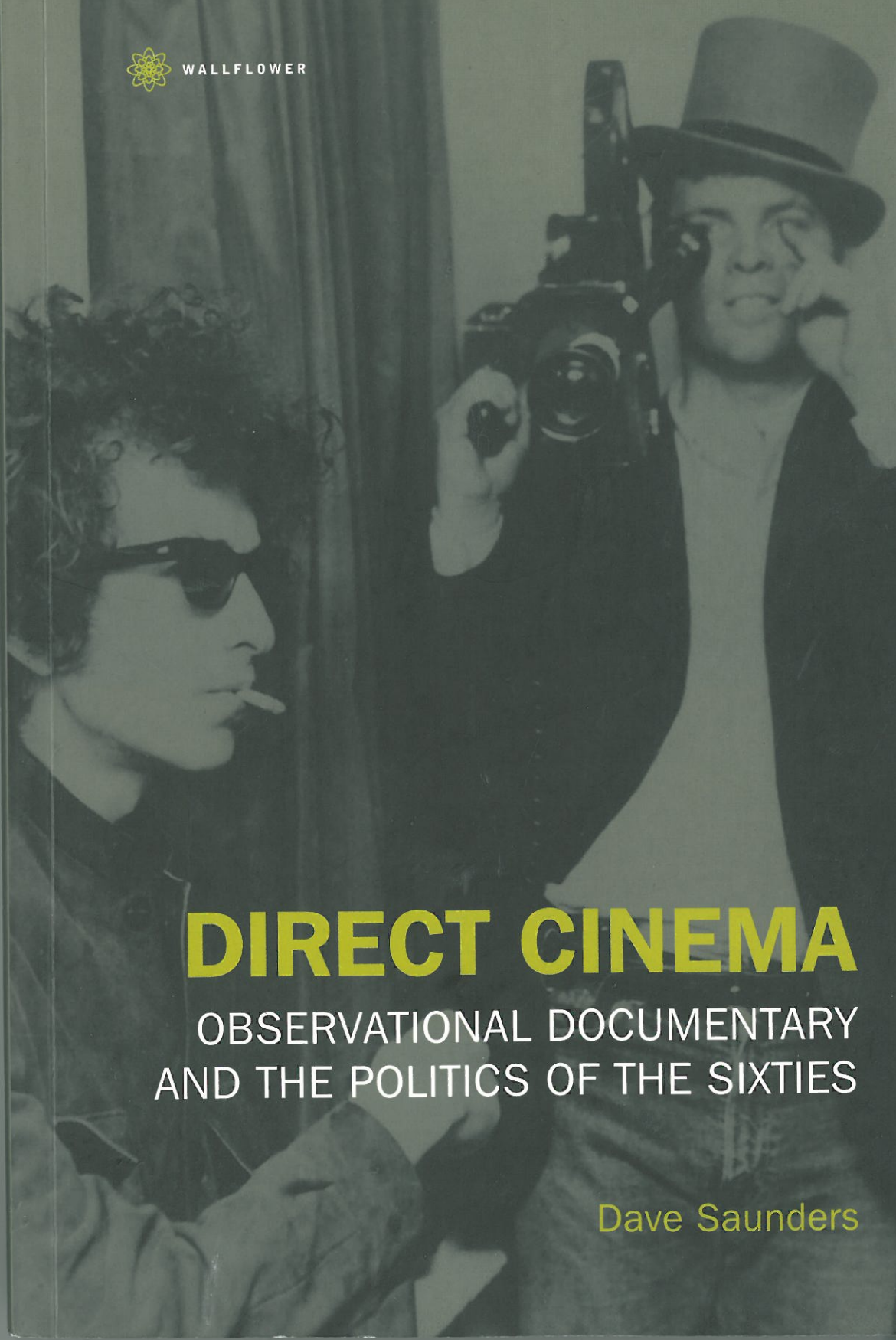




WALLFLOWER



# DIRECT CINEMA

OBSERVATIONAL DOCUMENTARY  
AND THE POLITICS OF THE SIXTIES

Dave Saunders

## INTRODUCTION

### 'THIS IS THE ACCOUNT OF A CRISIS':<sup>1</sup> DIRECT CINEMA IN CONTEXT

A time of extraordinary domestic discord and, as one optimistic critic wrote, the harbinger of 'a collective identity that will be blacker, more feminine, more oriental, more emotional, more intuitive, more exuberant – and, just possibly, better than the old one' (William Braden quoted in Patterson 1996: 442), 'the Sixties' was a tumultuous period in American history. Remembering the 1960s, now an impossible process for younger people seeking to grasp their significance or understand them within a broader cultural canvas, must now largely be relegated to the evaluation of contemporary evidence. Although for many years a mainstay of American studies, the 1960s' creative nexus has only relatively recently begun to be commonly understood as the product of a historical condition worthy of commensurate exegesis (see, for instance, Farber 1994; Cavallo 1999; Gosse & Moser 2003). The academic field of film studies has not been slow to acknowledge this development or take up associated lines of enquiry; yet non-fiction forms – and especially the still-influential synchronised-sound observational documentary, which came of age in the United States of the 1960s – have received scant attention in this regard.<sup>2</sup>

The present study endeavours to address this deficiency by hermeneutically and historically re-evaluating the canon of American *cinéma vérité* – or, as coined by Albert Maysles, *direct cinema* – as symptomatic in essence. Like any other expressive works, these celebrated yet politically underappreciated films, rather than representing disinterested, technologically determined singularities, constitute historically contingent testimonies that are rich in both subjective creativity and discursive potency: the shifting discourses of the 1960s affected all who were acute to them, including the observational school. This study thus posits the early films of the Drew Associates, Michael Wadleigh and Frederick Wiseman as inexorably bound to a broader political and artistic diachrony. In contrariety to what is almost a critical consensus, the direct cinema genus represents more than a surface account of events played out whilst those 'flies on the wall' (a term the filmmakers would come to loathe) looked on with apparent dispassion; rather, it engages in a substantial and compelling dialogue *with America, about America*, in an epoch beset and defined by upheaval. The pioneering and novel union of portable equipment with self-effacing, classically cinematic continuity facilitated, *but did not circumscribe*, direct cinema's transitory intellectual flowering.

Part One, 'Furthering Film', examines afresh the historical and cultural factors that led to direct cinema's emergence from its journalistic heritage at Time-Life,

and the pioneering Drew Associates' evolving responses to these stimuli. Part Two, 'Counter-Cultural Commentaries', offers close readings of four music- and musician-orientated documentaries inspired by the counter-culture: D. A. Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* (1965) and *Monterey Pop* (1967), Michael Wadleigh's *Woodstock* (1970) and the Maysles brothers' *Gimme Shelter* (1970). Part Three, 'Frederick Wiseman's Sixties', considers the esteemed filmmaker's best-known 'institution' films, *Titicut Follies* (1967), *High School* (1968), *Law and Order* (1969), *Hospital* (1970) and *Basic Training* (1971), and seeks to emphasise their timely import as overarching reformist statements.

In part, my aim is to demonstrate that the seemingly nebulous inventive impetuses and meanings that inhabit these often oblique filmic statements can be delineated by a close examination of their cultural and socio-political backdrop; by extension, I have sought to suture direct cinema to American history and provide a unifying, comparative overview of the major works. This volume does not attempt a rewriting of factual history, but instead highlights hitherto overlooked but nonetheless pertinent connections to external motivators and culturally sympathetic events. Where thorough background exposition is needed to provide sufficient context, the study digresses from filmic analysis, and, in the process, from received readings. This is necessary to expand upon existing conceptions of direct cinema, most of which reduce the movement to an uncommitted aesthetic mode whose realist conceits, performative naturalism and procedural effacement preclude orientation; in other words, there is usually a denial of socio-cultural specificity. Worse, critics too frequently espouse the fallacy that American reactive observationalism, hamstrung by a 'persistent pretense of impartiality' or 'a posture of objectivity' (Waugh 1985: 235), perpetually occupied a craven, politically purposeless vacuum of its own making: both of these prevalent views, this book aims to show, are far from accurate.

## 2 | THE NEW FRONTIER AND BEYOND: DIRECT CINEMA'S SEARCH FOR A SUBJECT

It is now possible to film with a simplicity that has been little more than a dream in the past. Taking the camera off the tripod is like being cured of a paralysis.

– Ian Cameron & Mark Shivas (1963: 12)

What American *cinéma-vérité* undertakes to acknowledge is not the necessity of death, but the reality of life, the life of reality, the real possibility of spontaneous expression, in the present. Freedom is the “truth of cinema” that television in America was – is – busy denying.

– William Rothman (1997: 124)

John Kennedy assumed office on 20 January 1961, delivering an inaugural speech that provided a contrast with Eisenhower's rhetoric by dint of its enjoinings to planetary crusade: 'We observe today not a victory of a party but a celebration of freedom ... Now the trumpet summons us again [to] forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance'; 'Ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man' (Kennedy 1962: 6, 10). Merging fervent optimism to the invocation of un-American demons, Kennedy's first oration in tenure was persuasive political theatre. The State of the Union Message, coming shortly afterwards, contained overtures aimed at placating pacifists, militarists, liberals and conservatives alike; but, as William L. O'Neill remarks, 'in the real world one must choose between opposites, and President Kennedy had already done so' (1971: 30).

In his forswearing of pro-filmic manipulation, interaction, didacticism and political advocacy, Robert Drew paradoxically imbued his vision of reality with an auspicious sense of national purpose. The short-lived television documentary boom of the 1960s (which was quietly heralded by *Primary's* observational breakthroughs, although not prompted by them) must, writes Michael Curtin, be 'understood within the larger agenda of Kennedy's New Frontier, which sought to forge an alliance of reform factions behind an invigorated and interventionist U.S. foreign policy' (1995: 7). Television, the newest of America's weapons in the Cold War, accommodated Drew's endeavours as appropriately democratic in spirit; *Primary's* de-emphasised rhetorical perspective and visual dynamism thus piqued the interest of networks and affiliated sponsors, who, despite manifold initial misgivings, would conduct a transitorily fruitful relationship with its producer.

The markedly dispassionate nature of Drew's subsequent early 1960s documentaries, which were largely produced under the patronage of both Time, Inc.

at home, garnered from candid sessions granted to the filmmaker by a statesman now unafraid of betrayal by his foremost filmic adherent. Historian Dan T. Carter denigrates the film as a 'puff piece' accentuating 'the informal and "personal" attractiveness of Kennedy as decisive president and doting father. Fluid camera angles, obviously unrehearsed dialogue and occasionally poor technical quality gave viewers a sense that they were watching the raw materials of history' (1995: 143). American non-fiction programming in the early years of the 1960s habitually evoked a sense of faith in the nation's rectitude. News media rarely censured the country's broadest aims, or seriously countered a hypothesis underlined by Michael Curtin: that a society 'enlightened by unbiased information and expert commentary could muster the necessary willpower to take on the great issues confronting the Free World' (1995: 153). Stories that reinforced confidence in the ability of elected leaders to perpetuate and disseminate freedom were commonplace; items criticising those in positions of corporate or political power – to whom the networks deferred – were not. The presidency, the most visible nucleus of the United States and its goals, was sacrosanct in a time before Woodward and Bernstein's Watergate revelations made cynicism about government almost a default stance.

