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Eternal Verités

The year 1960 was a watershed in the history of film in America. I think of the release of *Psycho* in 1960 as marking the definitive end of the classical era of American movies. 1960 was the year the French “New Wave” broke on American shores. Perhaps not entirely coincidentally, 1960 also marks the emergence of what has been called “cinema-verité.” (This term is hopelessly inadequate, of course, yet I persist in using it. Alternatives such as “direct cinema” are no less inadequate and far more misleading. These days one is far less likely to fall into the error of supposing that “cinema-verité” films are guaranteed to be truthful than the error of taking them to be “direct,” that is, unmediated.)

Cinema-verité, of course, is a form of documentary film, or a method of making documentary films, in which a small crew (often a cameraperson and sound recordist, sometimes only a solitary filmmaker) goes out into the “real world” with portable synch-sound equipment and films people going about their lives, not acting.

Jean Rouch, collaborating with the sociologist Edgar Morin, made *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) in France simultaneously with the earliest cinema-verité films in America, such as the Drew Associates productions, of which *Primary* (1960) is perhaps the most famous. Nonetheless, for a number of reasons, I think of cinema-verité as an essentially American

phenomenon, not a European one. It is in America that the grandest hopes for cinema-verité have been harbored. In the past thirty years, American filmmakers working within the cinema-verité tradition have created a remarkably impressive body of work. And cinema-verité has been perhaps the fullest inheritor of the concerns of America's "classical" cinema, the popular movies associated with the name "Hollywood."

Rouch's approach to cinema-verité was highly sophisticated. He anticipated, and quite shrewdly addressed, the problems and paradoxes—epistemological, aesthetic, and moral—that, as subsequent practitioners were to discover, inevitably attend this new, apparently more direct way of filming. Rouch understood that however "invisible" the man-with-the-movie-camera might make himself, and however unselfconscious the camera's subjects might appear, filming is a real act performed in the real world with real consequences. He understood as well that sometimes a filmmaker has to forsake the passivity of a place behind the camera to provoke reality into revealing its deepest truths. For Rouch, already a veteran of over a decade of ethnographic filmmaking among the Songhay and Dogon peoples in West Africa, the new lightweight synch-sound equipment became an indispensable instrument of a life-long cinematic enterprise poised between science and poetry, between anthropological research and a personal need to give poetic expression to his conviction that "primitive" societies possess knowledge that modern science must find ways to acknowledge.

For a maker of very American films such as Richard Leacock, who was Robert Flaherty's cameraman on *Louisiana Story*, cinema-verité was what film itself was to Griffith a half-century earlier: it promised a radically new way of revealing the truth about humanity. This truth was to be found not in Flaherty's romanticized vision of man's struggle against the elemental forces of nature, but in the everyday struggles of ordinary men and women to retain their humanity in a hypocritical America of sex, lies, and exploitation. The human truth was to be found in the coarseness and ugliness of that America, but also in the flashes of beauty, tenderness, and compassion revealed to Leacock's camera.

For Leacock, the beauty fleetingly glimpsed by cinema-verité offered the promise of redeeming America. Since it seems that this promise was fated not to be kept, cinema-verité also meant, for Leacock, a

threat of disillusionment and despair. But he has remained faithful, in his filming, to the strict cinema-verité discipline, as have Robert Gardner, John Marshall and Frederick Wiseman, to name several of the great masters of cinema-verité whose work I deeply admire and who happen to be based in the Boston area, where I was able to become acquainted with them personally during the years I was teaching film at Harvard.

David Hume withdrew into his study, shutting out the world in order to contemplate whether it was possible that the world does not exist. The author of *Walden* withdrew from society and spent two years at Walden Pond in order to gain a new perspective on the world and learn how he might live in it. In order to film the world, the cinema-verité filmmaker, too, withdraws from the world. To effect this withdrawal, he needs only to assume a place behind the camera. His philosopher's study, his Walden, so to speak, is the camera itself. This is a Walden one can bear on one's shoulder.

