

Introduction

MOST of the reflections on films and filmmaking in this book were written in the intervals between days and weeks of filming. For that reason they tend to focus on the immediacy of film images, both on the screen and, perhaps as much, when seen through the viewfinder of a camera. My underlying aim has been to bring the two experiences closer together, shifting that of the film viewer a little nearer to that of the filmmaker. This is a book of personal observations based on my own practice and film viewing rather than a book of general film history or theory. I can therefore make no claim to being encyclopaedic, whether writing about documentary or about fiction films. In many ways these are speculative essays, reflecting both convictions and uncertainties, and the intermediate position of someone whose career spans documentary filmmaking and anthropology.

The book is in three parts, moving from a personal to a wider view; from the immediacy of filmmaking to the ways that films address us as viewers; and from the growth of documentary cinema as a genre to its role in anthropology and public discourse. Part I is concerned with the filmmaker's eye and mind behind the camera; the constraints, both public and self-imposed, that filmmakers face in filming what they witness; and some of the strategies that may help them to give a better insight into the life experiences of others. Part II looks at the ways that images and sounds evoke emotions and physical sensations, and how filmmakers have come to place increasing emphasis on human perception and bodily experience. Part III is primarily concerned with documentary cinema's powers of representation in academic and public life. Particular attention is paid to the development of observational cinema and visual anthropology. Here I discuss some of the misconceptions, theoretical questions and practical problems that arise in this work. In the closing chapter I cast a broader glance at the history of documentary and call for a reinvestment in the ideas that originally inspired it.

Writing about these subjects has meant taking account of the complex relationships between filmmaker and film subject, relationships that ultimately guide the filmmaker's decisions. It has also meant focusing on those moments in which the filmmaker responds second by second to the events taking place in front of the camera. These events are often as unpredictable to the people

filmed as to the filmmaker. In them, filmmaker and subject become bound up in a common experience. The resulting films trace both a course of events and the consciousness of their passing. Much as in fiction filmmaking, they seize upon a gesture here, an object there, or the fleeting expression on a face. They require as much attention to the commonplace as to the rare moments of revelation. They also require the ability to resist looking away from the subject, out of impatience or embarrassment. This does not come automatically to filmmakers; it is something that must be learned over time: not to retreat from the disturbing face of reality, as we constantly do in daily life. It demands both the novelist's unsentimental eye and the journalist's resolve to record what he or she has seen.

As this applies to the individual filmmaker, so it applies to documentary films generally. One aim of this book is to question the odd tendency of the genre to withdraw from examining life as we experience it – to remain so often in the safer zone of the authoritative report, the inspiring message, the conventionally beautiful image.

If the new directions taken by documentary films in the 1960s had a principal aim it was to reduce the gap between the viewing perspectives of the filmmaker and the film viewer – between the world shown on the screen and what was actually happening around the filmmaker at the time. This was basically a question of how much the viewer would be allowed to see. Widening the conceptual frame of the film meant including, at least implicitly, the filmmaker as part of the event, and respecting the ability of viewers to observe filmed events and apply their own deductive reasoning to them. This meant relinquishing some of the control that went with cinematic professionalism: the power of films to amaze and mould the responses of their audiences.

These moves were not so much driven by a spirit of egalitarianism as by a wish to let others see what the filmmaker had seen. They were perhaps also a response to the dominance of fiction films and their taken-for-granted artificiality, as opposed to the desire of documentary filmmakers to convey a sense of the historical moment. They challenged the assumption of so many earlier documentary films that images were to be taken as emblems of things in the world rather than glimpses of the world itself. Too often, the 'facts' of these films had come to stand for something other than themselves – for heroic ideals, social problems, personal passions. Against this background, filmmakers began to suspect that the real strength of documentary lay in acknowledging the camera's limitations rather than its sleight of hand. The question then, as now, was not what the images meant but what viewers would be allowed to make of them.

Each film has its maker and its viewers. The filmmaker is the first and keenest viewer of a film, during the actual filming and, later, in the editing. Every film exists twice. The first film is an uncertain enquiry in which new

discoveries appear at every turn. For the filmmaker, this is a time of all-consuming engagement with life, compared with which the film's completion sometimes seems irrelevant. The second film is the one prepared for others to see. Now the film, instead of being fluid and expansive, becomes a work of consolidation. It begins to take on the intricacy of a network, where strands are linked across great spaces, where shapes and resonances converge and coalesce. Here one strives to make connections not noticeable in the raw materials, and yet, if one is careful, to preserve some true sense of their rawness and indeterminacy. The elements within a film often have little independent meaning; they acquire it through their connectedness. Of the two films I have described, the first belongs essentially to its maker, the second to its viewers. As time goes on, its audiences will change and be replaced, and different viewers will find different things in which to take an interest.

Several essays in this book pay attention to how viewers respond to films with their senses – how they grasp the textures of objects, the indefinable presence of human beings, the openness or confinement of spaces. Films let us experience a coherent world that we also recognise as experienced by the people in them. But this evocative power, although it appears in many forms, should not be taken as an end in itself. The human sensorium is only part of a much larger complex in which we engage in multiple ways with objects, words, each other and the social forces around us. Evoking physical sensations, although a vital element of cinema, can easily become insular and coercive, forcing viewers into fixed responses, much as the manipulative music and authoritarian spoken commentaries of documentaries did in the past. That tendency is still with us today in varied forms – in the elaborate packaging, spectacular imagery and multi-track sound designs of many films, employed in some cases simply to hold the wavering attention of television audiences. We should welcome films that deepen our sensory experience, but not at the cost of our independence as viewers.

