Cinema Verite: Definitions and Background

At its very simplest, cinema verite might be defined as a filming method employing hand-held cameras and live, synchronous sound. This description is incomplete, however, in that it emphasizes technology at the expense of filmmaking philosophy. Beyond recording means, cinema verite indicates a position the filmmaker takes in regard to the world he films.

The term has been debased through loose critical usage, and the necessary distinction between cinema-verite films and cinema-verite techniques is often lost. The techniques are surely applicable in many filming situations, but our exclusive concern here is for cinema-verite documentaries, as will become clear through further definition. Even granting the many film types within the cinema-verite spectrum (where, for instance, most Warhol films would be placed), it is still possible to speak of cinema verite as an approach divorced from fictional elements. The influence of fictional devices upon cinema-verite documentaries is an important issue, but the two can be spoken of as separate entities.

Cinema verite in many forms has been practiced throughout the world, most notably in America, France, and Canada. The term first gained popular currency in the early sixties as a description of Jean Rouch's *Chronique d'un Eté.* To embrace the disparate output of Rouch, Marker, Ruspoli, Perrault, Brault, Koenig, Kroitor, Jersey, Leacock, and all the others under one banner is to obscure the wide variance in outlook and method that separates American cinema verite from the French or Canadian variety and further to fail to take into account differences within the work of one country or even one filmmaker. Just as Rouch and Marker have distinct approaches, the Marker of *Lettre de Sibérie* is not the Marker of *Le Joli Mai.*

Because cinema verite in all its forms is so varied, we shall concentrate on one relatively distinct branch. The work of Americans Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, the Maysles Brothers, and Frederick Wiseman presents a sufficiently consistent filmmaking philosophy to allow for independent discussion.

Happily, for critical purposes, enough diversity is also present to allow exploration of a range of responses to key cinema-verite questions. But in all ensuing discussion, it should be clear that *cinema verite* is being employed under deliberately arbitrary circumstances, more in the context of what the American outlook expresses and as I envision a certain ideal for this kind of filming than as a universally applicable term.

The problem is further confused by terminology. *Cinema verite* is a pretentious label that few filmmakers and critics have much use for. In America, and to some extent in France, the term *direct cinema* is preferred, although that too with some reservation. I prefer the French designation if only for its now traditional association with the nonfiction film. Any use of *direct cinema* in the chapters that follow is intended to be synonymous. Most important, cinema verite is not to be translated literally, for claims to higher truth by proponents of these films will not concern us.

The essential element in cinema verite is the act of filming real people in uncontrolled situations. *Uncontrolled* means that the filmmaker does not function as a "director" nor, for that matter, as a screenwriter. In a cinema-verite film, no one is told what to say or how to act. A prepared script, however skimpy, is not permissible, nor are verbal suggestions, gestures, or any form of direct communication from the filmmaker to his subject. The filmmaker should in no way indicate that any action is preferred by him over any other. The filmmaker acts as an observer, attempting not to alter the situations he witnesses any more than he must simply by being there (along with, usually, another person recording sound). Cinema verite has a faith in the spontaneous; the unwillingness to assert control goes so far as to refuse to recreate events, to have people repeat actions for the sake of being filmed. Interviews are also not employed, since their use, in effect, is a form of directed behavior.

The meaning of the term *real people* develops from the commitment to uncontrolled shooting. *Real* indicates not only avoiding the use of professional actors (unless, of course, we see them as

actors) but also not placing nonactors into roles selected by the filmmaker, even to "play" themselves. Cinema verite asks nothing of people beyond their permission to be filmed.

The need for portable equipment is a result of the desire to shoot in uncontrolled situations. Instead of having people come to the camera, the camera goes to them. The filmmaker must be free to follow action without dominating it through sheer mechanical presence. Tripods, heavy lights, cables, and the rest of the paraphernalia of studio shooting are eliminated. The filmmaker is a reporter with a camera instead of a notebook.

Editing of footage shot in this fashion attempts to re-create events as the filmmaker witnessed them. An outcome of the cinema-verite approach is that it integrates the filmmaking process: selecting a subject, filming it, and editing the raw footage become continuous steps in a single effort and not discretely assignable tasks. The connection between the uncontrolled event and the finished film is enforced by the filmmaker's functioning as his own editor. The footage shot can then be judged while editing as much by what is missing as by what is present. The idea is that the film will not contradict the events themselves through an ordering of shots, juxtaposition of sequences, or use of other manipulative devices at variance with the filmmaker's own response as an actual witness. When editing is viewed as an independent function, left to people who did not participate in the filming, a whole new set of priorities and biases, based solely on the footage, can conflict with the commitment not to distort the event itself.