Behind the camera, practitioners of the cinema-verité discipline forsake their ordinary lives to become observers who wait selflessly for the people they are filming to reveal themselves in their own good time and on their own terms.—But are cinema-verité filmmakers selfless? What are the fantasies that animate their hours of silent watching? Writing about Alfred Hitchcock's neglected early masterpiece *Murder!*, and hence in a rather dark mood, I argued that the role of cinema-verité filmmaker has an inhuman, murderous aspect:

The cinema-verité filmmaker withholds himself from the world in order to film it. Stepping behind the camera may appear an act of perfect innocence and purity. But it expresses, it does not overcome, the fantasy of power and murderousness that *Murder!* declares to be an inalienable constituent of authoring a film. The cinema-verité filmmaker's fantasy of virginity and impotence has as its secret other face the fantasy of being author to the world, commanding it to unmask itself. Claiming exemption from responsibility for forging community within the world he is filming, he trains the camera's eye on that world, wreaking vengeance on it. These twin fantasies of impotence and omnipotence come together in cinema-verité's underlying vision of a world con-

demned to a lack of human community by virtue of the act of filming.¹

Led by Edward Pincus and his students at the M.I.T. Film Section—for years, Pincus was codirector with Leacock of this unique cinema-verité training ground—a new generation of filmmakers attempted to break away from the inhuman aspect of the cinema-verité filmmaker's role while remaining faithful to the spirit of cinema-verité. Their aspiration was to reconcile the conflicting demands of filming and living by learning to film the world without withdrawing from it. Inevitably, the filmmaker's life and the demands of the filmmaker's role became the increasingly explicit subjects of films by Pincus, Steve Ascher, Ross McElwee, Jeff Kreines, Joel DeMott, Mark Rance, Ann Schaetzel, Robb Moss, and others. Their explorations culminated in two extraordinary epics, Pincus's *Diaries 1971–76* and McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1986).

In *Diaries*, a conflict emerges, seemingly inevitably, between the filmmaker's experiment of filming his life, a project only he can call his own, and the claims made upon him by his wife, children, parents, lovers, and friends who call upon him to acknowledge them as human beings separate from him and his film. The filming of *Diaries*, which has the aspect of a romantic quest, threatens to seal the filmmaker's isolation rather than liberate him to live freely within a human community, to turn him into a hero not of romance but of tragedy. This conflict between the romantic and the ordinary, between filming and living, emerges in *Diaries*, at least on the surface, as the primary obstacle to the filmmaker's goal of becoming fully human.

In the more ironic *Sherman's March*, the conflict between filming one's life and living it in a fully human way is equally central. In McElwee's film, too, the filmmaker takes his project to be a romantic quest. But *Sherman's March*, made a full decade after *Diaries*, presents its filmmaker as a comical character whom it treats ironically. Viewed from this perspective, the filmmaker's attempt to become more human by filming his life necessarily seems a foolish one doomed to failure. If *Diaries* tells its story with a gravity akin to that of tragedy, *Sherman's March* tells the same story as farce. They both, however, surely demonstrate that there is an irre-

ducible aspect of withdrawal and isolation, and of violence, in the cinema-verité filmmaker's role, even if people directly address the filmmaker behind the camera; even if other people are allowed to turn the camera on the filmmaker, rendering him or her visible; and even if the filmmaker breaks his or her silence and enters into conversations with other characters in the film.

Reflecting on a history of cinema that is still far from perspicuous, it can seem quite remarkable that, despite film's long and illustrious documentary tradition, cinema-verité only emerged as late as 1960. There were isolated experiments such as Flaherty's celebrated *Nanook of the North* (1922). But most documentary filmmakers—even Dziga Vertov, so often claimed by cinema-verité filmmakers as a precursor—had little inclination to follow *Nanook's* example. In part influenced by Marxist ideas about the necessity of transcending the individual protagonist, they veered in a different direction. In the films made in England by the talented filmmakers gathered around John Grierson, and in the work of Pare Lorentz, Willard Van Dyke, and others in America, a dominant form of documentary emerged in the thirties whose influence remains strong to this day. These documentaries composed their views of people lyrically or expressionistically, and used them rhetorically in advancing a social thesis, usually explicitly stated by a (typically male) narrator's authoritative voice.

In postwar Italy, the neorealist movement championed the use of nonprofessional actors and "real" locations in fiction film, and strove to discover dramatic subjects in the realm of the everyday. But the neorealists never took the decisive step of dispensing with scripts altogether and venturing into the world to film "reality itself." Nor did André Bazin, France's great theorist of cinematic realism, advocate this step. Above all, Bazin was a champion of film as a medium of authorship. How can a cinema-verité filmmaker claim to be an "author" in Bazin's sense, since in a cinema-verité film the world remains, as it were, a free agent?

In the thirties and forties and even the early fifties, the technology for portable synch-sound shooting was unavailable. Yet filmmakers could have made silent films that followed the lead of *Nanook of the North*.

dio as the neorealists did. For whatever reasons, however, filmmakers were not interested in filming this way.

