group around Robert Drew. (2)

(1) Stephen Mamber, Cinema Verite in America, page
13.

(2) Ricky Leacock, For an Uncontrolled Cinema, in
Film Culture Reader, pages 76-78.

The Drew Films

There can be little question that the birth of CV in the United States is directly linked to the group of film-makers who began to work together under Robert Drew in the late 1950's - Ricky Leacock, Don Pennebaker, Albert Maysles, etc. Not only did this group develop the very equipment which made the possibility of film-making with synchronous sound a reality, but in their approach and style they laid down the model of a CV structure from which all later entrants into the area would work, or work against. The model for CV which the Drew group formulated, had at its basis an observational attitude towards the events which one was filming. The film-maker served as a go-between for real experience and its cinematic rendition. The particular roots of this movement come out of journalism, but contain also influences from Hollywood models and TV news. The influence of this group also extended back into its roots, as, especially, the Hollywood film would accept the Drew group style as its standard of cinematic realism in the 1960's. Political campaigns, car races, and a host of other subjects could never be filmed the same way as they had been before this group of films.

If one watches enough of the Drew films, one is

struck by the great similarities between them, despite the many different personalities involved in the making of each film. The presence in each of what has been called the "crisis structure" is perhaps the first such feature. Basically, the crisis structure would be represented immediately through the information given by the voice-over narration. After an initial synch sound encounter with the main characters and/or the situation of each film, the narrator would then provide additional information, usually unnecessary, and then would state the problem or crisis which would generate each film's individual narrative: "Will David be able to stay off drugs?" or "Will Donald Moore be able to save Paul Crump?"

The use of the narration, and of the crisis structure clearly shows the curious love-hate relation which the Drew films had with the conventions of Hollywood. They can not be seen devices simply imposed by Drew or anyone else on top of the filmic structure: as Ed Pincus once commented, it's impossible to imagine these films without the narration. The statement of the problem in each individual film serves as the revelation of plot does in the Hollywood film: we know immediately what we're looking at, and in a sense why we're looking at it. The statement of the crisis serves in more subtle

ways as well: it represents a kind of disclaimer for the responsibility of the camera or the film crew for any of the event to be witnessed. On a literal level, we are told that the situations exist before we get there. A further implication of this might be that any seemingly strange or dramatic behavior which might occur in the film happens not because of the camera's presence, but due to the dynamics of the particular crisis. This is curiously parallel to the Vertovian concept that his camera did not disturb the truly hard-working Soviet workers, as they were too busy to notice his presence; here, the involvement is of a different sort, but again it's presented as strong enough within each Drew film to take the filmed subject's attention away from the activity of the film-makers. (i.e. Moore is too concerned with freeing Paul Crump to notice Leacock; consequently, as these moments simply "occur" they are real.)

Once the plot is revealed to us via the crisis at hand, each film then becomes our experience of filling in all the details leading up to the conclusion. We are made to look for signs, through gestures, expressions, choice of words, etc., which might indicate or explain the outcome of each crisis. As we don't see every moment in the week of Paul Crump's planned execution, we believe, or at least suspect, that every moment which we are given

is charged with significance. We try to determine, by what we say, whether or not Johnny will go straight. A common tendency, at least in my own experience, of first-time audiences at a Drew film such as Primary is to claim that they could "guess" the ending - that certain details and shots in the film pointed towards an inevitable conclusion that Kennedy would win. It seems that, if this be a general case, that this approach to film-making in the Drew films comes close to fulfilling the dream of the French film theorist, Andre Bazin, who longed for a cinema which would allow the world in its wholeness and ambiguity to "speak" directly to him. On the other hand, this might indicate the subscription of the Drew films to such a strict adherence to the conventions of Hollywood that an average audience can read them as easily as they could a Western.

The concern in the Drew films, in contrast to the concerns in either Vertov or Flaherty, tended to be towards the individual, the extraordinary. In the work of Ricky Leacock after the Drew period, we can see his abandonment of the crisis structure for totally crisis-free situations (to an extent) in order to examine the individual at their leisure. In his approach, Leacock seems to be working in a totally opposite manner than would the French CV group, and most especially different from that other bete noire of CV, the TV news. In private, Leacock

has always referred to the vast differences between what he sees himself doing and what he sees the rest of the media as doing. Leacock seems far more aware of "the media" and its relation to CV than any other CV film-maker I personally can think of. There is also a certain McLuhanesque aspect to his approach, as in his choice of subjects (until recently) Ricky seemed to have traded in the notion of movie stars for "media stars." The demand for access to the everyday lives of media stars goes beyond America's original fascination with stars and starlets of Hollywood. CV is, in one sense, an answer to that demand.

