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# Documentary Now

WHETHER ON STAGE OR "LIVE," whatever the exact degree of contrivance, documentaries stake everything on their appeal to reality. The documentary sets out in search of the real world—to show us real lives, to give those lives a sudden and final importance—and what makes Eisenstein (for example) so disappointing is that he never really tries to find it. Instead of the sensitive detail, the caught inflection of a face, there is the grand imposing spectacle filtered through montage. With Eisenstein the documentary serves artifice at one extreme and *Realpolitik* at the other (scrambling to delete all mention of Trotsky from *Ten Days That Shook the World),* though *Realpolitik* may itself be a higher end—dialectically speaking. His pictures all want lurid coloring; they create an objective viewer because of their artificiality, not their truth.

We cannot imagine the documentary film—with its grainy reality, unwinding the truth 24 times a second—in anything except black and white. Yet Eistenstein seems always about to burst those bounds. He would rather be picturesque than grainy, and the splendor of his method is a kind of fake elegance. The sharecropper children in a Walker Evans photograph are tragic in black and white, for they gaze up with terribly and immediately individual faces. No such difficulty attends the creatures of Eisenstein, in the Odessa Steps sequence of *Potemkin,* let us say. Why not have a pink baby in that carriage? This universal infant cries out for solidity of pinkness, and with the perambulator careering down the steps, burdened under the awful weight of history, the poor thing inside cannot even bear the weight of itself. There isn't any life in it.

It is sometimes said, usually with an air of resignation, that Eisenstein was at any rate the greatest director, at least of documentaries. It seems to me that the conviction is just as wrong as the remote "Oh, well," that supports it, and not only because Eisenstein's gifts were at the service of tyrants. We hear a great deal about how the artist rises above the worst of his ideas, but this is not so with Eisenstein. Here, for once, practice conforms to theory. The director must follow out the logic of a set of rules, established so that life should never be discovered by a man with a camera: the pattern of life exists, and has only to be revealed.

Just how far this departs from the one rule of art (which is: personality) we can understand by recalling *Land Without Bread,* Buñuel's great documentary of the '30s. The film is about malnutrition, disease, illiteracy, about the poverty and destitution of Spanish peasants, and the very plainness of the narration makes it all the more stirring. Yet *Land Without Bread* is at once a social document and a distinctly personal one: therein lies its power, and its true revolutionary spirit. One extraordinary scene has a mountain goat treading carefully along a high rocky path, then stumbling, spilling the beehive which was loaded on its back, at last giving in to the endless stings until their poison turns unbearable and it falls down to die. The symbolic force is there, but too directly to need any prodding, and at the same time too subtly to make a political point. For the scene doesn't "convince" us right off: the goat, helpless and tormented, is the people of Spain, and yet the bees erupt with the violence which will free them, and yet . . . it is all the private nightmare of Buñuel. Bourgeois de-

cadence. The director committed down the line would have known better than to tolerate such nonsense, which adds nothing measurable to our zeal. But that director is a formalist in the bad sense; and by depriving his audience of sight he deprives himself. Buñuel recorded what he knew had to be seen—what was part of life, day by day, under the conditions he meant to protest—and we, the audience, are the richer for it. That is what documentary should mean.

SOME OF THE VARIETY of modern life in America, and much of the flatness and despair, come through to us in the films of Frederick Wiseman, presently the most interesting of American directors. Wiseman has the first great strength of the documentary artist: the life of his films has never been through a filter. Of course, this "open view" is the hardest thing for any director to achieve, but Wiseman was fully in control of perspective, the unobtrusive eye, by the time he made his second film.

His first, *Titicut Follies,* comments on the loving care of a state mental institution, and somewhere in it there is the pallid, bare body of a demented old man, his eyes sinking down into craters and teeth rotting away, waltzing around his private cell in the asylum and looking up, bewildered and imploring, at the camera that reports his antics. At such a moment we feel, not that we have witnessed something that would better have been left unseen, but that this is perhaps too obvious and a dreadful slice of life—"jolting," as the journalists say. Still, the film goes on and our reservations stay reserved.

