

The Daly Show:
How Direct Cinema Guilelessly Presents its Subject Matter

by

Vladimir Bilenjki

FA/FILM 3401

Prof. Seth Feldman

Tuesday October 20th, 2015

In the realm of observational cinema, the filmmaker can choose to assume one of two roles in capturing the subject on film: the voyeur or the provocateur. Direct cinema is the choice to be a voyeur and therefore not a fabricator of dishonesty, rather an observer of honest moments and by concerning oneself only with capturing the depths that the subject can reveal; the filmmaker can unveil truth in cinema. Direct cinema does not point viewers to specific conclusions about the filmed subject by virtue of its unobtrusive approach, its persistence on uncovering as opposed to covering up and its amenity with the subject, and an audience could bear witness to captured reality rather than pointed fiction. It is important to note the editing of two key movies that deliver cinematic truth, **Warrendale** (Allan King 1967) and **Lonely Boy** (Wolf Koenig, Roman Kroitor 1962), is deceptive but not in any way that is detrimental to the truth, rather in place to serve cinema that presents said truth, which will be further explored in this essay. One must acknowledge the difference between cinema and recordings since cinema is a constructed platform for expressing recordings while recordings are essentially solitary moments that have been captured. Upon understanding the assemblage of direct cinema as being essential to unearthing the essence of these recordings, one will find that direct cinema showcases reality all the contradictions that make it real.

The foundation of truth in cinema is the transparency between the subject and the audience; therefore, the camera must abide by the spectatorship principle in order to allow the subjects to reveal themselves to the celluloid. “Craftsman who care about the whole want to be involved in the whole” (Harcourt 71) said Tom Daly, the head of Unit B at the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). The Unit B-produced Candid Eye series for the NFB was a forerunner to direct cinema and with the advent of television, “[t]he

television screen was enormously hungry, while at the same time standards were not too high” (Harcourt 71) which meant “a number of fresh principles” including “a minimum of scripting and artificial lighting”. This freedom allowed Unit B to discover an unscripted and thereby truthful approach to cinema, which would inherently not point audiences to any conclusions but rather allow them to form their own opinions on Candid Eye’s subjects. **Lonely Boy** was, according to Seth Feldman, Unit B’s “masterpiece” which “Kroitor and Koenig [...] exhausted the vocabulary of the new technology” (Feldman 10) and considering “the shooting ration for LONELY BOY was about 1/20” (Harcourt 71) the truth was certainly in the celluloid, waiting to be fleshed out in the editing room. Paul Anka’s ultimate concert in **Lonely Boy** perfected the spectatorship principle of direct cinema by splicing audience reactions filmed during several of Anka’s concerts into a wave of euphoria to the tune of Anka’s serenade. With candid interviews delving into Anka’s troubled past and his conversations with fans, friends, roadies and organizers as well as a spontaneous demoing session all masterfully assembled by John Spotton, **Lonely Boy**’s innovative editing techniques and transparent shooting style put the viewer into the audience as well as the backstage for a revealing yet uncritical look at the teen idol. The sort of unprecedented **Lonely Boy** set for truth in cinema was furthered five years later by **Warrendale** whose director, Allen King, was praised by Jean Renoir as “a great artist” and that he was “under the impression of being hidden in a corner of this children’s hospital and of actually witnessing the events registered on-screen” (Koresky).

While transparency on behalf of Anka and Daly’s cohorts was enough to serve the ambiguous truths within **Lonely Boy**, persistence in uncovering and preserving the truth

was necessary for 'Warrendale' to push the envelope of direct cinema. **Warrendale's** unusual look at the lives of emotionally disturbed children was not aired on television despite being produced for CBC due to its extensive profanity and disturbing subject matter, but by King's refusal to edit around this, the truth persevered. As with **Lonely Boy**, **Warrendale's** editing was deceptive in order to structure the film with a climax, which in truth occurred early in shooting: the children's reaction to the death of their beloved cook, Carol. Following staff director Walter Gunn's phone call in support of King's controversial decision to film these reactions, the audience bares witness to John Brown's holding technique, which involves apprehending distressed children by embracing them tightly. In the midst of the panicked reaction to Carol's death, some children voice their indifference in wake of the tragedy. This commitment to capturing the action from several vantage points owes a debt to the Candid Eye "aesthetic" in the sense that King found candidness in "the camera's right to be surreptitious, ubiquitous" in addition to "being forthcoming" (Feldman 2). By living at Warrendale for five weeks prior to shooting, the presence of King's crew was unobtrusive, allowing for the ubiquitous quality of the film to flourish. When the chaotic climax comes to a slow halt, King's efforts assuredly uncover the truth within Warrendale's walls with persistence and understanding, with Warrendale's fickle core shining bright for the world to see, for better or for worse considering its closure within almost a year of opening.

Perhaps Pierre Berton's **City of Gold** (Colin Low, Wolf Koenig 1957) stays truest to Daly's previously stated assertion on the craftsman commitment to 'the whole' since Berton wanted to realize his vision of Dawson City's past as a writer through cinema. To fully realize his vision, Berton's collaboration with Unit B required the invention of an

innovative documentarian effect, which would come to be known as the ‘Ken Burns effect’ despite preceding Burns’ signature style, with which still photography is made dramatic using camera pans, sound and narration. Ingenuity is a staple of direct cinema because there is no schematic in place with which the truth can expose itself to the camera; it is the product of the filmmaker’s amenity with their subject. A filmmaker must be in tune with the subject’s internal journey in order for the avenues of invention to reveal themselves and within this precious bond is the candid truth Daly sought to share with Canadian audiences and beyond.

Direct cinema guilelessly bares its subjects’ souls to viewers by means of its fly-on-the-wall approach in conjunction with a persistent attitude to finding the subject’s truth and the filmmaker’s own ingenuity in order to appease the sensitive trust a subject bestows to them while respecting the audience’s intelligence. Editors are ultimately the arbiters of how much of the authenticity present within recordings translates to the screen, and with Unit B’s impact on the form, the screen presents audiences with increasingly personal films that viewers must make sense of themselves. The importance of direct cinema lies antithetical to fictional cinema since its focus is truth, but a marriage of the two is vital for the evolution of cinema as a medium for shedding light on the darkness within reality and us all.

Work Cited

Feldman, Seth. "The Days Before Christmas and the Days Before That." *Candid Eyes;*

A Canadian Documentary Film Reader. ed. James Leach and Jeannette

Sloniowski. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. 2-10. Print.

Harcourt, Peter. "The Innocent Eye: An Aspect of the Work of the National Film

Board of Canada." *Canadian Film Reader*. ed. By Seth Feldman and Joyce

Nelson Toronto: Peter Martin Associates. 1977. 67-77. Print.

Koresky, Michael. "Eclipse Series 24: The Actuality Dramas of Allan King."

September 21st, 2010. [https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1599-eclipse-](https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1599-eclipse-series-24-the-actuality-dramas-of-allan-king)

[series-24-the-actuality-dramas-of-allan-king](https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1599-eclipse-series-24-the-actuality-dramas-of-allan-king). Retrieved Tuesday October 19th, 2015.

Web.