

UNMASKING THE TERMINOLOGICAL BATTLE: CINEMA-VERITE VS. DIRECT CINEMA IN NON-FICTION FILMMAKING OF THE 1960S

In the realm of non-fiction cinema, the 1960s brought forth numerous technical innovations, such as the lightweight and silent 16mm camera or synchronous sound recording, which led to the emergence of fresh forms. In the context of terminology and theory, we can observe the emergence of novel trends.



Filmmakers and theorists, in an attempt to distance themselves from the label of "documentary film," propose a variety of expressions to define, figuratively speaking, this new wave of films closely linked to reality. Deluged with akin yet distinct terms such as "cinéma-vérité," "direct cinema," "Candid Eye," "Living Camera," etc., it's easy to become entangled in the nuances of different concepts whose meanings can significantly vary depending on the context of usage. Even experts can't reach a consensus: French historians tend to reject the notion of "cinéma-vérité," despite it being the most widely used term at the time, in favor of "direct cinema." Conversely, English-speaking scholars and critics prefer the term "cinéma-vérité" while reserving "direct cinema" for handheld camera filmmaking. Indeed, the terminological battle is far from over, despite the efforts of many theorists and critics.

CINÉMA-VÉRITÉ, FOR LACK OF A BETTER TERM

The birth of the so-called "cinéma-vérité" dates back to the 1960s. It was actually in an article for *France-Observateur*, titled "For the New 'cinéma-vérité,'" that Edgar Morin first used this term, which is essentially a French equivalent of Dziga Vertov's concept, "Kino-Pravda," as translated by Georges Sadoul. Although Morin only speaks of selected ethnographic or sociological films presented at the Florence Festival, the text became a kind of manifesto for the new documentary film. "Can cinema not be one of the means to break this membrane that isolates us from each other, whether in the subway or on the street, in the stairwell of the building? The quest for the new cinéma-vérité is, at the same time, a quest for a cinema of fraternity," Morin suggests, rejecting a distant relationship with the viewer and a vertical gaze on the filmed subject.

Going back to the early days of the documentary genre, we will find a surprising definition: in 1915, once the word "documentaire" was substantiated in the French language, it strictly referred to didactic films—technical, industrial, or agricultural—or travel films.

It wasn't until nine years later that the concept of a "documentary film" appeared in the English language in the writings of John Grierson, referring to Robert Flaherty's film "Moana." In the 1930s-1940s, the documentary film, claiming a special relationship between cinema and reality, gained significant popularity. Screened just before a feature film as the first part of a projection, these documentaries became an educational tool, earning them the nickname "docucus."

In light of this didactic approach in the documentary genre, some young filmmakers in the 1960s attempted to renew the genre by aiming to establish a close connection with reality, erasing the distance between the viewer and the film through raw footage shot with 16mm synchronous cameras, rather than describing it clearly.

Nevertheless, the concept of "cinéma-vérité" appears rather rarely in the media landscape in 1960. In 1961, the film "Chronicle of a Summer" (*Chronique d'un été*, dir. by Rouch and Morin) claimed to be cinéma-vérité; in fact, the expression is asserted in the very first sentence of the film's voice-over and on its poster. In the following year, the press, referring more to "Chronicle of a Summer" than to Morin's article, began to group several

documentary films into a movement called *cinéma-vérité*: "L'Amérique insolite" (François Reichenbach, France, 1960), "Shadows" (John Cassavetes, USA, 1961), "La pyramide humaine" (Jean Rouch, France, 1961), or "Les inconnus de la terre" and "Regard sur la folie" (Mario Ruspoli, France, 1962).

Some filmmakers, like the Franco-Italian director Mario Ruspoli, openly expressed their affiliation with the new trend, even if they sometimes saw it as primarily a matter of technical innovations, especially the lightweight camera.

Ruspoli's films quickly gained popularity and were considered a new "Chronicle of a Summer," with the same production company, the same cinematographers, and the same camera prototype, the KMT.

The concept of "*cinéma-vérité*" became widely popular between 1961 and 1963 and encompassed numerous French, American, and Canadian films that, thanks to lightweight cameras, claimed an unprecedented proximity to reality. The theoretical relevance of this term was not questioned until 1963. Before, other terms sporadically

appeared, such as "Living Camera" and "Candid Eye," corresponding to the titles of documentary film series produced respectively by the Drew Association. In retrospect, when delving into in-depth studies of *cinéma-vérité*, one notices a significant disparity within the corpus of films, which later raised doubts.

The year 1963 witnessed numerous encounters among filmmakers, confronted with other films within their own movement. The most significant cinema-related meeting took place in Lyon in March, 1963, during the MIPE-TV Study Days. During this event, discussions revolved around technical, theoretical, and artistic questions. Shortly thereafter, two fractions crystallized—on one side, the opponents like Ruspoli and Leacock, who assigned a primary role to the filmmaking tool in their approach, nicknamed "*cinéma direct*"; on the other side, supporters of "*cinéma-vérité*," including Georges Sadoul, Joris Ivens, and Jean Rouch, for whom the pursuit of "truth" was primarily a theoretical and ideological question.

Both camps could agree on the symbolic power attributed to technology, especially the importance

of discretion and comfort, as well as the necessary disappearance of certain equipment such as tripods, clappers, or artificial lighting. For Mario Ruspoli and Richard Leacock, lightweight equipment is a significant investment: silent and easy to carry, the camera becomes somewhat invisible to the subjects being filmed. Soon, the proponents of so-called "cinéma direct" go further: for them, the new techniques not only hint at their own 'disappearance' but also that of the filmmaking presence. In this case, the term "direct" does not refer to a live broadcast, instantly aired, but as a synonym for immediate, without mediation. In other words, defenders of "cinéma-direct" view the tool as a utopian theoretical stance of absolute mimicry by the film crew.

Consequently, some "direct" filmmakers faced criticism, especially from Georges Sadoul, who couldn't accept the departure from Vertovian aesthetics: "You simply do not create truth by recording it," he argued. For Sadoul, Ivens, or Rouch, the new techniques allowed them to realize Vertov's ideas, to take truth as raw material and use it either objectively or demonstratively to express a truth that the film's author carries or believes to carry within them. In

summary, according to the proponents of the original term, the pursuit of "truth" is a principle, a moral requirement preceding filming, not an accidental consequence of the technique, as is the case with the advocates of "direct." Consequently, the "Vertovian" truth, according to Sadoul, is used to construct a cinematic discourse that reflects the personality of the author.

With lively voices, Georges Sadoul and Joris Ivens—the latter concluding his MIPE-TV speech with the exclamation "long live cinéma-vérité"—attempted to connect the new documentary cinema to a theoretical doctrine and aesthetics. In the French-speaking context, the winners are well known: cinéma direct. The success of this concept is largely attributed to the editorial activity of its key proponents, with texts such as Mario Ruspoli's "Groupe synchrone cinématographique léger" (1963), Louis Marcorelles' "Une esthétique du réel, le cinéma direct" (1964), and Richard Leacock's "Naissance de la Living Camera" (1965), among others. On the other hand, cinéma-vérité was never extensively developed in lengthy publications and remains somewhat of a mystery for historians.

The 1960s marked a period of renewal for the documentary genre. The didactic and instructional aspects that were prevalent in its early days gave way to a desire to capture and display the truth. However, after an initial wave of enthusiasm, filmmakers themselves began to doubt the new terminology, which had been coined somewhat accidentally, and they divided into two camps, sparking an endless terminological debate.

Sources

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Gabriel Denaes is a film journalist and photographer.

gabrieldenaes.online