

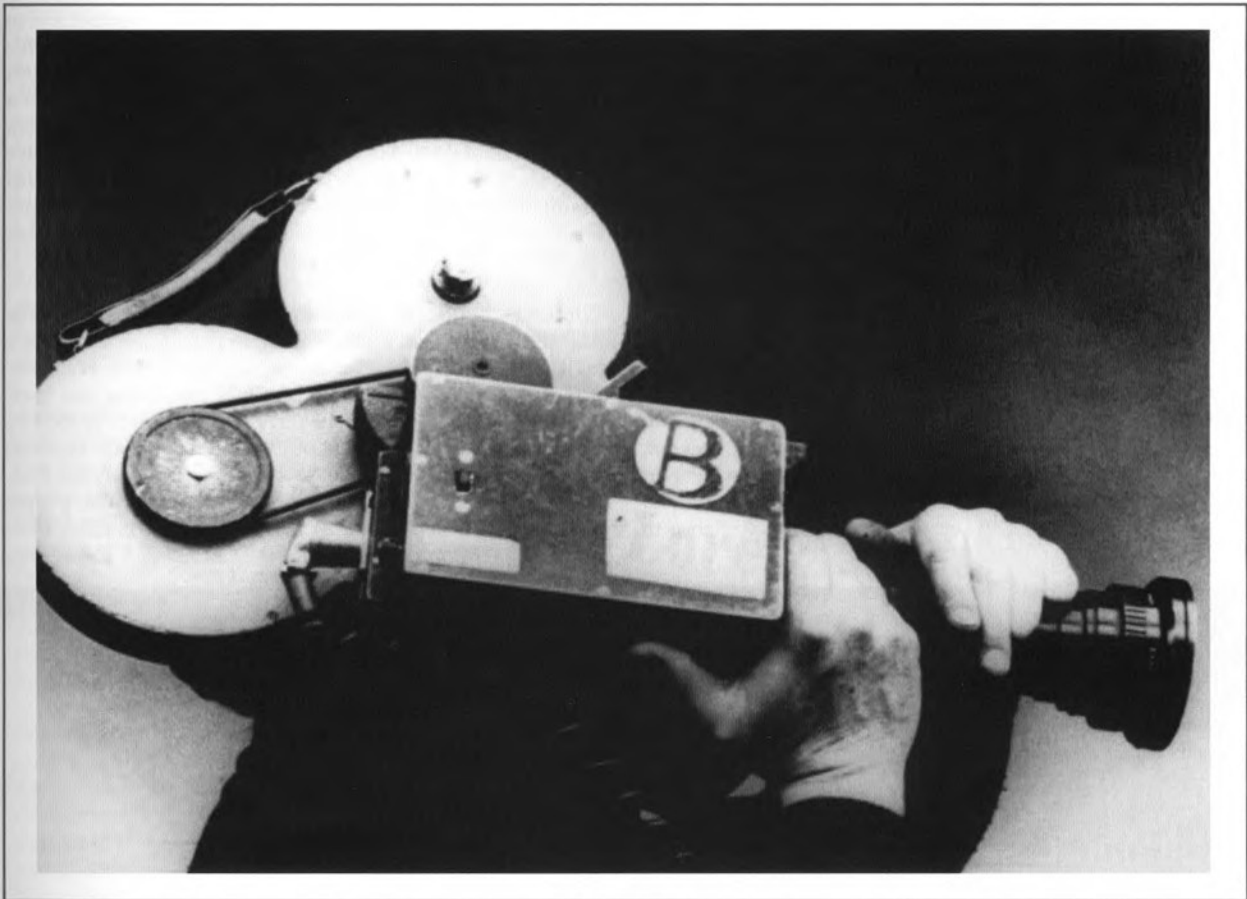
# CAMERA EYE

## Peter Wintonick's *Cinéma Vérité*: *Defining the Moment*

By Maurie Alioff

Between the extremes of those who would prefer dental surgery to sitting through a documentary and the unquestioning champions of the form, are the ambivalent majority. Viewers know that docs can give them revealing, enlightening and thrilling film moments. But they've also suffered through films that exude a creepy aura of self-righteous, didactic, even authoritarian attitudes.

