

The King of Cinéma-Vérité: An Interview with Allan King

By Tammy Stone

"There are few Canadian filmmakers whose impact has been central to the medium, but Allan King is unquestionably one of them. His contribution to the documentary form, most notably that strand known as cinéma-vérité, is second to none. Warrendale (1967) and A Married Couple (1969) are two of the most important documentaries ever made and are acknowledged as such by critics and experts around the world." Piers Handling, Director, Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), from the preface to *Allan King: Filmmaker*, edited by Seth Feldman.

Cinéma-vérité was a term coined by French film historian Georges Sadoul in reference to Jean Rouch's and Edgar Morin's 1961 feature-length documentary *Chronique d'un été*, which comprised a series of street interviews with the people of Paris about their various states of mind edited together into a series of long, uninterrupted takes. This technique was made possible by the introduction of lightweight, compact 16-mm cameras with provisions made for direct recording of synchronized sound. Its roots can be traced back to the American director Robert Flaherty with his famous documentary on Inuit life, *Nanook of the North* (1922), through Italian neo-realism (Roberto Rosellini's *Open City*, 1945) and the French new wave. But more importantly, it was the introduction of television in the late 1940s with its need for immediate coverage of the news and the demand for content that spurred the movement in the 1950s and early 1960s. The movement, known as cinéma-vérité in France and Canada and direct cinema in America, grew spontaneously, with an emphasis on the



Left to right: Allan King with cinematographers William Brayne and Richard Leiterman.

"filmmaker" over the director and glorified the function of the cameraman as an immediate link between the camera and the subject. One of its most famous Canadian advocates is Vancouver-born Allan King, who was honoured at the 2002 Toronto International Film Festival with a comprehensive retrospective and mimeograph, *Allan King: Filmmaker*, published by TIFF in conjunction with Indiana University Press.

Would you please talk about the emergence of cinéma-vérité in Canada and how you became involved?

The whole process emerged out of expectations, not one event. For some people, it happened because those types of films were all you could make during the 1950s and 1960s. That was the case with me. Also I didn't have the sense that I could write fiction. Other than drama for television, documentary filmmaking was all that was feasible in Canada in those days. I had a chance to see Robert Flaherty's films [*Nanook of the North*, *Moana*]. Then I managed to get a job at the first CBC station in Vancouver and I began to think about making documentaries. We were always looking for more flexibility in shooting news footage. In television, there was a need for immediate news and there was a need for a camera that could shoot sound and picture at the same time. A company called Cinevoice brought out a 16-mm camera that recorded optical sound, and then it added a 100-foot magazine. Soon there were people shooting with that equipment. The sound was poor, but I think that was the first impulse for vérité.

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I wouldn't call what Jean Rouch was doing [in France and Africa] *cinéma-vérité* any more than I would call my first film, *Skid Row*, *cinéma-vérité* because the sound wasn't in sync. There was no *vérité* until we had sync sound. What Terence Macartney-Filgate [in the NFB/CBC series *Candid Eye*, 1958-61] was doing was not *cinéma-vérité*. He would get sync sound in some situations, like in his film *Blood and Fire*, but that film was loaded with narrative. However, I think extreme distaste for narration is silly. If it's saying something sensible and not telling you how to think, it can be very helpful, very useful and very interesting.

There has been a lot of comparison between cinéma-vérité and the rash of so-called reality television today.

Oh, you mean where they take the camera off the tripod and shake it? *Vérité* came about swiftly as the demands of television—which provided the market—could mobilize the different equipment and sound gear to serve its needs. At the time of Flaherty, there wasn't much of a demand, at least in the theatres. There was a particular audience for

non-fiction films and there were newsreels, but it just wasn't a big market. When the demand came with television, when people wanted everything more immediately, filmmakers were able to record actuality, or reality, as it occurred, spontaneously. They started chopping off the top of the camera and adding a Mitchell magazine that could run 400-foot rolls on a light body, even 1,200-foot rolls. At the same time, the Nagra tape recorder was developed, which was initially operated with an external battery. Then it developed into a self-powered, battery-driven machine. All this came along because there was demand to catch conversation as it happened, without rehearsal. So it was the technology that made *cinéma-vérité* possible. This only comes about because somebody wants to do something and thinks very hard, "It would be better to have a wheel than a square," and so on. This is how things develop.

