

The Curse of *Cinema Verité*: How Robert Drew Failed the Counterculture and Changed Documentary Filmmaking Forever

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The term *cinema vérité* was created by the French filmmaker Jean Rouch and the sociologist Edgar Morin in the early 1960s. However, when *The New Yorker* published an article entitled “The Godfather of *Cinema Verité*” in 2014, it was to celebrate the life of the recently passed American filmmaker Robert Drew.¹ “No filmmaker has changed his branch of cinema more drastically, enduringly, or quietly than did Robert Drew,” Richard Brody writes, although this impact would not have the immediate mainstream effect Drew had hoped. At the beginning of the 1960s, Drew set out to change the way documentary films (and television news-programs) were made in America, and the way they impacted American citizens. Drew, an editor and photographer for *Life*, took a year off in the 1950s to be a Neiman fellow at Harvard, “to try and figure out how journalism could work,” Drew said in 1962.² After completing his fellowship, he decided on the following journalistic philosophy: “I’m determined to be there when the news happens. I’m determined to be as unobtrusive as possible. And I’m determined not to distort the situation.”³ This philosophy became *cinema vérité*. A method of documentary filmmaking and broadcast journalism without hosts, interviews, or narration; a film that was simply constructed of what could be filmed and recorded on the scene.

In 1960, Drew formed the production company Drew Associates, enlisting other filmmakers who would later become renowned documentarians to produce films that followed his new vision of broadcast news. The most successful among them included Don Allan (D.A.) Pennebaker and Richard Leacock, who later formed the Leacock-Pennebaker company and produced films such as *Don’t Look Back* and *Monterey Pop*, as well as Albert Maysles, who along with his brother David later made *Salesman* and *Gimme Shelter*, among other films. To make their films, Drew Associates had to create their own equipment. To achieve their goal of being an objective fly-on-the-wall, they needed quiet mobile cameras and the ability to record synchronized

¹ Richard Brody, “The Godfather of *Cinéma Verité*,” *New Yorker*, 31 July 2014.

² Hanley Norrins, “Filmmaker Robert Drew discusses his ideas that created American cinema vérité,” *Vimeo*, uploaded by Jill Drew, 15 January 2014.

³ Jeanne Hall, “Realism as a Style in *Cinema Verité*: A Critical Analysis of ‘Primary,’” *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 4 (Summer, 1991): 24.

sound to limit a voice-over narration that lectured audiences, which Drew detested.⁴ They were able to achieve this through Pennebaker's experience as an engineer and Drew's ability to sell his ideas, as the "equipment may eventually have cost Time, Inc. a half-million dollars," according to author P.J. O'Connell.⁵

These founding fathers of the American *cinema vérité* movement sought out to change the way broadcast news was made and the way it influenced the American people. The filmmakers became too concerned with their *cinema vérité* ideologies, and failed to create the impact they had hoped, in both changing the way Americans consumed news and aiding the political causes they focused their lenses upon during the 1960s. Despite this failure, their films and the films they influenced others to create serve as extremely useful historical documents when examining 1960s America. This paper will argue that it was impossible for *cinema vérité* to succeed under the philosophy Robert Drew used to create it. This is supported by the rejection of Drew's filmmaking philosophy by filmmakers and theorists in the 1960s; the incompatibility of Drew's philosophy with that of the New Left; Drew's high expectations for the media literacy of most Americans; and fatally, the inability to follow his own rules for filmmaking.

Scholars have largely attributed the lack of impact American *cinema vérité* filmmaking had on the American public to Drew's philosophy. Thomas Waugh saw the style Drew developed as ineffective in supporting the various other political movements of the decade. Robert C. Allen attempted to explain why this contribution fails, attributing it to the philosophy of Robert Drew. Allen wrote that Drew and his associates believed that by documenting the realities of oppressed people in America, they would be able to change American minds. Allen interpreted the filmmaker's ideologies in the following way: "The advocacy of a specific program of change is not the filmmaker's task; it is enough to reveal the 'truth' of a social situation to the viewer."⁶ As Waugh pointed out, this did not work. The objectivity that Drew and others strived for simply translated to impassivity. Bill Nichols took issue with the authorial point-of-view that was held by *cinema vérité* filmmakers. He wrote that they saw themselves as observing history from the periphery, instead of acknowledging that they were a part of history. He wrote: "For a film to fail

⁴ Hall, "Realism as a Style," 28.