Editing, of course, is a selective process and inevitably implies at least some shaping of the material. Use of the word re-create allows for a variety of responses in editing, and a cinema-verite film does bear the selective influence of its creator. However, the respect in shooting for noninterference carries over as the determining force in the form of the final film. Even though reality is filtered through one sensibility, the filmmaker tries not to shape his material on the basis of limiting preconceptions.

In line with this commitment, some of the standard devices of fiction film and traditional documentaries fall by the wayside, especially music and narration. The former is never added (one of the few generalities about these films that nearly always applies), and the latter, if necessary at all, should do no more than provide facts essential to following events on the screen. Whatever the filmmaker's initial interest in the subject, the final film does not try to make the material seem as if it was included for the purpose of proving one specific point. The lack of "mood" music and guiding narration are part of a general outlook that does not try to push the viewer in one direction and one direction only. Room is left for responses as individual and complex as the situation itself.

Cinema verite as we are speaking of it, then, is an attempt to strip away the accumulated conventions of traditional cinema in the hope of rediscovering a reality that eludes other forms of film-making and reporting. Cinema verite is a strict discipline only because it is in many ways so simple, so "direct." The filmmaker attempts to eliminate as much as possible the barriers between subject and audience. These barriers are technical (large crews, studio sets, tripod-mounted equipment, special lights, costumes, and makeup), procedural (scripting, acting, directing), and structural (standard editing devices, traditional forms of melodrama, suspense, etc.). Cinema verite is a practical working method based upon a faith in unmanipulated reality, a refusal to tamper with life as it presents itself. Any kind of cinema is a process of selection, but there is (or should be) all the difference in the world between the cinema-verite aesthetic and the methods of fictional and traditional documentary film.

Unfortunately, some writers have claimed that cinema verite practically makes other film methods obsolete.[1] We should view such claims in a dialectical spirit, for while this kind of filming questions many assumptions of fiction films (as well as providing fiction filming with new devices to exploit), it will certainly never displace fiction film any more than photography has replaced

painting. Still, cinema verite is more than a mutant offspring of documentary techniques. It deserves a place of its own as an alternative kind of cinema—neither documentary (as usually practiced) nor fiction (though often telling a story). Its relative newness (primarily due to the recent development of the necessary equipment) does not necessarily mean it is the wave of the future that will drown all past efforts. Nevertheless, it must be reckoned with as an extension of the present limits of cinema, an independent form raising its own critical questions.

Cinema verite did not sprout full-grown in the early sixties. A broad historical approach could locate traces of similar concerns from the beginnings of cinema, and such an approach would give the misleading impression that cinema verite is the culmination of a sixty-year search for a new cinematic form. However, the supposed influences generally depart from cinema verite in crucial areas, and the links are often rather tenuous. Instead of undertaking this sort of comparative survey in this chapter, we shall explore the work of selected filmmakers and theoreticians who anticipate key cinema-verite concerns. This will be done primarily to discuss ideas still relevant to cinema-verite practices today, not to provide a full examination of cinema-verite prehistory.

Dziga Vertov

The writings of Dziga Vertov, the Russian filmmaker and theoretician, are replete with statements that reflect a deep awareness of issues related to cinema verite. Vertov coined the term *Kino-Pravda,* which was applied to a series of 23 films he made between 1922 and 1925, each organized around a specific theme or idea.[2] Georges Sadoul claims that his translation of *Kino-Pravda* into *Cinéma Vérité* in his 1948 *Histoire du Cinéma* is the first use of the term.[3] The origin of the label, however, is not so important as what it has come to mean. The Kino-Pravda of Vertov is not the cinema verite of the sixties. It anticipates many key ideas of modern cinema verite, but no more than that is claimed here.

In the strongest possible terms, Vertov denounced all forms of

theatrical, fictional cinema, calling for an end to the dependence of cinema upon literature, drama, and music, in other words, the characteristics of nearly all films made to that point[4] (and, I might add, most since then). He wrote of his cinema as being a branch of science[5] and of each film as an experiment.[6] He set for himself and his fellow filmmakers this task: "To combine science with cinematic depiction in the struggle to reveal truth . . . to decipher reality."[7] With characteristic boldness, Vertov spoke of the goal of "observing and recording *life as it is* (italics in original)."[8]