In Canada, where the documentary was once the only filmmaking game in town, old-guard media types persist in sanctifying it as the sole honest and virtuous genre, the antidote to Hollywood's pretty poisons. An old joke goes: "What's the difference between Canada and Russia?" The answer: "Canada still has communists," might imply that we tolerate culture commissars who come on as if they have a natural-born right to dictate public taste. The producers of CBC-TV's *The National* are not documentary filmmakers. Yet their recent insistence that program presenters use the lame PC term "fisher," which is hated by both actual female fishermen and other CBC staffers, typifies the heavy hand still lingering in Canadian "reality" mediamaking. The proletariat and the downtrodden are the salt of the earth, as long as they behave the way they're supposed to. NFB founder John Grierson was a brilliant documentarian with an empathy for the working class, but it's unlikely that his image of them included revellers at a Korn concert. "Working class" in Grierson's iconography, meant hapless victims or noble labourers, their muscles glistening as photogenically as the subjects of Leni Riefenstahl's Naziprop and Calvin Klein ads.



*Cinéma vérité:*

"Life was the director and the people wrote the script," Pierre Perrault

Far removed from this mindset is one of this country's top documentary filmmakers, Montreal's Peter Wintonick. While committed to socially conscious projects, the co-director of *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* approaches moviemaking with a freewheeling, doctrinaire-free attitude. Wintonick is an irreverent, playful guy, whose burly frame and curly hair evoke thoughts of Irish poets and Falstaffian romps. A nonstop punster with a self-deprecating sense of humour, he tags his political stance as "Groucho Marxist."

In *Cinéma Vérité: Defining the Moment*, Wintonick's new feature-length picture about what is probably the most vital and influential of doc genres, he slyly alludes to the kind of numbing films uninitiated viewers think of when they hear the "d" word. One of *Cinéma Vérité's* running gags involves an ancient NFB instructional short in which a pair of sombre twits explain how to climb a ladder with such pedantry, they could be demonstrating the correct way to handle plutonium. "The Extension Ladder," an unwittingly surreal parody of old-time reality filmmaking, gets fingered by Wintonick's voiceover as the kind of stuff that "gave documentaries a bad name."

It was about 40 years ago that the international filmmaking movement known as *cinéma vérité* in France (a.k.a. free cinema in England, direct cinema in the United States and candid eye in this country) broke away from the kind of documentaries that treat viewers like dim schnooks. A collaboration between the NFB's English and French programs (Adam Symansky and Eric Michel producing), Wintonick's *Cinéma Vérité* is the first movie to offer an in-depth look at the genre's origins and trace its continuing impact. Shot on digital video with a small handycam for waggish inserts of Wintonick and his tiny crew (cinematographer Francis Miquet, writer/researcher Kirwan Kox) at work, *Cinéma Vérité* plays vivaciously and is information packed. It continually finds smart ways to highlight its inventory of great vérité scenes and goes *tête-à-tête* with its moviemaking subjects in several different countries. And the movie's data includes what you need to know about technical innovations like French cinéaste Jean-Pierre Beauviala's crystal-synch system, which freed cameras from tape recorders.

During the week of the film's October debut at three film festivals, Wintonick told me that he believes *vérité* is a crucial "defining moment" of movie history on a par with the invention of the

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medium and the year when films began to speak. This revolution synthesized a vision of reality without the proscenium arch. It was a technological break, born of the desire of artists to be mobile." The story of the moviemakers who first breathed life into *vérité* is one of the best known in cinema history. Legends like England's Karel Reisz and Lindsay Anderson, Americans Richard Leacock and D.A. Pennebaker, France's Jean Rouch, and Canadians Wolf Koenig, Roman Kroitor and Michel Brault, wanted to capture the quivering intensity of real life without manipulating it or telling viewers what to think about the images they were seeing. Inspired by 1920s Russian avant-gardist Dziga Vertov's *kino pravda* (cinema truth), and still photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson (who hunted big game before he decided to track human beings), they shot fast and loose with excitingly new, lightweight cameras and portable sound equipment. Their improvisations were all about "wanting what you got, rather than going out to get what you want," says Reisz in *Cinéma Vérité*. The early films "had no arguments, no polemic, no conclusions. They were asking the audience to identify with the detail."

