Like most forms of art and media, film reflects the eternal human search for truth. Dziga Vertov was perhaps the first to fully articulate this search in “Man with a Movie Camera.” Many years later he was finally followed by the likes of Jean Rouch, Richard Leacock and Fred Wiseman who, though more provocative and technologically advanced, sought to bring reality and truth to film. Edgar Morin describes it best when, in reference to _The Chronicle of a Summer_, he said he was trying to get past the “Sunday best” portrayed on newscasts to capture the “authenticity of life as it is lived”. Both direct cinema and cinema verité hold this principle in common – as I see it, the proponents of each were trying to lift the veneer that existed between audience and subject or actor. In a mediated space like film, the veneer may never completely vanish, but new techniques such as taking the camera off the tripod, using sync sound that allowed people to speak and be heard, and engaging tools of inquiry despite controversy were and remain giant leaps forward in the quest for filmic truth.

Though much about these movements grew directly out of technological developments, they also grew out of the social changes that were taking place in the 1960s. According to documentary historian Erik Barnouw, both direct cinema and cinema verité had a distinct democratizing effect by putting real people in front of the camera and revealing aspects of life never before captured on film. And according to Colin Young, both movements were a reaction to “didactic educational films” and “highly manipulative classic melodrama” as evidenced by their characteristic lack of narration and editorializing. However, this is where the paths of Direct Cinema and Cinema Verité begin to diverge. Barnouw describes it best when he contrasts cinema Verité filmmakers as provocateurs, participants and catalysts for crisis, while direct cinema filmmakers are characterized as the invisible bystander, waiting for crisis and only taking advantage of available events. Essentially, it is the role of the filmmaker and how he or she uses that role that is the decisive difference between direct cinema and cinema verité. In this paper, I would like to examine the role
of the filmmaker in two different parts: the filmmaker gaze and the filmmaker stance. Specifically, I would like to answer these questions: What makes a film more or less voyeuristic? What is the role of filmmaker in this process? Is it possible and is it necessary to hold to an ideal of objective filmmaking?

Filmmaker Gaze

“The essential characteristics of observational cinema will always make it vulnerable to charges of voyeurism and duplicity.”

Voyeurism is an issue I have been wrestling with since we watched John Marshall’s film “An Argument about a Marriage.” And as we have progressed onward to more observational films, this issue has only become a more important factor in deciphering truth inherent in film. The above quote is in direct reference to Frederick Wiseman’s *Titticut Follies* and the legal pressure that resulted from his work in a mental institution for that film. Wiseman’s approach in all of his films has been to make himself and his crew such a routine presence that they are able to capture a more truthful sense of reality. In *High School*, this is what makes the film so completely riveting. However, Wiseman is the first to disclaim any ideas about film truth achieved by this method. Instead, he refers to his films as “reality fictions.” Perhaps, this is due to the fact that his ratio of film to edited product is often 20 or 30:1. There is much that the camera can and does capture, but the final product is hardly a repository of the camera’s steady, framed gaze.

It is interesting then that in the case of *High School* and *Titticut Follies*, the subjects later resented their portrayal by Wiseman. They gave him complete access to view their lives or their lives at work and were disappointed with Wiseman’s selective edits and the ensuing public criticism. This raises an important point about informed consent. If a filmmaker follows the direct cinema method of being a fly-on-the-wall, privy to most details and/or interactions of a subject’s life, then I would argue that the subject is unable to fully grasp how little and how much a camera is capable of capturing, nor what kind of effect the camera will have upon their subsequent actions. Also, direct cinema does not offer an alternative solution for self-representation via an interview. These factors combined make the filmmaker the most dominant presence in the film and his or her selectivity becomes tantamount to fair and accurate representation.

*Primary* is an interesting anomaly, because it focuses on the lives of politicians. And in fact, it is a tender portrayal of people hard at work in public service. By the sheer volume and pace of public life as portrayed in the film, the viewer develops a kind of sympathy for the candidates. And in the case of public officials,
rightly or wrongly, there is a general feeling that we, the public should have more access to their lives. I think there is also the sense that public officials possess more power than the average private citizen putting them on a par with the power belonging to the filmmakers ie. Though the filmmakers claimed total access, Kennedy and Humphrey handlers would likely restrict some access to the candidate. In addition, the filmmakers did not go “home” with the candidates, nor did they have Wiseman’s 20-40 days with the candidates.

Jean Rouch in contrast to Wiseman, Leacock and others in direct cinema is neither tied to examining the tiny details of lives, nor to any kind of exacting representation through constant observation. Rouch instead facilitates truth by facilitating the human experience and though much of his work is experimental, he takes great pains to note that this is about human experience, not experiment.\(^8\) *Chronicle of a Summer* lays bare the heartaches and hopes of many of the subjects in the film. Yet there is a sense of participation, rather than voyeuristic gaze due to the fact that Morin and Rouch play with their own role in the film. They are never disengaged or detached from the process of making the film. In fact, they act as provocateurs by showing footage to some of the characters during the process, and by showing the entire film to all of the characters and including their response in the edited film. Both filmmaker and filmed are allowed the luxury of self-representation and reaction resulting in a sense of equality never seen in direct cinema. And Rouch duplicates this effect in *Jaguar*, as well, by allowing the subjects to play with their own identities and then react via narration.

