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***D.A. Pennebaker's Don't Look Back:
Direct Cinema's Early Portrait of a Cultural Icon***

Final Paper for Projective Artwork in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Professor, Chrissie Iles

In 1965 filmmaker Donn Alan Pennebaker made a black and white documentary film about a young “folk” singer’s tour of England. The singer was Bob Dylan, and Dylan’s manager Albert Grossman commissioned Pennebaker to make the movie. Titled *Don’t Look Back* after Satchel Page’s saying, “Don’t look back, it might be gaining on you,”ⁱ the feature length film utilized the latest portable, synchronous sound equipment to follow the three-week tour as it unfolded. Using the documentary style called “cinema verité” (truth film) in France and “direct cinema” in the United States, Pennebaker and his small crew gathered footage of concert performances, hotel room bantering and the tour’s repeated interstitial spaces of dressing rooms, trains, cars and back stage catacombs. During the process, Pennebaker parlayed the cinema verité style he learned making television documentaries with Drew Associates into the feature film format. The film gave Pennebaker the creative latitude television did not, he elaborates on this when discussing a scene where the theater manager opens the hall’s doors for a waiting crowd, saying, “I like the long length of this. Now if we’d been doing this for *Time-Life*, I would have had to cut this shot before we even got it open really. And I left it just going on and on. I couldn’t cut it.”ⁱⁱ His approach, however, was still formed by the lessons of television. He explains the tightrope that a cinema verité director walks, “. . .you had this incredible need, absolute demand, not to be preconditioned, so that when things happened

you didn't expect, you could kind of move away with them and find out ... The things you [discovered] as you went. And so, you had to teach yourself not to get preconditioned, but at the same time it was very hard not to go in without having some kind of pre-conceptual idea. So, you were caught between these two opposite poles and it was like stretching yourself out, to be alert on both ends.”ⁱⁱⁱ This improvisational attitude and the existing equipment necessitated zooming, panning and led to shaky camera movement as the operator follows the significant events of the day.

“Stylistically,” writes historian Sharon Sherman, “the portability of the equipment allowed the camera crew to film almost ‘from the inside’ of an event and thus gave the audience a feel for being there.”^{iv} Sherman adds, “Like folk art, this apparent aesthetic weakness, however, did not prove to be a drawback. Quite the contrary, it somehow added to the notion that one was seeing the unvarnished truth, providing a raw vision of the real thing.”^v Not everyone was receptive to this “raw vision,” however, leading to mixed reviews about the look and content of *Don't Look Back*. Cinema verité's alleged objectivity, and its ability to reveal the truth was also questioned by some. For *Don't Look Back*, the camera's presence was seen as a stage on which Dylan “acted,” causing some to question the authenticity and effectiveness of Pennebaker's portrait.

With a strong, emerging counterculture as their backdrop, documentaries regained their vitality, showing on television and in cinemas during the 1960s. “For the first time since World War II,” writes Sherman, “documentary film reached new levels of production.”^{vi} With the development of portable, synchronous sound equipment, a new style of working – one that reflected the rapidly unfolding events and peaked activism of that era – became

possible as well. Those who created this style of documentary strove to capture events as they unfolded with minimal intrusions. Thanks to new equipment, which was often designed and developed by the filmmakers themselves, cinema verité directors could work in small crews without tripods or lights. This flexibility allowed them to blend into the situations they recorded. Controversial, the style was considered aesthetically clumsy by some and an avant garde breakthrough by others. The cinema verité style, according to critic Ron Blumer, was prominent by the late 1960s, “Their style (capturing reality without prejudging or altering its shape) is called cinema verité and now dominates the whole field of documentary; their subject matter has tended to be somewhat more bizarre and a great deal more personal.”^{vii} The term cinema verité is credited to the French anthropological filmmaker Jean Rouch, who, with Edgar Morin, directed *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960) using portable equipment.^{viii} According to experimental filmmaker Lewis Jacobs, Rouch’s use of the term acknowledges a specific filmmaker’s work, “The name cinema-verité, as well as its intention, was ostensibly derived from the theories of Dziga Vertov, the Soviet cameraman-director who in 1922 had defined his documentary credo as ‘kinpravda,’ film truth. It denoted a type of documentary film that photographed reality without any preconceived notions – either of shooting or arranging it. Truth was to be achieved by a direct encounter with uncontrolled life where the camera – in a figurative sense – get out to discover genuineness of a particular human scene.”^{ix} While Vertov’s documentary style did not flourish in the 1920s, Jacobs muses, “It was television, years later, that provided the impulse for the successful development of this kind of film.”^x

