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Richard Leacock and the Origins of Direct Cinema: Reassessing the Idea of an Uncontrolled Cinema

In 1961 Richard Leacock published an article in "Film Culture" calling for an Uncontrolled Cinema which saw the filmmaker as an "observer and perhaps as a participant capturing the essence of what takes place around him, selecting, arranging but never controlling the event." [1] Less an elaborate manifesto than a short piece conveying the spirit of the times, it introduced the notion of control – or more accurately of *lack* of control – as an important aspect of a new style of documentary filmmaking, today usually called Direct Cinema.[2] In this article, I will retrace some of the historical developments that led to the emergence of this new form of Uncontrolled Cinema, and reassess its impact on American documentary filmmaking. I will argue that in recent years the cultural and political importance of Direct Cinema has been underestimated. Seeing it only as a form of observational filmmaking has obscured the fact that in the 1960s a variety of filmmakers contributed to a *democratization* of documentary modes that can still be felt today.

The story of how, in the 1960s, new technical equipment contributed to a new approach of filming the world (or, alternatively, how the desire for new forms of filmmaking spurred technological innovation) has been told many times. Yet I believe that the American Direct Cinema has had more far-reaching implications for documentary film, shaping the numerous variations that evolved out of the early observational practices. On the one hand, it introduced a new notion of proximity between filmmaker and pro-filmic subject. The desire to get closer to people and events resulted from a heightened mobility setting the

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[1] Leacock 1961: 23–25; 25
[2] The distinction between Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité – two schools of documentary filmmaking emerging in the 1960s – has tended to get blurred in recent years (admittedly, though, one of the earliest book-length studies by Stephen Mamber referred to an American version of Cinéma Vérité). In a historical perspective this glosses over considerable conceptual and methodological differences, in particular the different treatment of the issue of camera awareness. In this article, therefore, I will use the term Direct Cinema to designate the practice of observational filmmaking in the early work of Drew Associates, Richard Leacock, Donn Alan Pennebaker, Frederick Wiseman, the Maysles, or Ed Pincus and will indicate how it developed into more complex forms in the course of the 1960s. Due to the peculiar institutional history of American Direct Cinema, other variants – such as the Canadian productions – are not examined in detail. See Mamber (1974). A number of scholars have recently argued against making a distinction between Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema, among them Jeanne Hall (1998: 223–237) and William Rothman (1997: 109–124).

camera free to explore and establish a new sense of place. On the other hand, Direct Cinema highlighted the pivotal importance of the shooting situation as a new interactional space (and as the core concern of authenticating documentary footage). A new conception of experience emerged giving rise to hand-held cinematography as the foremost realm of stylistic expression. Observational cinema, though seemingly intent on obliterating a mediating agency, on the contrary opened up new possibilities for individualizing and personalizing documentary styles.

Finally, the task of giving structure and shape to this kind of footage created the need for new, experimental forms of narrative. Consequently, editing evolved as the second major area in which the individual style of a documentary filmmaker could find room for expression. Questions of proximity, mobility and the specifics of the shooting situation were taken up and refined by subsequent documentary practices. Yet they were first addressed by the early practitioners of Direct Cinema, who believed that giving up control in the act of shooting was a necessary first step towards a new level of historical insight and artistic creativity.

Richard Leacock and the Emergence of Direct Cinema

Richard Leacock, who was born in London in 1921, began making films at the early age of 14. In World War II he served as a combat cameraman yet enjoyed his most profound schooling as cameraman on Robert Flaherty's *Louisiana Story* in the mid-1940s.[3] As he once put it, working with Flaherty fundamentally changed his conception of documentary filmmaking: "I learned to look, and that the process of filming is a process of discovery. It is not a process of telling things. It is the process of revealing, discovering. And in order to discover anything, you have to look, you have to listen."[4] This formative collaboration with Flaherty laid the foundation for Leacock's desire to explore the 'real' world and inspired him to envision technical equipment that would be as unobtrusive as possible. It also made him suspicious of large production crews and their wish to project an image of professionalism. To him, they tended to intimidate the people and situations that supposedly were the film's subjects.

After working with Drew Associates in the early 1960s, collaborating with Donn A. Pennebaker and teaching at M.I.T., Leacock shifted from film to video in the 1980s. Always a supporter of artistic creativity, he emphasized even further the related notions: on the one hand the search for powerful but simple technologies, on the other hand the critique of mechanical professionalism, as he put it in 1986: "To my way of thinking, the death of all creativity lies with the

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[3]   For biographical and filmographical information on Leacock as well as some of his essays see his website at http://www.richardleacock.com.