⁵ David Resha, "Selling Direct Cinema: Robert Drew and the Rhetoric of Reality," *Film History* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 34.; P.J. O'Connell, *Robert Drew and the Development of Cinema Verité in America* (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992).

⁶ Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1985), 234.

to acknowledge this and pretend omniscience — whether by voice-of-God commentary or by claims of ‘objective knowledge’ — is to deny its own complicity with a production of knowledge.”⁷ *Cinema verité* was unable to have the impact it desired on the American public because of the filmmakers’ inability to bridge the gap between this objectivity they so desired, and the subjective social commentary that was needed to support alternative politics. At the root of this inability was Robert Drew’s philosophy, both in how he viewed American society and his filmmaking.

The philosophers that Drew studied while he was at Harvard provide some insight into his political intentions in making his documentary films.⁸ Providing insight into Drew’s political and philosophical beliefs allows for better understanding as to why his films lacked the social commentary that could have aided the counterculture movement. Although Drew did not share which specific philosophical ideas influenced him at Harvard most, it is known which philosophers he studied.⁹ One of which was Walter Lippman, who wrote that western democracies were not prepared for coming modern problems. At the heart of this problem was: “The failure of journalism to inform the populous about complex social issues in such a way that rational decisions could be made, and, once made, acted upon by a unified nation.”¹⁰ According to Allen, Drew’s studies and work were most in line with the political philosophy of American liberalism.¹¹ Allen cites Irving Howe’s definition of the theory as a “reformist tendency in American twentieth-century politics, which has sought to improve the lot of the disadvantaged in modern society through government regulation and intervention, rather than through a radical restructuring of society or the economic system.”¹² Operating under this philosophy, Drew’s films possessed the notion that any issues being shown to the audience on screen could be “solved by adjustments in the social system.”¹³ This idea was practically antithetical to the philosophies of the counterculture, who favoured revolution over reformation.

It goes without saying that Drew was not alone in his belief that government reform could solve societal issues. Therefore, examples exist where Drew’s philosophy faced off against that of the counterculture. One example is the 1970 U.S. Naval War College Seminar on Current Views

⁷ Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Spring, 1983): 20.

⁸ Allen and Gomery, *Film History*, 235.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹² *Ibid.*, 234.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 237.

and Attitudes, which included students from the Naval War College as well as Brown University and the University of Rhode Island. Naval students presented a philosophy akin to Drew's when speaking with their more radical counterparts from Brown and Rhode Island.¹⁴ The naval students believed: "changes occurred because voters requested them, laws were passed, and thereafter citizens' conduct and values changed accordingly."¹⁵ Additionally, they viewed their academic education as a part of the path towards professional success, financial wealth, and ultimately power.¹⁶ The students at the seminar who were from Brown and Rhode Island, as well as some junior naval officers, rejected this idea. They saw education "as an open-ended process, the aim of which was the development of the ability to take advantage of many different alternatives."¹⁷ Essentially, instead of viewing university as a way to join the commercial world that their parents lived in, the students involved in the counterculture saw education as a way to help them overthrow that world, which would solve issues of societal inequality in the process. In direct opposition to this, Drew's films present the idea that America's problems could "be corrected by the action of the government or concerned citizen."¹⁸