Ultimately, voyeurism is about the power vested in those who control images and the ability to articulate in some fashion, their own gaze. Dennis O’Rourke, a filmic descendant of Rouch, goes as far as to say that an equal relationship between filmmaker and filmed subject is a myth. His response is to reveal himself and his own gaze because as he says, “The gaze reveals all”.\(^9\) There is no doubt that the political action that came out of non-revealing direct cinema work like Wiseman’s on *Titticut Follies* is important and necessary and perhaps, in light of the political action that followed Wiseman’s gaze becomes more clear. However, ethnographic descendants of direct cinema like Gary Kildea with *Celso and Cora* do not examine institutions or provide “documentary reporting”. And more problematic still is the fact that Kildea is not committed to examining his own his gaze as a filmmaker, nor does he provide any meaningful reflexivity other than introducing himself to the audience. Without some kind of disclosure from the filmmaker, there is a portion of truth that is missing even when direct cinema avails the audience to all the details of the lives of the subjects.
Filmmaker Stance

“…the faith that many social scientists have in film as providing them with an ‘objective recording instrument’ is touching and almost sentimental.”

Both direct cinema and cinema verité required their practitioners to become a part of their subjects’ lives. That fact, in itself, compromises any mythical notion of objectivity. Primary, High School, and Chronicle of a Summer all required some kind of a relationship with the subjects. Yet, while Rouch is self-involved, ever-present in his films, many direct cinema filmmakers held to an ideal of pure observation. Robert Drew goes as far as to say: “The film maker’s personality is in no way directly involved in directing the action.” I can empathize with their need to reduce “reduce intervention and thereby improve observation”. But, as Colin Young points out film aesthetics are about “selectivity and subjectivity.” The filmmaker cannot help but be responsible for what the camera does and does not frame, what the edited film does or does not contain.

Wiseman is one of the few counterbalances within direct cinema who, while holding to the stylistic terms of direct cinema, believed that his films were very personal and subjective. But even Wiseman believed that he had no preconceived notions about his subjects prior to filming. When you consider his past history with Titticut Follies or the fact that he did go to high school and then made a film about it, I find it hard to believe that he did not have any preconceptions. In addition, so firm was his believe in his absolute right to control the final product, he absolutely refused to acknowledge subject response or viewer response to his films. Wiseman is quoted as saying: “I don’t believe in this whole business of testing out a film with an audience, or asking somebody else what they think or even showing it to a small group and asking for their reaction.”

Cinema verité took a completely different approach to issues of the filmmaker role and objectivity. As writer Brian Winston points out, Rouch took on the problem directly and solved it by involving himself in the film. In Jaguar, there is a constant sense of his presence though he is never actually seen. In Chronicle of a Summer, both he and Morin feature prominently which seems appropriate considering they were turning ethnographic study back on themselves and their own city. This kind of participation, in both films pushes the subjects further than direct cinema possibly could.
In comparison, each method uncovers two different kinds of truth. Take the example of *Chronicle of a Summer* and *High School*: While *Chronicle* reveals inner motivations, ideals and struggles, *High School* takes on the outward challenges of dealing with an institution. *Chronicle* turns up the heat with invasive probing and focus on the individual, while *High School* watches nameless, yet recognizable individuals respond to difficult events. One is a distinctly inner revelation being pulled outward, and the other is a hopeful belief that the camera can and will capture truth in reality, a truth we miss whilst going about our daily lives.

*Jaguar* is one of the few films featured within the bounds of cinema verité and direct cinema that deals with another culture other than that of the filmmaker. Its special treatment and adherence to neither the rules of neither fiction, nor documentary make it that much more interesting, and its here that the role of Rouch as filmmaker takes on special significance. The way that Rouch participates off screen in this film is very important. There is camaraderie evident between subject and filmmaker. And there is a conscious awareness that the viewer is seeing the journey of individuals rather than the portrayal of a culture. By using fiction and involving himself, Rouch creates a different kind of glimpse into what he would likely call “fragments” of truth transforming the role of the filmmaker into that of contributor and participant.

**Conclusion**

Direct cinema and cinema verité, while constructed very differently seek to bring out truth rarely seen on film, even by today’s standards. Direct cinema hopes to unveil truth through detailed outward observation of events and/or subjects; cinema verité seeks any means possible to explore ideas of truth and is intrinsically an inward individual process gradually being revealed. The role of the filmmaker can either assist in the process of discovering/revealing truth or detract from it. In Rouch’s case, he uses his role to participate thereby reducing the implicit imbalance of power between subject and filmmaker. In the case of direct cinema, truth is what steps in front of the camera and what the filmmaker chooses to highlight. Documentary is rarely a matter of pure observation, however within both methods, there lays an opportunity for revelation even if mediated to greater or lesser degrees by both the camera and the filmmaker.
Notes
4. Barnouw, p. 255
6. Ibid, p. 75
7. Ibid.
9. Lutkehaus, Nancy "Excuse Me, Everything is Not All Right: On Ethnography, Film and Representation. An interview with Filmmaker Dennis O'Rourke." In Cultural Anthropology 4(4) p. 431
10. Young, p. 100
12. Ibid.
13. Young, p. 100
14. Anderson and Benson, p. 75
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Winston, p. 50