[4]   Hamid Naficy 1982: 234–253; 236

general and current interpretation of the word 'professional,' which has come to mean the opposite of its original meaning of excellence, to an implication of mechanical coldness."[5] Opting for cheap personal films or video-recordings as his privileged form of exploration rather than big-budget productions, Leacock revealed that at heart he had always been an advocate of independent filmmaking, if independence was seen to mean freedom from institutional constraints and freedom to evoke a personalized perception of the world.

In his rhetoric against an ill-conceived professionalism, then, Leacock, who was one of the driving forces behind the emergence of Direct Cinema, aligned himself with the tradition of independent filmmaking and never gave up on some of its basic premises: most importantly, the wish to maintain a degree of freedom that would allow him to realize his personal artistic vision – be it in terms of subject matter or of film structure. Clearly he favored an institutional position peculiar to certain forms of documentary and avant-garde filmmaking, which, according to Charles Wolfe, "have a history of recurring affiliation, dating back to efforts in the 1920s and 1930s to define an 'art cinema' distinct from the conventional practices of the commercial film industry."[6]

The second major impulse of Direct Cinema came from a very different source: commercial television production. Independent producer Robert Drew, who negotiated with ABC for a series of documentary specials in the early 1960s and served as the leading figure of Drew Associates, was interested in creating a new form of television journalism. As Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery write: "The idea was to bring to television the excitement and spontaneity of the still photo-essays that had made "Life" one of the most popular magazines ever published."[7] Robert Drew himself put it more bluntly, saying: "I believed that we were selling 'an experience,' not 'subject matter.'"[8]

Thus, as Leacock and Drew – together with Donn Alan Pennebaker, Albert Maysles and others – formed Drew Associates in the late 1950s, a peculiar combination of talent contributed to the emergence of Direct Cinema. Leacock represented a strain of filmmaking concerned with the integrity of imaginative explorations of reality while Drew tried to maximize the commercial appeal of a new form of television reportage. Many elements of the new style which were later viewed critically – e.g. the crisis structure of the early films, the focus on celebrities, or the need for dramatic situations similar to fiction films – were largely attributable to the fact that the first films made in the spirit of Direct

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[5]   Richard Leacock 1986: 10, 11

[6]   Charles Wolfe 1995: 234–266; 234

[7]   Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery (1985, 223). On the history of Direct Cinema see also P.J. O'Connell (1992).

[8]   Robert L. Drew 1988: 389–401; 397

Cinema had to be compatible with the ground-rules of journalism and the commercial logic of American television.

It is therefore useful to distinguish between two historically distinct phases in the development of American Direct Cinema: the first television-dominated phase, roughly from 1958 to 1963; and the second 'cinematic' phase of independent production and distribution companies, ranging from 1964 to the mid-1970s. Films such as *Primary* (1960), *The Children Were Watching* (1960), *On the Pole* (1961) or *Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment* (1963) – all productions of Drew Associates – belonged to the first phase, while films such as *Black Natchez* (Ed Pincus, David Neuman 1966), *Don't Look Back* (Donn A. Pennebaker 1967), *Chiefs* (Richard Leacock 1969) or *Salesman* (David Maysles, Albert Maysles 1969) grew out of the second phase. To contemporaries such as Jonas Mekas, Richard Leacock belonged to the new spirit of independent cinema – i.e. to 'revolutionary' impulses of improvisational and aesthetically liberating forms of filmmaking – so that although Direct Cinema had its institutional origins in films for commercial television, it began to realize its potential more fully as filmmakers moved into the field of independent production.[9] Correspondingly, we should distinguish between a 'genuine' form of Direct Cinema, and a form of television reportage, which in later years incorporated some of its stylistic features but on the whole appeared to be a kind of 'fake vérité', as Brian Winston has called it.[10]

Characteristics of a New Documentary Style

What are the characteristics of this 'genuine' form of Direct Cinema? To begin with, in the early 1960s the development of portable synchronous-sound equipment, low-noise cameras and faster film stock opened up two radically new possibilities in filmmaking: firstly, sounds and images could be recorded synchronously in places and situations where it had been impossible before; secondly, by using more flexible, often hand-held 16-mm cameras a new mobility was established, which immediately opened up new stylistic possibilities. A new "reality effect" (Roland Barthes) manifested itself, which completely redefined notions of authenticity and established synch-sound footage as *the* core element of the documentary form. Instantly, the new mobility of the camera, together with the fascination of synch-sound material, came to be seen as a major creative breakthrough. According to Ed Pincus, who collaborated with Leacock at M.I.T.'s Film Section in the late 1960s, part of the exciting thing was that "all of a sudden film-makers got freed from these limiting studio situations, or from the limiting situations where they couldn't use