Vertov insisted upon exploring the real world and the actual objects in it. He wrote, "If a fake apple and a real apple are filmed so that one cannot be distinguished from the other on the screen, this is not ability, but incompetence—inability to photograph. The real apple has to be filmed in such a way that no counterfeit can be possible. . . ."[9] He was also opposed to the use of actors, except when they are presented as real people in a film that attempts to study the relationship between their feelings and the roles they must play.[10] An idea quite common in cinema verite was expressed in 1929 by a Russian writer describing Vertov's method: "The director ordinarily *invents* the plot for the scenario—Dziga Vertov *detects* it. He does not, with the aid of authors, actors, and scenery-carpenters, build an illusion of life; he thrusts the lens of his camera straight into the crowded centers of life (italics in original)."[11]

These sentiments are commendable but now seem somewhat platitudinous. Vertov's most important contribution was his realization of the crucial role of editing. He wrote that each "Kino-Eye" film (a name he applied to a broad part of his work[12]) "is in the act of being edited from the moment the subject is chosen until the finished film comes out, that is to say, it is being edited during the whole film-making process."[13] In a fitting metaphor, Vertov saw the bits of film as bricks. With these bricks, he said, one could build a chimney, the wall of a fort, or many other things. And just as good bricks are needed to build a house, in order to make good films one needs good bits of filmed mate-

rial.[14] He also recognized that there was no one truth, that editing could serve to support any truths (or lies) that one wished.[15]

Vertov even went so far as to note three key "periods" in the filmmaking process and the different activities during each: the selection of the subject and the period after it is chosen when a shooting plan is developed, the period of shooting itself (which he realized was a selective period), and the "central editing" period when the film is assembled.[16] Although he saw each of these periods in a very different light from the cinema-verite goals discussed earlier, the recognition of these steps as closely related parts of a continuous process was, and is, very important.

Vertov was not opposed to scripts or some kind of scenario, reluctantly feeling that they were necessary in order that there be "a continuity and correspondence of scenes to result in an irresistible movement forward."[17] He does, though, speak of making the script as brief and condensed as possible. Interestingly, he said that the cameramen themselves should try to set up preliminary schemes, but since not every cameraman may be sufficiently knowledgeable about his subject, they should be assisted by "specialists," that is, scenario writers, who would work "arm in arm with the cameramen."[18] With admirable tentativeness, he admitted that his thoughts on this matter were not very clear, and he invited further dialogue. In an empirical spirit that is very much a part of cinema verite, he asked only that his idea of the small scenario be tried, as "practice is the criterion of truth."[19]

Almost as important as Vertov's idea of editing was his recognition of the importance of sound and, even more crucial, the need for synchronous sound.[20] Along with his "Kino-Eye" theory he developed the "Radio-Ear," and he considered the two inseparable.[21] This was another outstanding observation on his part, for cinema verite as we speak of it has come about only since the need for synch sound was again realized and the technical battle was won. Vertov's recognition of the technical goals went even further, for he spoke of the need for a camera that could go

anywhere under all conditions. He wanted the "Kino-Eye" to be as mobile as the human eye.[22] As happened with sound, we will see how filmmakers forty years later came to discover the same need.

Vertov also suggests yet another important cinema-verite concept—that it tries to capture life as it happens and is not a re-enactment of past events. He brings this up in the context of a discussion of the "Kino-Eye" as a means to study the lives of individual people, an idea at the very heart of the films we will be talking about:

I do not write on paper, but on film. . . . Many writers took their heroes from real life. For instance, *Anna Karenina* was based on the life of one of Pushkin's daughters. I thought about recording on film the history of Marya Demchenko from the life of Marya Demchenko. The difference was that I could not write on film events that had already occurred. I can only write simultaneously as the events are occurring. I cannot write about the meeting of the Komsomol after it has taken place. And I cannot, like some correspondents, write an article on events, on spectacles, on carnivals several days after they have taken place. I do not demand that the cameraman be at the scene of a fire two hours before it breaks out. But I cannot permit that he go to film a fire a week after the fire has gone out. . . .

Now I am working on films about the Woman. . . . They will be about a schoolgirl, about a girl at home, about a mother and a child . . . [and so on through ten or more examples].