William F. Averyt, a faculty member at the Naval War College who participated in the seminar, wrote that the philosophy of the counterculture, as presented at the seminar, was largely informed by three main philosophers: Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Herbert Marcuse.¹⁹ All three of whom advocated for the upheaval or reorganization of the society they lived in.²⁰ For the purpose of this paper, Marcuse is the most useful to examine, as he was both living and writing during the 1960s. While Lippman may have influenced Drew to think about the ways institutions could solve the problems that faced democracy, Marcuse told students of the counterculture that these institutions were actively working to make them unaware of the systemic issues that they themselves were creating in society.²¹ As a means of social change, it is evident that Marcuse would disapprove of Drew's films. In 1964, Marcuse wrote: "the struggle for the solution has outgrown the traditional forms. The totalitarian tendencies of the one-dimensional society render

¹⁴ William F. Averyt, "The Philosophy of the Counterculture," *Naval War College Review* 23, no. 7 (March 1971): 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Allen and Gomery, *Film History*, 237.

¹⁹ Averyt, "The Philosophy of the Counterculture," 25.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17-25.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

the traditional ways and means of protest ineffective – perhaps even dangerous because they preserve the illusion of popular sovereignty.”²² It is clear that Drew believed in the popular sovereignty and its power to make change. He also believed that by showing audiences an unmediated view of American issues, they would become concerned citizens and take whatever actions they could to make change.

Drew’s critics, such as Waugh, wrote that his films struggled to influence tangible change because they failed at their opportunity to provide “explicit sociopolitical analysis to support the momentum of alternate politics.”²³ This explicit analysis was necessary to avoid the counterculture’s inevitable failure, as the movement was criticized for providing the emotions of change, but not the practical ideas for it.²⁴ This problem was recognized by Theodore Roszak in his seminal text, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. He wrote that the counterculture could end up as “a temporary style, continually sloughed off and left behind for the next wave of adolescents: a hopeful beginning that never becomes more than a beginning.”²⁵ For the counterculture to avoid this predicted trajectory, Roszak called for the further development of the counterculture’s ideas so that they could become more suited for adult discussion.²⁶ This development could have been aided by Drew, whose Drew Associate films were broadcast for an adult audience as a part of ABC’s news programming.²⁷ There were many liberal Americans who lived through the 1960s without joining a protest or experimenting with a new lifestyle.²⁸ Waugh argued that the failure of *cinema verité* is made more embarrassing considering this fact. He wrote: “This failure of Leacock, Wiseman, et al. was a particularly bitter one, because of their widespread reputation as social critics, and because of the broad-based, potentially activist, liberal audience they addressed.”²⁹

²² Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), accessed through *Pacifica: Marxists Internet Archive*, 2012.

²³ Waugh, “Beyond verité,” 35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counterculture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1969), 72.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Allen and Gomery, *Film History*, 230.

²⁸ Nadya Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope: Musical and Cultural Perspectives on Late Sixties San Francisco* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 2.

²⁹ Waugh, “Beyond verité”, 35.

One example where the Drew Associates failed to provide the political analysis that Waugh called for can be found in *The Children Were Watching*.³⁰ A “Drew Associates classic,” according to the Criterion Collection, that was shown on ABC.³¹ The film chronicles the 1960 New Orleans School Crisis, which took place in November of 1960 when four Black children—three third graders and one first grader—were selected to begin the desegregation of the New Orleans public school system. The film focuses on two of these Black children, Tessie Prevost and Ruby Bridges, two six-year-olds forced to walk to school in the protection of U.S. Marshalls as racist white parents viciously harass and attempt to attack them. The filmmakers sought to demonstrate the passing of prejudice between generations.³² To do so, they juxtaposed the raw racial hatred of the white parents against the oblivious faces of white and Black children; the white children were confused as to why their parents are so upset, and the Black children did not understand why they were being attacked walking to school. In one powerful scene, Tessie’s grandmother explains that the latter is because the six-year-old was raised to see all races as equal. “I thought when people saw how vicious and awful, they were in front of their own children, they’d all be converted,” Drew said of the film.³³ This was decidedly not the case, as schools in New Orleans were not desegregated for another 10 years.³⁴ That is not to say Drew’s film could have dramatically hastened the proceedings of desegregation, but more to illustrate that Drew believed his films had the power to truly sway people’s opinions. Allen quotes reviewer William Bluem as one of the critics of Drew Associate’s method of showing audiences the problem but not explaining it to them. “While others were trying to explain the meaning of these events in order to invoke the sobriety of the reason, he was predisposed to show only hate and fear at its most tumultuous level, leaving us no room, no avenue, for thoughtful action.”³⁵ The “he” Bluem referred to in this case is Leacock, as he directed the film while Drew served as executive producer. Drew was convinced that the image itself could sway audiences. As Jeanne Hall remarked: “With characteristic audacity, Robert Drew once invited viewers to turn off the sound on their television sets and