French Cinema-Verite

At the same time as the Drew group moved into their full-scale production of synch-sound films, a group of French documentarians also began their experiments with this new approach. Jean Rouch, Chris Marker, and Edgar Morin were the principle figures here.

The films produced by this early French CV group were far different than anything produced by the Drew group, in both structure and style. For the French, CV basically afforded them the opportunity to confront their filmed subjects directly. The camera in Le joli mai by Chris Marker, for example, clearly exists as a kind of provocative agent: an instrument which not only records events but in a very real sense actually creates them. The silent implication in all the Drew films was always that the events shown would have occurred with or without the presence of the camera crews. In French CV, the events shown were caused by the camera's presence, be it a discovery of something about oneself, or an embarrassing moment between lovers. The most common form of confrontation which exists in these films is the direct interview, usually with the interviewer visible or at least partially visible in the frame; and here, the presence of French eyes staring into the camera is a sign of the authenticity of the encounter.

Ed Pincus

The filmography of Ed Pincus begins soon after the close of the Drew period in American CV. While his early films seem in some sense typical of the CV films made on the Drew model, with some modifications, the status of the camera is basically that of an observer on the scene. The seeds for his approach to CV as found in his later work can be found, however, in a work as early as Panola (1964-1970)

Panola is a portrait of a black man living in Natchez Mississippi, during the height of the Civil Rights struggle. Pincus and his partner, David Neuman, were in Natchez shooting footage which eventually became their first CV film, Black Natchez. Panola differs strikingly from what the above description might make it sound like, in several important ways. First, Panola himself was a rather eccentric choice for a CV film subject, far ~~away~~ from the Drew or the Leacock type of character. The town drunkard, he was scorned by both his community and family; unlike someone like David, a drug addict who is the central figure in a Drew film, Panola himself has no redeeming features, nor any real desire to change, from what one can tell from the film. Also, the choice was interesting as the media, especially

as the liberal media was trying to present "positive" images of southern Blacks during their struggle.

The film's crucial difference from the Drew model for our discussion is the relationship between Panola and the camera. Not only does he acknowledge the camera's presence, in sharp contrast to the Drew films and most of the rest of American CV (Pincus: "In the 1960's, if someone looked into the camera during a shot, the material was considered unusable."), but he is obviously performing for the camera throughout the film. By performing for the camera I mean to infer two things: (1) that Panola calculates his gestures and words for the sake of the camera, and that he is aware of his calculation; and (2) that what we see on the screen probably would not have occurred had the presence of the camera not in some way have provoked it. In line with this, Panola himself exists in the film as a kind of movie character, in that his existence, which in the film is reducible to his performance, seems to begin and end with the passage of the film. Of course, Panola is not a movie character, but a real human being. To understand the film, then, we must seek out the relationship between Panola's performance and his reality; especially in the final scene, the film asks us to see beyond the performance to the reality. Of the Drew films, perhaps the one which comes closest

to this spirit is Jane, where in the course of that film the difference between Jane Fonda acting and Jane Fonda living as an actress is progressively minimized.

In an article about Alfred Guzzetti's Family Portrait Sittings, William Rothman outlined how in watching a CV film, the immediate feeling is that the characters on the screen are dissembling; this leads to an erroneous supposition that there exists another world beyond the "film world" where there is truth. Panola, it seems to me, addresses itself boldly to this very issue.

At about the same time that Pincus was completing Panola, he began his Diary series, of which South by Southwest is the first completed installment (to my knowledge). The film is the record of a trip made by Pincus to the Southwest of the US to visit his friend and former partner, David Neuman.