I will also write about specific people, living and working. . . . I will film the development of man from diapers to old age. . . . The endless process of taking creative notes on film. The endless process of observation with camera in hand.[23]

The final entries on the bulging credit side of Vertov's ledger relate closely to a key cinema-verite issue—camera awareness. In speaking of the filming of Vertov's *The Man With a Movie Camera,* Sadoul says: "They chose people who were sufficiently absorbed in some spectacle or violent emotion so that they would forget the presence of a camera."[24] Sadoul also speaks of their filming at a party filled with drinking and jazz, where those being filmed became more used to the presence of the cameras as the

evening wore on (as a result of both their increased ease in front of the equipment and the effects of the dancing and alcohol) until they were behaving in the same manner as if they were not being filmed. Sadoul compares this to Richard Leacock's ideas on needing the confidence of the subject for this kind of filming.[25]

In this section, I have selected only those aspects of Vertovian thought that correspond to present cinema-verite ideas. A detailed account of the substantial differences between Vertov and cinema verite will not be rendered, but it should be emphasized that an equally lengthy outline of these aspects is possible. Vertov's interest in hidden camera and telephoto and infrared lenses, his use of slow and fast motion, his extensive preplanning of filming according to a particular theme, and especially his emphasis on strong editing control in many ways correspond more closely to other forms of documentary than to cinema verite. Still, he was phenomenally prescient in this area, even if the direct path of influence goes off in a different direction.

Robert Flaherty

Robert Flaherty, like Vertov, is not strictly a precursor of cinema verite, but again he prefigures important central elements. Also, the links between Flaherty (who was American by birth, though he traveled extensively) and American cinema verite are more clearly established, primarily through Richard Leacock's association with Flaherty during the making of *Louisiana Story*.

The term that has come to be associated with Flaherty's method is "non-preconception," through its use by Mrs. Flaherty in lectures and writings about her husband.[26] To quote her: "Non-preconception, a method of discovery as a process of film-making, was Robert Flaherty's contribution to the motion picture. From that method everything there is in his films flows."[27] The difference between what the word itself suggests and what Mrs. Flaherty means by it is somewhat misleading. Nonpreconception, I would think, should imply an idea no more complicated than the absence of preformed opinions, biases, or attitudes concerning the

subject to be filmed. As such, it is a method very much in keep-
ing with cinema verite. But Mrs. Flaherty uses the term in another
way, to differentiate between the purpose her husband had in
making documentaries and the goals of the English documentary
school and also Hollywood films. Films like John Grierson's, she
says, "have been preconceived for political purposes, for propa-
ganda," while, to her, Hollywood "preconceives" its films "for the
box office."[28] Robert Flaherty's films, however, "do not argue. . . .
What they celebrate, freely and spontaneously, simply and purely,
is the thing itself for its own sake."[29] Nonpreconception, then, is
used as a term to describe goals rather than methods.

   The problem of terminology aside, Mrs. Flaherty does have a
point. Flaherty's films are different from Grierson's and Holly-
wood's. And, as I hope will become clear, cinema verite has
strong affinities with Flaherty's way of making films.

   The major Flaherty contribution, in terms of cinema verite, be-
gins with his interest in studying real people in their actual sur-
roundings. Beginning with his 1922 *Nanook of the North*, he
made films that explored cultures through the activities of a small
number of people. In effect, Flaherty found stories about indivi-
duals that served as means to structure his films in a way that
would show what he felt to be important about the people (in a
cultural sense) he was observing. (Said Flaherty on this point: "A
story must come out of the life of a people, not from the actions
of individuals.")[30] And, quite significantly, the films only took
shape in the arduous process of shooting and editing, out of ob-
servation of life as it presents itself and not as the result of a pre-
pared script. (". . . You cannot superimpose studio-fabricated
plots on an actual setting without finding that the reality of the
background will show up the artificiality of the story.")[31]

   The Flaherty method of filmmaking was as intuitive as it was
complex. A fascinating analogy between Flaherty's work and cer-
tain Eskimo attitudes reveals a concept very much akin to cinema
verite. Basically (although the passage this is quoted from should

be read in full), the idea is that the form of an object is an expression of its purpose. The carver of ivory, for example, seeks to bring out that which is already hidden within the unworked piece. Through a "ritual of discovery," turning it in his hand this way and that, carving aimlessly if the result is not immediately apparent, he finds, say, a seal within the ivory. "Then he brings it out; seal, hidden, emerges. It was always there: he didn't create it; he released it; he helped it step forth." Or, a found piece of an antler is examined, as always, only in terms of its intended use: "Form and function, revealed together, are inseparable. Add a few dots or tiny rings or just incisions, rhythmically arranged to bring out the form, and it's finished."[32] According to Arthur Calder-Marshall, "This attitude is implicit in all Flaherty's work, though he never stated it more fully than 'First I was an explorer; then I was an artist.'"[33]

In terms of his method, this "ritual of discovery" meant shooting a tremendous amount of footage, often with no idea of how it was to be used in the finished film. (In *Louisiana Story*, for example, 200,000 feet of material was shot to make an 8,000-foot film,[34] a 25 to 1 ratio.) Calder-Marshall notes elsewhere in his book that the end of a Flaherty film usually came only when the money ran out.[35] In reference to *Nanook of the North*, he says, "Perhaps if he had been given an annuity by Revillon Frères (sponsors of the film), he might have gone on shooting in Hudson Bay until he died, because the camera eye had become to him more perceptible than his own."[36] If nonpreconception is to be taken as a working method, this is its basis in Flaherty's work —the notion that filming should flow from the filmmaker's boundless interest in his subject and that shooting should not be overly selective.