Most American cinema-verité films could not but be in synchrony, could not but have people who speak spontaneously and in their own voices. When and why and how people speak, the powers and limits of language in our human form of life, remain central concerns of American cinema-verité. This concern is manifest even in cinema-verité's refusal to use "authoritarian" voiceover narration. In cinema-verité, truth is to be revealed, not asserted by a narrator whose authority is beyond question. In cinema-verité, words are spoken in particular ways by particular people to particular people on particular occasions for particular reasons. No one's authority is beyond question. (Perhaps it is no accident that the emergence of cinema-verité in America was simultaneous with the impact of the "ordinary language" philosophy associated with the names of Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin.)

In the sixties, when the classical tradition had broken down and Hollywood's audience had become fragmented, cinema-verité promised a new way to make movies that might seem as vivid and "real" as Hollywood films of the thirties and forties had been, in their day, to their audience of all Americans (and to their audiences worldwide). By the sixties, the classical conventions seemed to have lost their vitality and relevance, and America had even lost the memory of the wonderful conversation its movies had once sustained with their culture. Thus it was possible for filmmakers and audiences to be convinced that cinema-verité owed nothing to classical movies, to think of Hollywood as the sworn enemy of all that cinema-verité stands for. Yet, in truth, cinema-verité owes far more to popular Hollywood movies than it does to most earlier documentary films. In the sixties, cinema-verité represented a new way of making films that inherited the concerns of popular genres such as the "comedy of remarriage" and the "melodrama of the unknown woman" (as Stanley Cavell has named them) that had crystallized in Hollywood in the thirties and forties. And cinema-verité derived from classical cinema its picture of human being-in-the-world as an expression of a dialectical opposition between the theatrical and the nontheatrical. In *The "I" of the Camera*, I characterized

Film's opposition between the theatrical and the nontheatrical is grounded in, and grounds, its conventions for presenting human beings in the world. Typically, the camera alternately frames its human subjects within public and private spaces. The frame of an 'objective' shot is a stage on which human beings perform, subject to view by others in their world. Within the frame of a reaction shot, a subject views the spectacle of the world, reacts privately to it, and prepares the next venture into the public world. Point-of-view and reaction shots together combine to effect the camera's penetration of the privacy of its human subject, who alternates tensely and hesitantly between acting and viewing as he or she prepares an entrance onto the world's stage, performs, and withdraws again into a privacy to which only the camera has access.²

As we shall see, cinema-verité did not follow classical cinema in its use of point-of-view shots as a technique for distinguishing between the theatrical and the candid. Nonetheless, cinema-verité inherited classical cinema's great stake in the realm of privacy, and in the realm of the everyday. Cinema-verité inherited as well classical cinema's understanding that, within these realms, "the non-candid—the unspontaneous, the manipulated and the manipulative, the theatrical—is everywhere to be found."³ And it inherited classical cinema's conviction that our happiness as individuals—and America's as a nation—turns on our ability to reconcile our private and public selves.

In thinking historically about the emergence of cinema-verité in America, it is important to keep in mind that early cinema-verité films such as *Primary* or *Crisis* (1963) were made not for movie theaters with their dwindling audience, but for network television, newly crowned as America's dominant medium. In the context of television programming, these films' identity was divided: like "real movies," or television dramas, or even soap operas, they appealed to human emotions. Yet, as documentaries, they were public-affairs shows, news.

2. William Rothman, *The "I" of the Camera* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 69–70.

3. *Ibid.*, 189.

Typically, news is presented on television by newscasters who address the camera directly. When news footage is shown, it is accompanied by a newscaster's voiceover that tells us how to understand what we are viewing. The newscaster is always "on." Television provides no system for distinguishing the person of the newscaster from the role she or he is performing—no system for acknowledging, for investigating, or even for exploiting, the dialectic between theatricality and nontheatricality that is at the heart of cinema-verité as well as classical movies.