In another sequence an intelligent and bitter young man, confined at the asylum out of some legal insanity, complains to the state-hired psychologist that he must get out of this place or he will *really* lose his mind. He offers to prove his sanity, to demonstrate that he can think logically, but the psychologist marks down his "rebelliousness" as one more sign of mental instability. Then a group of administrators speak with the man about his "problem," send him out of the room, decide all together that he's still nuts and resolve to treat him coolly; otherwise he might do something irrational. These people, the administrators—they do not impress us as intelligent, or sensitive, in spite of all their veneer of concern. As a group, they build on each other's complacencies. The rebellious inmate speaks with a precision they will never have, but he will be at the institution forever: the finality of his situation is plain, and sickening. And it is real. We know that we have understood the nature of this institution, which is a soft cancerous mesh wired up by the people in authority, those higher and far more dangerous lunatics.

Yet the lingering over horrors in *Titicut Follies* does make for a certain unevenness, a rawness, which has disappeared in *Law and Order.* Wiseman had the rather unattractive idea of following policemen in a midwestern city on their daily round of calls, the routine things: arresting prostitutes, picking up a drunk, bringing a wailing lost child to the station, settling a family dispute that threatened to turn violent. Unattractive, perhaps, but Wiseman was honest enough to learn about his subject, and not to tell his audience what it already thought it knew. *Law and Order* surprises us by being in some part, and with uncommon force, an account of common decency and humanity. Two policemen caught in a mid-day lull, pulling their cars up side by side to trade remarks about the job, salaries, life in general, radiate a peculiar and memorable charm. The den mother of a house of prostitution—a heavy woman with makeup zig-zagging across her face—has a proud, filthy charm about being booked. Near the end of the film, we get treated to a bit of candidate Nixon addressing a campaign rally on the need for law and order, more and better police; and this is ironic, but not because we have been reassured that all policemen are after all "pigs." It is rather that the well-oiled phrases of the politician come nowhere near the kind of human sympathy which these policemen demand.

Always, the administrators turn up at the source of a dry rot that invades the whole system, whatever be the nature of the institution: mental, legal, educational.

*High School* is Wiseman's masterpiece, and to my mind the finest American film to have appeared in the past few years. Here the official school counselors, again with that impressive show of "concern," have the presumption to warn parents in the presence of their child, "Well, your daughter Mary gets along fine, you

see, but she is not really intelligent—doesn't have what it takes—if you know what we mean." Male physical education teachers make sly, dirty jokes in their sexual hygiene classes from which girls have been separated out; vice-principal flunkies prowl the hallways in search of a short skirt, a tardy soul; English teachers do "Casey at the Bat," the poetry of Simon and Garfunkel: serious literature.

It is all there, the kids being "prepared for the world." The football helmet, the astronaut's helmet for a specially arranged simulation flight, and so on to Vietnam. One of the graduates of this training ground writes back from the war: he is about to parachute into enemy territory, he cannot be sure that he is right, but he was taught to do it for God and country—yes? The letter is a plea. But the teacher who reads it to the assembled faculty, a woman who took care of the boy in place of the mother he never had, declares that they can now at last be proud of their work—what they have done for this boy. This sort of tragedy —the woman reading the letter, so pathetically devoted, her student in Vietnam so fatally deluded—will disappear as the old ideas grow into decay, even in the secondary schools. In the moment just before that process began, Wiseman caught the tragedy in full flower, and so made tangible something of our collective fate.