³⁰ Richard Leacock, “The Children Are Watching” (1961, ABC TV and Drew Associates), Film.

³¹ “The Children are Watching,” Film description, *The Criterion Channel*, <https://www.criterionchannel.com/videos/the-children-were-watching>.

³² Drew Associates Website, <https://drewassociates.com/films/the-children-were-watching/>.

³³ Allen and Gomery, *Film History*, 236.

³⁴ Nikki Brown, “New Orleans School Crisis,” *64 Parishes*, undated, <https://64parishes.org/entry/new-orleans-school-crisis/>.

³⁵ Bluem in Allen and Gomery, *Film History*, 231.

‘follow the logic—even drama—of the show in what evolves visually.’³⁶ While this was specifically impossible with *The Children Were Watching*, as a main thematic concern of the film is what children hear from their parents and how that informs future generations. It was impossible to watch any Drew Associates film that way because many still included narration. The narrator in *The Children Were Watching* tells the audience that they may “discover another story, deeper than words. Of how prejudice is passed on and how hope is planted in children.”³⁷ As mentioned earlier, Drew purported to be against the lecturing narrator of mainstream television news. But Drew broke his own rules of *cinema verité* almost as often as he followed them. Thus invalidating the very style of realism he talked about creating, by demonstrating his films did not meet the criteria Drew created when he conceived *cinema verité*.

By not following his own rules, Drew proved that the impact he had hoped to make with *cinema verité* was not possible, constrained by the limitations of observation-driven narrative that he created. This aided in the downfall of the *cinema verité* movement. Other filmmakers who hoped to sway public opinion “felt the need to move beyond *verité* and develop a more polemical style of filmmaking.”³⁸ Drew and Drew Associates departed from their own rhetoric in their first film, *Primary*, which followed John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey as they campaigned for the 1960 presidential primary in Wisconsin.³⁹ Dave Saunders remarked that *Primary* fails as a *cinema verité* film because it is forced to rely on “the filmed practices of, and recorded responses to, other journalists who plainly had to ask questions of their subjects.”⁴⁰ This proves how unrealistic Drew’s dreams of creating a new form of broadcast news were, as it demonstrated the inability for a *cinema verité* film to tell a complete and comprehensible story without relying on the very forms of journalism it attempted to replace - a far cry from a documentary that can provide a complete story through its images alone, which Drew claimed his films did.⁴¹ Additionally, Saunders wrote that “*Primary* does nothing to upset the longstanding images of Kennedy and Humphrey already disseminated by the press and on television.”⁴² Displaying that Drew’s “claim

³⁶ Hall, “Realism as Style,” 27.

³⁷ Leacock, “The Children Were Watching.”

³⁸ Allen and Gomery, *Film History*, 237

³⁹ Robert Drew, “Primary,” (1960, Drew Associates and Time), Film.

⁴⁰ Dave Saunders, *Direct Cinema: Observational Documentary and the Politics of the Sixties* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 27.

⁴¹ Hall, “Realism as Style,” 27.