Ensuring that Drew and his team could not even accidentally expose any weaknesses in the administration was in any case an easy task for aides, who more often than not simply turned the producer away. Although Leacock's annoyance at what he regarded as 'total censorship at the source' (quoted in Levin 1971: 206) is understandable, so too is the rationale behind such denials of access. One meeting Drew was prohibited from filming was a discussion between Kennedy and his cabinet about the eventually disastrous April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, a fiasco during which the President, fearing Soviet reprisal, failed to support CIA-trained exiles with any worthwhile military backing.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Drew could not cover talks on the subject of Berlin or anything related to the Cuban missile crisis of the following year; international emergencies were out of bounds for all reporters, in spite of Drew repeatedly asking to film his head of state during a truly critical situation, one that might genuinely have shed some light upon the internal workings of government. Ostensibly, as regulators maintained, the public had a 'right to know'; in effect, all but the most trivial machinations of those in power remained invisible. The President, in an address to newspaper publishers in 1961, denied any wish to impose censorship in the shape of an 'official secrets act', but nonetheless asked his audience to ensure that what it wrote was not only newsworthy but also 'in the national interest' (see Dallek 2004: 375).

As Leacock admitted, he was often faced with insurmountable obstacles when trying to express himself or make the most of his new equipment: 'There was no chance of our being privy to the real discussions that took place. No one has ever got that on film. There is much more chance of getting somebody fucking on film than of getting politicians being honest' (quoted in Levin 1971: 206). That Leacock or someone like him might eventually be privy to either act was one of the philandering President's concerns, and he was keen to keep the media on his side. Throughout his term, Kennedy felt secure that he had successfully controlled his media image through a series of televised press conferences and a policy

and ABC-TV, was suitably compliant with what would become known as the 'Fairness Doctrine', a series of rulings that encouraged programmers to air differing (but never too insolent) perspectives on issues of national importance. This manifesto was part of a broader initiative, formulated by the Kennedy administration, which sought an explicit connection between foreign and television policies (see Curtin 1995: 24). Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton Minow, in an inaugural address made in spring 1961 to the National Association of Broadcasters, expressed the aims of his appointer and the nature of what amounted to a personal role as moral superintendent of the 'tube':

[In] today's world, with chaos in Laos and the Congo aflame, with Communist tyranny on our Caribbean doorstep and relentless pressure on our Atlantic alliance, with social and economic problems at home of the gravest nature, yes, and with technological knowledge that makes it possible, as our President has said, not only to destroy our world but to destroy poverty around the world – in a time of peril and opportunity, the old complacent, unbalanced fare of action-adventure and situation comedies is simply not good enough. (1964: 50–1)

Minow's speech ended with a paraphrasing of Kennedy's appeal to national courage in the face of perceived menace: 'Ask not what broadcasting can do for you – ask what you can do for broadcasting. I urge you to put the people's airwaves to the service of the people and the cause of freedom' (1964: 64). Whether or not Drew calculatingly opted to join his fellow correspondents (who, as Theodore White admitted, were 'marching like soldiers of the Lord to the New Frontier' (quoted in Hoffman 1995: 142)), direct cinema's infancy was spent in a network broadcast environment that would nurture its ostensible dispassion.

Drew, after *Primary*, went on to make many syndicated television films (sold under the name 'The Living Camera') with some or all of his original, core crew of Leacock, Pennebaker and Maysles. These include *On the Pole* (1960, sometimes called *Eddie*), featuring the racing driver Eddie Sachs in his bid to win the Indianapolis 500, a contest between alpha-male protagonists reminiscent of *Primary*;<sup>1</sup> *Yanki No!* (1960), constituting a daringly even-handed examination of Castro's revolutionised Cuba, to which was added (by ABC and to Leacock's lasting chagrin) a 2,000-word voice-over that made clear to viewers the left-wing totalitarian's 'messianic', and hence hypnotic, appeal to the impressionable proletariat;<sup>2</sup> *The Children Were Watching* (1961), which reported on the integration of New Orleans' schools and that was, for many, the first conveyance of overt racism seen on television; *Football* (1961, alternatively known as *Mooney vs. Fowle*), featuring two clashing Miami school teams in another example of Drew's fascination with the idea of noble competition; and *The Chair* (1962), a typically crisis-based film centred around a black man, Paul Crump, convicted of homicide, and his lawyer's attempts to secure a commutation to life imprisonment.<sup>3</sup>

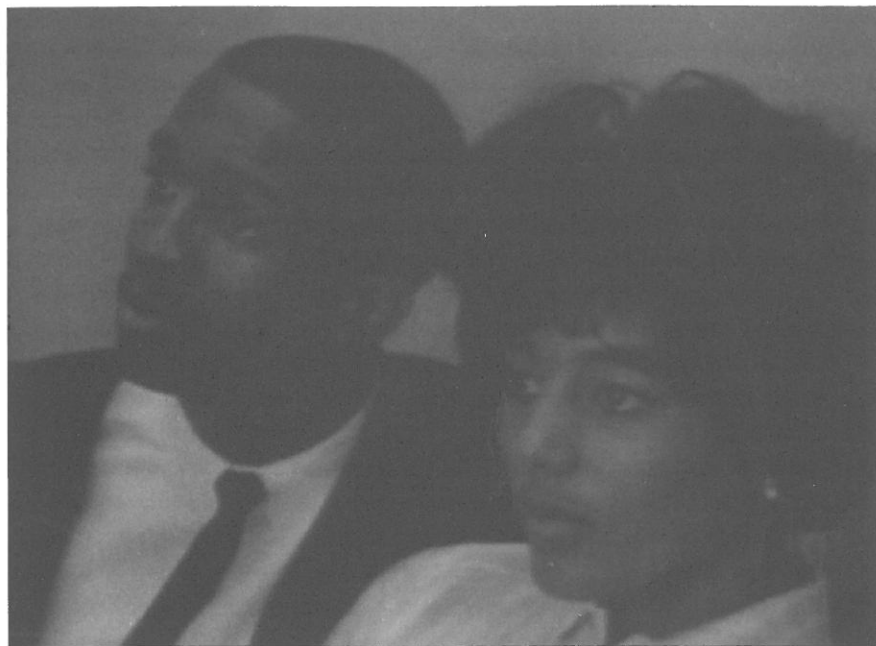
Drew returned to his favourite subject, JFK, three times after the President's narrow electoral victory over Richard Nixon. *Adventures on the New Frontier* (1962) reconstituted material from *Primary* and spliced it with new footage of Kenne-

of selective restriction; he circumspectly offered rewards (access to mundane scenes in the Oval Office, tours of the White House given by Jackie) for those who remained within 'traditional limits', whilst chiding the few who criticised his actions or sought to publicise his clandestine romances (see Dallek 2004: 477–8). These affairs were an open secret in newsrooms, but the mainstream press, out of loyalty (and perhaps a sense of hypocrisy), always resisted exposing Kennedy's continual indiscretions. Nobody wanted to upset a friend, and if they did they could expect to be harassed, at Robert Kennedy's behest, by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI.

Complete journalistic integrity, which Leacock sought more fervently than Drew, was unattainable when following high-office subjects. There would always be issues of creative constraint and pro-filmic disingenuousness (the career politician is by nature a performer), but there would also always be secrets that must remain absolutely so. Four weeks after the Bay of Pigs, according to the subsequently unearthed Pentagon Papers – the government's classified history of the Vietnam conflict – Kennedy sent four hundred Special Forces members to Indochina. 'Vietnam', insisted aide Walt Rostow, 'is the place where [we] must prove we are not a paper tiger ... We have to prove that Vietnam and Southeast Asia can be held (quoted in Hersh 1997: 220). Having learned a valuable lesson from the botched invasion of Cuba (for which he publicly accepted responsibility), Kennedy ensured that there would be more discretion around his new adventure: he and his brother Robert, the Attorney General, would take it upon themselves to see that the South prevailed against Northern insurgency, whatever the eventual price. 'The quagmire', notes Seymour Hersh, 'was forming' (1997: 221)

Civil rights, however, was a matter of increasing concern to liberals in office, most of whom wanted their cause promulgated in the media, and a subject – already addressed in *The Children Were Watching* – that would lend itself to Drew's 'crisis' template. A domestic, progressive issue such as the racial desegregation of Southern schools required no vetoing from Washingtonian officials in 1963; indeed, the promotion and depiction of liberal reforms at home was seen as a desirable means of demonstrating Kennedy's resolve with regard to contentious domestic policies (see Barsam 1992: 312). When the President took office, he had failed to accept the potentially seismic challenge that issues of race offered him, preferring instead to concentrate on international concerns. Eventually, 'Jim Crow' endangered America's global image to such a degree that it had to be confronted on television, lest Communists abroad and at home seize upon what appeared to be white apathy about incendiary black concerns (Curtin 1995: 169–70).

*Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment* (1963) centres on Alabama Democratic Governor George Wallace and his attempt, literally and illegally, to block the enrolment of two black students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, by standing in the door of their college. Wallace, who after losing a gubernatorial election to overt racist John Patterson vowed that 'no other son of a bitch will ever out-nigger me again' (Anon. 1996/97: 67), was an ideal foil for Drew's Hyannis Port heroes, a 'sleazy, strutting Alabama redneck' (Carter 1995: 142) whose parochial style and squat physique could not have contrasted more appreciably with the Kennedy brothers' poise. To many, Wallace did not come across well in *Crisis*. This was



Malone and Hood wait for justice in *Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment* (1963)

partly due to Kennedy's rebound into public favour after his astute brinkmanship during the missile affair of October 1962 (and recent implementation of popular tax cuts), but also because Drew's film functions as a public relations vehicle for the media-literate President and Attorney General, who are depicted apparently unaffectedly inhabiting both patriarchal and professional roles. Second only in direct cinema lore to *Primary's* follow-shot of JFK is a shrewdly filmed telephone conversation between Robert Kennedy and his imposing deputy, Nicholas Katzenbach, who had been sent south to face Wallace. Kennedy's infant daughter is put on the phone to 'Uncle Nick', and the filmmakers capture both sides of what is a cordial and politically symbolic adjunct about the hot climate in Alabama. Wallace, however, looked awkward trying to project what he imagined would pass for Southern affability. The Governor was plainly acting up for a medium about which he was still unsure, and disquieted in the presence of 'Yankee' journalists whom he innately distrusted. 'I know what they'll do', he remarked to aide Earl Morgan: 'They'll have Bobby Kennedy looking like an eloquent statesman, and they'll have me picking my nose.' He was not far wrong. 'They did leave out the nose-pickin'', laughed Morgan later on; Drew had had to settle instead for images of Wallace 'slurping his food' (quoted in Carter 1995: 144).