In the United States, Drew Associates (Bob Drew, Richard Leacock Donn Alan Pennebaker, and Albert Maysles) were the first to explore direct cinema. They created documentaries, including the film *Primary* (1960) and, later, a series of documentaries commissioned by *Time-Life* for television.^{xi} According to Leacock, the hands-off methods of its filmmakers gave the cinema verité documentaries a unique point of view, saying, “In a funny sort of way, our films are the audience. A recorded audience. The films are a means of sharing my audience experience. Which is very different from being a playwright. We say we are filmmakers, but in a funny sort of way we are the audience. We do not have the burden of the director.”^{xii} With time, many of the members of Drew Associates wanted to depart from the commercial limitations of television and create feature length documentaries designed to be shown in the theater. Pennebaker explains how this influenced the group, “Drew had swung around from putting together a kind of magazine format, with little short bits, to something with what we were talking about; what Ricky [Leacock] and I both [thought] was the concept of a major film. Of doing films which were one hour, minimum, in length.”^{xiii} Several years after he had begun to work at Drew Associates, Pennebaker was offered a chance to make a feature length documentary free from the limitations of television’s voiceover narrative and mainstream aesthetic strictures. The subject of the film would be a young Bob Dylan’s three-week tour in England. Pennebaker elaborates about how the project came about, “Albert [Grossman] showed up at the office one day and he said, ‘Would you like to make a film of my client, Bob Dylan.’ I was kind of waiting for something where I could really make a film instead of a program for TV. So when Albert came in, I said, ‘Shit, this is it. It absolutely, nothing could deter me.’”^{xiv}

The structure of *Don't Look Back* is essentially chronological, although the narrative is fractured and compressed. The shooting style includes liberal use of the zoom lens accompanied by erratic panning back and forth between characters in conversation. Scenes are shot from angles that, no doubt, required some contortion and acrobatics on Pennebaker's part. The footage may be raw and spontaneous, but the, usually truncated, events are tied together cleverly through editing. In one scene Dylan jokes about going insane and the next scene begins with the close up of a newspaper photograph where the singer, with arms akimbo, looks overly gregarious and daft. This reflexivity between the public image of Dylan and Pennebaker's seemingly unfiltered footage of the singer-songwriter is woven throughout *Don't Look Back*. It is perhaps the film's most effective device. Similar to Mick Jagger being filmed while viewing footage of the Altamont concert in the Maysles Brother's "Postverité"^{xv} documentary *Gimme Shelter*, Pennebaker shows Dylan responding to the press's articles and photographs. The film may not use conventional documentary narrative devices, but the "story" is enriched by the media's written impressions (narration) of Dylan and the tour. Critic James Arnold, explains the difference between the traditional and the direct cinema approach, writing, "In the old documentaries, the filmmaker discovered things and told you about them, much as the traditional artist does;" instead, writes Arnold, "in the new documentary, as in the new art, the viewer is presented with complexity and makes his own discoveries."^{xvi}

According to Leacock, the direct cinema filmmaker also had a very strict set of rules, saying, "We now subjected ourselves to a rather rigid set of rules. If we missed something, never ask anyone to repeat it. Never ask any questions. Never interview."^{xvii}