"It was the technology that made cinéma-vérité possible."
- KING

What are your thoughts on the "truth" claim that has been made by some vérité filmmakers and used against them by scholars and other filmmakers?

What is "truth" is a problem that has puzzled philosophers ever since Plato. You do get a kind of truth with

cinéma-vérité, and you do get a kind of a truth from reporting. As for absolute truth, the only absolute truth is in logic. However, cinéma-vérité filmmakers did discover that one does get an immediacy of behaviour that there's no other way to achieve. To say that we still haven't overcome the problem of the interaction between the object and the perceiver is a philosophically devastating revelation, but you know, nobody else has overcome this problem. Werner Carl Heisenberg's uncertainty principle states that there has to be an interaction between the target and the object being shot at it. The best you can do—the best you can ever do—is to be aware of this fact and take it into account with what is going on; use whatever sense you have as an artist to assess and interpret what is happening in the words and behaviour of the subject you are filming. However, the kind of immediacy possible with cinéma-vérité is very powerful, an entirely fresh opportunity. It's always been available to novelists, but then it requires a translation into words, which has its own kind of subjectivity.

For filmmakers, it's in the editing.

This happens when you turn the camera on and off. What's interesting is always in the eye of the beholder. One is always quite sensitive to making choices and interpretation. That's the way we live. That's being human. I think there's always a wish that cinéma-vérité could be more than human. I think everybody has fantasies of impotence. In my experience I've never met anybody without them. Everybody would like to see what their parents were doing in bed. But if you actually saw it, what then? I don't know. That's part of the fascination with vérité. People want to break down barriers.

Were you thinking about this particular aspect of fascination with vérité when you shot A Married Couple?

Well, no. I was already being charged with voyeurism in *Warrendale*, and filmmaking, from the outset, tends to be voyeuristic.

Warrendale is still shocking today, although at the time of its release it must have been unfathomable. Although it commissioned the film, the CBC wouldn't air it. What do you attribute this to, the subject matter?

Yes. I think it's the subject matter that surprised people with aspects of their own reality that they had not looked at or were unlikely to have looked at. At a screening in New York in 1999, I showed *A Married Couple* and *Warrendale*. It was startling, because the films had the same impact as they did when they first appeared in 1967 and 1970.

How did you achieve the intense interaction in A Married Couple?

The camera was right in the room. It was never more than 10 or 15 feet away, and sometimes only four or five feet, and the couple [Billy and Antoinette Edwards] were committed to exploring the tensions in their marriage. I mean, they avoided it for a long time, but people always avoid things. I think it was a fairly natural process.



Did you arrive at a point where you felt they weren't acting in front of the camera anymore?

Well, it's interesting. I was having a conversation about acting the other night. It's very hard. I would say that what is going on [in *A Married Couple*] isn't really acting; however, it often was—in the sense they were making things up—and therefore it's not real. But I think that's a misunderstanding of acting. I don't think that they ever were



ished, preserved and welcomed, or you can cripple it by telling people what to do or what it means. In my experience, people need to discover the meaning for themselves. You can engage in an exchange about it, but everybody you work with has to discover it in their own terms. Otherwise, they'd be doing what you tell them to do. Robots can do that, but not people. Not unless you're living in a dictatorship and want to be dictated to behave like robots. But that doesn't tell us much about reality.

totally unaware of the camera. I think that people, at least in the films I've done in *cinéma-vérité* style, are always aware of the camera because that's the reason they get involved in the first place. They want to express something, and expressing something means you have to explore it. So that kind of experiential exploration is at the heart of the contract between the filmmaker and the person being filmed. It takes awhile for trust to develop, for the observer—the camera and crew—to be relatively “candid,” as it were. And that, I suppose, has to do with losing self-consciousness. Then devotedness to the task builds, and it builds as long as there is trust and collaboration. In a sense, the same thing occurs with acting. There are actors who act, and they're awful. And then there are actors who are able to live in the moment, to go moment by moment in a film or a play, and you find it totally convincing. When you're fortunate and everything is going right, it feels like an experience of what is known; it reflects one's own experience, one's perception of how things happen between people. That sense of veracity gives the most of what one can expect out of reality, of any experience. It feels genuine, totally a product of the commitment and dedication of the people working.

