

Trends In The American Documentary: Where the Independents Have Come From and Are Going

by William Sloan (1996)

Non fiction films go back to the very beginnings of cinema, to the works of the Lumières brothers in France at the close of the nineteenth century. We do not, however, usually classify these as "documentaries" since they were simple works - - often consisting of one shot or take. "Documentary" implies something more, a work with structure, a developed work - like the Lumières still based on reality - but with a recognizable beginning, middle and end. It is a genre that in the hands of many filmmakers becomes an art form. A fairly recent development has been the independent movement where the artist creates the work out of his or her own commitment without reference to a sponsor or outside producer to oversee the content. In fact documentary has followed some unforeseen paths in the past decade or so, ones which while perhaps not as orderly as earlier are certainly rich and varied. The forces that have shaped the contemporary movement are historic, personal and technological in character.

Early History: 1922 -1968

The initial half century of the American documentary was coherent and its shape easily recognizable. Robert Flaherty made the first fully-fledged documentary, *NANOOK OF THE NORTH*, in 1922, one of the finest films in the genre's entire canon. It represented Flaherty's personal vision of primitive man fighting for survival in a cruel environment and established a humanistic as opposed to a political tradition which continues today. His four features all shared this poetic view of mankind.

Flaherty had no interest in exploring the issues of racism and exploitation that affected the economic life of his subjects. Those kinds of works came a decade later in the early 1930s with the Film and Photo League, a group of radical left-wing filmmakers who responded to the upheavals of the Great Depression. Photo Leagues spread from New York to many American cities. Their films, often called workers' newsreels, were in part made as an alternative to Hollywood newsreels. Among the most active of these filmmakers was Leo Seltzer, still a figure on the New York film scene.

Two of the major documentaries of the period were produced by Pare Lorentz for the New Deal administration of Franklin Roosevelt. More center of the political road than the Film and Photo League, Lorentz dealt with the environment and the exploitation of the land in *THE PLOW THAT BROKE THE PLAINS* (1936) and *THE RIVER* (1937). *THE RIVER* was one of the great films of the period.

In the pre-World War II era there was one other important documentary group, Frontier Films, an ideological descendent of the Film and Photo League. The moving force behind the group was Leo Murwitz, who with the renowned photographer Paul Strand made NATIVE LAND (1942) which developed themes around racism, workers' rights and the abuses of big business of the period.

With World War II documentary production shifted gears in support of the war effort. Among the many fine films produced at this time for the U.S. Army was the "Why We Fight" series by Hollywood director Frank Capra. One of the most stirring of the war films was THE BATTLE OF SAN PIETRO (1945) by another Hollywood director, John Huston.

The period following the war was a difficult one for the documentary. The form had become rather set with the script being paramount. The exploratory spirit of Robert Flaherty was out of fashion while Pare Lorentz had been a beautiful stylist whose sonorous prose achieved a level of poetry that his successors were unable to achieve. Easily portable synchronous sound shooting which might have revitalized the genre was more than a decade away. Senator Joseph McCarthy whose accomplices included the House of UnAmerican Activities Committee among others led to the Black List whereby almost all the documentarians of the 1930s were rendered unable to find work in film or television. Lionel Rogosin, the only major independent to emerge in this period and who had private funding, made ON THE BOWERY (1956), a rare and humane look at the derelicts on that infamous street.

Prologue to the New Documentary

The sixties brought in a new era. The Black List was becoming ineffective and the TV networks reeling from the quiz show scandals began to produce memorable documentaries although they would not buy the work of independents. However, the government under the Kennedy administration, did bring in new independent talent through the United States Information Agency under Edward S. Murrow. At the same time Drew Associates, a documentary organization funded by Time Inc., developed portable synchronous sound shooting, variously called *cinéma vérité* or direct cinema. Their first film was one of their most memorable, PRIMARY (1960), made by a stellar crew that included among others Richard Leacock, Robert Drew, D.A. Pennebaker, and Al Maysles. This unit produced a number of landmark films. It was not technology alone that influenced the next wave of documentary filmmakers but the prestige of the direct cinema filmmakers themselves - - Leacock, Pennebaker, Maysles were the stars of the so-called *cinéma-vérité* style -- and their charisma captured the imagination of a new generation of documentarians.

In the late sixties and early seventies the networks and public broadcasting made a number of particularly resonant documentaries such as SIT IN (NBC, 1960),

THE SELLING OF THE PENTAGON (CBS, 1971), BANKS AND THE POOR (NET, 1971), all of which explored major problems facing American society.

New Forces

Until the mid 1960s the path of the documentary was neat and continuous. But social movements, in fact social upheaval, began to have a direct effect on independent film. The assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the civil rights struggle, the anti-Vietnam War movement radicalized a generation of college-age youth. Out of these upheavals emerged African-American filmmakers and the feminist film movement. Indeed women filmmakers perhaps more than any other group shaped the contemporary documentary from the 1970s on.