As a diary, Pincus's film functions in somewhat the same way as a first-person novel. By this I mean that our knowledge of Ed (the figure in the film, as distinct from the maker of the film) comes to us not through viewing his own acts but in his circumscription by other people. Ed, in South by Southwest, is revealed to us in the sense that he is not-David (the character we see for about 95% of the screen time). By watching David, we of course learn about David, but more important we learn about Ed. The clear implication felt throughout the film is that

David represents, for Ed, something he might have become, but something he clearly is not. The great distinction between them, far beyond their personal attitudes towards whatever, is that Ed is filming and David is not. Thus, from the very first installment of the Diaries, Pincus is defining himself primarily as the one who is engaged in the act of making this film. Aside from the obvious tautology of the above statement, I believe that we can draw from this two major implications: (1) that Pincus, the ostensible subject of the film, is absent from the film itself; even when he physically steps into the frame by asking ~~someone~~ else to hold the camera, we view him as just another character who circumscribes the real subject of the film. His figure on the screen has none of the authority that say Keaton's has in his own films. (2) the film asks, after setting up the relation of David not filming/ Ed filming, the most crucial question of all: "Why is Ed filming?" While it is too early to tell by the evidence, I suspect (and hope) that Ed Pincus's Diary will eventually be about the need to make diary films as well.

Finally, to touch briefly upon Pincus and Steve Ascher's Life and Other Anxieties, it seems that in many ways this film is either a continuation of the questioning begun in the diary, or a possible response

to questions raised during the course of its filming. At least one question whose strong presence is felt throughout the film is "What does it mean to film someone?" The first part of the film deals with the death of Pincus's friend David Hancock. Hancock asks Pincus, we are told in a voice-over, and here I'm paraphrasing, to film his final weeks as an indictment against the inhumanity of medical practice. Yet the material with Hancock never really touches upon this: Pincus's own desire to film David in way overrides Hancock's request to be filmed as a victim or whatever of medicine. Instead of Hancock's request, we get Pincus's own vision of the experience. Can we say then that Pincus failed his friend in this request? Perhaps in some way as a response to this, Pincus and Ascher then set out to Minneapolis, where they embark on a film structured around people's requests to be filmed.

The problem with the film, from this point on, as I see it is that the film gives us what people wanted to be filmed, yet it seems difficult to figure out what this might mean in terms of how they were filmed. It is the request itself, and the initial contact with the request's author on screen, which seems interesting. Watching the resolution of the filming of the request at times doesn't seem to rise above the level of an exercise. What

seems like it might be revealing of the film-maker is the sum of the fifty or so sequences which were left out of the final version. Having seen progressive cuts of the film, it never seemed exactly clear to me why what went did, although I felt that the final version of the film seemed by far the best one.

In closing, one can see how the work of Pincus offers an example of the evolution of American CV away from the Drew model in a certain direction. Another move away from the Drew model, but in a diametrically opposed direction to Pincus's, would be that of Wiseman. Wiseman dispensed with the care for individuality which was felt in the Drew films or in the work of someone like Leacock. Instead, he made films about places, which he calls institutions. Like the Drew films, however, there is the same sense of separation between film-maker and subject. The act of film-making itself is never openly questioned.

In Pincus's later work, however, this is precisely the major grounds for speculation. The extraordinary individual is again replaced, but this time by the film-maker himself, in some sense. All at once, the filmed subjects of American CV turn and face the camera.

Some Thoughts on Recent CV Films Produced at MIT

The following section is an attempt to give my own thoughts and critical thinking towards the work of some of my friends and colleagues at the MIT Film Section some coherence. I apologize for any inaccuracies due to my lack of a clear memory of an individual film.

Mom by Mark Rance

Mom is a good example of a film which on a theoretical level deals with a confrontation over the act of filming a subject. The film clearly divides into two, unequal parts, the "follow film" and the confrontation. The "follow film" consists essentially of Mark recording the experience of his mother as she leaves Chicago to attend a fashion institute in New York. The approach here is clearly observational: we have little sense of any contact between Mark and his mother throughout this first part of the film.

The presence and the quality of the first part of this film is what makes the second part as remarkable as it is. Suddenly we feel - and see and hear - the distance which Mark has established between himself and his subject being violated, not by the film-maker, as in Jeff and Joel

Kreines's film of the southern farm family, or even by someone like Pincus in his own films, but by the subject herself. Mrs. Rance in a way tries to turn the camera against Mark, both in attacking his purposes in making this film, and, more subtly, by exposing herself in a way, and attempting to expose Mark, so as to make the film unusable: to present something that is "too real" for the camera, and the film, and the film-maker, to take. One can not say, on the other hand, that the scene was provoked by the presence of the camera. The feeling is that it would have transpired anyway. What is to me most interesting is that is directed at the camera, as it takes in the reality of being material for a film into its essence.