While Pennebaker adhered to the “Never ask any questions” guideline, he let the press fill in for the director in that function as well. In asking Dylan questions, the reporters may not receive direct answers, but much is learned about Dylan’s frustration with his fame and with an uninformed media’s desire to define him. In this way, the reporters fulfill the documentary filmmaker’s role as interviewer, digging for information about the subject. In the editing, Pennebaker adopts Dylan’s lyrics as a linking device between scenes and as an indicator of personal dynamics between Dylan and others. This includes the splicing in of footage from a Mississippi voting rally as an answer to the South African reporter’s question of how it all began for Dylan, to Joan Baez singing “You must leave, take what you think will last” in the car shortly before she despondently exited the tour. The press conferences and performances are interspersed with gatherings in the hotel room, frenetic shots of the characters running to and from cars and Dylan blowing off pre-concert steam in dressing rooms.

Although Pennebaker provided the funds for the film, Grossman was given the title of producer and received a significant percentage of the movie’s profits. The film, however, was not initially marketable. Considered too blurry and choppy for the major film distributors at the time, Pennebaker was forced to show *Don’t Look Back* in non-commercial locations such as schools. He explains the turmoil of the distribution process:

It took a little working out before we could figure out how to operate because nobody had ever distributed a film like this before. And, I could tell you I took it around to the two or three major film distributors. In fact I have a letter from somebody at a place called Warner-Seven Arts. In which he said, “I’ve seen this film, its ratty, it’s badly focused its hard to hear what anyone is saying, it’s a disaster film, and we would be crazy to ever

distribute it.” So I spent a little time showing it at schools and colleges and trying to figure out what to do next with it. And a guy showed up at my office one day who ran a group of theaters called Art Theater Guild. At that time he and his partner had this string of porno houses. They were trying to clean up their act.... and he came and looked at the film. He said afterwards, “You know, it looks like a porno film, but its not. It’s exactly what I’m looking for.” He arranged to show it at the Presidio in San Francisco, and we only had a 16mm print, and I just prayed every night that the sixteen [millimeter] print would hold up because if it went we would be out of business. He kept saying “Can we have another print as a backup?” And I said, “It’s on the way, it’s on the way,” which of course it wasn’t. And we finally got a thirty-five millimeter print and we opened it up in New York, and it was a big hit. I was surprised.^{xviii}

For many of the same reasons the distributor articulated in his letter, the critical reception of the movie was also mixed. While the handheld camera with its zooming and panning seems natural to a generation raised watching films made with stedi-cams (an invention that has its roots in cinema verité filmmaking) and seeing newscasts and music videos created with video cameras, the aesthetic was disturbing to many audiences and critics at the time. The grainy, blurry, and fractured style of *Don’t Look Back* reflects the intensity of Dylan’s career at the time and the fragmented nature of Dylan’s poetic lyrics. Many critics, however, responded violently to the influence of contemporary poetic practices such as cut ups, stream of consciousness and overlapping dialogue in the film. A review in Cleveland’s newspaper *The Plain Dealer* exhibits how radical direct cinema appeared to some viewers at the time:

This is a cheap, in part, a dirty movie, if it is a movie at all. It is a chopped up “story” of Bob Dylan’s stormy visit to England....The “picture” is bad enough without this sequence of filth. The whole of it appears to have been shot with a handheld camera. The scene jerks all over the screen.... Actually, it shows no signs of being edited at all. it was thrown together, or perhaps the film is used just as it came from the development vat and dryer.^{xix}

While this reviewer was misinformed about the complexity of the film’s construction and shocked, in part, by the lifestyle of Dylan and his comrades, his sentiments reflect how

Don't Look Back shattered some viewers' expectations regarding acceptable subject matter and formatting in documentaries during the 1960s.