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9   See Jonas Mekas 1962: 6–16 and William Rothman 1997: 109–124
10   Brian Winston 1995, 210–211

sound, and all of a sudden things could begin to happen on-camera, unexpected, marvelous, giving us insights where we didn't have ones before." [11]

Among the members of Drew Associates certain rules for gathering and presenting this new material emerged (though few films actually adhered to all of them): the size of the production crew was reduced, films were unscripted, participants were not told what to do or how to act, narration was minimized, editing tried to be faithful to the rhythm and structure of the filmed event. Ed Pincus remembers:

> The key elements of the style were that films were unscripted (which means action and narrative unpredictable), the camera was hand-held to achieve the mobility necessary to film people behaving independently of the presence of the camera, and the basic unit of film was the shot with synchronous sound. The Americans, unlike the French and the Canadians, thought that the filmed reality should be unmanipulated. People were never requested to do anything, even repeat actions, and in general the interview was eschewed as a form of camera-created reality. (Ed Pincus 1977:165)

Thus, traditional elements of documentary filmmaking were eliminated: technical barriers such as tripod-mounted equipment, studio sets or lights, procedural aspects such as scripting or directing and established conventions of documentary rhetoric.[12] Indebted both to Flaherty's poetic tradition of observational filmmaking and the journalistic ground-rules of non-intervention and fairness, Direct Cinema emerged as a "practical working method based upon a faith in unmanipulated reality, a refusal to tamper with life as it presents itself."[13]

Following Flaherty, Leacock saw the moment of shooting as an act of discovery, which was not to be dominated by the filmmaker's personality or presence so that the impact of camera and sound equipment had to be minimized. Opening up the documentary form for surprises, unpredictable situations or insights turned out to be a highly productive impulse. It was understood as "an informal attempt to break down the barriers between the filmmaker and the subject, to capture footage while events are happening rather than to create footage in the studio, to provide the viewer with the feeling of being there."[14] In many cases, filmmakers stayed for relatively long periods with their subjects, while cinematography and editing were ideally carried out by the same person, or by close association.

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[11]   G. Roy Levin 1971, 357
[12]   The characteristics of Direct Cinema are elaborated in detail by Mamber (1974); Richard M. Barsam (1986:131–156); and Pincus (1977). See also the sections concerning various filmmakers in Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins (1996). For German publications on documentary films of the 1960s see Wilhelm Roth (1982); Mo Beyerle and Christine N. Brinckmann (1991); Christof Decker (1995); Mo Beyerle (1997).
[13]   Mamber 1974: 4
[14]   Barsam 1986:138

The notion of being able to capture some aspect of 'unmanipulated' reality, however, also led to overblown claims among Direct Cinema's practitioners and to misunderstandings on the part of the audience. In his plea for an Uncontrolled Cinema Leacock had envisioned film to "record aspects of what did actually happen in a real situation. Not what someone thought should or could have happened but what *did* happen in its most absolute sense." [15] Yet critics not only found fault with essentializing notions of the film medium (the idea that it was capable of capturing an essence of reality), they also questioned Direct Cinema's status as a realistic discourse and the possibility of minimizing camera awareness. While the 1970s focused on the nature of the film image and the ideological complicity of realism, subsequent critiques of Direct Cinema addressed questions of ethical responsibilities and the dangers of colonizing or exploiting the 'other'.[16] At heart, though, Direct Cinema remained much more a "practical working method" (Mamber) than a full-blown philosophical program designed to radically alter the conception of reality. In fact, its pragmatism – the constant testing and revising of underlying premises – was one of its strengths allowing for continuous adjustments. Thus in the second, cinematic phase of the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s a broadening of individual approaches took place which contributed to a refinement of working methods and stylistic choices.[17]

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[15]   Leacock 1961:25

[16]   For an elaboration of these critical issues see Alan Rosenthal (1988); Bill Nichols (1991); Winston (1995)