This kind of shooting, of course, places a great burden on editing. The idea that the camera eye is more perceptive than the human eye is a bold concept and one that, if accepted, must call into question the nature of the editing process itself. Richard

Griffith places even stronger emphasis on this point than Calder-Marshall, connecting this view of the camera eye and Flaherty's shooting methods as follows:

  He was the first film director to understand that the eye of the camera does not behave like the human eye, which selects from a field of vision only what interests its owner. The camera's eye unselectively records everything before it. . . . Robert Flaherty trust[ed] the camera before himself. He wanted what the camera's eye could show that his own eye could not see. Because of this, he shot everything, and only afterward, in the projection room, did he really "make" his films, looking at all he photographed again and again until the underlying pattern emerged for him. His was first of all an art of observation and afterward of selection.[37]

  It becomes a simple but important matter then (though neither Calder-Marshall nor Griffith do it) to connect the faith in the camera eye as a superior recording instrument and the influence of Eskimo attitudes on Flaherty. The connection comes about because of what, I believe, the actual advantage of the camera is (which is not the advantage Calder-Marshall and Griffith see), the opportunity for repeating the event as many times as necessary to assist in the "ritual of discovery." It is because repeated projection can yield new facets of reality that editing could be a creative process for Flaherty. It is a step comparable to the Eskimo carver's holding his work up to the light and twisting it about. Without the possibilities for seeing the material in a different light with each viewing, Flaherty would have had no urge to edit (although it does seem that editing was of less interest to him than filming).
  The relation between shooting and editing is basic in cinema verite. Flaherty wrote (close to the end of his life) that his first thought in connection with the use of a movie camera on one of his expeditions was as a means "to compile visual notes."[38] This attitude of tentativeness toward the raw footage is not characteristic of other kinds of filming but is certainly so of cinema verite.

Flaherty's way of editing, as described by Griffith, is precisely analogous to cinema verite. The selection process seeks to determine "the underlying pattern" (Griffith's term) in the material. (This is not to be found in Vertov, who saw editing as the step that wedded the original theme to the footage shot in service of that theme.) That "pattern," if it evolves out of the material, might not conform to traditional notions of film structure. In most films, of course, whether documentary or fiction, the editing stage is not the time when such basic structural decisions are made.

Flaherty's *The Land* comes closest of all his films to following a cinema-verite approach. Flaherty traveled around the United States beginning in 1939, shooting material relating to soil erosion, the plight of migrant farmers, and new mechanized farming techniques. *The Land*, to quote Calder-Marshall, "was not a film in the sense that it had an argument or a constructed pattern. It was a record of a personal journey. . . ."[39] Flaherty shot without a script, and the film does not have a continuing "cast of characters" to provide dramatic continuity (unlike his previous work). While Calder-Marshall sees in the film "an epic theme he [Flaherty] could not resolve,"[40] this lack of resolution is indicative of an unwillingness to wrap problems in a neat package. Flaherty was torn between sympathy for the migrant workers' plight and fascination for advances in agricultural technology. To be a unified work, *The Land* would require an allegiance to one side or the other. But Flaherty took no stand, and the film reflects the complexity of the situation.

Observations by Richard Leacock, who was Flaherty's cameraman on *Louisiana Story* (1948), his last film, point to the technical impasse that had been reached. Most of *Louisiana Story* was shot silent with two Arriflex cameras, a relatively light piece of equipment.[41] At the end, a sound crew with a Mitchell camera (much heavier than the Arriflex) came in for the sequences where synchronized dialogue was needed.[42] Over ten years later, Leacock was to recall these difficulties:

. . . I saw that when we were using small cameras, we had tre-
mendous flexibility, we could do anything we wanted, and get a
wonderful sense of cinema. The moment we had to shoot dia-
logue, lip-synch—everything had to be locked down, the whole
nature of the film changed. The whole thing seemed to stop. We
had heavy disk recorders, and the camera that, instead of weigh-
ing six pounds, weighed two hundred pounds, a sort of monster.
As a result of this, the whole nature of what we were doing
changed. We could no longer watch things as they developed,
we had to impose ourselves to such an extent upon everything
that happened before us, that everything sort of died.[43]

Leacock has said in several other interviews that this was the
time when it became clear to him that the next step in developing
these techniques of filming was a technical one, the need for hav-
ing portable equipment that could also record synch sound.[44]
(As I have already noted, Vertov anticipated this necessity some
time earlier.)

