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Ethnographic Observation and the Super-8 Millimeter Camera

RICHARD LEACOCK

The idea of going out into the real world with a movie camera and observing society has been with us for a long time; in the early nineteen hundreds Lumière and his disciples went all over the world filming real people and real events. As early as 1904 Leo Tolstoy is quoted as saying "It is necessary that the cinema should represent Russian reality in its most varied manifestations. For this purpose life ought to be reproduced as it is by the cinema: it is not necessary to go running after invented subjects." But somehow this ideal was never achieved. The end results were almost always centered on process: this is how we build our boats, this is how we catch fish, this is how we divide the spoils. Valuable though these records are, they are a far cry from what Tolstoy had in mind. The inability to record verbal communication was, in my opinion, the central frustration.

When Dr. Eleanor Leacock and I first tried to make an ethnographic film during a long summer in central Labrador, living with our two children and a group of Naskapi Indians, I remember the consciousness that we were missing the point. It was the relationships, the decision-making processes, the emotions that were fascinating us, but inevitably it was the canoe-making, fishing, berry-picking, etc., that got filmed.

Around 1960 equipment was developed that made a radical change possible, and since that time those that could afford tens of thousands of dollars for cameras, recorders, and 16-mm film have been making films that occasionally transcended this frustration when no language barrier existed between the subjects and the observer and audience. However, these people not only needed lots of money, they had to be as strong and stubborn as mules to carry out their resolve. Hiking around the wilderness

with some sixty pounds on your back is not particularly conducive to sensitive observation. This has resulted in the emergence of a very small group of film-oriented ethnologists who are closely allied with the "*cinéma vérité*" or "direct cinema," filmmakers who do not call themselves ethnologists but spend their time and lose their shirts observing our own society. The rules of this game are often very strict: never ask a question; never ask anyone to do anything; never ask anyone to repeat an act or a phrase that you missed; never pay anyone; etc. If the same people film the material and edit it, the results can be summarized as "aspects of the observer's perception of what happened in the presence of a camera." Such a definition gets us out of a fruitless bag of silly arguments about "absolute" truths, etc., and allows us to settle for something quite useful.

Recently there have been two technological leaps that can alter this situation considerably. First, the development of portable, relatively cheap video recorders which have a fascinating ability to play back on the spot but require access to some place where you can charge batteries and, at this stage of the game, a handy repair shop. Second is the development here at M.I.T. of a cheap, very sophisticated but easy to use super-8 synchronous sound filmmaking system. Both these systems are very easy to learn to use. The video camera and recorder weigh about 20 pounds. The film camera weighs 6 pounds and the separate sound recorder about 7 pounds.

With these two systems available, the technical and financial problems have been solved to the point where a much more general use of these techniques can result.

The degree of expertise required to make ethnographic films in the past resulted as already noted in this very special group of "filmmaker-ethnographers." I think it can be said that this group became specialists who did no other kind of observation. A chasm developed, to my dismay, between the film group and the non-film group, and further splits have developed between schools of filming, some claiming that closeups or details should be avoided at all costs, or the orientation to the general scene is a necessity; others advise one to "pretend film" with no film in the camera for the first month. Personally I reject dishonest behavior whatever the cost. I do not want to get into the details of these schisms. I merely want to suggest that perhaps non-filmmaker ethnologists might want to use these simple and at this point much cheaper techniques of recording behavior in a non-exclusive way perhaps, as they continue their customary forms of observation; they might, in particular instances where film and video seemed especially appropriate, make use of these techniques, ~~without~~ having to dedicate the rest of their lives to becoming "filmmaker-

ethnographers". Perhaps they should depend on their own judgement as to how they use these techniques.

To this end we have designed systems here that try to cut out all the complexities and hassles of traditional filmmaking. A three-to-six week intensive course should give adequate training and obviate reliance on special technicians.