[17]   The new documentary theory, taking shape in the 1990s, was influenced a lot by the work of Bill Nichols, who introduced a number of modes of representation for the discussion of documentary film – among them the expository, observational, interactional, reflexive and performative mode; see Nichols (1991, 1994, 2001). This approach has been highly productive, yet some methodological difficulties remain. On the one hand, Nichols introduces the representational modes as ideal types, comprised of a number of specific characteristics (e.g. cinematography, editing, forms of address). On the other hand, they serve as grids for a historical analysis and are identified with particular decades. One of the difficulties with this overlapping of systematic and historical aspects is that, when looking at individual films, we usually find them to be a mixture of different modes. As helpful as these are systematically, they tend to be too exclusionary for a historical analysis. Thus, if we characterize Direct Cinema as an observational mode, we are looking primarily at the working method of shooting the footage. In their final form, there are significant differences among the films: all of the Drew Associates-productions are shaped by a male voice-over, which is not just descriptive but often editorializing; *Happy Mother's Day* (Leacock, Chopra 1963) is dominated by an ironic voice-over narration; *Don't Look Back* eschews voice-overs but introduces recurring jump-cuts disrupting continuity; *One Step Away* (Pincus, Neuman 1968) uses ironic intertitles and has the film subjects addressing the camera. All of these films basically adhered to an observational method of shooting the footage, yet numerous variations (expository, reflexive, interactional) were introduced at the stage of editing the material, so that to label them as exclusively observational would be misleading.

Increasingly, it became clear that avoiding preconceptions or biased views *before* getting to know the specifics of a situation did not mean that the filmmakers were aiming for some kind of uninvolved objectivity. Nor did the refusal to direct or script situations imply that they were aspiring to a form of distanced neutrality. They were aiming for self-effacement but at the same time establishing a particular mode for engaging with people and situations, manifesting an artistic sensibility, which clearly left its mark not just in the cinematography but also in the editing of the footage. Though Direct Cinema was often equated with a naive sense of 'capturing action on the run' or with an essentializing notion of realism, the films of the independent period did not adhere to a 'vulgar' form of reflection theory. They were carefully constructed semiotic artefacts, which acknowledged the premises of their working method and to a certain degree also their truth claims on several, most often stylistic levels.

Thus, Direct Cinema-filmmakers tried to be unbiased but they were not neutral. Following the action with hand-held cameras, they created stylistic traces of an interaction with their subjects, which belonged more to the avant-garde tradition of 'subjective' camera movements than an empiricist notion of dispassionate observation.[18] In capable hands, the new mobility of smaller equipment enriched the field of cinematic first-person narratives much more than the supposedly objective accounts of journalism or science. As editor Patricia Jaffe noted, the most interesting footage evoked a particular sense of poetry: "When shooting is at its best, the cameraman develops a sixth sense that enables him to shift his angle almost precisely at the moment that the action before his lens shifts emphasis."[19] As the action was filtered by means of cinematography and editing, personal styles developed, which individualized documentary rhetoric. Ceding control in the act of shooting was seen as the key to an intensified form of participation. The decision not to interfere complicated notions of interaction, yet Direct Cinema filmmakers were at their worst when they tried to become dispassionate observers. As Richard Leacock stated in the 1980s, he was essentially looking for a particular 'love affair' between filmmaker and image: "By 'love affair' I do not imply that you have to love what you are filming; in fact, you may hate it but you are involved emotionally, or intellectually. You are engaged."[20] Correspondingly, filmmaker Ed Pincus remembers that the working methods of Direct Cinema tied in with democratic ideas of political movements such as civil rights groups or organizations like the *Students for a Democratic Society*:

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[18] For a discussion of the philosophical position of empiricism in the films see Allen and Gomery (1985)

[19] Patricia Jaffe 1965: 43–47; 44

[20] Richard Leacock 1986: 10

One of the most appealing aspects of the new technology was that for the first time you could do meaningful films about people without manipulating them by telling them what to do. The autonomy of the subject was an implicit confirmation of free will. The camera followed the subject rather than the subject implicitly following the direction of the camera. (Pincus 1977:171)

Democratizing Documentary

It thus seems appropriate to say that Direct Cinema established a new form of cultural hermeneutics, a new mode of approaching issues and subjects in documentary film, which revolutionized traditional approaches. Ways of seeing and understanding the world were placed into an intellectually open discourse and shaped by a form of direct experience mediated by the artistic sensibility of the filmmaker. Although these notions were influenced by different political backgrounds – among them the liberal agenda of television journalism, strategies of the New Left and the emergence of sub- and countercultures – it was grounded in a radically democractic vision. Some of its core elements can be summarized accordingly:

Firstly, the working method of the filmmakers revolved around the idea of openness: lack of preconceptions and bias, a willingness to be surprised or contradicted: "The filmmaker comes to the subject with attitudes and expectations, but must allow for their being contradicted by experience."[21] Thus, a fundamental reversal of traditional priorities took place. Giving up control in the act of shooting implied an intentional yielding of the filmmaker's authority, a refusal to interfere or manipulate. He or she was assuming the viewpoint of a member of the audience, taking his or her clues from first-hand experience.[22] It was less a matter of capturing the essence of reality than of engaging with unpredictable situations and individuals.

Secondly, by going out into the streets, new subjects, new participants and social spaces were introduced. Letting subjects speak for themselves was part of a new form of exploring and discovering their ordinary world. As a result, a new sense of everydayness was established.

Thirdly, in the process of editing, the footage was integrated into a new structure, a new form of documentary rhetoric, which stressed modes of indirect address and put its emphasis less on aspects of persuasion. A multiplicity of viewpoints was presented in ways enabling the audience to draw conclusions

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[21] Pincus 1977: Fn 12, 177

[22] As Richard Leacock points out: "The closest I can come to an accurate definition is that the finished film – photographed and edited by the same film maker – is an aspect of the film maker's perception of what happened. This is assuming that he does no directing. No interference. In a funny sort of way, our films *are* the audience. A recorded audience. The films are a means of sharing *my* audience experience." James Blue (1965: 15–22; 16)

and see connections. In the best cases, this structure did not imply a naive or seamless concept of reality – nor was it ever to be confused with Hollywood's forms of fictional storytelling.[23] It was not intended to duplicate the real world, but to give rhythm and form to a certain mediation of experience.[24] Correspondingly, a new form of reception was hoped for. The multiplicity of viewpoints was seen as an invitation to diverse interpretations generating active forms of decoding.[25]

Finally, simplified and cheaper technologies were seen as a first step in the broadening of filmmaking activities, a movement towards the de-professionalization of the creation of visual culture. As Ed Pincus wrote in his "Guide to Filmmaking" in 1969: "The hope is held out that someday it will be technically as easy to make a film as it is today to write. Then, perhaps,

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[23]   Stephen Mamber (1974: 117) was among the first critics to analyze in depth how the films of the first phase took up conventions of fictional storytelling. He coined the term 'crisis structure':

"Drew, like the *Life* photo essayists, saw the crisis moment as both the ultimate goal of shooting and the conclusion of the story. This was a pragmatic structure, then, because the sequence of events in the finished film could correspond to the chronology of filming."

Yet even though there were structural similarities with dramatic storytelling, I believe that references to Hollywood's mode of narration (and thus the possibility of documentary losing its non-fictional status) are usually exaggerated, particularly if we look at the second phase of Direct Cinema. Did any member of the audience ever mistake *Salesman* for a Hollywood-feature? I find it more useful to see Direct Cinema (of the second phase) as a movement contributing to new forms of experimental narratives, sometimes striving for spatial and temporal continuity (though never getting close to the seamlessness of Hollywood), sometimes radically disruptive. When Direct Cinema filmmakers relied on pre-defined social roles (or stereotypes) in order to tell a particular story – e.g. Frederick Wiseman and his concern with institutions – I would argue that this did not significantly affect the film's status (indexing) as non-fiction. Rather, it opened up the question to what extent social performances are shaped by situational or contextual factors and thus contributed to Direct Cinema's emphasis on social interaction.

[24]   In strictly observational films, however, the range of information for interpreting situations is limited to sequences accessible to witnesses. The full complexity of the events and their invisible, inner dimension may easily be beyond the filmmaker's reach. This is one of the reasons why symbolic patterns of communication are of major importance. The feel and atmosphere of a situation – elements such as body language, speech patterns, ways of interaction – may turn out to be more relevant and fascinating than the more abstract aspects of a historical analysis.