DECAY MELLOWS INTO DECADENCE, and much of the current decadence is on exhibition in *Brand X*, a document of and by the "cultural Left." This film is in the most literal sense *about* pubic hair, body odor, spastic behavior, and the unsung glories of animality. Yahoos burp on its soundtrack and defecate in its frames, indicating their grasp of "black humor" in a comical routine about Christ telephoning God from the cross. The political equivalent of this derangement shows up in a film like *Ice*, directed by Robert Kramer and set with a cast of willing bourgeois revolutionaries. *Ice* acts out the fantasy of urban guerrilla warfare in the United States, which should at least be good for a shudder. But alas, the film is *verité* and spontaneous, and boring. People without exceptional gifts cannot afford to work without a script, and so far as the invention of dialogue goes the (non-)actors of *Ice* are worse than run of the mill. The morality peddled by Kramer seemed to be brutal and rather sick, but then I could not sit through the whole thing, despite one or two stretches of unintended rich humor in the so-bad-it's-good variety.

*Brand X* and *Ice* (both of them fantasy-documentaries) want to be judged outside any normal frame of reference, beyond good and evil, and the same is true of the recent Maysles production *Gimme Shelter*, a film interesting for reasons having nothing to do with worth. *Gimme Shelter* has the look of a tough, highly moralistic portrayal of our diseased sub-culture, after the manner of *Scorpio Rising*. Such efforts —the much praised *Derby*, for another example, which deals with competitive roller skating —are as a rule poor and pretentious, but there is about *Gimme Shelter* an appalling slickness that makes one long for the good old days of the genre. In fact, the Rolling Stones documentary does not belong to this crude but not disreputable type of film, because of a root dishonesty which by now everyone knows. The most compromised of observers, the Maysles brothers were themselves responsible for the disastrous Altamont rock concert which provided the material for their film. They had the bright idea of buying the services of Oakland's Hell's Angels, at a cost of 500 kegs of beer, thus saving considerably on the price of more orthodox keepers of order. This brought about the disaster; the incredulous head-shaking of Mick Jagger (while the directors show him raw footage of the events, film-within-film) will not change a bit of it. Anyhow, the phony moralism hung round a real corruption has nothing to do with the fascination of *Gimme Shelter*, which centers on the corruption itself. Jagger with his burning blue eyes, blank and menacing; the psychotic hollow face of Charlie Watts, having a staring contest with the camera and losing; Melvin Belli's ur-vulgar office, filled with garbage: we remember these things, and they make us feel several kinds of pain. The appeal to reality is quite bare. We are witnessing the battle to death of two groups of derelicts, two armies of inverters: the drug-rock crowd and the chain-fighting crowd. And as a gray, purgatorial dawn opens out to meet the survivors of the concert, we see that with the worst intentions *Gimme Shelter* still manages a kind of success and leaves us—reflective.

FROM THESE DEPRESSING VISIONS of a culture breaking down, we turn, logically enough, to the films about social reconstruction in the Third World which have lately come down to us of the Advanced Industrial Societies. Saul Landau's *Fidel* is a narrowly imagined portrait of the Cuban leader, a mild (not fatal) case of hero worship that tells us close to nothing about the man and the new order he is creating. Landau went to Cuba expecting to find a lusty revolutionist uncorrupted by power, being followed by happy and obedient multitudes, and not surprisingly he found just what he was looking for. The refugees are shown to be lazy revanchists whose only complaint is that they were expropriated. Enthusiasm abounds; Castro makes jokes and plays baseball with the people. We see a great deal of the "colorful" aspect of Fidel, to which Landau proved himself a ready subscriber: Castro holds up a pineapple, winks at the cameraman and says, "This is propaganda. I'm turning the bruised side away from the camera." The film gives us the Cuban revolution, turning the bruised side away from the camera. It would appear that Landau never got near his hero, since the interviews with him are nowhere very substantial and the last half of the film depends in large measure on the techniques of the poster or brochure. For colorful Fidel the director substitutes the local color of Havana bars, guitar players, and you know the rest. The actual color of *Fidel* is, by the way, without character; it is all bright and bereft of nuance, like television.

This at least cannot be said of *Ramparts of Clay,* the first film of Jean-Louis Bertucelli. Set in the majestic wastes of Tunisia, the film begins with a citation from Fanon, to the effect that life after the revolution must start once more from the bottom, rebuilding stone by stone. The quote is somewhat misleading, considering that *Ramparts of Clay* depicts the life of a primitive village where the revolution never quite made its way. Although the events are taken from a book—hence authentic—the film does nothing to explain those anthropological curiosities to which it is witness, including the village's particular sense of community and the various sorts of ritual that are still performed in it.