Space Coast by Ross McElwee and Michel Negroponte

The enormity of Space Coast precludes it being conveniently pigeon-holed into a film which addresses itself to a particular problem or even set of problems. At least one key issue to which the film addresses itself however is the effect of an environment, taken in the larger socio-political sense,, on a group of individuals living within it. The selection of Coco Beach, Florida gives the film the premise of a community which has undergone drastic

changes within the environment within a very short period of time. The effect of the environment, the film proposes, will be felt in the dynamics of its changes.

One possible approach to the making of a film like this would have been to live for some extended period of time there, constantly filming, and then to assemble a kind of "year at Coco Beach," in which we could see the changes for ourselves. Ross and Michel take a very different approach, probably not the least reason being that the physically visible changes in Coco Beach had probably happened long before the start of the film. Thus, the first thing which their narrative dispenses with is a chronology: there is certainly no indication that the film was shot in the course of a year, for example. Rather than opt for a scheduled account of the changes, Ross and Michel instead attempt to create a sense of mood, a feeling for the tone of life in Coco Beach. They are aided somewhat in their effort here by the fact that they assume that we can imagine a different mood pervading the area during the heat of the space program.

The attempt to create or render this mood moves a discussion of the technique of Space Coast away from the realm of the actual filming of the material used in the film to a discussion of the structure of the editing. Editing in CV is a peculiar problem, because of some of the

particular properties of the films; for example, many of the films have a chronology essential to their meaning. The approach to filming each of the central characters seems to fluctuate according to the particular character: the shooting seems more relaxed, there is less of a sense of barrier between film-makers and subject, in the Papa John sequences or the Ted sequences, than in the Willy sequences, who seems to be trying to ignore the camera's presence.

In the final analysis, however, it is not the shots themselves, but their juxtaposition or association, which renders the vision of the film intelligible. Space Coast is a type of created "reality" in a kind of Vertovian sense: a portrait clearly composed by the film-makers themselves, without any pretence to be otherwise. In keeping with this, there is little sense of a commitment to tell these character's stories: Mary drops out for a good portion of the film, and Willy is seen far less than the other households; the film is never their story, their story is part of Michel and Ross's story.

Absences by Robb Moss

Absences is a diary-like film which chronicles Robb's return home to Los Angeles after spending time in the East. In a sense, the subject, or focus perhaps, of the film is not the fact that Robb is back, but that he's been away. Distance - chronological and physical - gets translated into personal distance. The embodiment of that distance is the camera, which becomes a barrier between Robb and his parents, friends, etc. for it forces him to not only deal with their words and actions but to examine them, to study them and seek out their inner meaning. In both times that I have seen complete versions of this film, I've felt an uncanny identification between the camera and Robb, in the Robert Montgomery sense of identification: the eye as an information processor, in the fullest sense of the term. The technique or approach used is that of a so-called "staring camera," a term first I believed applied to the films of Ozu Yasujiro, the great Japanese film-maker. The extended takes - so-called "talking heads" - enable us to get beyond the fact that the camera and recorder has made a physical record of a moment so that we can study more fully the meaning behind the appearances.

Sisters (provisional title) by Mary Arbuckle

Pat's Towing by Ann Schaezel

These two films might be considered in one sense the fringes of CV. On a personal level, one wonders how much their appearance might have to do with the presence of Jonas Mekas at the Film Section in the Spring of 1978.

These films represent a move away from the use of an event or an individual subject as the focus for a CV film to depiction of a state of mind. Metaphysically, the development is a happy one, as states of mind should not be considered any less real or true than events or personalities. Formally, both films feature the absolute denial of any kind of chronology: Sisters goes so far as to subvert the sense of time by the obvious repetition of actions or bits of dialogue. The long takes with a stationary camera give Sisters a sense of theatricality, which is supported further by the various performances for the camera; yet Mary robs this theatrical setting of type of continuities we have tended to associate with theatre. Aside from the lost sense of time, there is a loss of the sense of individual characters, as Mary and her sisters seem to blend one into the other. The information given tends to be rather meaningless in itself, but

it decisively establishes the film's background: girls worrying about boys and worrying about each other. The film emanates a sense of being a shared experience, as if it recreates a scene which all women can relate to in its essence, though perhaps not in its details; slightly magical as it is composed to an extent of memories and dreams, as well as real experience .