[25]   As Mamber (1973:11) indicates, one of the prime values of Direct Cinema "has been the filmmaker's faith in the complexity of the events and people he is witnessing, so that editing avoids shaping the material to one strict point of view, and thus allows the audience as wide a range of interpretations as would be available to an actual witness."

filmmaking will be free from an industry that fetters the filmmaker."[26] All of these elements contributed to a democratization of documentary film in the 1960s, particularly the yielding of authority and the exploration of new subject matter. At the heart of Direct Cinema lay a renewed faith that film could convey the complexity of historical events, and that audiences were willing to accept a more open form of rhetoric. Furthermore, the method was easily adjustable in terms of more explicitly critical endeavors: Ed Pincus and David Neuman saw it as a way of consciousness-raising while Richard Leacock thought of it as a means of demythologizing society, of unmasking and disclosing discrepancies in prevailing notions of social life.[27]

In the larger context of American art, Direct Cinema thus indicated an important step for documentary film. It represented the attempt to dehierarchize film communication, and linked this political goal with aesthetic concerns: on the one hand, the notion of letting people and events speak for themselves; on the other hand the self-effacement of the artist as a conscious artistic strategy – not as an attempt to disavow the subjectivity of mediation but to find a form of individual expression accessible to the larger public. Sharing the experience of discovery and focusing on mundane concerns of the everyday world lay at the center of Direct Cinema's democratic agenda. In this sense, it adapted concerns of American art movements such as straight photography, precisionism, or objectivist poetry, which had attempted to reduce the distance between art object and audience in order to invite a more immediate and concrete form of perceiving and appreciating the ordinary world.[28]

Direct Cinema and Institutional Power

Having pointed out these concerns evolving in the early 1960s, however, we are faced with crucial questions: If the democratization of documentary film was a major aspect of Direct Cinema, what were the reasons why it did not succeed on American television? Why was it eventually more influential in the field of independent production?

Firstly, Direct Cinema highlighted the issue of gaining access. If openness on the part of the filmmakers was a prevailing attitude, they could only share insights and experiences if they were allowed to become 'participant observers'. Yet as Richard Leacock remembers about *Primary*, they had experienced no problems except "total censorship at the source". He went on to say:

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26   Edward Pincus 1969:XII
27   Leacock explained the rationale behind his approach in an interview with James Blue (1965:18): "To me, it's to find out some important aspect of our society by watching our society, by *watching how things really happen* as opposed to the social image that people hold about the way things are *supposed* to happen. And by seeing discrepancies, by revealing the *things that are different from what is expected*."
28   On the earlier movements see Wolfe (1995)

"*Primary* in no way achieved what I at least wanted to achieve. I wanted to see the political process at work, and we saw only the public aspects of the problem. There was no chance of our being privy to the real discussions that took place with the statisticians, with the public relations people, which is where modern politics operates." [29]

Censorship at the source meant that although the Kennedy campaign, and in later productions his administration, allowed the filmmakers to move behind the scenes, public relations agents and professional forms of image management were increasingly regulating the degree of access and thus delimiting the chances of realizing the sense of disclosure that was part of the democratic agenda.

The earliest films of Drew Associates, then, demonstrated that the issues of access and power were inextricably linked, complicating the idea of 'giving up control'. In subsequent years, access to the film's subjects usually turned out to be in inverse ratio to their social status or authority, greater power meaning limited access, lesser power easier access. Inevitably, an important ethical debate developed around the question of control: yielding control in the act of shooting, though democratically inclined, could mask the issue of access, which may serve to re-establish hierarchical relations between filmmaker and subject.

Secondly, Direct Cinema met with a number of institutional pressures, which in the long run proved to be impossible to overcome. Shooting a large amount of footage but using little of it, together with the possibility of not 'getting' an interesting story made it appear too risky for strictly commercial considerations. Furthermore, abandoning the 'two-sides' approach of television journalism (as Leacock did in *Happy Mother's Day* in 1963) involved the danger of undermining the hallowed tradition of objectivity. In a related sense, the open form also turned out to be too 'soft' for political movements with more aggressive tactics, many of which resorted to the persuasive rhetoric of older expository forms in the late 1960s. Thus, the aesthetics of openness and unpredictability turned out to be institutionally weak, relegating many projects to the field of endowment-sponsored productions (Ed Pincus), the newly established sphere of public television (Frederick Wiseman), or the university.

Finally, some aspects of Direct Cinema's working method – e.g. the question of self-effacement – came to be regarded as obstacles blocking the desire for more personal forms of expression.[30] A number of filmmakers began to realize the difficulties of 'gaining access' in political settings and started to address more explicitly the act of bearing witness and related notions of performance or self-expression. Gradually, observational filmmaking was supplemented with forms of stylistic reflexivity (like individualized voice-overs) or with elements of interaction and participation of the filmmakers on camera.