To the audience, everything that happens in the village is puzzling: the workers' strike, for instance, which results in a confrontation with the national army. (In the book, this happens when the workers discover that their labor is toward the housing of government functionaries instead of themselves.) The photography dwells on the long, rolling power of its visual space, beautiful and severe mountain landscapes giving way to the desert and the sea. Unfortunately that does not make a film, for Bertucelli has ambitions beyond those of *National Geographic.* The crazy thing about this picture is that hidden inside all the ritual and austerity —so far as we can discern any plot at all— there is the old Hollywood story about the small town girl who wants to get away and dance in the streets. *Ramparts of Clay* comes on glowing with lyricism—"poetry." It lacks certain of the irrelevant luxuries, things like *pace* and *wit.* So for all that he seems full of integrity, Bertucelli finally induces the art-house nod that says, "Yes, this is extremely noble, and now maybe you'll let us sleep?"

No one, I imagine, will be glazed into torpor by Fernando Solanas's *Hour of the Furnaces,* although its four-hour running times does offer a ripe temptation to yawning. As a total ideologist, Solanas uses quotations stridently all through his film—from Sartre, Fanon, Debray and the like—along with quick-flashing slogans as in Godard. Naturally, the title itself is taken from Che Guevara: "Now is the hour of the furnaces, gather round and throw in the bourgeoisie." Something like that. Solanas is, at all events, revolutionary mostly in virtue of his hatred, which is strong and generous and not easily fatigued. His shortest advice to revolutionaries might be Paul Muni's great line in *Scarface:* "Do it yourself, do it first, and keep on doing it." Along the way Solanas warns us (with the authority of Fanon) that in time of revolution, "Every spectator is a coward or a traitor," and such is the terrible power of this film that the audience, spectators one and all, begin to cheer. Lest anyone think that Solanas is literally using his film to torture spectator-traitors, I should add that it was meant to be shown in segments, broken up by discussions of revolutionary tactics.

The analogy drawn between left-wing political movements and religions has always seemed to me rendered, as it were, in bad faith. Yet as one watches *Hour of the Furnaces* confidently

supplying the most violent solution to every social evil that besets Argentina, it grows hard to avoid that sort of comparison. For what we have here is most certainly a religion, and it is a religion of hate. Wrote Christ-Guevara (and the scripture is duly cited): "For him who chooses revolution, death is not the end. It is a liberation. . . ." Thus, the resurrection. Solanas defies parody because he makes his case precisely in these terms; the haunting death mask of Guevara is driven into us for a full minute on screen, and immediately symbolizes Christ's last divine agony. The director as propagandist may have felt that should appeal to Christians, for the same diplomatic reason that he acknowledges the Peronists as honorable forerunners of the true revolution. That the film is openly anti-church scarcely alters the content of those subliminal currents which it sets flowing. And indeed, it comes out against everything Western, according to Sartre's quite original view that the treasures of the West belong to the wretched of the earth.

It is simple enough to point out the morally repellent aspects of *Hour of the Furnaces,* which are to be criticized by the well-known objection to Fanon: that in the act of murdering another man one dehumanizes oneself. Yet even with this integral flaw—even though, with Eisenstein, it draws strength from its inhumanity—the film has extraordinary force as a social document. Solanas has made his own universe of glaring lights presiding over a trembling urban darkness, and this is the Argentina of *Hour of the Furnaces:* nervous and malignant, shot through with metallic grays and blacks. A child runs alongside a train carrying its bourgeois cargo, raising his eyes and hands, begging for coins, and from the child's prayer we cut to a skyscraper rearing up in the center of Buenos Aires, immense and unattainable. That is an act of genius; and there is also the sort of cleverness Brecht would have admired, as when the social-cultural elite of Argentina are run down with pictures and commentary, with a refrain that goes "Here they are. . . ." Part I of *Hour of the Furnaces* (bearing on history) is the best, Part III (the revolutionary future) the cheapest and least memorable. In the end, it hardly matters whether the statistical facts of the narrative are right or wrong, for the film is a document in the imaginative sense—straightforward and relentless.