We can think of Flaherty as the man who best expressed the
faith in open observation that is at the heart of cinema verite. Like
Vertov, his methods extend beyond cinema verite's (and some-
times contradict them, especially in the matter of restaging
events), but the consistent homage paid to Flaherty by the major
practitioners of this kind of cinema throughout the world is cer-
tainly merited. Flaherty could say, "First I was an explorer; then I
was an artist," but rarely has film art dealt so reverentially with the
real world.

Cesare Zavattini

Italian neorealism is often cited as a forerunner of cinema verite,
but the relationship is marginal at best, and discussion of the
question would shed more light on neorealism than upon cinema
verite. Instead, we shall consider briefly a "position paper" by
Cesare Zavattini, neorealism's foremost proponent, which in spirit
is very close to our present concerns.[45]

Zavattini calls for "a direct approach to everyday reality . . . with-
out the intervention of fantasy or artifice."[46] The force of Zavat-

tini's argument is distinguished throughout by an emphasis on the possibility of making films without the contrived drama of most fiction films, basing them instead on the simplest of incidents. Theoretically at least, Zavattini argues for a faith in real time with more zeal than has been demonstrated by any cinema-verite advocate: "No other medium of expression has the cinema's original and innate capacity for showing things, that we believe worth showing, as they happen by day—in what we call their 'dailyness,' their longest and truest duration."[47] Elsewhere, Zavattini has also claimed that the supreme act of faith for a neorealist would be to present, in the middle of a film, ninety consecutive minutes in the life of a man.[48] (A more drastic application of the same notion, suggested by Fernand Léger, is described by Kracauer: "Léger dreamed of a monster film which would have to record painstakingly the life of a man and a woman during twenty-four consecutive hours: their work, their silence, their intimacy. Nothing should be omitted; nor should they ever be aware of the presence of the camera.")[49]

Zavattini is equally adamant on the matter of technical equipment and the general way that films are made. This paragraph, indeed, makes a good deal more sense in relation to cinema verite than to neorealism:

The term neo-realism—in a very Latin sense—implies, too, elimination of technical-professional apparatus, screenwriter included. Handbooks, formulas, grammars, have no more application. There will be no more technical terms. Everybody has his personal shooting script. Neo-realism breaks all the rules, rejects all those canons which, in fact, only exist to codify limitations. Reality breaks all the rules, as can be discovered if you walk out with a camera to meet it.[50]

His feelings about screenwriting are especially surprising, considering that it has been his major capacity in filmmaking. He goes so far as to say, "The screenwriter as such should disappear, and we should arrive at the sole author of a film."[51] Like Vertov in his writings and Flaherty in his practice, Zavattini also

emphasizes the importance of the individual filmmaker: "Every-
thing becomes flexible when only one person is making a film,
everything possible. . . ."[52] And on one last point he further con-
curs with these two earlier filmmakers: "The actor . . . has no
more right to exist than the story."[53]

  Zavattini has to be cited as part of the aesthetic foundation of
cinema verite, regardless of the failure of neorealism to fulfull this
stated commitment to undirected reality. There has to be room
here for a man who can say: "However great a faith I might have
in imagination, in solitude, I have a greater one in reality, in peo-
ple. I am interested in the drama of things we happen to en-
counter, not those we plan."[54] Here, he beautifully articulates a
cinema-verite outlook.

Georges Rouquier

Georges Rouquier's 1946 *Farrebique* is cited in A. William
Bluem's *Documentary in American Television* as an example of
cinema verite, and Bluem then uses it as a means to castigate
this kind of filmmaking for seeking, he says, to hide the fact that
events have been reconstructed for the film.[55] While Bluem is
mistaken, *Farrebique* is a step between Flaherty and cinema
verite, although it is closer to the former.