Well into the sixties documentary production remained largely in the hands of white males. The Maysles brothers made some of the best work of the period with films like *SHOWMAN* (1962) and *SALESMAN* (1969). Fred Wiseman, the most prolific of all documentarians, launched a distinguished career with *TITICUT FOLLIES* (1967). The period also saw the beginning of the modern political film with the work of Emile de Antonio who made *POINT OF ORDER* in 1962 on the U.S. Army McCarthy Senate hearings of 1954. He went on to make a group of political films such as *IN THE YEAR OF THE PIG* (1969) on the war in Vietnam and *MILLHOUSE: A WHITE COMEDY* (1971) a jaundiced look at Richard Nixon's political career. De Antonio was a star (his films played theatrically, a rarity for documentaries) but he was also a loner. Moreover his films for the most part were compilation films, not part of the mainstream documentary tradition. But the center of anti-Vietnam war film activity fell to others especially under the leadership of Robert Kramer, Robert Machover, and Norm Fruchter. They were active in the radical collective Newsreel which promoted new filmmakers (Newsreel groups were also established in Chicago and San Francisco). Machover and Fruchter produced *TROUBLEMAKERS* (1966), an exceptionally well-made film on community organizing in the Black ghetto in Newark, N.J. Kramer made anti-war cinéma-verité style narratives, such as *THE EDGE* (1969).

Black filmmakers also began to emerge at this time. Their leading figure was (and remains to the present) William Greaves. His series on public television, "Black Journal", gave the first opportunities to minority filmmakers such as Madeline Anderson who made *TRIBUTE TO MALCOLM X* (1969). It was the birth of a new genre in documentary: Black films made by Blacks.

Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s there developed professional film making programs in U.S. universities. Ahead of the commercial film industry the universities began accepting women and racial minorities. Thus was laid the groundwork for the womens' and Black film movements.

A New Generation

One of the early feminist films was *GROWING UP FEMALE: AS SIX BECOME ONE* (1971) by Julia Reichert and James Klein. It was a seminal work that marked a new wave in the documentary realm -- one which is still going on -- an exploration of issues by the people who are most affected. From then on women filmmakers began to turn out work on aspects of women's lives from every viewpoint imaginable: history, employment and social discrimination, health, abortion, rape, wife abuse, and contributions to twentieth century life. One could create a lengthy thesaurus of the subjects these women explored and they did not limit themselves to feminist issues. Deborah Shaffer made political films on Central America and won an Academy Award with her outstanding *WITNESS TO WAR* (1984) on the war in El Salvador. It won additional awards around the world. Another filmmaker was Helena Solberg who made *EMERGING WOMAN* (1974), one of the best films on women's issues of the period. She has gone on to make films on Brazil, most notably the portrait film, *CARMEN MIRANDA: BANANAS IS MY BUSINESS* (1995). The independent who has received the widest acclaim for her documentary work however, is Barbara Kopple whose first major film, *HARLAN COUNTY U.S.A.* (1976), had wide theatrical release and won an Academy Award. These are simply examples of the many, many important films made by women beginning with the 1970s.

Looking back to the thirties one can see how one movement in film spawned or influenced new ones. But for the last twenty-five years it has not always been easy to see how one movement in film has led to another. Even so one can conclude that the womans' documentaries of the new generation did lead the way. Indeed in terms of sheer talent and achievement women filmmakers by the nineties appear to outnumber men. Evidence of this is found in the outright number of outstanding productions, the success of the films both theatrically and non theatrically, and the organizing skills of the women who successfully formed distribution collectives such as New Day Films and Women Make Movies.

Underlying the surge in independent documentary production have been technological advancements. In the late 1960s and early 1970s light weight "portapak" originally designed for electronic news gathering (ENG) and corporate and educational institution requirements were put to use by community video and public access television projects produced by Dee Dee Halleck, George Stoney and Jon Alpert among others. It started a generation of artists to think of video tape as a cheap alternative to film. The subsequent development of the even more handy camcorders and affordable yet sophisticated video editing equipment meant that productions of a professional caliber acceptable to cable and broadcast television were possible for many more people than had ever been possible with the film medium. At the same time video cassette distribution

meant that there was an inexpensive way to get productions out and directly market to potential audiences.