Over the years, the format of television news has evolved to convey the impression that we do know the private person behind the newscaster mask. Walter Cronkite ended each of his broadcasts with a seemingly privileged moment, as he looked directly at the camera with an expression that told us he was taking us into his confidence. Person-to-person, he acknowledged that he was no impersonal newscaster; he was a human being who had in some particular way been moved, just as we had been, by the story chosen to close the show. He had taken the story to heart, like a *mensch*. Then, with an authority grounded in this display of emotion, he summed up his philosophy of life, always with the same words but every evening with a new inflection, one tailored to match the prevailing mood. "And that's the way it is." This nightly ritual put Uncle Walter's personal stamp on the role of newscaster, and thereby revised that role, paving the way for others who have gone much farther—indeed, much too far, as evidenced by the nauseating, shameless conviviality of local "news teams"—in incorporating displays of "personality" into a once rigidly impersonal role. The point is that the newscaster's role, however revised, however "personalized," nonetheless remains a role, a mask, no less so when the newscaster appears to be dropping his or her mask. The format of television news still provides no system for acknowledging even the possibility of such theatricality.

In classical cinema, we view "stars" continually putting on masks and taking them off. In most forms of television programming today, the mask is never dropped, unless another mask is already firmly in place beneath it. To be sure, when television was primarily live, masks often slipped, or cracked, or were inadvertently put on crooked. Already by 1960, though, the nature of television was changing from a primarily live medi-

um to one in which no discernible sign distinguished what is "live" from what is, shall we say, canned. The result is not to make the canned seem live, but to make even the live seem canned. (This effect is, in a sense, a denial of the uncanny.)

Thus when it first appeared on television in America, cinema-verité represented, at one level, an assault from within against television's deadening denial of the distinction between theatricality and candor that has been the basis of American movies. By letting the audience view, say, John Kennedy when he was not performing in public (or at least by purporting to reveal the "private" man), *Primary* (and to a lesser degree *Crisis*) granted Americans a new perspective on Kennedy the public figure. (Of course, Kennedy's mask was hardly dropped completely. The camera was not granted access, for example, to his boudoir, to his private life as a stud.) All in all (and surely Kennedy himself anticipated this), these films served to reinforce Kennedy's public image, which was that of a man who "had it all together," who was enviably successful in his career and enviably lucky in his marriage, and whose public and private selves were, even more enviably, a harmonious match.

What I am suggesting is that cinema-verité was meant to undermine television's practice of packaging public figures as exploitable images. Ironically, cinema-verité itself quickly became a favorite tool of image-packagers who have learned to fabricate tolerable imitations of the look of spontaneity and candor. The famous Nixon-Kennedy debates helped Kennedy and hurt Nixon because both men, forced to be at least a little spontaneous, revealed something of their "true" characters to a camera that neither man was in a position to control, hence which took on something of the penetrating power of the camera in cinema-verité. When Nixon was in a position to control the camera (as, for example, with his staging of the infamous "Checkers" speech, which saved his political neck), he was free to perform his "sincere act" on television without the threat that its theatricality might be exposed.

Many of the earliest cinema-verité films in America revolved around celebrities, and portraits of celebrities—political figures, sports heroes, movie stars, singers and musicians—remain a staple of cinema-verité. No political convention, or similar event, is so common as to have a

minidocumentaries that make public figures private by presenting them, in ABC's immortal phrase, "up close and personal." Cinema-*verité* brings celebrities down to earth by filming them the same way it films ordinary people (which, of course, celebrities also are). The filmmaker's task in filming any human subject is to create a compelling figure on the screen, to make that figure as known to us, and as unknown, as James Stewart, Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, or any other star of classical cinema. Cinema-*verité* transforms an ordinary person into a star, or reveals, as it were, the "star within"—at least if that person happens to "have what it takes." But classical cinema has always made its stars out of ordinary people who happen to "have what it takes."

Classical cinema instituted a system of production in which, first, a screenplay is authored; then that screenplay is realized by a process of filming in which the director plays a central role; finally, the film is edited in a process that reconciles the screenplay with what might be called the "accidents of filming." In a cinema-*verité* film, there is, at least in theory, no directing of actors, and the camera's gestures, too, are improvised, not directed; and, of course, there is no screenplay.

D. W. Griffith did not write or work from screenplays as such, although his films were hardly "unscripted." Griffith was able to envision the film he wanted to make and to realize his vision in the act of filming without first putting into writing what he saw in his mind's eye. However, as the Hollywood system of production became rationalized, Griffith's method was superseded. Screenplays assumed a central function as blueprints for filming and editing, no doubt partly because studios wished to limit the risky (and potentially expensive) unpredictability inherent in the filming process.

In the voluminous writings about adaptations of literature to film, the screenplay has received virtually no attention. Perhaps the most surprising formal feature of the classical screenplay is that it employs no pictures or diagrams to help guide the reader in visualizing the film. The screenplay is made up of nothing but words.