The Film Board's "The Extension Ladder" was number five in its series called *Basic Rescue*. What was the instructional value of the early *vérité* directors filming the lifestyle of British teenagers (Reisz's *We Are the Lambeth Boys*), Paul Anka as a cocky young star (Koenig and Kroitor's *Lonely Boy*), American bible hucksters (the Maysles brothers' *Salesmen*) or Parisians on a summer day (Rouch's *Chronique d'un été*)? As Michel Brault puts it, "We can't think we're creating truth with a camera. But what we can do, is reveal something to viewers that allows them to discover their own truth."

Wintonick's doc about docs is driven in part by the impulse to construct a historical record of *vérité*'s master artists, who (like the Cuban musicians in Wim Wenders' popular *The Buena Vista Social Club*) are living out their final years. In fact, director Pierre Perrault (*Pour la suite du monde*, the lyrical classic about Québécois whale hunters) died three weeks after he was interviewed for the film. Obviously crazy about the independent-minded people he tags in *Cinéma Vérité* as a "small band of rebel filmmakers," Wintonick cuts in shots of himself charging into

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*The Blair Witch Project*: Contemporary *vérité*

Near the end of his picture, Wintonick interviews two of *The Blair Witch Project*'s producers in the appropriate setting of a Halifax graveyard. For Gregg Hale and Robin Cowie, *vérité*'s restless view of the world was, as Wintonick argues, a new syntax that deeply embedded itself in film language. The makers of *Blair Witch* felt no need to meditate on the precedents for their pseudo-doc horror movie because, as Cowie says, "You don't have to go back and learn Latin to learn that Latin words are in English." Nervous pans, improvised framings and enigmatic smears signify reality, as fans of Woody Allen's *Husbands and Wives*, not to mention TV series *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (occasionally directed by doc virtuoso Barbara Kopple), are aware.

their studios and houses, eager "to meet my idols in one fell swoop."

One of *Cinéma Vérité*'s most striking characters is Richard Leacock, who collaborated on films like the archetypal rockumentary *Monterey Pop* and Robert Drew's JFK study, *Primary*. Bursting with energy at age 78, Leacock sums up the rush of *vérité* filmmaking when he recalls his epiphany while shooting Roger Tilton's little-known 1954 short, *Jazz Dance*: "I fell in love 20 times," he says over frenetic images of young New Yorkers bopping the night away. "I was standing on tables, jumping around on the floor, all over the place. Just shoot and shoot and shoot and shoot. And it was freedom! Screw the tripods! Screw the dollies! Screw all the stuff! You can move!"



# EYE

The peripatetic moviemaker, who lives in an antique French farmhouse where he edits digital videos and fires them around the world on the Web, epitomizes *vérité's* symbiotic relationship with hipster culture and its romance with impetuous free expression. The saxophone, the electric guitar, the freewheeling Harley of movie genres, *vérité* kick-started when the Beats were in full howl and shifted into high gear during hippie times. The antics of young people inspired the Leacocks and Pennebakers (if not the Jean Rouches and Robert Drews) while straight *vérité*, transposed into movies like Richard Lester's *A Hard Day's Night*, electrified the kids. Who didn't fire up a doobie, ball, and then head out with a Nikon, Bolex or port-o-pack video camera to record impressions of the unfolding universe?

As for content, the kids were elated by the antiauthoritarian vibe of docs like Pennebaker's famous Bob Dylan portrait, *Don't Look Back*, or Frederick Wiseman's horrific vision of a mental hospital for convicts, *Titicut Follies*. In the latter film, a shrink with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth during an autopsy of a patient was one of the classic movie assholes of the 1960s, right down there with the brutal prison gang bosses in *Cool Hand Luke*. In other words, despite Leacock's sardonic crack, "Supposing people had little minicams when Jesus was crucified. Would that help things much?" most *vérité* films aimed at making the corrupt and tyrannical look bad.