IF RAMPARTS OF CLAY SHOWS the characteristic weakness of color in the documentary form—that is, a tendency to dwell on "background" above all else—*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* comes near to redeeming this element, pointing the way toward a more effective use of it for nonfictional subjects. Strictly speaking, of course, *Ivan Denisovich* is not a documentary, and yet it would be unthinkable without the example of documentaries looming behind it, just as Solzhenitsyn is unthinkable without Hemingway. Casper Wrede's version of the novel (not brilliant but faithful, and that is an achievement) opens with a great blue wheel of light, gradually moving into range and focus to reveal the well lit barrier around the camp. Blue is the dominant color throughout, a clear, drained-out blue that speaks of technological miracles and "the iron in the soul."

Where Solzhenitsyn wrote about a quite specific group of men, the film is caught in infinite spaces and universality, though never in a vulgar way. The novel brings us into the long perspective only in its last lines:

> A day without a cloud. Almost a happy day. There were three thousand six hundred and fifty three days like that in his stretch. From the first clang of the rail to the last clang of the rail.
> Three thousand six hundred and fifty three days. The extra days were for leap years.

And the film ends on these lines also, to wonderful effect. On screen, however, this is continuous with what went before; instead of generalizing, it sums up. The feeling of a greater abstraction (brought around by overhead shots, views of men marching in the distance, etc.) is Wrede's contribution, and to remark the change is only to note a different kind of success.

The prison camp atmosphere of *Ivan Denisovich* recalls Milos Jansco's *The Round-up,* and it must be said that Wrede's film suffers in the comparison. Jansco is the master of a flat, irrational world, a plateau of Eastern Europe oddly dotted with human beings whose fate it is to be traduced hour by hour, moving painfully in and out of their detention cells. His film has a strength of image that *Ivan Deniso-*

*vich* lacks—but that should not make us ungrateful. The chief fault of *Ivan Denisovich* is its screenplay, which is transposed almost directly from the novel and doesn't know just how to make sense of things for the screen. Ivan Denisovich finds a bit of hacksaw blade on the ground and puts it in his pocket: in the book we know that he did this for no special reason, in the film the gesture seems laden with significance and we wonder why. Yet such difficulties (repeated here and there) are small enough. Tom Courtenay was last seen in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner,* a botched bit of social realism with one striking episode (the Borstal boys singing "Bring me my bow of burning gold" while one of their kind gets pummelled for running away), and in this film he comes into his own. He looks intelligent and sad, keeping off the trite "bitter" expression which is stock in trade for realistic actors; when he chews the grass cereal that is "tasteless, hot or cold," he makes the stuff seem ordinary and awful. The comments on his situation are obvious at times—at a change of working hours, "Do you mean to say, the government can even tell the sun what to do?" —but often much better than that. "Have you heard? There'll be no Sunday next week." The best line comes straight from Solzhenitsyn, after Ivan Denisovich has asked to be laid off for illness and a young functionary has denied the request: "How can you expect somebody who is warm to understand somebody who is cold?"

Midway through *Ivan Denisovich,* there is a conversation about Eisenstein which bears very nicely on the problem at hand. A prisoner named Tsezar asks his friend X 123 to admit the magnificence of *Ivan the Terrible*—"The dance of Ivan's guards, the masked *oprichniki,* the scene in the cathedral!" X 123 replies that this is all ham, "so arty there's no art left in it, spice and poppyseed instead of everyday bread and butter," and adds that if the prisoners could get some of the meat horribly infested with maggots in *Potemkin,* they would all be glad enough. The point of this should be clear: the art beyond life at last holds out nothing but artifice. With documentaries, our hope lies in the everyday bread and butter, the fact newly found out and observed, seen with an open eye.