In the classical system of production, the screenplay functions as

an envisioning-in-advance, an imagining, of the film. One might think that yoking films to screenplays in this way subordinated cinema to writing. Yet the development of this mode of writing can also be thought of as an affirmation of cinema's authority over the written word. Screenplays demonstrate and declare film's powers, which are also writing's limits. For film has the power to make real, or to reveal to be real, what the words of a screenplay can never more than "envision." To read a good screenplay and then to see the film made from it—if it is well made—unfailingly restores one's wonder at the power of cinema.

By enforcing the discipline that films were to be "realized" only after first being envisioned in advance through the medium of the written word, the classical system also acknowledged the power of writing. This acknowledgment immeasurably strengthened the affirmation of film's authority. For film possesses precisely the power to reveal writing's limits, as I have suggested: Writing is not film. In turn, writing possesses precisely the power to challenge film to declare itself: Film is not writing. (In Griffith's hands, film comparably declared its authority over theater, hence revealing the limits of theater even as it affirmed theater's power: Theater is not film, and film is not theater.)

Nonetheless, within the classical system, no film is made without a screenplay. In this system, film may appear to lord it over writing, but it is dependent upon it. Cinema-*verité* constitutes an alternative system, one in which filming proceeds by improvisatory encounters with the world, by chance and whim (the filmmaker's whim, and the world's).

When cinema-*verité* dispensed with the screenplay, it was a declaration of film's independence from writing. Yet by issuing this declaration, cinema-*verité* was also following (or paralleling or leading) a literary trend, joining ranks with the self-conscious "nonfiction novel" (*In Cold Blood* is the most famous example) that is cinema-*verité*'s exact contemporary. This suggests that cinema-*verité* was not breaking with the written word, but with the discipline of composing the film in advance, the yoking of filming to envisioning or imagining.

To say that a screenplay envisions or imagines a film in advance implies that filming is a process of realization, or interpretation, of the text of the screenplay.

is an interpretation of the written score. In realizing a screenplay, the director directs the actors in interpreting their roles as written, as in theater (the casting of a particular actor in a role is already an act of interpretation). The director also directs the camera, interprets the camera's role as written. Part of the actor's role, to be interpreted by the actor under the director's direction, is to present himself or herself to the camera in particular ways, ways that may encompass an interpretation of the way the camera views that actor. In turn, the camera—also under the director's direction—addresses the actor—self-presentations (and interpretations of the camera) and all—as a subject in his or her own right.

No text has one and only one possible interpretation. If a classical film is an interpretation of its screenplay, this implies that other interpretations of the screenplay are also possible. Thus a screenplay can determine a film only up to a point, and can never fully determine a film in its concrete actuality. No moment of any film can be completely envisioned in advance. The actual filming transforms the screenplay in ways that are not perfectly predictable as well.

Film is photographic; there is an irreducible element of automatism in the way it reproduces the world. Nonetheless, screenplays bind classical film to the realm of interpretation, and to words. (Or do they reflect the fact that film is so bound by its nature?) Indeed, classical film is doubly bound to interpretation and to words because it is always possible, in the face of a realized classical film, to write in screenplay form what might be called a "transcription." Such a transcription is not an envisioning of the film in advance, nor is it an interpretation of the screenplay realized by the film. Rather, it is an interpretation of the film itself.

In transcribing moments of a classical film, one must find words that objectively characterize particular gestures, intonations, glances, facial expressions, or movements of the camera. But these are things one cannot objectively characterize apart from characterizing, interpreting, one's subjective experience of them. Screenplays, too, routinely characterize such things as gestures, intonations, glances, facial expressions and camera movements—things one cannot describe without interpreting one's own experience. In a screenplay, as in a transcription of a realized film, "objec-

mastered, that masters of this discipline are capable of creating compelling, expressive, endlessly exhilarating and moving films by interpreting screenplays that are made up of nothing but words, is an inherently unpredictable fact about words, and about film. Writing a transcription of a realized film is also a discipline that can be mastered. Every masterfully written transcription "is a study in the limits of what can be said. It is also a study in the limits of what goes without saying. What the possibility of such mastery reveals is that the limits of language and the limits of film coincide. That is, there is a boundary between them."⁴

The screenplay of which a classical film is an interpretation and the transcription that is an interpretation of that film cannot be expected to coincide word-for-word. In principle, such coincidence is not impossible; it only requires a miracle. Some films (and hence their transcriptions) fail to acknowledge or realize the screenplay's own perspective on the world it envisions. Other films go beyond their screenplays in the sense of acknowledging and revising the screenplay's own interpretations (I am thinking, for example, of the ending of *Now, Voyager*. The screenplay takes the woman still be in love with the man, still to be putty in his hands, while the realized film understands her to have attained a transcendental perspective.) When a film does revise and deepen its screenplay, this revision could always in principle have been anticipated and incorporated into the screenplay. After all, in writing a screenplay, the writer continually revises and (we hope) deepens his or her imagining and understanding of what is being imagined.