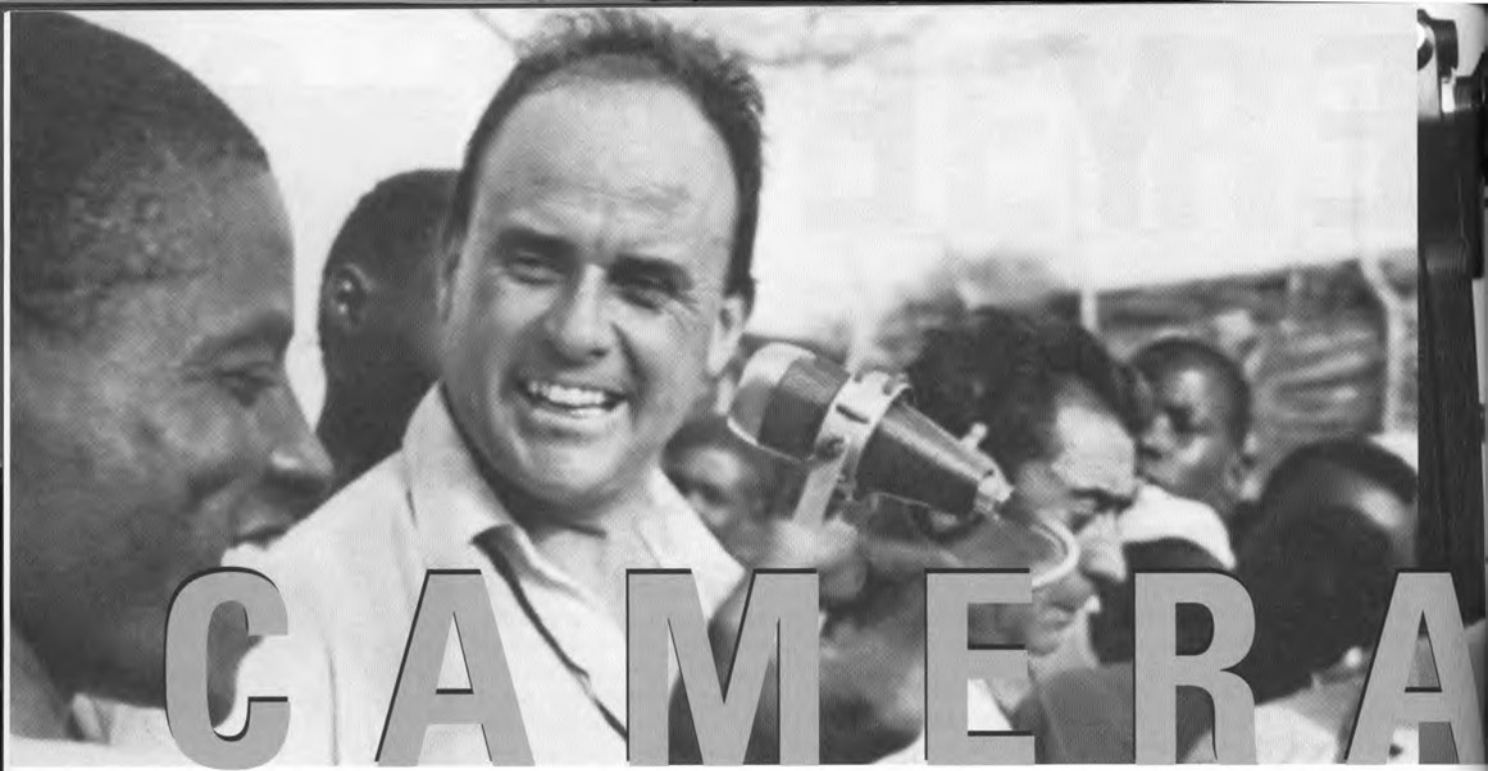
Wintonick, for one, has faith in the fading 1970s ideal that movies can transform the real world and he has a personal reason to be optimistic: those who know credit *Manufacturing Consent* with helping push the UN into taking action against Indonesia's vicious treatment of the East Timorese. "I think part of a filmmaker's role is not just to exist as an individual," Wintonick says, "but also to participate in a wider movement, in a set of proactive commonalities." *Cinéma Vérité* argues the director's view that the current cyber-revolution, with its ongoing switchover from "chemical and celluloid cinema" to easily accessible, inexpensive digital production and distribution methods is, like *vérité*, a defining moment. "With the ubiquitous nature of all this stuff," argues Wintonick, "everybody can be a filmmaker."