*So it is not something particular to the *cinéma-vérité* style?*

No. It's the same as working with professional actors. You can't tell an actor how to act. You can't direct them. You can tell them to “move here” and “move there” as you become more skilled and can block quickly; however, either an actor knows how to act or not. In my experience, you can only provide the conditions in which people can work. The imaginative expression, as it were, can be nour-

*Would it still be your preference to work in *cinéma-vérité*?*

Oh, it's much more interesting. I mean, interviews are fine, but *vérité* is the most terrifying, challenging and, if it works, the most rewarding filmmaking experience. It's the next best thing to being a writer. There was an article in the paper the other day where someone said: “If you want to say what you really want to say, write a novel, don't write a film.” *Cinéma-vérité* is a contradiction because in a lot of respects it's like a novel. *A Married Couple*—Billy and Antoinette, in those particular 10 weeks, in those circumstances—is like a fiction in the same way that the people who emerge in a novel don't come out of nowhere. They come out of the experience of the person who is writing them. In psychoanalysis you learn about the process of transfer, projecting our experience onto other people—reactive projection back and forth—and we exchange, such that the objects of your mind are fiction. They are based on reality, but they are, in a sense, constructive. The people that come out on paper from the mind of a writer reflect that same sort of thing. Good writing, of course, is able to rise above literal, biographical material. It's why almost all books that are based on actual experience, actual events and actual people, are invariably banal and don't give us anything particularly imaginative at all. The creative part comes from the writer. With *cinéma-vérité*, something magical can happen. The task of the filmmaker is to shape it into a dramatic form.

You have called this process “actuality drama.”

That's a fancy way of saying the same thing. It's still

cinéma-vérité, because in all of those films the filmmaker is invariably trying to find a dramatic form. We're fascinated with drama. I haven't figured out where that comes from, but we need conflict, something needs to happen, to give the film its shape. Even in character-driven films, like the Maysles brothers' *Salesman*, where there is less plot and it's more about the exploration of character, it's still about finding moments of conflict in which the character will emerge. It's interesting that character will emerge in conflict, as distinct from love. And if the film is about love, it's about the conflict, about achieving, consummating love. So conflict seems to be a powerful aspect of the human experience.

When you made Warrendale, had you seen a lot of the other work going on in vérité?

I'd seen Jean Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* and some of his African films. I had also seen Douglas Leiterman's and Beryl Fox's *One More River*, which was made for the CBC's *Intertel* series.

So you hadn't seen a lot of the NFB films or any of the American direct-cinema films? Did you, in a sense, develop your ideas independently?

No, actually I learned from what other people were doing. Douglas Leiterman drew my attention to it first. But I went off documentaries for awhile and made a number of films that were shot like vérité but with acting. On the CBC's *Document* series [1964-66], they wanted documentaries, but I wanted drama. So we did scripts based on real people. They were not like vérité, not with the same fluidity and depth you can achieve with vérité or the films by John Cassavetes. In 1961, I shot a film about a couple who ended up having a lot of problems [*Dreams*] and suddenly I started to cry. I thought: "What am I doing here? What do I think I'm doing here, playing God?" And so I had to think a lot about it, and I finally concluded that you can't make people change. People will do what they want to do. They hesitate, do foolish things, and you

can't change them.

That thought has fascinating implications for why vérité can work because you are capturing things that can not change, despite the presence of the camera.

It's true. Something different occurs, but they are essentially the same people. The huge advantage that cinéma-vérité has—what most people aren't aware of and you see very little description of—is what one gets out of shooting other people's lives. You get an extraordinary revelation of their unconscious, particularly their unconscious thoughts, because it's all there in the dialogue. Skilled writers of dramatic work with extraordinarily great devotion can accomplish the same effect, but it's terrifically hard to achieve. The fact is, it's all there in cinéma-vérité. That really is what you're achieving with vérité, or spontaneous film, if you, as a filmmaker, have anything to express and if the people you are filming are committed to being open. Then it can occur. The thing is, if the subjects are making it up—pretending or acting for the camera—if you have any perspicuity at all, you can see through it. It's not just that you can see what's going on as it's happening—whatever's being produced—it has its own code, and you can interpret it. You may not interpret it correctly, or you may need a few screenings, but people pick up what's going on. So there's two things that occur with vérité. One is avoidance behaviour, as it were, which

is legible and visible, and the other is using the camera as you use a confidante. It's a very rich and rewarding form of filmmaking.

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