This suggests that while a classical screenplay is an imagining of the realized film that constitutes an interpretation of it (and which can, in turn, be interpreted by a transcription), the original screenplay, too, can be thought of as a transcription of a film that exists only in the screenwriter's imagination. (One might wish to speak, further, not only of a film that exists only in the screenwriter's imagination but also of a [different?] film that exists in the imagination of each reader of the screenplay [a different imaginary film for each reader?], and, crucially, in the imagination of one particular reader, the director [who may or may not also be the screenwriter] whose task it is to interpret the screenplay in the act of filming.)

Of course, it is not necessarily the case that a screenwriter first sees a film in the mind's eye and then subsequently transcribes it. The writing of the screenplay may also serve as an instrument of this imagining. Perhaps it is better to think of "the film envisioned by the screenplay" as having no prior existence apart from the specific words and literary form of the screenplay itself. (As I become more and more deeply mired in such distinctions, I find myself homesick for the field of philosophy.) In any case, what is imagined in this imagining? What is this "film that exists only in the screenwriter's imagination?" Is it a film at all? (If it isn't a film, what is it?)

It would be obviously misleading to speak of a novel as a transcription of a "novel that exists only in the novelist's imagination." This is because a novel, like a screenplay, is made up only of words, while presumably the novelist imagines not words but a world—a world that it is part of the discipline of the novelist to render in words.—But how do we imagine a world? What is the medium of our imagining?

The way we imagine a world is akin to the way we dream. It is often said that we dream in images, but it is more precise to say that we dream in views, or, rather, that we dream by imagining views. Views are always of the world. It is of the nature of views that they are from particular perspectives, that they correspond to positions *in* the world that nonetheless provide vantage points on the world.

We have no other way of imagining the world than by imagining viewing the world from vantage points that are at once inside and outside the world being viewed. This may seem an insignificant distinction, yet it is precisely where film's uniqueness lies. The material basis of film, Stanley Cavell argues in *The World Viewed*, is a succession of automatic world projections. Film is the medium in which the world leaves its impression in the form of a succession of views. To imagine the world is to imagine the world viewed, and to imagine the world viewed is, in effect, to imagine a film. This is what novelists do, for example, when they imagine the worlds of the novels they are writing.

But when a screenwriter envisions a film, isn't she or he imagining the world present in all its substantial reality, rather than imagining the

imagine not a film but a world as it presents itself to be filmed? Doesn't the screenwriter imagine what the field of film study calls "profilmic reality," not views of reality? But what is it to imagine reality (at least in its visual aspect) if not to conjure views of reality in one's imagination? The imagination itself is a faculty of projection. Nothing we can imagine is more real to us than views.

Views are the medium of imagining the world; imagining the world (in its visual aspect) is always imagining viewing the world; what one imagines are always views. Yet there is a difference between imagining and viewing. In viewing, the world makes its impression on me, although my imagination must meet the world halfway. By contrast, in imagining, I conjure views from within. Having conjured them, I have no need actually to view them, any more than I have a need, when I am dreaming, actually to view the views that constitute my dream; I need do nothing with the views in my dream other than dream them. And the screenwriter envisioning a film imagines the world viewed, imagines views of the world, but these views need only be imagined to be rendered in words, they do not need also to be viewed.

In imagining the film that is to be transcribed in the screenplay he or she is writing, the screenwriter does not imagine it as a film that has to be scripted and then realized by filming. To exist in the screenwriter's imagination, this film only has to be imagined. As it exists in the screenwriter's imagination, it is not a product of the classical system of production. (This is not to deny, of course, that the films a screenwriter is willing or able to imagine may be inspired, or constrained, by a lifetime of movie viewing.)

Paradoxically, then, a classical film is authored by first being envisioned as a film that has no author, as a film that comes into being through spontaneous encounters with unscripted, undirected "reality." Thus it is tolerably close to the truth to say that, in the imagination of the screenwriter (and in the imagination of the director whose task it is to interpret the screenplay), a classical film is a cinema-*verité* film.