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[29]   Levin 1971:206
[30]   See Pincus 1977:171, 172

Moving from social to private settings, filmmakers like Ed Pincus demonstrated that in terms of reflexivity the most sophisticated evolution of Direct Cinema was moving towards a new form of autobiographical film.[31] He finished *Diaries 1971–1976* in the early 1980s, yet it reflected insights that had emerged from his work in the mid-1960s:

> One of the reasons we changed, or I changed in a lot of my thoughts in relationship to cinéma-vérité was the kind of filming that we were doing demanded a strange sort of 'egolessness' or voyeurism, since we were committed to filming a situation as it happened independently of our presence. That meant we couldn't interject our personalities in any way, and we had to become as small a part of that environment as possible. That does very strange things to your head, and also affects your perceptions of things. (Levin (1971: 346)[32]

Thus, in the course of the 1970s Direct Cinema established itself as a *personal style* of filmmaking broadening the range of artistic and expressive possibilities, and developing, in many cases, into more reflexive, interactive and participatory forms. In order to appreciate the formative influence of filmmakers such as Leacock, Pennebaker, Pincus or the Maysles, it is therefore necessary to relate them less to American journalism or science than to diverse movements in the early 1960s attempting to create new forms of experimental narratives. Jonas Mekas, for example, celebrating the New American Cinema in 1962, linked Richard Leacock with John Cassavetes, the beat generation, Stanley Brakhage or new styles of acting. As the camera was beginning to move about freely, Mekas felt that the cinema was going through its "Actors' Studio period – mumbling, stammering, searching." [33]

In the field of documentary, these narratives eventually revolved around questions of intimacy (i.e. getting closer to the subjects) and communication. The choreography of camera movements and the editing contributed to the subtleties of this twofold desire for closeness and interaction, suggesting that the observational stance was initially inspired less by scientific scrutiny than an effort to establish a more equal and, in terms of film aesthetics, also a more exciting relationship. In this sense, Leacock's call for an Uncontrolled Cinema was mainly concerned with questions of creativity, furthering the impression

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31   Another case in point are the films by the Maysles whose trajectory is summarized by Davidson: "From the 'fly on the wall' method of the Drew films and their own first efforts, the Maysles have increasingly produced documentaries whose focus is on the tension between the 'performing' subject and the 'interpreting' filmmaker; the relative simplicity of observational cinema has been superseded by the intricacies of reflexive cinema." David Davidson (1981: 3–13; 4).

32   In Levin's interview with James Blue in 1965, Leacock alluded to the problem of technology and voyeurism: "What about the whole question of invasion of privacy? I'm absolutely convinced that these new techniques can result in the most awful plethora of voyeurism, of peeping-tomism, of every kind of error." Blue (1965:18)

33   Mekas 1962: 10

that the early Direct Cinema filmmakers were in effect both, documentarians *and* stylists.[34]

Richard Leacock: Advocate of Creative Freedom

Richard Leacock thus adopted the role of spokesman for a new kind of creative freedom he saw at work within the Direct Cinema-movement. Oddly enough, though, while shooting on film – i.e. up until the early 1980s – he finished relatively few projects that allowed him the degree of control he had been so vociferously calling for. In his critique of mechanical professionalism he conjured up the idea, shared by the avant-garde, of the filmmaker as artist, shooting and editing his or her own material and addressing a minority audience.[35] Yet even though he deliberately demanded a blurring of the line between professional and amateur, much of his own work was done on commission or as part of a larger professional team. Seemingly disillusioned, he conceded in the early 1970s: "It seems to me that the best films we've ever done have been on almost idiotic subjects, supposedly." [36]

Still, certain recurring themes in Leacock's work indicate personal predilections: first and foremost he has been interested in people – public figures, musicians, artists, politicians, friends. Secondly, many films revolve around the issue of music, in particular the unfinished aspects of rehearsals, performances and improvisations. Finally, he was always drawn to political issues, though films such as *Chiefs* seldom reveal a journalistic instinct or a desire to generalize from individual cases. For Leacock, so it seems, the political must always be referred back to the personal. As soon as it takes on an official air – like the motorcade to celebrate the birth of the quintuplets in *Happy Mother's Day* – it is prone to becoming funny and ridiculous. In fact, Leacock's notion of demythologizing conventions of social reality builds on the assumption that watching people and events unobtrusively will inevitably result in an unmasking of their self-deceptions. *Happy Mother's Day* highlighted the absurdity of social interaction through an ironic voice-over, yet Leacock is not generally or willingly aiming for comic effects as his later work, particularly *Community of Praise*[37] shows. While shooting on film, however, the champion of Uncontrolled Cinema seems to have had only limited access to the kind of artistic freedom he had been hoping for. The move to video in the early 1980s, then, was a logical next step opening up new possibilities, which, as Michael Renov suggests, have yet to be addressed within the discourse on documentary film.[38]