Malone and Hood are fairly and sympathetically represented in *Crisis*, atypically for a time in which, so Michael R. Winston asserts, 'television had more to say about blacks in American society, but very seldom was any of this said by blacks' (quoted in Curtin 1995: 175). Positioned for a liberal, middle-class audience, the two prospective students – who are anodyne, good-looking emblems of a righteous, white cause – nevertheless occupy a decentralised narrative space quite outside



the clash over their futures: the political suppression of a high-profile segregationist thus comprises the thrust of the film (as is repeatedly conveyed by the at-times otiose voice-over, something upon which Drew was still reliant). The fight between Robert Kennedy and Wallace – the titular crisis – itself orbits a bigger issue: progressive governmental reform versus intransigent parochial opinion, or the popular indignation of the conservative South (as embodied by the strutting Wallace) versus a newfound federal morality (as embodied by the Kennedys). Somewhere on the periphery of this filmic wrangle lie Malone and Hood, necessarily aggrieved but placidly reasonable beneficiaries of a long-overdue privilege only granted them by the White House one hundred years after the Thirteenth Amendment.

Wallace, even with huge public support from Alabamans, could never win in Tuscaloosa. His physical blockade was eventually no more than a courageous but pathetic protest in the face of Katzenbach and the federalised National Guard. 'I am not interested in a show', Katzenbach tells Wallace at *Crisis*'s climactic confrontation, momentarily looking to Leacock's camera as if seeking accordance: 'I don't know what the purpose of this show is.' In the end, Wallace had his moment of defiance, and Hood and Malone were unceremoniously escorted through a back door. That night, 11 June 1963, Kennedy addressed the nation on television to call for the passage of a comprehensive civil rights law, one of the most important and far-reaching decisions of his presidency. The crisis in Alabama had convinced him that executive action alone would not work any longer; he had, for the first time, conceded a moral duty to rid the United States of unconstitutional inequality. Drew ends *Crisis* with Kennedy's ardent speech, a plea for civic progressiveness that brings the narrative to an optimistic close and bodes well for an integrated future in which Wallace and his like are consigned to permanent redundancy. In reality, the emergency had not resolved itself with such neatness.

Only a few hours after the President had gone on air, a tragic event saw that news of his oration was relegated from several of the following morning's front pages. Mississippi Field Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Medgar Evers, was gunned down by a white supremacist: he bled to death within an hour of being shot.<sup>5</sup> Outside the Kennedys' urbane 'universe of eloquent words and noble deeds' (Carter 1995: 155), Wallace's stand in the schoolhouse door looked, to both realists and ideologues, like the act not of an anachronistic monster but of a popular spokesman. 'Wallaceism', proclaimed black activist and Kennedy ally Martin Luther King Jr, 'is bigger than Wallace' (quoted in Carter 1995: 196). The administration, or so some maintained, was pushing for too much, too soon.

*Crisis* was to be the last effort by Drew that held any prospect of bringing about a formal revolution in current affairs broadcasting. The innovations inherent to Drew's work were no longer novel, and many of his aesthetic techniques and storytelling devices were being appropriated piecemeal by more conventionally informative productions. Equally frustrating for Drew was the growing wariness amongst his peers regarding the observational style's cinematically influenced effacement of recording processes. *Crisis*, said the *New York Times*' Jack Gould, had taken place in a 'circus atmosphere', amid manipulation by its arch and illusory

subjects, collaborators in a dangerous, high-office 'peepshow' (1963a: 75). That Drew should be considered a security risk because of the apparent candidness of his approach is not a little absurd. Given Drew's deference to Kennedy and the President's own endeavours to ensure America's standing (and Drew's exclusion from every genuinely important meeting), the *New York Times*' affronts were as ironic as they were damaging.<sup>6</sup> Gould, one of America's foremost critics, fervently damned Drew's most ambitious film as 'thoroughly ill-advised' and liable to 'tarnish national dignity' (1963b: B13). Audience response to *Crisis* was generally favourable, but not sufficiently so to ensure Drew a secure tenure on television. A fad having passed, networks grew less interested in independent factual productions, as did the sponsoring companies. Viewers were not familiar enough with the observational approach to understand that it could not deliver on whatever promises may have been imagined of total, non-invasive fidelity to the putative world. Trusted presenters such as Walter Cronkite henceforth appeared in hybridised productions influenced by early direct cinema but uncommitted to its ambitious, visually dependent narrative approach.<sup>7</sup> Once again reassured of the camera's inherent truthfulness, audiences were didactically guided by familiar faces and sonorous commentaries, interspersed with 'on-the-fly' footage to imbue at least an element of what Drew had laboured for – a sense of real life 'getting out of the film'.

Thirty-three days after *Crisis* was first transmitted, a terrible reality in Dealey Plaza, Dallas, transfixed the world via television and robbed Drew of his most illustrious subject. Vice-President Lyndon Baines Johnson was sworn-in on Air Force One, declaring, 'Let us continue', as a token salute to Kennedy's 'Let us begin'. But 'Continue what?' was the consensual retort amongst assiduous commentators, who remembered only a mediocre administration that had passed few significant bills (see Isserman & Kazin 2000: 103). Most were too dazed, however, to deride a man so unexpectedly lost. A radical student – whose views could not have been governmentally endorsed – expounded of Kennedy's murder: 'For me, the assassination has made all other acts irrelevant and trivial; it has displaced time with paranoia, good with evil, relative simplicity with incomprehensibility, and an ideal with dirt' (quoted in Diggins 1992: 191). Even Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt's deaths did not impact as hard on their constituents or arrive with such abruptness as the Dallas atrocity. Kennedy was only 46, and America was at peace, prosperous and (mostly) happy. 'Besides', notes Jon Margolis, 'those earlier presidential deaths might as well have taken place in another country. They were pretelevision [*sic*], and television, by bringing the president into almost every living room almost every day, had transformed the relationship between him and the people' (1999: 10). Thanks to the ubiquitous invention that had become the 'comforter of first resort' (1999: 11), anyone who wanted to join in the mourning could. All normal broadcast schedules were dropped: during four days in November 1963, a stunned America virtually shut down, its populace letting the events as reported unfold in their homes.

Television crews did not capture the President's killing, or his wife's frantic attempts to retrieve a chunk of his brain. Abraham Zapruder's accidentally horrific amateur footage, upon its release into the public domain (first via selected stills in

*Life* and much later in its uncut entirety), would forever inform popular discourse on film's potential truly to bear witness. Endlessly scrutinised for a myriad reasons, the Zapruder film remains to this day a paragon of non-fiction filmmaking as evidence and objective record. Drew, like many others, set to work conveying not the impact of a bullet, but the sadness of a nation now without its young figurehead. The filmmaker decided to express himself by looking back at Americans as they experienced an outpouring of grief – to 'watch the people watching the funeral' (Drew quoted in O'Connell 1992: 200).

The short film *Faces of November* (1963) is poetically unreserved in its photography, poignantly revealing of its producer's feelings and uncharacteristically spiritual. Beginning and ending with the bare branches of a tree silhouetted against a harsh white sky, the narration-less piece is Drew's lament for a modern martyr. Shots of mourners parading past Kennedy's coffin (we might here infer a tragic echo of *Primary's* handshaking scene) are set to the Funeral March. Those in attendance seem equally black and white, male and female. Jackie and Robert Kennedy, she tearfully behind a veil and he with solemnity, look on, and it is easy to empathise with all those who are bereft of a husband, father or leader. As the corpse lies in state in the Capitol, the camera slowly tilts up to the Rotunda's dome to show long rays of winter sunshine pouring down upon the flag-draped coffin and the catafalque whose presence asserted a Catholic's religiosity.<sup>8</sup> All this imagery, its unfussy composition and sympathetically dignified editing never effacing an emotional heart, makes for a persuasive, if at times slightly hackneyed, piece of work; 'documentary filmmaking at its simplest and best', is how P. J. O'Connell describes it (1992: 200). Drew had successfully exemplified, as never before, the



*Life* essay on film. For the first time also, no one was interested in broadcasting his efforts.

*Faces of November* was lost amid a torrent of reportage, hard information and fervent eulogising. There was no place on television for Drew's award-winning requiem, whose awkward twenty-minute length exacerbated scheduling difficulties.<sup>9</sup> Only later would the enduring myth of 'Camelot', authored by Theodore White at Jacqueline's request, seize the public imagination and create a vast market for romanticised Kennedy nostalgia. To sustain a moderately successful relationship with the networks, Drew, as he later conceded, would have to compromise some of his hard-won principles.<sup>10</sup> This, indeed, he did, continuing for many years to produce a modest number of invariably acclaimed (though now mostly forgotten and unavailable) broadcast films.<sup>11</sup> Leacock, Pennebaker and Maysles, however, had already had enough of what they saw as a restrictive purview. After *Crisis*, Leacock and Pennebaker (Albert Maysles had left earlier to form a production company with his brother, David) decided to go their own way.

### HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY: LEACOCK BREAKS THE NEWS

Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God ... [in] whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.

– Thomas Jefferson (1787) (quoted in Peterson 1984: 290)

Robert Drew was at heart a reporter, and his choices of subject matter and methodology have always been in the tradition of a newspaperman beholden to market forces. Leacock, by contrast, was inclined towards leftish reflection and averse to the rhetorically void stories proffered by his former employer: 'In my opinion, it is the nature of broadcast television, that "cultural wasteland", that posed a problem for Bob Drew ... Drew's dream, to put twenty to fifty, whatever, hour-long shows on broadcast TV was our nightmare' (O'Connell 1992: 238, 236). Joining with Pennebaker to form Leacock-Pennebaker Films was thus a natural progression for Leacock, especially given Pennebaker's sympathetic if extreme distaste for Drew's 'prosaic, predictable bullshit' (quoted in Levin 1971: 236). The pair now had independence to express themselves as they saw fit, and concomitantly much less security in the knowledge of guaranteed mass exhibition.

On 14 September 1963 Mary Anne Fischer, of Aberdeen, South Dakota, gave birth to America's first set of healthy quintuplets and her own reluctant celebrity. Media operatives began to circle the rural family, and Leacock, with Joyce Chopra as sound recordist, was among those sent to provide coverage of what remains a rare event.<sup>12</sup> *Happy Mother's Day*, Leacock's first production subsequent to his split from the Drew Associates, gives both a critique of the tendency of conventional journalism to invade, reduce, commoditise and exploit the province of those who have no possible redress or alternative, and a response to the formal demands of national television. Its sponsor, the *Saturday Evening Post* (a long-time publisher of Norman Rockwell's anodyne cover paintings that romanticised rural and working-class life) was consequently and predictably displeased with what it

saw. Echoing Henry James' mid-nineteenth-century appraisal of the sensationalist press as 'so ubiquitous, so unprecedentedly prosperous, so wonderful for outward agility, but so unfavourable, even so fatal, to development from within' (quoted in Reynolds 1988: 566), Leacock, in *Happy Mother's Day*, subverts twentieth-century textual conventions to challenge materially pervasive forces of consent.