A cinema-*verité* film is not envisioned in advance, and hence does not have a screenplay. However, insofar as it allows for transcription in

words. But is it possible to transcribe a cinema-*verité* film? This question is akin to asking whether jazz can be transcribed. In the case of cinema-*verité* there is no special problem in transcribing the gestures and expressions of the camera's human subjects. What poses special problems for transcription, or challenges, are the movements and vicissitudes of the camera itself.

Screenwriters are habitually advised to write as few "camera directions" as possible, the ostensible reason being that directors are said not to like it when writers encroach on their prerogative. Yet one cannot envision actions in the world in concrete detail without at the same time envisioning particular vantages on those actions, which correspond, in film, to positionings and movements of the camera. Shrewd screenwriters specify framings or camera movements only when they are surprising or especially significant, and most often leave the camera to the director's imagination. They know full well, however, that the conventions of classical cinema all but dictate that the director imagine a long shot here, a medium shot there, and so on.

In classical cinema there are conventional categories of shots and conventions for their use, although, to be sure, on occasion framings or camera movements may be called for that are so idiosyncratic that they require individualized descriptions. When an occasion does arise for specifying particular framings or camera movements, the screenwriter thus has at hand a repertory of conventional categories (close-up, two shot, point-of-view shot, and so on), screenwriters' terms that evolved hand in hand with the conventions of cinematography. Even in the forties, when the "long take" style flourished as an alternative to "analytical" editing, the "long takes" tended to take the form of stable framings—each virtually a separate shot, conventional in format—linked by reframings instead of cuts.

Typically, cinema-*verité* is shot as close to "real time" as possible, and by one hand-held camera. Thus the cinema-*verité* frame is rarely stable or fixed. Rather, there is continual reframing, and also zooming in and out (the zooms have the consequence that image size does not necessarily correspond to spatial distance). The camera is never completely still, but most of its movements have little or no particular significance apart from their status as indicators of temporal conditions. Filmmakers must

movement of the camera indicates that the camera is hand-held, that it is an extension of the filmmaker's bodily presence. Second, in their characteristic hesitations, indecisions, incessant revisions of focus and framing, these movements are also indicators that this is not a scripted film, that the filmmaker is only a human being, not an omniscient author.

It is not just for technical reasons that cinema-*verité* films tend to approach as nearly as possible to the condition of complete continuity. This style also offers formal testimony to the method of filming—as if any cut would threaten the viewer's assurance of the filmmaker's dedication to the cinema-*verité* discipline. Every cut could be a splicing together of shots taken at different times or different places. In terms of cinema-*verité* discipline, every cut could be an instance of "cheating."

A corollary of this avoidance of cuts that break up continuity is that cinema-*verité* abandons the point-of-view technique that is a staple of classical cinema. Point-of-view technique requires cutting back and forth between viewer and viewed, instantaneous shifts of perspective not possible for a filmmaker shooting with one camera in "real time." In cinema-*verité* films, point-of-view shots can only be simulated. The motivation for dispensing with this technique, too, is not just technical, however: because the cinema-*verité* camera is perceived as an extension of the filmmaker's body, the camera's presence is identified first and foremost with the person of the filmmaker. This means that there is a limit to the camera's ability to establish an identification with its (other) human subjects. Point-of-view shots would risk transgressing that limit, hence they are to be relinquished. In avoiding point-of-view shots, and in the motivation for this avoidance, cinema-*verité* surprisingly reverts to Griffith, who never allowed the camera's gaze to stand in for the perspective of a character. Griffith's camera was always to be identified, first and foremost, with the perspective of the invisible author of the film.

The camera's "normal" state of incessant motion in cinema-*verité* contrasts strikingly with the classical camera's "normal" state of motionlessness. In classical films, the camera's stillness is punctuated only by specific, composed gestures of the camera. Not moving the camera may itself, at times, constitute a gesture of this kind, and such privileged moments of

sical camera's fixity of position, like the incessant motion of the cinema-verité camera, has no particular significance apart from marking the camera's presence. The incessant motion of the cinema-verité camera binds it to the bodily presence of a human filmmaker whose hand and eye are continually and unavoidably revealed by this motion. By contrast, the camera in classical cinema breaks its stillness to declare itself in specific, self-possessed gestures that call for acknowledgment.