While Wintonick is an incorrigible utopian now in production on a film about attempts to create ideal societies, there is evidence to back his optimism. Not only did Danish provocateurs Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg's *vérité*-like, content-driven *Dogme '95* manifesto of filmmaking, capture young imaginations around the world, Steven Spielberg himself recently said he would like to shoot a movie under its rules. *Dogme* doesn't mean doc, but it does forbid "superficial action" and moviemaking aids ranging from camera dollies to optical printers. At Montreal's International Festival of New Cinema and New Media, where *Cinéma Vérité* shared the Telefilm Canada prize for Best Canadian Feature, Wintonick was happy to meet 20-year-old cyberfreaks who loved the film. In fact, he wants his film to show that "there's a history to most things. That the digital revolution wasn't born with the latest Sony handycam. It came out of the conscious effort of those who created cinema."

## Cinéma Vérité: Defining the Moment



Photos at right from top: Bob Dylan from D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back*; the Maysles brothers' *Salesman*; JFK in Robert Drew's *Primary*; Paul Anka with Wolf Koenig, right, and Roman Kroitor, left, looking at rushes for *Lonely Boy*.



Above: Influential French documentarian Jean Rouch; right, ace Canadian cinematographer Michel Brault

Wintonick's idealistic enthusiasm for his subject does not prevent him from candidly appraising it. For one thing, the idea that the practitioners of *cinéma vérité* are all synched into an identical approach to moviemaking is a false one. Apart from the differences between the Canadian, French, British and American schools, "What we found on this road documentary about *cinéma vérité* is that when you confront each filmmaker individually, they all have their own definitions of what their quest for truth has been and is. There are questions of style and aesthetics, how much you manipulate and how much you try to leave the illusion that you're not manipulating on the screen." Wintonick has no problem with strategies that "allow the public access to a new, strange experience." Moreover, he does not shy away from probing naive assumptions about the

veracity of movies that call themselves "true cinema." Numerous commentators on *vérité* invoke physicist Werner Heisenberg's principle that observation changes the thing being observed. Aiming a lens at a situation changes behaviour, and editing modifies reality even more.

Referring to his masterwork, *Pour la suite du monde*, Pierre Perrault says, "Life was the director and the people wrote their own lines." But obviously, the fishermen Perrault documented must have sensed he wanted to capture a particular, heroic image of them. Most of the subjects in *Cinéma Vérité* admit they finesse the realities they film. Wolf Koenig, Roman Kroitor and Robert Drew say that *vérité* is essentially theatre, a kind of fiction that paradoxically aims at revealing truths. Jennifer Fox, who made the recent and ambitious hit, *American Love Story*, believes that objective cinema is a fallacy. Frederick Wiseman, who calls *cinéma vérité* a "pompous and pretentious French term that has no meaning," gets really harsh. The one-time darling of doc purists because of his strict no-narration, intervention or interviews approach, Wiseman tells Wintonick that his moviemaking is about organizing "some of the dramatic aspects of ordinary experiences in everyday life." When Wintonick responds, "but there's no conscious manipulation of the reality," Wiseman snaps, "Of course there's conscious manipulation. Everything about a movie is manipulation. How can you say that?" The director of *Titicut Follies* and *Canal Zone* would probably be amused by stories of legendary photographer Weegee who would arrive on crime scenes and create poignant effects by, for instance, artfully positioning a murder victim's hat near his body.