*Happy Mother's Day* begins with a deadpan voice-over whose dispassionate intonation hints at a subversive intent. Immediately, Leacock rejects tradition – and the dictates of Drew – by incorporating a hated device paradoxically to undermine its formal standing. The most crucially informative introductory line, 'Mrs Fischer has just become a mother of quintuplets', is drawled with such disdain for the affected ardour or gravitas (what Ernest Callenbach called the 'Voice of Doom' (1961: 38)) evinced by most mainstream documentary narrators of the time that its sarcasm is striking. We see the Fischer babies in hospital incubators, name-checked in turn by the narrator, but there is an uncomfortable dissonance between picture and sound; his voice is almost mordant, too uninvolved in what it describes to sit easily with our expectations. 'Aberdeen South Dakota', continues the narrator over an aerial shot, 'is a prairie town. The land around it is flat.' This, as William Rothman wryly notes, is plainly 'speaking the obvious' (1997: 128), and the film does so quite simply because it is not the obvious that concerns Leacock; rather, *Happy Mother's Day*, so the filmmaker admits, 'has nothing to do with having quintuplets' (quoted in Levin 1995: 207).

As Mary Anne leaves the hospital, the first close shot we see is of her crowded by many intrusive microphones before she wearily gets into a car to go home. 'I don't have many feelings', she says, battered by a physical ordeal yet still acute to the pressures of civic obligation. Her husband, Andy, seems bewildered by the sudden rash of attention. 'Mr Fischer', says the deadbeat narrator, 'keeps livestock, to help cut the food bill.' We see shots of the fecund parents' five previous children playing with various animals on their farm (which is rented so that the children may have 'space to grow' away from the city in which Mr Fischer works); a local dairy, so we learn, has donated a year's supply of milk to cater to the numerous new children's needs (and to reap the publicity); and 'five little kittens' are cuddled by their juvenile owners in a banal equivalence that speaks of a universal human pleasure in taking care of the vulnerably appreciative.

Into this frugal but apparently happy situation comes the first of many old-school press reporters, John Zimmerman of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Zimmerman asks the obliging family to pose in their ramshackle car, photographing Andy (along with his wife and older brood) in his 'only luxury', a hand-cranked Model-T Ford, as it trundles noisily around the yard. The Fischers have sacrificed material goods – the Model-T was, by 1963, superannuated for thirty years – to an abundance of children; the journalist hence seeks to construct a quintessence of small-town pastoralism for the modern age, a romanticised image of make-do homeliness that might concretise, in middle-class readers' minds, the American rural family as a 'font of virtue' happily immune to the charms of post-war consumption. (The picture magazines, which families like the Fischers could not afford, were a significant means of displaying such temptations.)<sup>13</sup> But, for Students for a

Democratic Society (SDS) leader Tom Hayden, such complacency represented a distraction from uncomfortable realities. As he declared in the seminal 1962 Port Huron Statement, or what amounted to SDS's (and the entire New Left's) early manifesto: 'Some would have us believe that Americans feel contentment amidst prosperity – but might it not better be called a glaze above deeply felt anxieties about their role in the new world?' (Students for a Democratic Society 1970: 165). The then recently opened Disneyland, notes James T. Patterson, cursorily 'managed to have things both ways, celebrating Main Street (*à la* Norman Rockwell) as well as Tomorrowland. Main Street evoked nostalgia for traditional smalltown styles of life, while Tomorrowland appealed to the still strong yearnings of Americans for the new' (1996: 342). If the affluent classes felt guilty about any technological and economic disparities between suburban and agricultural communities, between those who 'chose' to buy into the American Dream and those who did not, the mainstream news media's Capra-esque presentation of families such as the Fischers helped assuage it. What is more, even the poor might sample the 'outright, thoroughly vulgar joy' (1996: 317) of material possession, so long as they could perform a newsworthy trick.<sup>14</sup>

Leacock cuts to a scene featuring Mary Anne in a local department store, being shown sundry gratuitous dresses she might wear for upcoming civic occasions. 'Mrs Fischer', the narrator says, 'has not had a store-bought outfit since her marriage.' She is allowed to try on a mink coat, but is not allowed to keep it: 'Take it, quick', she laughs, looking simultaneously uncomfortable and desirous of something beyond her means. We then see Zimmerman atop a stepladder, photographing 'a representative selection of the gifts that the Fischers have been offered'. Strewn across a lawn lie all manner of chattels. 'Automobiles, wading pool, high chairs, bathroom fixtures, washing machines, TV sets, toys', recites the now gratingly aloof narration, as Leacock slowly pans his camera across the items, which indeed are, as Rothman suggests, 'absurdly lifeless and soulless when viewed *en plein air* in this way, divorced from their everyday use and from the glamorous aura with which magazines, ads and television commercials invest them' (1997: 135). Perhaps a more obvious problem with these only temporarily displaced 'manifestations of generosity and public interest', as the narrator puts it, is 'invasion of privacy'.

Andy is interviewed by Leacock and Chopra, in a camera framing that shows his wife's obvious ambivalence towards her new role as town mascot. She looks on glumly at left-of-frame as her husband says what he thinks he should:

It's something that don't happen every day of the week here ... It's always been a quiet town, it's bound to liven it up tremendously ... Anyone within a hundred miles of Aberdeen will drive in just to say they've been in the town ... You're gonna have to let 'em in to see [the quintuplets].

Mary Anne reflexively responds by saying, 'They're never going to be on display to anybody as far as I'm concerned.' Chopra asks, incredulously, 'Anybody?' The reply is, 'To anybody.' Leacock has here ingratiated himself beyond all reasonable

expectation. His camera, as far as its most important subject is concerned, sits apart from those of the pressmen as a gratefully privileged, benevolent presence whose reason for existence somehow transcends journalistic praxis. Mrs Fischer may have sensed that Leacock was not after a 'scoop', but a tale with greater and more lasting import: the story of how a place like Aberdeen pursues its own economic wealth within the American system.

After a meeting of the town council, which decides there is nothing wrong with 'money coming in' regardless of the Fischers' right to privacy, and a scene featuring a mayoral decision in favour of a celebratory parade, we again see the babies in hospital. They are weighed and checked for health: everything is agreeable – there is no financial liability, so Leacock suggests by juxtaposition, or risk that one child may die and bring consequent doom to the prospects these five siblings have bestowed upon a community. The narrator again speaks, with extraordinary haughtiness, over a number of shots showing the extended Fischers preparing themselves: 'The morning of the parade honouring the one-month birthday of the Fischer quintuplets. Relatives have come from as far away as Oregon and California. The Fischer house is crowded to the walls – as a matter of fact it's jammed.' There is a rehearsal of the parade, staged, as the voice-over says, 'for the benefit of the newsmen, whose ... [there is a rhetorical pause] *deadlines* can't wait.' Looking suspicious and bored, the Fischer children greet an awkward congressman, who seems resignedly enjoined to the cause of self-promotion. The youths are then posed for agents of the local press, who, according to their time-honoured remit, once more condense and display humanity for material gain.

A bemused Native American, decked in full tribal regalia, is asked to squat in front of the children for a picture: 'Come on, turn around and look at 'em, Chief – turn around and *look at 'em*', demands a peremptory photographer. The 'Chief' does not know which way to look or how to act for the camera, but there is little sense that anyone in the film is feeling sympathetic discomfort for his embarrassment. Presumably the elder is one of a remaining few Indian Dakotans who could still earn a living as a bygone curio, for hire to municipal parties so they may disavow their ancestors' pogroms. He is thus brought forth as a noble savage, a representative of peoples long subdued by the Hotchkiss gun but still invoked as a triumphant reminder of who the white Europeans displaced to make way for settlers such as the Fischers. South Dakota's historical relationship with the aboriginal 'Redskins' is crystallised by the 1890 battle at Wounded Knee, a much-documented atrocity during which at least 150 Sioux men, women and children were massacred; a less notorious truth, however, is that L. Frank Baum, the usually placid editor of South Dakota's *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer* and later the author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), advocated the annihilation a week before it happened:

The Whites, by law of conquest, by justice of civilization, are masters of the American continent, and the best safety of the frontier settlements will be secured by the total annihilation of the few remaining Indians ... Their glory has fled, their spirit broken, their manhood effaced; better that they should die than live the miserable wretches that they are. (Quoted in Stannard 1992: 126)

If Baum had called into question popular stories of 'Indian uprisings', as a responsible editor should, then the slaughter may never have ensued. As subsequently reported by the *Pioneer*, one of the scanty survivors – a young girl named Lost Bird – was taken in and exhibited for profit by a General Colby, before ending up in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and dying at age 29. Disturbing parallels with the Fischers' own situation can of course here be construed; moreover, it is the quietly pernicious propensity at the heart of consensus journalism that is most pertinent to Leacock's agenda in *Happy Mother's Day*.

At a function in the Fischers' honour, the mayor gives a grandiloquent speech calling for the town to respect the family's privacy. Yet the event is clearly contrived to expose and totemise they who are the community's novel 'responsibility'. Much as the kittens on their farm are kept, the Fischers here find themselves cosseted pets of Aberdeen, a place at least temporarily 'dedicated to their welfare' because of a statistical anomaly. A soprano performs a twee rendition of a Grieg folk dance, and Leacock looks for facial reactions with his camera, along the way finding Mary Anne, who gives a very fleeting smile directly to the lens. William Rothman describes this glance as transfiguratively epiphanic, and an inaugural declaration of the sync-sound camera's freedom: 'It is at this moment that *A Happy Mother's Day* [*sic*] is born. It is at this moment that [direct cinema] itself is born, or reborn as a movement of independent film' (1997: 142). Rothman's assessment not only avows the rhetorical importance of Mary Anne's partiality to Leacock, but also goes further in arguing for the existence of a 'secret bond between Mrs Fischer and Leacock's camera' (1997: 141), a putative relationship that intellectually cuckolds Andy – the 'decent man' without mental recourse to ironical comment.

It is, though, difficult to be sure of the philosophical nature of this 'bond', or even whether factors other than the filmmakers' affable personalities and long-term presence are at play. There is intimated, in Mrs Fischer's to-camera smile, an irreverent sympathy with the cameraman that lends the film a qualitative sensitivity to the ridiculousness unfolding; yet there is also a sadness in Mary Anne's acquiescence to what she obviously considers absurd, and this may be equally significant to Leacock's thinking. She knows she can never become empowered enough in her own right to escape the literal and metaphorical boundaries of Aberdeen, as Leacock had so easily escaped the strictures of clichéd reporting and corporate remit; she will, unlike the sync-sound camera and despite her happiness in motherhood, perhaps never be free. What Rothman indisputably gets right, though, is that films such as *Happy Mother's Day*, 'dispossessed from network television and thus compelled to discover or create their own audiences as *films*', marked the 'true birth of cinema-vérité in America' (1997: 121). Without ethical or financial obligation to sponsors, Drew's more left-wing, left-field alumni could be as impudent as they dared. The climactic street parade, notwithstanding its stoical majorettes, is depicted as a washout. Leacock focuses on the older Fischer children's miserable faces, and this cheerless sentiment is echoed by the narrator, who emphasises in a sarcastic drawl – while rain falls upon everyone, including the doctor who delivered the quintuplets – that it was 'a typical day of celebration in Aberdeen, South Dakota, USA'.<sup>15</sup>



After protracted legal disputes and the *Saturday Evening Post's* censure of the initial cut, ABC bought the rights to Leacock's raw footage, subsequently shaping an innocuous and now forgotten version for network broadcast.<sup>16</sup> His cherished original remains a canonical work, mostly because it represents the first significant move by one of direct cinema's instigators to challenge the staid condition of televised non-fiction. Although Leacock found it hard to incorporate reflexive acknowledgement of his own presence among the journeymen reporters, something he admits he 'did want to bring up – the pretence of our not being there' (quoted in Levin 1971: 204), we nonetheless witness in *Happy Mother's Day* what amounts to a giant leap towards direct cinema's potential. No longer 'lodged in the bosom of the mass media' (James 1989: 213) at Time-Life, Leacock took the opportunity to formulate a contemptuous retort.<sup>17</sup> In filming the Fischers, downhome folk who had not chosen to be held aloft as town mascots nor committed any transgression or entered into any competition, Leacock departed from the Drew norm by seeing no crisis other than perhaps the one most crucial to the observational documentary's survival: whether or not that form could be applied usefully to bring about a change in our apprehension of the often stultifying modern condition and its principal architects.