  Rouquier lived on a French farm for one year to record the life
of one family during that time. (This is a goal analogous to
Flaherty's in *Nanook of the North,* which he said began with the
thought, "Why not take . . . a typical Eskimo family and make a
biography of their lives through a year?")[56] Like Flaherty,
Rouquier does not content himself with undirected reality, pre-
ferring instead to reconstruct events for the camera, but the point
is, the film does not pretend to be otherwise. There is a moment
in Flaherty's film when Nanook smiles briefly at the camera;
Rouquier's film has many similar moments of unhidden compli-
city. When Bluem says we can see "that these people are aware
that they are performing,"[57] he errs in assuming that the rest

of the audience doesn't see it too and that the filmmaker is making a special effort to hide this situation.

Farrebique is a step toward cinema verite for the faith it shows in its people. Its success on this score is reflected in a comment like that of James Agee, when he says the film makes one "realize with fuller contempt than ever before how consistently in our time so-called simple people, fictional and non-fictional, are consciously insulted and betrayed by artists and audiences. . . . this is the finest and strongest record of actual people that I have seen."[58] Agee also saw, and liked, Rouquier's interest in the simple details of their life, what he calls "the small casual scraps of existence."[59] The film's interest in routine chores, the milking of cows, the slicing of bread, is indeed indicative of a concern for nonplot elements that is still exemplary.

We are also indebted to Agee for taking issue with what would become a common cinema-verite criticism; he quotes Bosley Crowther's remark that *Farrebique* is "lacking in strong dramatic punch . . . not even a plain folk triangle."[60] Agee correctly saw that the absence of "punch" was very much to Rouquier's credit.

Jean Renoir and the Camera

Jean Renoir, in an interview with André Bazin that first appeared in *France Observateur* and later, translated, in *Sight and Sound,* indicates a new view of the role of the camera, partly inspired by television, that has become typical of cinema-verite attitudes.[61] Leacock has said that he is certain this article influenced him,[62] but whether this is so or not, Renoir does make a crucial distinction that is at the heart of cinema verite—essentially, that the camera should be looked upon as a recording device and no more, subordinate to what is being filmed:

 . . . In the cinema at present, the camera has become a sort of god. You have a camera, fixed on its tripod or crane, which is just like a heathen altar; about it are the high priests—the director, cameraman, assistants—who bring victims before the camera,

like burnt offerings, and cast them into the flames. And the cam-
era is there, immobile — or almost so — and when it does move it
follows patterns ordained by the high priests, not by the victims.
   Now, I am trying to extend my old ideas, and to establish that
the camera finally has only one right — that of recording what
happens. That's all. I don't want the movements of the actors to
be determined by the camera, but the movements of the camera
to be determined by the actor. This means working rather like a
newsreel cameraman. . . . It is the cameraman's duty to make
it possible for us to see the spectacle, rather than the duty of the
spectacle to take place for the benefit of the camera.[63]

   Renoir means this standard to apply to all forms of cinema,
but when considered in conjunction with comments he makes
later in the same interview about the power of reality as some-
times seen on television, his observations become very much
to the point. In speaking of televised political hearings, presum-
ably the Army-McCarthy hearings, he says, "I found this tremen-
dously exciting . . . and somehow an indecent spectacle to watch
(ellipsis in original). Yet this indecency came nearer the knowl-
edge of man than many films."[64] The idea of the camera in ser-
vice of the subject is more suited to unstaged reality, for in fiction
the subject matter exists solely for the purpose of being filmed. In
cinema verite, the subject is of interest whether the filmmaker is
there to record it or not. In other kinds of films, the way the ma-
terial is shot and edited is usually a prime determining factor in
whether the finished work is of interest. Cinema verite adopts
Renoir's idea of the camera and uses it as a recording tool, so
that the events themselves, "the knowledge of man," become the
standard we use to judge the film.

Siegfried Kracauer

Throughout this study so far, we have noted a continuing dis-
satisfaction with the artifices of traditional storytelling techniques
as they have been employed in cinema. The objection has
generally been to the preparation of stories prior to filming in-
stead of allowing stories to grow out of the events themselves.

To recount this thread, here are several examples previously
noted:
1. "The director ordinarily *invents* the plot for the scenario—Dziga
Vertov *detects* it." (italics in original)
2. "A story must come out of the life of a people, not from the
actions of individuals." (Flaherty)
3. "I am interested in the drama of things we happen to encoun-
ter, not those we plan." (Zavattini)