⁴² Saunders, *Direct Cinema*, 22.

to a new privileged grasp of reality,” was ultimately false, and that audiences did not gain a new perspective through his film.⁴³

Aside from using the processes of traditional news mediums to further the narrative in Drew’s films, Hall pointed out another way *Primary* undermined its philosophies; specifically, the idea that *cinema verité* films are an accurate depiction of reality. Proving a criticism leveled by Nichols that “documentaries always were forms of re-presentation, never clear windows onto reality,” as every director, cinematographer or editor might present something differently.⁴⁴ In her writing, Hall coined the phrase “the match game” to describe the way Drew possibly distorted reality in *Primary*.⁴⁵ Hall describes this method as follows: “Appropriate (if not ontologically linked) images are offered as illustration or explanation for certain sounds. The more likely the sound-image match appears, the more credible the film becomes on its own terms.”⁴⁶ One example Hall referenced is a moment at a Kennedy rally where an announcement has been made that smoking will no longer be permitted, following a complaint from a woman whose dress was burned by a cigar. While this announcement takes place, Drew shows the audience a man smoking a cigar and a disgruntled looking elderly woman. By doing this, the audience forms a narrative in their mind that the man burned the woman’s dress, despite the fact “there is no shot establishing spatial proximity between the two.”⁴⁷

The “match game” remains an issue in later Drew Associate films, such as the third Drew-Kennedy endeavor after *Primary* and *Adventures on the New Frontier* (which followed Kennedy through a day in the Oval Office), in *Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment*.⁴⁸ This film followed John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy as they faced off against Alabama Governor George Wallace, who was attempting to prevent the integration of the University of Alabama. The film also followed the two Black students enrolled at the university, Vivian Malone and James Hood, however, they are not as central in the film as they should be. The bulk of the film took place inside the Oval Office and RFK’s office in the Justice Department, where the camera contemplated its contemplating subjects, focusing upon the faces of the Kennedy brothers for nearly 10-seconds at a time as they formulate decisions and hear new information. One example

⁴³ Waugh, “Beyond vérité,” 34.

⁴⁴ Nichols, “Voice of Documentary,” 18.

⁴⁵ Hall, “Realism as Style,” 30.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁸ Robert Drew, “Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment,” (1963, ABC News and Drew Associates).

of the “match game” appeared near the end of the film, when John F. Kennedy addressed the nation and made his commitment. The audience is shown various shots of the main stakeholders of the film: Robert F. Kennedy is shown listening and then nodding; Wallace is shown frowning; Malone and Hood are shown eyes-wide and hopeful. However, none of these shots pan to a television set or offer any other indication that the subjects are in fact watching John F. Kennedy as he made the speech, and there are multiple other instances throughout the crisis where Wallace would have been frowning and Robert F. Kennedy listening intently. Another example can be found in *The Children were Watching*, where Leacock and Drew matched images of innocent children’s faces with the sounds of white-suburban mothers spewing hate speech. The message the filmmakers were trying to send is clear, however, it is unclear if these children were actually hearing the words the audience is while being filmed.

However, as Hall notes, the “match game” is a product of “an attempt to show that *Primary* can cover not only the planned political drama on stage, but the spontaneous mini-drams in the audiences as well.”⁴⁹ Covering these smaller, more nuanced aspects of massive historical events is something *cinema verité* excelled at and is a reason its films serve as useful historical documents today. Nichols says, “such films seldom offered the sense of history, context or perspective that viewers seek.”⁵⁰ When reconsidering these films as historical documents, the context already exists due to other forms of scholarship. This meant that, despite the fact that there may be little contextual information in Drew’s films, today’s students of history can gain valuable insights into the decade by attending lectures, reading books on the topic, and then watching Drew’s on the ground account of an event. These films can provide a unique perspective or show otherwise unremarked upon moments during historical instances that those interested in the 1960s may not find elsewhere. One great example of this comes in *Crisis: A Presidential Commitment*, when RFK is speaking to Nicholas Katzenbach, his deputy in Alabama. RFK’s children had come by the office for a visit, and he asked his young daughter, Kerry, if she would like to say hello to Katzenbach. Cutting the tension with cuteness, the quick interlude was filmed perfectly. Pennebaker was holding the camera in Washington and Leacock in Alabama. Incredibly, both men correctly trusted their instincts, as neither of them knew the other end was being filmed.⁵¹ This

⁴⁹ Hall, “Realism as Style,” 33.

⁵⁰ Nichols, “Voice of Documentary,” 17.