Baby-boomers, however, born into prosperity and reaching an age – a 'teen-age' – at which they exerted spending power, were, in the early 1960s, beginning to alter the mass marketplace and notions of conservative accord. Thanks to their parents, they had pocket money to spend on what they wanted: vigour, excitement and rejection of the pervasive authority that had allowed America to become vastly rich but concomitantly entrenched in prudery. For some years, white pop music and youth culture in general had produced no torchbearers capable of upsetting this comfortable stasis. Marlon Brando had grown up, and James Dean, the most potent symbol of the short-lived teenage rebellions of the mid-1950s, was dead; the 'kids' now found amusement in beach movies, surf music, bobbysoxer pin-ups and tail-finned cars. 'A generation raised on crew-cuts, teeth-braces, hot rods and Coca-Cola', asserts Ian MacDonald, 'knew nothing of blues or R&B and had forgotten the rock 'n' roll which had excited their elder brothers and sisters only five years earlier' (1994: 8). Elvis Presley, since his army service and digression into lightweight musical film appearances, was no less a legend than in his heyday; yet he bored his public by repetition, continually reprising lucrative but colourless roles arranged around increasingly sub-standard songs. Folk music offered a conscientious, if sometimes dour, objection for those of a different bent, but its devotees were not of appropriate number or inclination to bring about a national craze.

In the sad months after Kennedy's death, America felt in need of a tonic, a happy displacement of national grief upon something overwhelmingly life-affirming yet not explicitly sexually dangerous or politically earnest. What arrived from across the Atlantic, however, hyped and heralded by radio and television, would divide parents and children as never before over what could be considered morally, principally, aesthetically and artistically decent. 'The lads that will never be old' (A. E. Houseman quoted in Goldsmith 2004: 179) were signalling a change in

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generational attitudes that would impact upon popular culture for four decades or more. 'Beatlemania', to be sure, 'struck with the force, if not the conviction, of a social movement' (Ehrenreich *et al.* 1997: 524).

### WHAT'S HAPPENING!: THE MAYSLES BROTHERS MEET THE BEATLES

The boys and girls of this age are young men and women looking for something in life that can't always be found, a *joie de vivre*. Life is changing all the time. We are all looking for a vision of the ecstasy of life.

– Leopold Stokowski (quoted in Goldsmith 2004: 157)

It's [easy] to understand the hostility of the Establishment: on some level, it knew it was doomed.

– Martin Goldsmith (2004: 178)

David Maysles convinced his more experienced brother of the Beatles' worthiness as subjects for a documentary.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Albert, he had heard of the jovial Liverpudlians, liked their music and sensed that their first visit to the United States might represent, for the nation's youth, an unusually potent exciter. On 7 February 1964 (or 'B-Day', as the media had christened it), the Beatles' plane touched down at the recently renamed John F. Kennedy International airport to be met by thousands of screaming (mostly) young women and over two hundred press correspondents. A pop group whose joyful music simultaneously evoked and reinvented the state-side rock 'n' roll that had come before, and whose 'mop-top' hairstyles infuriated parents and captivated teens by the million, set foot on American soil expecting a warm reception but quite unprepared for the anomalous hysteria they encountered. 'We've never seen anything like this before', said an airport worker to the *New York Times*, 'not even for kings and queens' (see Gardner 1964a: 25–6). John Lennon was astutely circumspect even as he was overwhelmed, asking photographer Harry Benson, before stepping off the plane, 'Where are all the Freedom Riders?' (quoted in Goldsmith 2004: 133).<sup>19</sup> The Beatles were not politically active, college-educated 'longhairs' of the sort hated by the Establishment; they were, to middle-class suburbanite elders, something far more confusing: they extended an invitation simply to 'let go' and enjoy the feeling of 'protest against the adult world' (sociologist David Riesman quoted in Ehrenreich *et al.* 1997: 527), without commitment to specific issues or conventional ideologies of dissent.

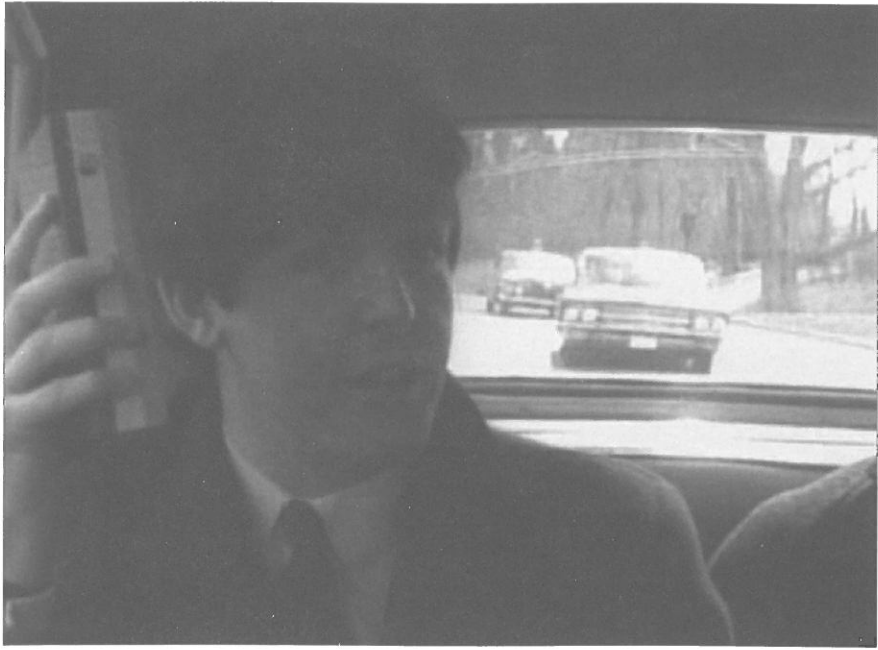
The Maysles arrived at the airport to begin shooting a film that would be the first direct cinema production entirely to eschew voice-over. This was an inestimably significant development, and one made possible in large part due to the puckish Beatles' assiduously constructed public personalities. Though certainly they worked to an internalised script of sorts, the Beatles were openly too far at odds with prescribed devices (specifically 'lecture-logic' via the 'Voice of Doom') to sit easily within media formats unsympathetic to their irreverent repartee. Always within Drew's favoured 'crisis' narratives was an imperative quest for justice or valour that often required verbal elucidation and dramatic emphasis; the Beatles,

however, had already won over their young constituency (the chief audience that the Maysles sought) and saw no need to change tack in the wake of unprecedented attainment. Vivacious celebration was self-evidently the crux of the function of the Beatles as torchbearers for the 'kids', and the group knew exactly how to play at being 'John, Paul, George and Ringo' when on promotional duty; everybody thus thought they knew the Beatles, because the Beatles made sure nothing sullied or complicated their image. This awareness suited the Maysles brothers' urge to escape Drew's conventional impositions, as well as offering a means of allowing the pro-filmic world to avow itself – without pretensions to omniscience or anthropology – as an independently valid hypothesis for the first time.

*What's Happening! The Beatles in the USA* (1964) begins with New York disc jockey Murray 'the K' Kaufman, the Beatles' foremost early champion in America, espousing the band's greatness on air. 'Here's what's happening, baby – The Beatles!' shouts Kaufman, before playing 'She Loves You', which had been a breakthrough hit in the UK, replete as it was with an Americanised 'yeah, yeah, yeah!' refrain that so annoyed elders and thrilled teenagers. The directors cut to an excited female crowd at the airport, who sing the same song, wear t-shirts emblazoned with the 'Fab Four''s smiling faces, and flaunt cheaply-produced Beatle 'wigs' on top of their shoulder-length hair. Placards are raised on the concourse. Most are friendly, but two declare hostility: one reads, 'Beatles Unfair to Bald Men', but another is more serious – 'England Get Out of Ireland!' A screaming crowd rushes to greet the plane as it lands, before we see a television press conference – something John Kennedy had popularised – that demonstrates the group's intelligence and softly cynical, Goons-influenced charm:<sup>20</sup>

- Reporter: Prove to us that you can sing!  
 Lennon: No, we need money first...  
 Reporter: Don't you get a haircut at all?  
 Harrison: I had one yesterday.  
 Starr: It's no lie; you should have seen him the day before...  
 Reporter: How do you account for your great success?  
 Lennon: If we knew, we'd form another group and be managers.

The film's titles then run over 'I Saw Her Standing There', a paean to dance-floor libido in which the narrator conspiratorially implies lust for the underage but sexually willing: 'Well she was just *seventeen*, you know what I *mean*.' As Ian MacDonald extols, the song 'socked avid young radio-listeners in the solar plexus. With the authentic voice of youth back on the airwaves, the rock 'n' roll rebellion, quiescent since 1960, had resumed' (1994: 60). Murray the K exultantly dances around his radio studio, and a close-up of a promotional picture of the Beatles, with two-dimensional wobbling heads simulating their stage act, provides a light-hearted comment on the band's reflexive transposition of sexual urges to the upper body: a commercially efficacious relocation away from Elvis's crotch and its 'animal gyrations' (Congressman Emanuel Celler quoted in Guralnick 1994: 384). More explicitly, the group's tonsorial verdure represented a mocking of gender distinctions.



Paul, in the eye of the storm – *What's Happening!* (1964)

Partial androgyny – as expressed musically in their Little Richard-style falsettos, trilled as they simultaneously shook their heads – was threatening to parents because it offered children a quasi-perverse means of aesthetic divorcement: the Beatles did not appear bestially licentious, but mystifyingly feminised. Naturally, boys copied the look to appeal to girls. 'In thousands of living rooms, kitchens, and dens', writes Jon Margolis, 'parents pleaded, urge, cajoled, bribed, and finally commanded their sons to get a haircut' (1999: 140). The Beatles offered no firm political stance, yet the media cited them, positively and negatively depending on financial imperatives, as a challenge to the status quo. Regardless of obscurantists' protestations, continues Margolis, 'beneath millions of [short-haired] skulls, a rebellion brewed' (ibid.). There was *in utero* an uprising by both sexes (though what shape it might ultimately take was uncertain), and the Maysles brothers captured its initial stirrings with sympathetic enthusiasm.