Another thing critics did not seem to understand was the difficulty of making cinema verité with the equipment of the day. The process of filming spontaneous actions may appear commonplace to modern audiences who are familiar with small video cameras, but, Pennebaker explains, he had only recently created a camera that could handle the rapid pace of a movie like *Don't Look Back*, stating, "Five years earlier we could have never shoot this film like this because the equipment simply didn't exist. It wasn't until now that I had the camera I really wanted, and you could go anywhere with it and film this kind of thing. But before that you had to set up tripods...now of course they've invented video, so it's neat. My child can do this."^{xx} The sound was also more difficult to gather, requiring the sound engineer to appear in scenes recording sound as subtly as possible. This sometimes troublesome, nascent process was worth the work for direct cinema filmmakers because they believed it was a more natural, presumably more honest, way of documenting situations. The style's alleged ability to show unadulterated truth, made personality profiles a popular topic for the cinema verité filmmakers in America.^{xxi} But many critics questioned the automatic assumption that direct cinema was more honest. *Village Voice* critic, Andrew Sarris, for example expressed his distrust in a 1967 review of *Don't Look Back*:

Besides, I don't trust the Leacock-Pennebaker school of documentary. Ugliness and awkwardness are subtly transformed from technical necessities to truth-seeming mannerisms. When Leacock came up to Montreal in 1963 with *Jane* and *The Chair* [both documentaries created by Drew Associates for Time-Life], the National Film Board people were skeptical about the crudities in the films. It wasn't the usual underground

problem of money, but something more insidious, an attempt to con an audience into thinking that something is more real when it is awkward, or rather that awkwardness is truth... The camera can capture only the truth that chooses to exhibit itself. If there were nothing of the exhibitionist in Dylan, the camera would register a blank. Many truths are hidden from the camera and this is a fact too many makers of documentary refuse to face... Pennebaker's mock passivity before his plastic material does not alter the fact that Dylan is performing in front of the camera.^{xxii}

In reality, Pennebaker was aware of the slippery nature of his task in “documenting” Dylan, saying in a 2003 interview, “Being with Dylan then was like being inside the tornado. We were in the middle of something, and us being there, filming him, heightened everything for him too. The big difference between fiction movies and documentaries is that the actors in movies know they’re actors. But 10 minutes into shooting, Dylan knew he was an actor too.”^{xxiii} Leacock, however, believed that the style of documentary did lend itself to a more truthful telling of events, saying, “Now, why are we as filmmakers doing this? To me, it’s to find out some important aspect of our society by watching our society, by *watching how things really happen* as opposed to the social image that people hold about the way things are supposed to happen.”^{xxiv}

With cinema vérité, the relationship between the film and audience was more nuanced and complex than traditional documentaries. On the one hand, the cinema vérité filmmaker was interacting with the subjects and making the process more transparent – an honest gesture. Additionally, nothing was acted out and there was no narration guiding the viewer’s thinking, leaving audiences to draw their own conclusions. On the other hand, a style of filming does not automatically guarantee truth, and the documentaries were only as honest as their subjects and the filmmaker’s choices. Cinema vérité directors, critics and the subjects themselves recognized that gathering footage does not necessarily lead to the “truth.” Reporter Richard Goldstein of the *New*

York Times, gave the movie a positive review with no reservations about the choppy nature, but, instead, lends a note of caution:

“Don’t Look Back” poses the same problem for its audience as New Journalism presents to its readers. With realism heightened by novelistic technique, how do you tell act from formula? This credibility gap between medium and message is furthered here by the presence of Dylan’s manager, Albert Grossman, as the movie’s producer. It is a bad omen when an artist’s manager produces a film about his client. At worst, “Don’t Look Back” could have been a commercial. With Grossman’s presence felt during the crucial cutting and editing, this film is at best a commissioned portrait. It’s an artistic job, but still a bit flattering around the edges.