By the 1980's Black filmmakers became an increasingly important voice articulating concerns and issues affecting African Americans and building on the pioneering work of William Greaves. They organized the Black Filmmakers' Foundation as well as festivals and also developed their own distribution through Third World Newsreel, a descendant of Newsreel of the sixties (an anti-Vietnam War group based in New York). The movement helped generate support for Marlon Riggs. While one hesitates to write instant history, I feel a strong case can be made to rank Riggs as the most significant American documentary filmmaker since Robert Flaherty -- because of his mastery of film style, for his revolutionary ideas, for his ability to move a wide and diverse audience, and for his influence on a generation of young filmmakers. By 1989 he had perfected a personal and dynamic style which is apparent in TONGUES UNTIED (1989), a revelatory film on love and the many prejudices faced by gay black men. It looks like no gay film ever made before it. It reached beyond the Black and gay communities to move all kinds of audiences -- straight, male, female, young, and old. He died of AIDS in 1994. His last work, a feature on Black identity, was completed by colleagues after his death, BLACK IS...BLACK AIN'T , opened theatrically in 1995, and was in the Black Maria Film + Video Festival last season.

Marlon Riggs thus bridged two movements and many communities. The gay and lesbian movement, of which he was a part, has produced an array of timely films, made especially poignant since many of them document the AIDS crisis. A recent example is SILVERLAKE LIFE: THE VIEW FROM HERE (1993) by Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman. Joslin, who died before the film was completed, already had a distinguished career as a filmmaker. A number of significant films dealt with other aspects of gay history, one of the finest was THE TIMES OF HARVEY MILK (1984) directed by Robert Epstein. It won an Academy Award. He co-directed THE CELLULOID CLOSET (1995) on the depiction of gays in Hollywood movies based on the well-known book by Vito Russo. In the contemporary film movements gays seem to have paralleled women as particularly active producers.

Another strong and active group to document their concerns is the Asian American community. Through personal enterprise producers who identify with this culture have created scores of works over the last few years. Many have been supported by Asian Cinevision, a New York community production center and film festival. A leading figure among this group is Christine Choy of the New York University Film Program, who with Renee Tajima co-directed the Academy Award nominated WHO KILLED VINCENT CHIN? (1988). Asian Americans have made films on cultural identity and history as well as on discrimination -- including the injustices suffered during the United States' internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. One such outstanding work is Lise Yasui's FAMILY GATHERING (1988) which chronicles her grandfather's arrest and

internment during the war and its long-term repercussions on her family's sense of identity and justice.

Two other minorities that have appeared on the documentary scene in recent years are the Latinos and Native Americans. They deal with issues which are most pressing in their communities: pride in their culture, health, especially AIDS and substance abuse, the arts, and racism in a society dominated by white culture. A gifted Latino director/writer Jesus Salvadore Trevino produced YO SOY CHICANO (1972) which charts the history of the Chicano experience in America. Another brilliant and original filmmaker to emerge from the Native American community of the last decade is Victor Masayesva, of the Hopi nation. His RITUAL CLOWNS (1988) combines live action video, computer-generated animation, and ancient oral tradition to create a vivid impression of the Hopi culture.

Perhaps the most recent group to give voice to their concerns and needs are the physically and otherwise challenged. An outstanding example of work about people with disabilities is TWITCH AND SHOUT (1994) by Laurel Chiten which describes Tourette Syndrome, a nervous condition that she herself has.

In the flourishing of diversity in independent production there are the recent films of the direct cinema documentarians of the 60s and of those whose work is in that tradition who should not be forgotten. Among the finest films of the contemporary period are THE WAR ROOM (1993) by D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus, and HOOP DREAMS (1994) by Steve James, Frederick Mark and Peter Gilbert.

Search for New Forms

Some independents have explored innovative approaches and styles intending to take the documentary beyond its established forms in an attempt to express greater depth of meaning and feeling. It seems to me that women filmmakers on the whole have been more daring than men. Trinh T. Min-ha was one of the first of the new breed of filmmakers to challenge established documentary norms in her REASSAMBLAGE (1982) on village life in Senegal. She calls into question the way white male anthropologists see and look at native peoples. Trinh T. Min-ha has gone on to make other films which carry out this theme and very recently has turned her hand to feature-length experimental narrative. In another instance, NITRATE KISSES (1992) by Barbara Hammer presents a volatile juxtaposition of images on lesbian partners' love, perhaps inspired by Marlon Riggs' work.

Of the younger generation of filmmakers, Donna Cameron created an original, deeply moving, sometimes shocking work in CONFIDENTIAL DO NOT DUPLICATE (1991), a meditation on the murder of her sister. Cameron is one of

a small group of experimental filmmakers to occasionally embrace documentary. Another is Alan Berliner. He has produced an impressive body of work and in INTIMATE STRANGERS (1991), a portrait of his grandfather, has combined an avant-garde sensibility with a documentary approach.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to identify some trends, some movements in the independent documentary and also to identify some of the artists working in this genre who seem to me to best exemplify it. There are however, scores and scores of gifted filmmakers so that a brief summing up as I have done is somewhat capricious and arbitrary. Since the early 1980s the documentary genre has become a huge arena, one indeed that is hard to get a handle on -- there is so much good work that has been done. What I have presented therefore is a kind of personal sampling of where the documentary has been and where perhaps it is going.