McCartney, Starr and Lennon ride in the back of a limousine, while Albert Maysles films them from the front seat. The two songwriters are evidently performing for the camera, but, as with Kennedy, this is part of their professional lives, a learned response to a medium whose power was symbiotically growing, especially in America, with corporate forces. McCartney listens on a portable radio, emblazoned with a Pepsi-Cola logo, to reports that his band will be reading some of their poetry, 'tomorrow night from seven to eight'. The bassist affects an obtuse, 'hillbilly' accent, mocking the speciously jovial presenter ('We ain't *writ* no poetry') and a promotion of Kent cigarettes, whose 'exclusive, micro-lined filters ... really satisfy!' The Kent theme tune, its asinine rhymes amusing the three Beatles, contrasts with the Britons' affable (although real) cynicism and musical vitality. Law-

rence Laurent of the *Washington Post* underestimated the younger generation when he opined that 'our adolescents don't know the difference between parody and the real thing' (quoted in Goldsmith 2004: 147). Rather, they were enjoying the novelty of release from conservative strictures that the Beatles, who according to Laurent looked 'like sheep dogs and sound[ed] like alley cats in agony' (ibid.), provided in their public personas and their art. Upon stopping for only a moment, the car, despite an escort of mounted police, is besieged by hysterically high-pitched young women. When they get moving again, Albert Maysles – in an acknowledgment of his own privilege – films a man holding a cine camera, who runs alongside in an attempt to glean some footage of the thrilling new celebrities. When they reach their hotel, a crowd is waiting to mob them. 'Get in, quick', says Lennon, with a trace of fear in his voice.

The foray by English 'beat' groups into the land of their spiritual forefathers had begun with an unpredictably resounding success; the Beatles were the vanguard of what would be a mutually beneficial spate of transatlantic pop-cultural (and especially musical) exchanges spanning the next decade. In their suite, the seemingly chain-smoking quartet sits rapt in pride and bewilderment watching news reports on the television. 'The British invasion this time goes by the name of Beatlemania', intones a presenter; '"B-Day" has been common knowledge for months, and this was the day.' Again, swollen with justifiable feelings of conquistadorial victory, the band satirises the American media, sending up the portentous Huntley-Brinkley Report on television by irreverently mimicking its sincerity. McCartney, with the heartfelt righteousness of youth, sarcastically criticises the newspapers for condensing the Kennedy Airport press conference and thus not getting across the nuances of Scouse wit: "'How about your hair?" Answer: "We're really bald." *Funny.*'

We cut back to Murray the K in his WINS studio (complete with the wobbling, cardboard heads), announcing, 'This is the Beatles' station! They've taken over – they're telling us what to play! I got one week of this and I'm gonna become the fifth Beatle, baby!' In a scene that becomes an *à la mode* parallel to the groundbreaking telephone conversation in *Crisis*, Kaufman calls the group and invites them to give on-air requests. McCartney chooses Marvin Gaye's 'Pride and Joy', possibly to enhance his group's standing amongst the black community and effect cachet with aficionados of more 'authentic' musical genres and performers. It is not a song that can be seen as analogous in many ways to the Beatles', yet it provides the basis for a joyous montage, as the Maysles brothers celebrate 'what's happening, baby!' in a New York milieu far removed from Washingtonian politics. A young, black woman, dressed and made-up in the style of Motown singing groups, dances alluringly behind the middle-aged but effervescent Murray the K; the film cuts between the studio – in which the undulating young woman is the main focus of filmic attention – and the band enjoying the song in the hotel as it emanates fuzzily from the Pepsi-Cola transistor. This is a short but exciting thirty seconds of filmmaking, and one of the first instances of true revelry amongst the direct cinema founders in the looseness of their bonds to journalistic duty: here one art form delights in sympathy with another, feeling the thrill of the new. Later, at the

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Fig. 7 A night off for the Beatles in the Peppermint Lounge – *What's Happening!*

famous Peppermint Lounge, the Maysles brothers would take even greater pleasure in filming the Beatles 'twisting' on a night off, with results that bring to mind Leacock and Tilton's *Jazz Dance* (1954), an aesthetically similar blend of mostly unsynchronised sound and flailing bodies. Here, though, the vibrant camerawork and montage add to a sense that the famous Beatles, intoxicated and inaudible over the music, might for a moment have forgotten their collective concern for the maintenance of a public image. They are purely having fun, away from any psychological pressure to keep up the drollery that the fans and record companies found so easily sellable; the band flirts on a face-to-face level with self-assured women, not infatuated girls, and for once we infer a sexual physicality beneath the libidinous group's commercially acceptable veneer and coded lyrics of wanting to 'hold your hand'.

There is yet more teenage hysteria, as the filmmakers present further evidence that 'the vision of a suburban split-level, which had guided a generation of young women chastely through high school, was beginning to lose its luster' (Ehrenreich *et al.* 1997: 531) in the face of alternatives, however fantastical or idolatrous. Dozens of young women chant, 'We want the Beatles! We want the Beatles!' and gaze up at the hotel's windows, periodically gasping upon the sight of any movement therein. But the objects of their adoration are heading not for suburban romance but for a press call in Central Park, to fulfil promotional obligations. The foursome again demonstrate their pleasure in parodying the media ('Hey, *Beadles!* Hey, *Beadles!*'), whilst simultaneously providing the assembled photographers with what they want – posed shots of the band in affectedly spread-limbed action, playing on a reputation for fun-loving, neotenous displays of 'spontaneous' exuberance. The

Maysles brothers, like Leacock during *Happy Mother's Day's* creation, were outside looking in at these repeated demands with amusement, knowing that what they had was something more, despite the band's unwillingness ever to drop its act; their subjects, all the while doing their performative duty, doubtless shared the joke, as an emerging affinity between the filmmakers and the band serves to illustrate.

'Can you do it once more?' asks a photographer. 'I thought I hadn't stopped', replies Ringo. Paul breaks off from an interview about what he did last night, something the viewer of *What's Happening!* already knows ('Watched TV. Listened to the radio. We're lazy.'). to connect proactively with the filmmakers' future narrative: 'In fact, ladies and gentlemen, for the continuity of the film, I'd like to reintroduce the radio.' He holds the Pepsi radio aloft, and he and Ringo dance to what they think might be 'Breakfast at Tiffany's'. The pressmen do not ask for a repeat performance, and it is clear that the Beatles have always been, though very politely, one step ahead in their comprehension of marketing devices (if not the protocols of candid documentary). This scene, and the many other nods to mutual camaraderie in *What's Happening!*, suggest an evolving approach to direct cinema's hitherto cardinal rules about interference, exchange of ideas and disavowal of the camera's presence. There is a soulfulness in evidence that would be quite incongruous in *Primary*, or any of Drew's subsequent observational films. What the Maysles brothers have discovered is that Drew's 'theatre without actors', an idea whose initial austerity was giving way to fresh invention, need not pretend always to be without responsiveness, humility or *joie de vivre*.

By way of comparison, we briefly see Brian Epstein and his haughty female assistant, who has trouble with an American's continual mispronunciation of his name as 'Epsteen'. That the Beatles had got to America at all was largely down to 'Eppie', an astute manager whose professional guidance was in part facilitated by his reserved, English charm. A gay man in an epoch when even in show business such proclivities were still frowned upon (and illegal), he was tortured by his sexual identity and by an abiding addiction to prescription drugs. Seeming slightly detached both in and from the film (and very aware of his comportment), Epstein's clipped accent and equally subdued hairstyle certainly mark him out from his charges; his reaction upon hearing that his 'boys' record has entered the charts at number seven is to proclaim it 'marvellous ... I think it may go to number one, actually'. Yet it was he who had struck a deal to give free Beatles t-shirts to anyone who turned up at JFK Airport to greet the band, and he who appreciated the power of hysteria, keeping Lennon's wife, Cynthia, in the background (she is occasionally glimpsed in *What's Happening!*).

Paradoxically, the Maysles brothers' approach tells us everything and nothing about the enigmatic manager. Whilst in New York, Epstein enjoyed a clandestine affair with a construction worker: as a result he fell victim to an attempt at extortion (see Guiliano 1986: 56). No facet of this intriguing, secretly conducted life could ever have been a part of *What's Happening!*, an exemplar of direct cinema's intrinsic inability to explore forbidden provinces. But, by dint of Epstein's reserve, a truth (and importantly a truth quite distinct from Drew's dramatic vision) nonethe-

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less emerges from the documentary's facility. 'Brian', remembers Geoffrey Ellis, 'wanted to keep the fans' enthusiasm for the Beatles at fever pitch ... He knew he had a world-beating act. He knew he could get virtually anything for the Beatles' (quoted in Geller 2000: 77). The world would indeed fall at his and his charges' feet, yet he had no idea what direction the musicians would eventually take to transcend the limits of teen pop and confront concerns beyond love, lust and the pitfalls of hyperactive fame. All that mattered, in 1964, was the selling of his cherished phenomenon; indeed, it seems likely that the band's lampooning of product endorsements and advertising slogans in *What's Happening!* was partly a means of voicing frustration about its economically determined profile without offending Epstein.

A legendary 9 February appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, brokered well in advance by Epstein, secured the Beatles a place in popular history as the working-class English group that conquered America by sheer force of vivacity. 'The Presleyan gyrations and caterwauling of yesterday are but lukewarm dandelion tea in comparison to the 100-proof elixir served up by the Beatles', effused the New York *Daily News* on 10 February (quoted in Guiliano 1986: 51): 73 million people had watched the previous night's performance, during which the Maysles brothers were banned from the production floor (*ibid.*). In lieu of shooting the *Ed Sullivan Show* from the wings, Albert Maysles propitiously decided instead to go to the nearest tenement building and follow the sound of music to an apartment door. Sure enough, two generations were inside gazing at the television, the children in adoration, their parents in bewilderment, and the resulting scene is charming, revealing and emotionally potent – an illustration of direct cinema's potential. Without the excitement of the quartet's stage act, however, *What's Happening!* henceforward palls. After the tangible exhilaration of its first scenes, the impish but laboured charm exuded by the film's subjects wears thin, giving way to vignettes that substantiate the band's reputation for telegenic adeptness but ultimately ring hollow. A number of similar situations (on trains, in hotel rooms, in corridors) that should have been wonderful moments become grating minutes, as the band largely refuses to drop its guard and allow subcutaneous humanness to sully the 'Fab Four' myth; put simply, there are only so many variations on an inherently limited theme.

John, Paul, George and Ringo are indeed 'what's happening', but what we see via the Maysles brothers is a vaudeville act stretched beyond its limited promise into something that begins to look like simple mugging; the Beatles gave up touring in 1966, and it is not hard, on this evidence, to see why. At first the youthful musicians revelled in adulation, but nonetheless grew quickly jaded with playing caricatures of themselves, ostensible cartoons in serfdom to marketing devices. As Philip Norman remarks, by 1964 the appetite for Beatles-related ephemera was so great that the 'vaguest representation of insects, of guitars or little mop-headed men, had the power to sell anything' (quoted in Neaverson 1997: 8).<sup>21</sup> In *What's Happening!* the Beatles do little to counter establishment accusations that they are merely commoditised playthings, indifferent to being drowned out by shrieking acolytes. What is conveyed, rather than a portrait of four genuinely distinctive per-



sonalities, is an impression that the wobbling heads in Kaufman's studio efficiently impart the band's quintessence.