We should continue to be impressed with verité technique – especially when it is presented with the taste and skill of “Don’t Look Back.” But we must be wary of it as well. After all, it is only a version of the truth.^{xxv}

In *Don’t Look Back*, the camera’s quest to know Bob Dylan raises as many questions as it provides answers. Dylan criticized the film as being one-dimensional in this way, articulating in 1978:

Don’t Look Back was...somebody else’s movie...I don’t think it was accurate at all in terms of showing my formative years. It showed only one side. He made it seem like I wasn’t doing anything but living in hotel rooms, playing the typewriter and holding press conferences for journalists. Throwing some bottles, there’s something about [that] in the movie. Joan Baez is in it. All that is true, you know. But it’s one-sided.”^{xxvi}

New York Times reviewer Donal J. Henahan points to this one-sidedness in his review of the movie, “But it is Bob Dylan we came to see, and it is ultimately frustrating to discern so little of the man beneath the bushy hair, the dark glasses an the leather jacket. Even in what appear to be candid shots, the performer’s public face is tuned to the camera.”^{xxvii} In *Don’t Look Back* the complex correlation between the raw shooting style and the filmmaker’s power to mine a situation for truth is highlighted and explored, but any answers are tainted by the self-consciousness of Dylan before the camera. Richard

Goldstein aptly summarizes this complex relationship between subject and camera in his 1967 review of the film, “This is the danger in cinema vérité, as well as its greatest virtue. In the Hollywood fiction – film where the camera stands still and the actors emote against throbbing strings, we know we are seeing a studio product which is at most only emotionally real. But the tricks involved in making a vérité film are invisible if they work. Though it was edited from 20 hours of raw film down to 90 minutes, ‘Don’t Look Back’ seems to tell it like it was. And though the footage is two years old, its chief impact is in its impression of immediacy.”^{xxviii}

Don’t Look Back still possesses an immediacy even thirty years after its 1967 release. Considering the mercurial nature of the subject, the short time period and the specific circumstances of *Don’t Look Back*, it is, perhaps, best read as one point of view at a very precise time in a performer’s life rather than an all encompassing portrait of Dylan. The greatest asset and drawback for photography and film has, historically, been the perception that those media record life truthfully. It is essential as a viewer of any documentary, but especially cinema vérité, to remember the subjective aspects of documenting life in film. From the inevitable influence of the filmmaker’s interests to the subject’s self-consciousness to the commercial interests of producers, a documentary film can, as Goldstein states be “a version of the truth.” In 1965, fellow direct cinema filmmaker Richard Leacock commented that the new documentary style was too young to judge, saying, “Our kind of filming should not be judged yet. What it can do. Where it can go. People can judge a particular film, but the genre of filming is so infantile at the moment; and we are all suffering under so many preconceptions as to form, style, method

of work, and everything else, because all our thinking has come basically from traditional journalism and traditional films and theater.”^{xxix} In hindsight, cinema verité inspired a more improvisational realm for “thinking” about documentaries, influencing filmmakers of all genres. Its influence is seen in the work of director Jean-Luc Godard and, later, the films of Woody Allen. It even inspired the format of Rob Reiner’s satirical documentary *This is Spinal Tap*.^{xxx} Most recently David Lynch’s filming of an entire movie using a hand-held, high-definition video camera shows the continued influence of direct cinema as it is taken to new levels with the advent of new technologies. Direct cinema continues to be a force in television as well, contributing to the methods behind and aesthetics of everything from music videos to “reality TV.” As fiction and “truth” become more blurred in contemporary television and films, the questions and concerns raised by *Don’t Look Back*’s critics and advocates are, ultimately, as relevant today as they were when the film was released.