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[34]   See my interview with Ed Pincus in Christof Decker (1996)
[35]   See Naficy 1982: 250
[36]   Levin 1971: 207
[37]   Richard Leacock, Marisa Silver 1982
[38]   Michael Renov 1999: 313–325

As indicated, some of Direct Cinema's principles found a lasting institutional framework in university settings, primarily in anthropology departments. Here observational films were made in the name of science producing a form of 'privileged' knowledge, and defended on methodological grounds, which managed to ward off the more radical critiques of postmodern cultural and film theory. Thus, in an anthology of the early 1990s, Timothy Asch defined ethnographic film in terms sounding remarkably similar to the earliest statements by proponents of Direct Cinema, saying that "ethnographic film-makers record events as they happen – no scripts, no actors, no sets, no retakes. But a good film-maker knows that detached observation is not enough. The film must also capture the essence of the people, their passions, their fears, their motivations."[39] Given the sophisticated critiques of anthropological encounters, this definition may by now strike us as somewhat old-fashioned, yet it is useful as a way of highlighting a basic difference between Direct Cinema and ethnographic film.[40] Practitioners like Richard Leacock were making their films not in the name of science but as a new form of aesthetic experience, and in that respect – by creating experimental narratives and new ways of interactional filmmaking – they managed to redefine the field.

At last, however, the legacy of Direct Cinema must also be seen against the background of critical revisions within the field of documentary theory and practice. If the idea of 'capturing the essence of reality' today is seen to be technologically and semiotically simplistic, if not culturally dangerous, basic tenets of the documentary movements since the 1960s are to be re-thought: what are the truth claims of synch-sound footage, what is the status of knowledge produced by documentary discourse, how far can the shooting and editing of film be democratized, how can the issue of access, power and control be dealt with adequately, how can the role of mediation be addressed in the films without turning into a cliché of heightened self-awareness and reflexivity?[41]

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[39]   Timothy Asch 1992: 196

[40]   For a critical assessment of ethnographic filmmaking see David MacDougall's essays on forms of participatory or intertextual cinema: "Beyond Observational Cinema" (1985: 274–287) and "Complicities of style" (1992: 90–98). See James C. Faris (1992: 179) for a critique of what he calls the 'conceits of anthropological practice' – issues such as authority, authorship in ethnographic writing or claims to translation. In spite of his critique, however, Faris raises the question that if ethnographic film loses its claim for authenticity it also seems to lose its institutional legitimation: "To leave authenticity to local presentation is an exciting possibility, for focus may change dramatically. But it certainly threatens the veracity of Western representation, exposes its fragile contingency and plays havoc with the West's notion of truth and authenticity, the anthropological saw that has been our discipline's commodity fetish. If we lose that, if we cannot claim some form of *privileged* representation, are we needed at all?"

[41]   With regard to reflexivity, David MacDougall (1985: 284) cautions: "Involvement with one's subjects can become a kind of pose – the fleeting recognition of the film crew

Recent suggestions by practitioners such as David MacDougall indicate that one possibility lies in treating film as a system of representation which, in the case of ethnographic film, evolves in a 'contact zone' between different cultures: "I think we will increasingly regard ethnographic films as meeting places of primary and secondary levels of representation, one cultural text seen through, or inscribed upon another."[42] As necessary as these developments are, they all seem to point to an increasing complexity of film communication. Direct Cinema, we may recall, was welcomed as a new approach because it seemed to be "in many ways so simple, so 'direct'".[43] Since the simplicity of its design was also an important aspect of its democratic appeal, we may hope that the new forms of documentary representation will be both, formally accessible and culturally complex.

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which gives a sense of candor but really reveals nothing. For a film to gain meaning from the breakdown of old narrative conventions, that recognition must develop into a genuine conversation." The various questions have been addressed in recent publications; see Rosenthal (1988); Michael Renov (1993); Charles Warren (1996); and Gaines and Renov (1999)

[42] MacDougall 1992: 97
[43] Mamber 1973: 4

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