'The bigger we got', remarked Lennon in 1973, 'the more unreality we had to face. It was all just a bad joke to me. One has to completely humiliate oneself to be what the Beatles were, and that's what I resent' (quoted in Guilliano 1986: 51). For the time being, the 'bad joke' (along with some superbly-crafted pop music) was engaging enough to captivate a nation, but not sufficient to sustain an hour-long, unscripted film. Richard Lester drew inspiration from *What's Happening!* when making *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), and offered, arguably, a more entertaining, satisfying and astute commentary on the nature of stardom than the Maysles brothers' protracted documentary. The Maysles' influential but flawed effort was consequently driven out of distribution by Lester's homage, about which Albert is magnanimous: 'Imitation, after all, is the sincerest form of flattery.'<sup>22</sup> Lester was able to build a more cogent narrative around the group's media personalities, fusing character distillation with set pieces accompanied by several new songs. Despite the semi-underground, *ad hoc* tone of *What's Happening!* and its several charming scenes, it does not provide frequent enough relief from the band's adept press routine. The Beatles may have shared a distaste of journalistic fakery with the filmmakers, yet they were unable to give profoundly even to people whose trust was implicit. (In 1968, the Maysles brothers would form the elusive bond for which they were looking, with a group of Irish-American Bible salesmen pitching in Boston and Florida. The resulting film, *Salesman*, is one of direct cinema's most celebrated achievements; it is, however, an almost timeless account of the 'drummer' and his travails in a marketplace inured by mass promotion. Owing more to Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller than to Robert Drew, *Salesman* draws on the formal traits of dramatic fiction to mourn the lot of commercial actors less fortunately endowed than the Beatles (see Barsam 1992: 330–2; also Spears 1995).)

*What's Happening!* does succeed, though, in conveying its directors' impetuses. David Maysles reflected: 'I was trying to show how they typify a great part of American youth. I feel that there is a sort of restlessness. They want to find out what's happening in town. Where are they going to go? It's like *Marty* [1955]. They're always looking for something – for a "beat"' (quoted in Macdonald & Cousins 1998: 263). The Beatles, in 1964, amounted to a talented novelty act, evincing no hint of the true greatness that would arrive with the sonic depth and lyrical scope of their latter work. They represented simple, hormonal abandon, in particular through the repackaging of standard American rock 'n' roll in unusual harmonies, Anglo-centric humour and iconoclastic fashions. Two years later, the group would look back on their jocular behaviour with embarrassment, as they now lived 'X-rated lives' (Richard Lester quoted in Neaverson 1997: 35) that might have shocked conservative America into apoplexy had these proclivities been evident in 1964. But, even in their early-1960s guise as the 'lads from Liverpool', they were a threat to the older generation: 'four erotic divinities' (Carlin 1964: 37) arriving on their shores from the Old World to sweep away newly and undesirably orgasmic daughters, feminise sons and debase long-held values. Moreover, the Beatles' 'invasion' of the United States, notes Christopher Booker, was 'the first

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time that any country had fought back against America's domination of twentieth-century mass-culture since the first craze for *Alexander's Ragtime Band* in 1912. And the irony of it was, of course, that America's rout had been achieved with what were almost entirely her own weapons' (1969: 225).

America would soon respond in kind with a musical retort. In the meantime, more ominously subversive elements of the nascent cultural rebellion were quietly conducting their own radically experimental rituals. Aiming to reject paradigms engendered by the 'final stages of a sick society' (Leary 1999: 11) and to expand the mind with chemistry, this was the 'new religion' of LSD-25, and Dr Timothy Leary was its prophet.

### **YOU'RE NOBODY 'TIL SOMEBODY LOVES YOU: PENNEBAKER TURNS ON**

Any action that is not a conscious expression of the turn-on-tune-in-drop-out rhythm is the dead posturing of robot actors on the fake-prop TV studio stage set that is called American reality ... Never underestimate the sacred meaning of the turn on.

– Timothy Leary (1999: 3, 5)

After making the short films *Lambert & Co.*, about the singer Dave Lambert attending an audition, and *Michèle et Michèle* (both 1964, the latter unreleased), D. A. Pennebaker decided to accompany his friend, outré cabaret entertainer Monti Rock III, to Leary's wedding. Held in a Millbrook, New York mansion belonging to stockbroker William Mellon Hitchcock (that Hitchcock rented to Leary and his followers for a nominal fee), the ceremony was to sanctify the twice-married ex-Harvard professor's union with Swedish model Nena von Schlebrugge. Since the curtailing of his tenure at Harvard – ostensibly for missing classes, although in reality for subjecting undergraduates to drug experiments – Leary had used Millbrook as a haven in which to conduct the psilocybin, mescaline and LSD 'trips' he was sure would provide insight into the human mind's untapped potential.

Together with long-term academic collaborator Richard Alpert, Leary extolled 'higher consciousness, ecstasy, and enlightenment through hallucinogens', publishing his findings in an evangelising journal, the *Psychedelic Review*. Sitting amongst incense-swathed statues of Buddha and Shiva, Leary reiterated his hopes: 'It's only a matter of time until the psychedelic experience will be accepted ... We're simply trying to get back to man's sense of nearness to himself and others, the sense of social reality which civilized man has lost. We're in step with the basic needs of the human race, and those who oppose us are *far out*' (quoted in Lee & Shlain 1985: 96). When not in the kitchen observing one of radical psychiatrist R. D. Laing's 'mystical ballets', or riding a horse that had been painted pink and blue, Leary immersed himself in a saturnalia: 'Jesus Christ', he complained, 'do I have to fuck every girl that comes into this place?' (quoted in Margolis 1999: 38). Chemist Albert Hoffman's accidental 1938 discovery was giving a small but growing band of dedicated American followers not only a reason to feel that they were pioneering a new era of love and philosophical lucidity, but also the chance to exult, before the inevitable legal clampdown, in a 'party with a purpose' (Margolis 1999: 129).

*You're Nobody 'Til Somebody Loves You* was the result of Pennebaker's weekend with Leary and his retinue, and it is a film that reflects its subjects' and maker's shared desire to abjure the statutes of traditional reporting. As Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain note, Leary 'realized that the press was not an organ for disseminating truth; no matter what one said, it would always be distorted by straight journalists' (1985: 115). Likewise, the much-disdained *Vast Wasteland* was dismissed, at least by those who were 'hip' to the Establishment's pervasive media presence, as irredeemably beholden to corporate cryptarchs (a suspicion borne out by ABC's subdual of *Happy Mother's Day*). Pennebaker, in the months following his acrimonious separation from Drew and network television, was obviously no emissary of reaction; rather, it seems likely that he enjoyed, with Leary, a sense that the 'subliminal message – LSD could take you to extraordinary places – would come through between the lines and young people would turn on in greater and greater numbers' (ibid.).

Echoing *Primary's* ending, Pennebaker begins *You're Nobody...* with a shot of a car receding down the road. We do not yet know where the vehicle is going, and nor do its bohemian occupants, who appear to be cheerfully if concernedly off course in their excursion to visit a 'great scientist', who, says Monti Rock, 'looks like Dr Jekyll'. An up-tempo soundtrack announces a celebratory intent, but there is no title, no voice-over narration, and indeed no background exposition or provision of information other than the sign on the back of the car reading 'Monti Rock III'. *You're Nobody...* thus takes up the story of American observational documentary from where *Primary* left off; this time, though, the passengers' destination is not democratic rejection but spiritual refreshment. Unlike the Beatles (and even Hubert Humphrey), Pennebaker's subjects herein are not sufficiently famous as to require no introduction for a largely unfamiliar audience. What is evinced is total renunciation, a more committed extension of *Happy Mother's Day's* sarcastic commentary and *What's Happening's* reliance on the Beatles' recognisable, pre-defined identities; *You're Nobody...* is the start of an adventure for Pennebaker and those who were unafraid of 'dropping out', personally and artistically, of the 'sick society'. Theodore Roszak argued that 'ingenious rationalisation', or 'the total ethos of the bomb' (1971: 47), suffused the dovetailing mainstream discourses of efficiency, progress, welfare and warfare in the mid-1960s; affluent, democratic civilisation, so R. D. Laing contended, might for this reason benefit from a 'dissolution of the normal ego, that false self competently adjusted to our alienated social reality' (1967: 119). Postulating an omnipresent psychical exertion of authority, Leary was more forthright in condemning American orthodoxy, which he labelled damaging to 'internal freedom': 'Politics today is a disease – it's a real addiction' (quoted in Roszak 1971: 168). Governmental liberals, unconvinced of the efficacy of such radical notions, promoted technocracy's ultimate fulfilment through educational and civil equality as the means by which apotheoses of freedom and happiness could be attained. Global collectivism, in their view, remained the most persistently intractable moral concern.

Whilst Lyndon Johnson worked to implement social reforms and to honour his predecessor's best intentions, he was equally committed to managing a tough

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yet not perceptibly reckless approach to the Cold War. Remembering Munich's concessions, Johnson knew that a weak hand abroad could have dangerous corollaries; all the same, he remained wary of a course that was taking him 'further and further out on a sagging limb ... I don't like it, but how can I pull out?' (quoted in Dallek 1998: 243). Total disengagement in Vietnam, especially since the removal of Ngo Dinh Diem, sanctioned by Kennedy, was not an option without a degree of concomitant humiliation; despite Congressional voices urging him to withdraw, Johnson felt bound by both duty and conviction to attain at minimum a pyrrhic triumph that might appease anti-Communist voters and grant him tenure to effect domestic melioration. All-out war, however, proved an unpopular prospect. Even as no regime stable or independent enough to defeat the North emerged, it became clear that hawkish rhetoric would not win the forthcoming presidential election. The incumbent would eventually defeat right-wing Republican Barry Goldwater, largely because of the latter's pledge to escalate activities in Vietnam and Johnson's television adverts seizing upon his rival's casual attitude to nuclear weapons. Both men realised the need to pursue victory with determination, but Goldwater's heated pronouncements were misjudged: anything short of avowedly belligerent prosecution represented, to the electorate, preferable moderation. Democrats propitiously maintained in the public mind a fear of Goldwater as 'ridiculous and a little scary: trigger-happy, a bomb-thrower, a radical [who] will cancel Social Security' (Jack Valenti quoted in Dallek 1998: 169). Consequently, Johnson's electoral mandate, as even supporters acknowledged, was the product of anti-Goldwater rather than pro-administration feeling. 'We must love each other, or we must die', intoned Johnson during his notorious 'Daisy' advertisement spot, over images of a young girl picking petals from a flower: 'The stakes are too high for you to stay at home' (quoted in Dallek 1998: 175). A close-up of the girl's startled face then fades to black and is followed by footage of a mushroom cloud.