⁵¹ Drew Associates Website, <https://drewassociates.com/films/crisis-behind-a-presidential-commitment/#watchfilm>.

instinctive decision making that led to the filming some of the most interesting details during historical events began with Drew's ability to recognize the way history was unfolding in front of him while filming *Primary*.

Saunders raised one example of this, wherein the camera paid special attention to Jacqueline Kennedy, as Drew recognized her importance as the perfect First Lady for the moment.⁵² As Saunders wrote: "Jackie assiduously combined the attributes of the pinup (or 'babe'), the homemaker and the princess, a sense of synthesis that appealed to a public weary of familial breakdown."⁵³ Drew saw this and asked Albert Maysles to focus his camera on her as she stood by Kennedy's side at a rally. Kennedy himself appreciated the work that Drew Associates were doing for future generations. According to Drew's handwritten notes while editing *Primary*, he suggested the idea of documenting a crisis at the White House to Kennedy, who in agreement, replied: "What if I could look back and see what went on in the White House in the 24 hours before Roosevelt declared war on Japan?"⁵⁴ Displaying that those alive in the 1960s understood the possible benefits of Drew's filmmaking for future generations. By watching *Crisis*, Drew's access affords audiences a glimpse into every form of discussion the President and his advisors have, including the Kennedy brothers discussing what they should do if Wallace followed through on his threat to block the doors of the university to keep it segregated. "He can't cover all three doors," Robert said, as John looks on intensely, swaying in his rocking chair.⁵⁵

Drew wanted his films to show audiences a "Strong experience of what it is like to be somewhere else, seeing for yourself into the dramatic developments in the lives of people caught up in stories of importance."⁵⁶ Drew Associates succeeded at doing exactly that, as in *Primary* with a nearly 90-second continual shot with synchronous sound of Kennedy splitting a sea of supporters to reach the stage. The sequence, which was shot by Maysles, helps modern audiences understand the power of his presence; "Kennedy's youth and potency were mirrored perfectly in the film's agile camerawork," Adam Nayman wrote.⁵⁷

⁵² Saunders, "Direct Cinema," 18.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁴ Drew Associates Website, <https://drewassociates.com/cinema-verité/>.

⁵⁵ Drew, "Crisis."

⁵⁶ Allen and Gomery, "Film History," 235.

⁵⁷ Adam Nayman, "States of the Union, Part 1: The High Hopes (and Eventual Dread) of Kennedy-Era Filmmaking," *The Ringer*, 19 March 2020.

Later *cinema verité* films, by Drew Associates and others, offer valuable windows into the past, such as the Maysles brothers' *Salesman*, as it follows four salesmen from the Mid-American Bible Company. It is known through historical studies that America faced a crisis of religion during the 1960s, especially amongst the younger generations. A poll in 1971 that asked people if they had been to church in the past week returned an average response of 40% yes across all ages, but only 28% of the youngest demographic said yes.⁵⁸ Through the Maysles' film, audiences got to be in the living rooms of the people who made up these numbers to watch salesmen who were possessed by the spirit of capitalism, not Christ, enter the homes of a generation of Americans who had begun to drift from religion, and often could not afford the \$50 luxury Bibles being sold to them. The camera followed the salesman as they forcefully talked their way into the middle-class homes of Catholics who had begun to de-prioritize their church.

With intimate shots of both the salesman and their prey, audiences see the small facial expressions of middle-class Catholics preparing to say no, and the salesman realizing they will once again leave a home unsuccessful. Reviewing the film for the *New York Times* in 1969, Vincent Canby wrote, "It may not be the entire story of America or even of the salesmen themselves (whose private lives are barely touched), but it is a valuable and sometimes very funny footnote to contemporary history."⁵⁹ A footnote that has become more valuable as it is now understood that "parenthood and political conservatism" attracted Americans back to church in the following decades.⁶⁰