   The relationship between planned and encountered drama is
the subject of extended consideration in Siegfried Kracauer's
Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality. Kracauer's
book is based upon his belief that "films come into their own
when they record and reveal physical reality. . . . this reality in-
cludes many phenomena which could hardly be perceived were
it not for the motion picture camera's ability to catch them on the
wing."[65] His feeling that film "gravitates toward unstaged reality"
is strong enough for him to assert that "staging is aesthetically
legitimate to the extent that it evokes the illusion of actuality,"[66]
but he limits his argument almost exclusively to the domain of
prescripted fiction films. Nevertheless, many of his arguments
are applicable to cinema verite and reflect a faith in the real world
that is shared by these films. The appearance of Kracauer's book
in 1960, just prior to the wide-scale blossoming of this move-
ment, marks it as an important step in the aesthetic battle on
behalf of reality in cinema that in many ways justifies the goals of
cinema verite. Kracauer has been properly rebuked for his intol-
erance toward many kinds of films, but, without assuming that
he speaks for the whole of cinema, there is still a good deal of
merit in his argument.

   Kracauer does touch briefly on the nonfiction film, and it is pri-
marily in connection with the notion now under discussion, the
relationship between realistic and formative tendencies. He quite
correctly locates the heart of the conflict: "On the one hand, the
documentary maker eliminates the intrigue so as to be able to

open his lens on the world; on the other, he feels urged to re-introduce dramatic action in the very same interest."[67] As Kracauer observes, the faith in reality without plot has never been very strong: "In fact, the body of existing documentaries testifies to a persistent tendency towards dramatization."[68] To this seemingly insoluble dilemma, Kracauer proposes a solution. Assuming that stories will creep in one way or another, he suggests that some are more suitable than others.

It is here that we are back to the quotations listed at the beginning of this section, for Kracauer, too, is a proponent of "discovered" drama. His term is the "found story," which, he says, "covers all stories found in the material of actual physical reality."[69] His description of this finding process sounds like Flaherty's Eskimo influence: "When you have watched for long enough the surface of a river or a lake you will detect certain patterns in the water which may have been produced by a breeze or some eddy. Found stories are in the nature of such patterns." And, further, on a point of such importance that a good deal more substantiation would have been desirable, Kracauer considers found stories to be entirely unlike their fictional counterparts: "Since the found story is part and parcel of the raw material in which it lies dormant, it cannot possibly develop into a self-contained whole—which means that it is almost the opposite of the theatrical story." Also, the found story "tends to render incidents typical of the world around us."

Kracauer is very much taken with Flaherty's storytelling methods, especially his avoidance of strict linear narrative. While Kracauer believes Flaherty took it for granted that a story is desirable in documentary (a point with which he agrees), Flaherty depended upon a succession of typical incidents for structure rather than upon a story growing "from the actions of individuals." That is, Flaherty avoided situations too closely tied to unique personalities in order to lessen the strictures of forced interpretation through dramatic form. We should feel, for instance, that Nanook is one Eskimo of many, that because his

"story" is freed from tight plot through the universality of his constant struggle for survival, it has a significance beyond his actual circumstance. According to Kracauer, Flaherty's lessened reliance on plot was due to his being "afraid lest fully developed, rounded-out stories, which often have pronounced patterns of meaning, [would] prevent the camera from having its say."[70]

Kracauer's wariness toward fully fleshed-out drama is difficult to reconcile with his refusal to abandon narrative entirely. His preference for the "found story" and the "slight narrative" (the latter a description of Flaherty's storytelling methods taken from Rotha)[71] still indicates a firm commitment to dramatic structure in documentary film. While Kracauer emphasizes that stories should be elicited from "the raw material of life rather than subjecting the raw material to pre-established demands,"[72] this distinction is rather vague. "Raw material," as we shall see, may itself be highly dramatic, so the very selection of subject matter may be a marked element of preconceived structure. In practice, we have little way of knowing whether a story does indeed come out of the material or whether it is forcibly extracted.

While Kracauer's arguments concerning the found story and the slight narrative may provide some justification for the persistent dependence upon story in cinema verite, his most valuable contribution for our purposes is his delineation of the problem rather than his overly conservative conclusion. That a possible conflict exists between uncontrolled events and the varieties of meanings permitted by imposed structures is a complex, crucial issue in cinema verite.

The attempt in this chapter has been to shed some light on the intent behind cinema-verite filmmaking through discussion of some ideas that anticipated it. Influences from fields other than filmmaking, however, have scarcely been considered. A comprehensive analysis of the development of cinema verite would include, among other topics, influences of written journalism, photography, photojournalism, and television, as well as a clearer

picture of the traditional forms of documentary (including types popular on television). Such an analysis is not within the scope of this volume. It is hoped, however, that even such a brief background as the one given in this chapter will refute the suggestion, too prevalent in studies of this nature, that the methods of film-making under discussion popped up spontaneously and without precedent in the 1960s.