

# On Ethics and Aesthetics: *The Things I Cannot Change* and *Courage to Change*

BY Matthew Hays

*The Things I Cannot Change* (1966) is arguably one of the most aesthetically beautiful films the National Film Board has ever produced. In her second film [ed.'s note: see Thomas Waugh's article on *Merry-Go-Round* on p. 46]—now deemed by many a classic of its kind—Tanya Ballantyne Tree managed to create a groundbreaking bit of *cinéma vérité*. In particular, the film focuses on ostensibly insignificant “smaller” moments that more conventional filmmakers might have overlooked. The result is poetic: the nine children of the Bailey family putting their clothes on in the morning, one child gazing into the camera with wide eyes as she struggles with her shoes; Kenneth, the father, washing up in the sink; the children playing on the sidewalk outside the apartment; the puzzled expressions on the children's faces as their father rants about his dealings with the police. *The Things I Cannot Change* is one of the films that inspired the creation of the NFB's influential Challenge for Change program (1968–80) and one that would fuse concern for social issues and progressive change with a straightforward and seemingly undirected style.

While I feel the film's aesthetic style is laudable, I also feel the film is a textbook case of documentary filmmaking ethics gone terribly wrong. If the film set out to expose the plight of the impoverished, it also managed to severely constrain the lives of the poverty-stricken Baileys who serve as the film's subjects. Though it's arguably unfair to criticize the film in hindsight, especially after more than 35 years of documentary filmmaking, it's worth analyzing *The Things I Cannot Change*, especially when one takes into account its sequel, *Courage to Change* (Ballantyne Tree, 1986). The two stand as lightning rods for the potential pratfalls and ethical dilemmas facing social-issue filmmakers. One can certainly sense that thoughtfulness, care and consideration went into the creation of *The Things I Cannot Change*. The family is shown in all its sprawling glory, getting up in the morning and heading off to school. But the real star of the show, I would argue, is Kenneth. As British documentary filmmaker Basil Wright has noted: “The husband becomes a sort of epic character. He's one of the most odious little people you ever could have met. He's a bully, he's a coward, he's stupid, he's affectionate, he's clever, he's uneducated.”<sup>1</sup> At one point, Kenneth becomes embroiled in a nasty street fight over a lousy six dollars.

The moment when the fight scene begins is also a noteworthy moment of editing skill in the film. Pointing up the precarious state of the family's finances, shots linger over a very pregnant Gertrude, the mother, as she is examined by a doctor. Toward the end of the scene, we continue to see Gertrude but also hear the sound of an argument on the street. The sound lasts longer than a few mere seconds. The noise lingers, until we hear, “Give me my six bucks! Give it

to me!” The visuals then catch up with Kenneth, poised to get into a fight with a man on the street over the disputed six bucks. The use of a sound edit to bring the audience into a new scene is extremely clever, and the scene we find ourselves in the middle of would become one of the most controversial in the entire film.

The scene occurs as a result of the now-standard practice of following a subject around for days, if not weeks or months, with a camera crew. In this case, the camera captured Kenneth in a brawl, and he ends up with a bloody nose, humiliated and running from the police. Ballantyne Tree and her crew were criticized for not putting the camera down and stopping the violence. (In fairness, the attack happens extremely quickly, and it's difficult to know what the crew could have actually done to stop the fight; a far greater breach of ethics, I would argue, comes in *Courage to Change*.) But beyond the film's much-discussed fight sequence, the real ethical dilemma here occurs with the issue of consent and, ultimately, exploitation. The Baileys agreed to allow the filmmakers into their lives, under the rather murky—at best—auspices of social-issue filmmaking. What the Baileys didn't realize was the extent to which they would become national examples of grinding poverty. George Stoney, another Canadian film producer and director, once commented on the fate of the Baileys as a result of the movie: “The first time that family saw that film was on television, and their neighbours saw it at the same time. The children became the butt of jokes. The family began to see themselves as other poor people saw them, as people without dignity. That's the way the neighbours perceived them. They literally had to move.”<sup>2</sup> As for the filmmakers' progressive aspirations, Calvin Pryluck has argued that the film falls into the Griersonian tradition of positioning the subject as victim, and no more.<sup>3</sup> Documentary guru Bill Nichols posed the question extremely well when he asked: “What greater good justifies exposing the survival strategies of an impoverished family in *The Things I Cannot Change*?”<sup>4</sup>

Sadly, the folks behind *The Things I Cannot Change* didn't seem to learn much when, years later, the possibility for a sequel reared its head. In 1984, Ballantyne Tree was back, this time with producer Michael Rubbo, to re-examine the lives of the Baileys in a new film titled *Courage to Change*. Believe it or not, things looked even more grim for the family, and, quite frankly, for the state of documentary filmmaking ethics—when people really should have known better. This time, consent was cast in a different light. The Baileys were offered \$5,000 to do the film. Although this was done to clearly correct the earlier wrong of having the poor subjects remain poor, it doesn't solve the problem of exploitation. The Baileys are so desperate for money that the \$5,000 seems something akin to dangling a carrot in

front of a starving donkey. And again, the Baileys humiliation would be shared by the nation. The film was distributed by the NFB and also shown as a feature on the CBC's nightly national newscast.

In brief, Kenneth remains a dire alcoholic, but has also had a brain tumour removed. Simply put, he's in bad shape. One of the daughters has had an accident that does not allow her to use a typewriter, thus she's in a restrictive job working for a low wage. Due to her financial circumstances, she's given up her child, whom she doesn't feel she can adequately care for. One sequence has the filmmaker question her repeatedly about her child, despite the woman's requests not to discuss the matter. Another of the Bailey daughters has been in a devastating car accident, one that leaves her unable to communicate, severely brain damaged and stuck in hospital. The camera lingers particularly cruelly over this woman, raising another nagging but inescapable question about documentary practice: how do you gain consent from someone in this mental state? Clearly, Ballantyne Tree and Rubbo didn't bother to pause to answer this question.

Perhaps the most horrifying exploitation occurs in direct relation to the first film. Ballantyne Tree shows clips from *The Things I Cannot Change* to the family with a video-playback unit. As the fight scene plays itself out on the monitor, we are shown images of the family's faces as they witness their father's humiliation once again. After the scene is over, she lets the camera roll as the family reacts. Not surprisingly, a daughter gets up to leave the room. Kenneth grabs her, pulling her close to him, and begins to sob, apologizing to his daughter for the film. The camera moves in for the close-up. "What I didn't like," one son states later in the film, "was watching my dad get beat up." No kidding.

Some may argue I have been too critical of Ballantyne Tree in this article. The filmmakers claimed to have made *The Things I Cannot Change* and *Courage to Change* in the greater cause of progressive social change. If we are to believe them, a thoughtful analysis of their faults and failings is imperative. What these two films do is aptly illustrate the pitfalls of cinéma-vérité filmmaking, its earnest and well-meaning beginnings, and its potential for exploitation, sensationalism and subject degradation. **TAKE ONE**

#### Notes:

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1. G. Roy Levin, *Documentary Explorations: 15 Interviews with Filmmakers* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 49-50.
2. Alan Rosenthal, *The Documentary Conscience: A Casebook in Film Making* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), p. 354.
3. Calvin Pryluck, "Ultimately We Are All Outsiders," *New Challenges for Documentary*. Edited by Alan Rosenthal (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 255-68.
4. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 92.