Outside of Drew's orbit, filmmakers such as Shirley Clarke challenged his vision of an objective *cinema verité* film, while still creating a powerful historical document. Clarke's most well-known film, *Portrait of Jason*, is a 2-hour portrait of Jason Holiday (born Aaron Payne), a larger-than-life gay Black man who sits in Clarke's living room for 12-hours, while drinking and smoking his way through his life's story for the camera. Holiday has lived many lives and played many parts, he was a former houseboy, prostitute and all-around hustler who aspired to be a nightclub performer. Instead of observing Holiday and the various characters he played throughout his life, the white Clarke and her partner, the Black actor Carl Lee, provoked Holiday from behind the camera. The worst of this provocation came from Lee, who called Holiday: "a great con artist,"

⁵⁸ Hugh McLeod, "The Religious Crisis of the 1960s," *Journal of Modern European History* 3, no. 2 (2005): 225.

⁵⁹ Vincent Canby, "Screen: 'Salesman,' a Slice of America," *The New York Times*, 18 April 1969, 32.

⁶⁰ McLeod, "The Religious Crisis of the 1960s," 228.

who did not “give a shit about anyone or anything.”⁶¹ This was purposely antithetical to Drew Associates *cinema vérité* ideologies, as Melissa Anderson wrote “Clarke herself has noted that *Portrait of Jason* was made to ‘show Richard Leacock and D.A. Pennebaker the flaws in thinking about *cinema vérité*.’”⁶² Clarke criticized these filmmakers for only showing the climaxes of events and not the ways those climaxes were reached.⁶³ As Anderson notes, if Clarke simply used Holiday to prove a point, it was exploitative as Holiday faced intersectional oppression.⁶⁴ Yet, Clarke and Lee’s provocations “are complicated by the fact that Jason is a masterful manipulator, skillfully playing his ‘victim’ status as a trump card.”⁶⁵ In this interaction between Clarke, Lee and Holiday, audiences are able to learn the ways that some Black and LGBTQ+ people were able to construct a life where they could proudly exist as gay outside the heteronormative society. “*Portrait of Jason*, then, can be seen as a document that reanimates the voice of the previously silenced, challenging the spectator to include this voice within the discourses of blackness, maleness, and sexuality,” Anderson writes.⁶⁶ *Portrait of Jason* also demonstrates that filmmakers wanted to emulate Drew’s filmmaking methods, but not his entire philosophy. Which resulted in his immense impact on the form of documentary.

In conclusion, Robert Drew’s lofty goals for the *cinema vérité* movement to both transform broadcast news and sway the American public’s opinion, were ultimately unattainable under the philosophical constraints he created for the medium. The credibility of *cinema vérité* was undermined by Drew Associates, as they regularly defied their own ideologies. The movement failed to immediately change the way Americans visually consumed news due to its reliance on the traditional news gathering strategies it had positioned itself against. Drew failed to sway people’s opinions due to his overconfidence in the way the American people would view his films. As the films of Drew Associates found themselves bound by a “pretense of impartiality” that inhibited them from providing a social message to support political momentum.⁶⁷ Despite this, Drew, his team of filmmakers, and the other filmmakers they influenced, captured important

⁶¹ Carl Lee, *Portrait of Jason*, directed by Shirley Clarke (1967; New York City: Film-Makers' Distribution Center, released on video by Milestone films; 2013), film.

⁶² Melissa Anderson, “The Vagaries of Verities: On Shirley Clarke’s *Portrait of Jason*,” *Film Comment* 35, no. 6, (November/December 1999): 58.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶⁷ Waugh, “Beyond Verité,” 34.

historical moments with revolutionary access and nuance. Providing modern audiences with important historical documents to accompany the contextualizing scholarship that now exists. According to Richard Brody, seeing a Drew film now, “it looks far less revolutionary than in fact it was—because more or less everything that Drew and his associates did has become standard procedure in documentaries.”⁶⁸ This is important to consider, as although Drew may have been premature in his rhetoric when first discussing *cinema verité*, he was able to permanently alter his medium.

⁶⁸ Brody, “The Godfather of Cinéma Verité,” 2.

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