ⁱ Donn Alan Pennebaker, Bob Dylan *Don’t Look Back*, DVD: Commentary from D.A. Pennebaker and tour road manager, Bob Neuwirth, (New York: Pennebaker Hegedus Films, Inc. 1967 and Ashes & Sand, inc., 1999)

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ D.A. Pennebaker, “The Living Camera,” in Robert Drew and the Development of Cinema Verité in America, P.J. O’Connell (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), pp 139-140

^{iv} Sharon R. Sherman, *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video, and Culture* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998) p 21

^v *ibid*

^{vi} Sherman, p. 19

^{vii} James Arnold, “The Present State of the Documentary” originally in *Films 1968* annual publication of The National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures (New York). Reprinted in *The Documentary Tradition (Second Edition)*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (Toronto: George J. McLeod Limited 1979), p. 483

^{viii} Sherman, p. 20

^{ix} Lewis Jacobs, “Documentary Becomes Engaged and Verité,” in *The Documentary Tradition (Second Edition)*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (Toronto: George J. McLeod Limited 1979), p. 375

^x *ibid*

^{xi} Sherman, p. 20

^{xii} Richard Leacock, “One Man’s Truth: An Interview with Richard Leacock by James Blue”, originally in *Film Comment* (New York), Spring, 1965. Reprinted in *The Documentary Tradition (Second Edition)*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (Toronto: George J. McLeod Limited 1979), p.407

^{xiii} D.A. Pennebaker, "Other Voices – D.A. Pennebaker," in Robert Drew and the Development of Cinema Verité in America, P.J. O'Connell (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), p. 60

^{xiv} Donn Alan Pennebaker, Bob Dylan *Don't Look Back*, DVD: Commentary from D.A. Pennebaker and tour road manager, Bob Neuwirth, (New York: Pennebaker Hegedus Films, Inc. 1967 and Ashes & Sand, inc., 1999)

^{xv} Sherman, p 102

^{xvi} Arnold, p 485

^{xvii} Richard Leacock interviewed in *Documentary Explorations: Fifteen Interviews with Filmmakers*, ed. Roy Levin (New York: Doubleday), pp 195-96, as it appears in Sharon R. Sherman, *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video, and Culture* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), p 21

^{xviii} Donn Alan Pennebaker, Bob Dylan *Don't Look Back*, DVD: Commentary from D.A. Pennebaker and tour road manager, Bob Neuwirth, (New York: Pennebaker Hegedus Films, Inc. 1967 and Ashes & Sand, inc., 1999)

^{xix} W. Ward Marsh, "Bob Dylan Film 'Should Be Buried,'" *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, Ohio), July 25, 1967

^{xx} *ibid*

^{xxi} Jacobs, p. 376

^{xxii} Andrew Sarris, "Don't Look Back" (originally in *The Village Voice*, September 21, 1967) in *The Dylan Companion: A Collection of Essential Writings About Bob Dylan*, eds. Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman (New York: Dell Publishing, 1990), p.p. 90-91

^{xxiii} D.A. Pennebaker interviewed by Lynn Hirschberg in "Shooting for Pop History," *The New York Times*, May 4, 2003; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003), p. SM19

^{xxiv} Richard Leacock, "One Man's Truth: An Interview with Richard Leacock by James Blue", originally in *Film Comment* (New York), Spring, 1965. Reprinted in *The Documentary Tradition (Second Edition)*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (Toronto: George J. McLeod Limited 1979), p.411

^{xxv} Goldstein, p 141

^{xxvi} Bob Dylan quoted in *Behind the Shades Revisited* by Clinton Heylin (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), p. 184

^{xxvii} Donal J. Henahan, "The Screen: Bob Dylan and Company: 'Don't Look Back' at 34th Street East" *The New York Times*, September 7, 1967; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003), p 50

^{xxviii} Richard Goldstein, "Dylan: 'We Trust What He Tells Us,'" *The New York Times*, October 22, 1967, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003), p 141

^{xxix} Richard Leacock, "One Man's Truth: An Interview with Richard Leacock by James Blue", originally in *Film Comment* (New York), Spring, 1965. Reprinted in *The Documentary Tradition (Second Edition)*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (Toronto: George J. McLeod Limited 1979), p.414

^{xxx} Sherman, pp 21 - 22