Interestingly, when the camera is referred to in a classical screenplay, it is treated as if it were a character, except that, by convention, references to characters are capitalized only when they are introduced, whereas references to the camera are capitalized throughout. It is as if every time we are called upon to take note of the camera, an introduction is performed, as though we had forgotten ever having encountered the camera before. The camera has been present all along, of course, but only on such occasions does it call for acknowledgment. Part of what is then to be acknowledged is that the camera has already, has always, been present. The significant point here is that the vantage of the camera is always open to being specified because, at every moment of every film, the camera frames the view, and it always does so from some particular vantage. This is an ontological condition of film.

A transcription of a cinema-verité film could not be expected to register every movement of a camera that is constantly in motion. Yet some movements of the camera would have to be noted and interpreted—perhaps because they are deliberate gestures, statements, on the part of the filmmaker, perhaps because they are spontaneous expressions in which the self of the filmmaker is especially tellingly revealed.

For example, in the climactic passage of Richard Leacock and Joyce Chopra's *A Happy Mother's Day* (1963), a South Dakota woman who has given birth to quintuplets is stoically enduring a luncheon in her honor. As an amateur soprano sings with a perkiness she takes for sophisticated sauciness, Leacock's camera dwells on the mother for whom this luncheon is supposed to be, as one town booster puts it, "her own fun time." The camera remains on her so long that we may well begin to wonder what, if anything, it can possibly hope to discover in her plain face. As if suddenly realizing that the camera has been attending to her, she steals



**Richard Leacock and Joyce Chopra, *A Happy Mother's Day* (1963)
Mrs. Fischer acknowledges the camera.**

But then, no longer willing or able to continue the pretense that she is uninterested in its interest in her, she deliberately meets the camera's gaze with her own. At this moment, we feel that anything can happen, and everything is at stake. What does happen next, miraculously, is that Mrs. Fischer breaks into a sly grin in recognition of the camera's capacity to acknowledge her.

Then, as if authorized by Mrs. Fischer, and in secret conspiracy with her, Leacock's camera pans from person to person in the hall, finding obliviousness in the eyes of all the people gathered to honor this woman they do not really know. Unless a transcription notes and characterizes these gestures of the camera, the power and meaning of this wondrous passage is lost.

Within limits, then, a cinema-verité film does allow for a transcription in screenplay form. In principle, such a transcription could have been written prior to the filming, and could have functioned as an envi-

functions in classical cinema. A cinema-*verité* film can always be imagined to be a classical film. But can we imagine the reverse? Is it possible to imagine that a given classical film was really unscripted, was really made by the cinema-*verité* method?

There are special cases, of course, in which this can readily be imagined: films designed to simulate the appearance of cinema-*verité*, such as Mitchell Block's *No Lies* (1973), or specialized classical films like those of John Cassavetes in which the actors appear to be engaging so extensively in improvisation that it seems the camera, too, must improvise, giving rise to a cinematic style virtually indistinguishable, formally, from that of cinema-*verité*. But what of classical films that are not special cases? What would we say if someone claimed that *Casablanca* was really a cinema-*verité* film, or *The Philadelphia Story*, or *Gaslight*, or *Psycho*? Our first response would probably be that this is impossible, if only because, with the available technology, no cinema-*verité* filmmaker could have shot, say, *Psycho*'s shower-murder sequence, with its instantaneous shifts of camera vantage. The same is true, if on a less dramatic scale, for any classical sequence that employs analytical editing.

Apart from this problem, which is in a sense only a technical one, the camera in a classical film always seems to know exactly where to be to frame every action, and often seems to know this in advance, before the action takes place. The filmmaker would have to possess godlike powers always to be in the right place at the right time, or else the filmmaker would have to be the beneficiary of an incredible succession of implausible coincidences. Such a run of luck is not impossible, nor is it unimaginable. After all, it cannot be unimaginable for any given classical film to be a cinema-*verité* film, because, as I have argued, every classical film is, in fact, first imagined this way, first envisioned as a creation of chance and whim, first envisioned as a cinema-*verité* film.

It would take a miracle for a classical film, so self-possessed and composed, really to be unscripted and undirected. Yet every masterful cinema-*verité* film, too, has a miraculous aspect. In every great cinema-*verité* moment, the filmmaker happens on a situation so sublimely poignant, or so sublimely absurd, that we can hardly believe the stroke of fortune that reveals the world's astonishing genius for improvisation.

Indeed, we never would believe it, were it not on film. That the cinema-*verité* method, too, is capable of creating compelling, expressive, endlessly exhilarating and moving films is another inherently unpredictable fact about the world, and about film. In the fact of their unexpectedly felicitous marriage, how can we not believe in miracles?

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