While *Cinéma Vérité* covers its territory thoroughly, the picture does have its gaps and absences. Key filmmakers like Canadian pioneer Alan King are missing because of technical screw-ups and American Chris Marker didn't want to participate. Personally, I would have liked to have seen some Andy Warhol moments. Early Warhols like *Eat* were

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genres, *vérité* kick-started when the  
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# Vérité and the Future of the NFB

By Peter Wintonick

In many ways, the National Film Board was the living laboratory for the *cinéma-vérité* revolution. Ideally placed at the inter nexus of Europe and America, of continents and cultures, of English and French, the NFB was the incubus which catalysed what was to be one of the most important audio-visual revolutions of our times. In the next century the NFB—if it maintains its internationalist stance of giving filmmakers creative freedom to interpret life as they see it; if it manages to make as many films against television as for television—could regain an avant-garde position and world-class reputation for digital documentary.... In the late 1950s and 1960s not only were the new technologies codeveloped there, like the use of portable cameras and synch sound, 10mm lenses and lavalier lapel mikes, but also the approach—using the film like a notebook and the camera like a pen—as Michel Brault calls it. The people who populate my film, and the innovative and supportive NFB technical background crew, have taught me a lot. The NFB has finally made the great leap forward and weaned itself off the chemical and celluloid cinema and wholeheartedly embraced digitalia. What I call the digital doc is now possible.... It's been a rare pleasure to work at the NFB in a free and unadulterated atmosphere. Because I usually work independently, this *Cinéma Vérité* experience is the first time that we have not had to spend 90 per cent of our time begging budget from 100 different sources, broadcasters and agencies. The film is not contaminated by televisual constraints or conceits. The NFB people gave me de facto editorial control. They respect filmmakers.... The new digital revolution, which has *vérité* as its shock-troop precursor, is allowing many young people to rush the doors at the NFB, but now they don't find them blocked. I have noticed, as a reviewer—also as someone who is temporarily occupying a cell at the NFB's mother-ship—that there is a "neogenerational schmeer," as D.A. Pennebaker would call it, which is oozing through the corridors. Things have opened up in the last year, even in the last six months. Oh sure, the industrial green paint still institutionalizes the walls of the joint, but it is what is happening inside the walls that is important.... Actually, it's the strong women who are now running the NFB, like Sandra MacDonald, Barbara Janes and Sally Bochner, who are starting to turn the place around. I don't think they represent the Trojan horses of neoliberalism, yearning to privatize. They actually are trying to reconstitute the institution, defend and embrace its mandate. Given the recent allegations about the dubious practices dominating corporate cinema's industrial imperatives, I think the public will continue to turn to more honest filmmaking, and that's what the NFB is all about.

unedited 30-minute takes that gazed unflinchingly at their bleakly unlit subjects. No other *vérité* filmmaker was as purely noninterventionist. Warhol turned on the camera and walked away. Although Wintonick talks about the "crazy dance of documentary and drama," he tends to minimize fiction's impact on *vérité*. There's little in his film about the influence of Italian neorealism, or the French *nouvelle vague*, particularly Raoul Coutard's stunning improvised on-location dolly shots for films like Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*.

Ultimately, *cinéma vérité* is a slippery subject, and a complex experience for viewers. It's a film form that presents itself as reality, but in the process, raises mysteries, existing in some kind of twilight zone between the real and the fictional. "Life is a kind of theatre when you find the right story, but [the people are] not acting," says Robert Drew. Even if that isn't strictly true, who's to define exactly what a performance is, or what it does and doesn't reveal? Albert Maysles says in the film, "you allow that person to be himself," whatever that means.

The future looks good for *Cinéma Vérité*, which has already picked up prizes at Montreal's International Festival of New Cinema and New Media and at the Vancouver International Film Festival. On top of that, it screened at the prestigious Yamagata Documentary fest in Japan and got selected for Berlin's Forum. Given the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' new, more savvy procedure for selecting films to nominate in Oscar's feature doc category, Wintonick might get a nod from Hollywood. Meanwhile, he's characteristically delighted that his film got a rave review in a tabloid, Montreal's top daily, *Journal de Montréal*. "Maybe my own veil of insecurity is starting to lift," he laughed before heading off to a New Zealand desert to research his company's (Necessary Illusions) latest project about the human quest for Utopia. •