If Sisters is about girls together having fun, Pat's Towing is certainly the other side of the coin. The free-flowing quality of the narrative is both childlike and playful: only the "children playing" in this case are the mean boys who were only too well known in the school. As might be expected, the tough boys of Pat's Towing pick on girls: one of the wonderful features of the film is the fact that all three "victims" of these boys are women. The boys even have a mannish lady policeman helping them out. Speed here is essential, so the narrative races along as if the boys of Pat's can't stand still for too long without getting restless. By removing Pat's Towing from specific time and place, Ann gets at the heart of timeless spirit she sees in these men and in their job. The film confirms our worse fears about car-towing: that it's part of a deadly game, in which if you're not careful, you'll get caught.

My Own Work

Of all the lessons I have learned in my two years of MIT, I think my most useful one has been in regard to the basic sense of "uncontrolled" reality which seems close to the heart of CV. From my first film, none of which is included in the video cassette, I soon learned that the most interesting events on film were the ones which we were least expecting. The clearest example of this occurred in the sequence in which Jeri, a black woman who works as a domestic for a woman named Suzanne, brought us to meet and to interview Suzanne for the film. In the midst of her description of Jeri's many years of loyal service, Suzanne began to cry. My reaction is happily preserved on film, as one can see that my initial impulse was to turn away the camera. From what was by far the most beautiful moment contained in the film! Needless to say, I would love to re-shoot the film someday, this time with a different approach to my subject.

Basically, I believe that what links together the three pieces contained on the video cassette (Pershing Rifles, Pentecost, and Christal's Wedding) is the feeling in each piece of an event going somehow out of control, or moving away from the presuppositions which I had made of it. We can see this in Pershing Rifles in the structure

of the narrative. The film (shot on Super-8) begins with the disclosure of some plans of a military operation. The soldiers move through it, and then we see that it was only sort of a training **exercise**. The next two sections of the ~~axude~~ exude an attitude of condescension on our part to their playing army, which reaches its height during the "From the Halls of Montezuma" montage. We next follow the soldiers on another maneuver, but this time it has a rather horrifying conclusion, in the shot in which the camera tracks up to the dead body, pans away to see the almost guilty reaction of the soldiers, and then pans back to the body, almost waiting for some sign of life from it. From this point on, the action of the film becomes more depressing, as it seems no longer to be a funny sort of a joke. Finally, even the mitigating structure of the problem exercise disappears, as ~~the~~ action disperses into larger scale violence.

The development of the narrative in Pentecost has a somewhat similar structure. The videotape begins with our attempts to "get to know these fine folks," soliciting information, etc. As the service begins, however, it quickly moves to a level of intensity which takes us by surprise. The "talking in tongues" sequence gives the Church a totally new image for us, as it symbolizes the fact of the other reality under which these people are living.

The minister's sermon gives the tape some real focus, as he clearly spells out where the Church is coming from: "You're murderers, you're extortioners, you're idolaters, you're adulterers, you're wicked basically." Furthermore, the separation of the Church members from the rest of the world ("We've been born again!") is again emphasized.

In the sequence which follows ("Getting the Spirit"), the Church gives its most awesome display of power. The sequence ends with a kind of disclaimer concerning the effect of the camera on the congregation (Well you know we're always being recorded.) We then move to a verbal account of the Pentecostal experience by a young man who had entered the Church for the first time that night. There is a certain sympathy felt for him, as his figure stands halfway between them and us. Finally, the tape ends on a confident observation that the success of Pentecost is imminent.

Christal's Wedding has none of the sense of threat which looms in the background of the previous pieces, yet from the beginning the tape tries to telegraph a sense that "something is going to happen." When it finally does occur, and Christal sings to her husband, there's a sense of relief on the one hand, and heightened peculiarity of the moment on the other. Then, towards the end, repeated

images of violence (John brushing away Christal's hand, the fight over the garter, the threat to throw the jar) again introduce a rather ominous note to the proceedings. Finally, the tape ends with a rather mysterious reference to Christal having been kidnapped, and "she ain't going where she thinks she's going."

What I have tried to do in the above descriptions of the pieces included in my thesis has been to attempt to account, in some way, for their present structures: to give some insight into the rationale behind the creation of each narrative. In each case the narrative was already fairly structured due to the chronology of the events themselves, and the editing strategy in each piece was to maintain in some sense the integrity of that chronology. I would be pleased to think that a viewer of any of these works would find not only this chronological recording of events or series of events, but clear evidence of my reaction to these events as they unfolded before my eyes, and the influence of my reaction on the manner in which they are presented.