By 1964, reportage of the kind favoured by John Kennedy, although still prevalent, was out of touch with the epoch's creative mettle. 'Underground' magazines and films espousing uninhibited sex and reinvented religiosity as weapons against the 'spiritual bankruptcy which begat the bomb' (Nuttall 1968: 175) were becoming vehicles of popular expression. Three films released in 1964 – Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, Sidney Lumet's *Fail-Safe* and John Frankenheimer's *Seven Days in May* (which incorporated, as had John Cassavetes' off-Hollywood dramas, the handheld aesthetic of direct cinema) – appeared in high-street movie houses; all these dealt with atomic-age nightmares and concordantly inspired intellectual debate *vis-à-vis* American culpability. Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Cat's Cradle* (1963), with its first chapter entitled 'The Day the World Ended', similarly encapsulated the growing undercurrent of dissent amongst commentators worried about America's moral rationale: across all media, the 'flimsy stupidities of life' (Gitlin 1987: 206) were being called to account. On the gallery circuit, Andy Warhol's transgressive silk-screen rendering of several *Life* photos featuring Jacqueline Kennedy immediately before and shortly after her husband's death was a crowd-drawing exhibition; Warhol's joyfully postmodern exorcising of a national ghost superseded, by virtue of acuity,

Drew's heartfelt but trite eulogising of a fallen saint. Impulses of dissatisfaction permeated as far as the *Saturday Evening Post*, for which Norman Rockwell began painting black people, and in which Malcolm X's autobiography was soon to be serialised. 'The old swimming hole', noted one critic of the era's shifting nature, 'was polluted' (quoted in Whitfield 1996: 240).<sup>23</sup> As a young folk singer proclaimed, the times were changing, and all who wished to remain above this dirtied water had 'better start swimming'. Metaphors like these took precedence over denotative statements, the better to seek oneness amongst the 'with-it' by simple encryption. All the same, actions spoke as loudly as words. The Free Speech Movement, responding to the political suppression of campus activities, succeeded in shutting down the University of California's Berkeley site; the Mississippi Summer Project (of which three members were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan) registered new black voters; and, for the first time, draft cards were publicly burned. Millbrook, however, was a relative oasis of calm; Leary was holed-up in the mansion not to avoid engagement but to contemplate his own purpose as an intellectual maverick in a confusing world.

After Cuba, Berlin and then the shock of Kennedy's murder, existential insecurity, in the anxious era of the Bomb, seemed timely. Lewis Mumford called for a 'new myth of life' in order that 'a passionate religious faith in man's own capacity to transform and perfect his own self' might be achieved (quoted in Henrickson 1997: 380). As Leary was giving up mental acquiescence to the 'fake-prop TV studio', Pennebaker sympathetically renounced any sense of duty to convey anything other than what simply felt human, instinctive and good: the 'new myth of life' was infusing direct cinema with extempore characteristics quite distinct from those manifest in its early incarnation as a 'sub-species of journalism', or *Life's* inferior, televisual loss leader.<sup>24</sup> *You're Nobody...* thus represents both a confident divorcement from previous formal requisites and a congruity to trends defiantly at odds with dramatic archetypes; Drew's material crises yield to a numinous means of portraying humanity without obligation to storytelling, consensus or logic.

When the cars arrive at Millbrook for the wedding of 'Mr and Mrs Swing', as jazz singer Cab Calloway called them, Pennebaker cuts to the bride-to-be having her hair arranged. The director relishes what is an atmospheric scene, filming candles, baroque windows and von Schlebrugge's classically beautiful profile. An Indian raga plays in the background, typically for a house in which the aesthetic setting was contrived to aid the LSD experience by using Eastern culture to counter Judaeo-Christian pre-eminence. More so than blues, pop or rock 'n' roll, the sound of Asia bespoke progressive ideological distantiation from American guilt; slaves had created blues, and rock 'n' roll was arguably a trivialising bastardisation of what in its generative phase was a protest-based idiom born of oppression. After a brief shot of Charles Mingus improvising jazz at the piano (jazz was suitably free-form, and Mingus' blackness an affiliative totem of 'hipster' credibility), we then cut to Leary, who is attempting to put his suit on with the help of several friends. 'Richard, do you know how to operate this?' asks Leary of Alpert. Leary, since leaving Harvard, had usually worn diaphanous gowns, and seems bewildered by his Victorian-style waistcoat. 'This is the closest I've ever been to a straitjacket!' jokes

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Leary. Cross-cutting between the bride and her groom's preparations, Pennebaker lavishes close-ups on von Schlebrugge, who lounges with her bridesmaids in the dimly-lit house, wearing sunglasses and smoking. We see a close-up of Leary's daughter Susan, just out of prison for marijuana possession, reclining on a sofa, stroking a cat and obviously stoned. Pennebaker has entered into the spirit of the event, and ingratiated himself entirely. 'I filmed [*You're Nobody...*] as a kind of pageant and edited it as a mystery' (quoted in Levin 1971: 229), said the director of his first fully-realised experiment in completely extemporised filmmaking. The mystery is certainly in place, as is a sense of pageantry, but what is perhaps most important is that Pennebaker was taking steps towards a new appreciation of musical, counter-cultural forms as transposed to film. 'Sometimes I think it's beautiful, sometimes I wonder why I did it' (ibid.), he remarked; he did it, one might conclude, because he had made a decision, conscious or otherwise, to stay in tune with artistic fashions. 'All art aspires to the condition of music', wrote Walter Pater (quoted in Lser 1987: 56); by the same token, the old aphorism *ut pictura poesis* rings true. For Leary, 'all political systems were equal oppressors and power-trippers. Political news was game-playing, a bad trip, a bringdown, a *bummer*' (Gitlin 1987: 208). Pennebaker, it follows, was moving away from such 'bummers' by stylistic assimilation, infusing his work with a dynamic mimesis that fed off his impulsive need to reject archetypal triteness: in short, he wanted to stay young.<sup>25</sup>

The von Schlebrugge-Leary wedding is never shown. At the point of the ceremony's commencement, Pennebaker cuts to Monti Rock on stage, singing the title song at the reception: the filmmaker thus repudiates any closure or dénouement as something best left to reporters working to a template set down by corporate interests. *You're Nobody 'Til Somebody Loves You* operates outside these limits, finding for itself a modish niche as a film more inclined to explore new aesthetic perspectives than old narrative paths. It is a fleeting piece of work, but is indicative and predictive of Pennebaker's and direct cinema's overall trajectory in the mid-1960s. Where once Drew optimistically supposed that the sync-sound camera's unprecedented access might precipitate a means by which everyone with a television set could see into the real lives of the bold and the brave, there was now a more interesting avenue to explore: the colourful politics of upheaval.

### CONCLUSION: FROM JFK TO LSD – LEAVING THE 1950s BEHIND

Everything went young in '64.

– Andy Warhol (Warhol & Hackett 1980: 69)

The notional 'Sixties', which do not of course exist as a decimally discrete entity, began perhaps not with JFK's election, but with his death, a moment in which America's providence changed and a political inheritance was bequeathed its new chief-by-proxy. It was a time for vivified action against the prospect of doom brought on by America's decapitation, and against those who had denied Kennedy's mooted civil rights, medical and anti-poverty bills passage. 'Everything I had ever learned in the history books', recalled Lyndon Johnson, 'taught me that martyrs have to

die for causes ... I had to take the dead man's program and turn it into a martyr's cause' (quoted in Dallek 1998: 63). While trying to build a harmonised nation that he labelled the 'Great Society' (in deference to JFK's New Frontier and Walter Lippman's *Good Society* (1937)), Johnson was soon, however, distracted from his ambition to go down in history as the world's greatest reform leader by a 'bitch of a war on the other side of the world' (Johnson quoted in Anderson 1993: 89). Kennedy's least agreeable legacy, the 'limited' anti-Communist war in Vietnam, would be escalated by his flamboyant successor after the precipitous Tonkin Gulf Resolution of August 1964, for which renowned liberals Edward Kennedy, Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern voted. Vietnam, more than any other experience, subsequently came to shape the 1960s as a decade of fractious domestic conflict. The liberal consensus of the post-war 1950s began to break down by the time of the Drew Associates' dissolution; visual art reflected this antagonism by attempting to free itself from institutionalised preconceptions and obligations.

Susan Sontag, in a 1965 article entitled 'One Culture and the New Sensibility', made a case for the non-typographic media's germane vibrancy. She called for film, 'the most alive, the most exciting, the most important of the art forms right now', to join with other media and create an 'erotics of art' with a 'much cooler mode of moral judgement' (2001: 11, 14, 298–9). In the films made by Leacock, the Maysles brothers and Pennebaker immediately after their split from corporate control, we see an emerging ideological alignment with anti-establishment impulses. They did not, however, wish to endow their work with political fervency; rather, these filmmakers tried to detach direct cinema from its hitherto customarily journalistic vocabulary – a strategy Sontag would have commended – so that a more emancipated form of expression might be attained. Drew's steadfast preoccupations, moreover, helped set his former employees apart as fashionable mavericks gradually bringing the promise of a genre's merits into both a new age and a new forum.

While Drew's erstwhile colleagues were making friends with the Beatles, consorting with Timothy Leary and creatively renouncing all that the Time-Life veteran valued, Drew himself remained committed to the cause his training had espoused. His natural domain was a technological wonderland of jet-planes and racing-cars, of spaceships and limitless possibility, rooted in a sphere predicated on ballot-box ideals, masculine figureheads and the economic optimism engendered by World War Two's favourable outcome. But his was a world being superseded in many ways. Programmes like *Assault on LeMans* (1965), *Men Encounter Mars* (1965) and *On the Road with Duke Ellington* (1967) pleased their sponsors, yet there was no such phenomenon as 'Dukemia': audiences were by then seeking other kinds of pleasures in a transformed cultural climate. Drew was unresponsive to America's fracturing psyche, and unable to deduce that the 'end of ideology' was an assumption whose perspicacity, as the decade wore on, would be tested.<sup>26</sup> He was a product of Eisenhower's 1950s, which were, according to some accounts 'the happiest, most stable, most rational period the Western world has ever known since 1914' and 'the dullest and dreariest [epoch] in all our history' (historian Eric Goldman and an un-named source both quoted in Diggins 1989: 178). Well-mean-

ing, prodigious but out of touch with discriminatingly attuned consumers, Robert Drew was already an anachronism.

Sontag continued: 'Because the new sensibility demands less "content" in art, and is more open to the pleasures of "form" and style, it is also less snobbish, less moralistic – in that it does not demand that pleasure in art necessarily be associated with edification' (2001: 303). A new era of popular rebellion, birthed by recent historical events, existential uncertainty and government policy, was beginning; the novel outlook of this new age found reinforcement through its adoption of fresh, culturally and politically functional means of expression, infusing all who were keen to the spirit of the times. 'What I think was happening at this point', noted Andy Warhol, 'was that commercial moviemakers were learning and incorporating from underground movies but that underground movies weren't developing their narrative techniques as much as they might have ... Commercial moviemakers had always known that a movie couldn't make it big without a coherent story line, but now they were starting to do the narrative things with a freer style' (Warhol & Hackett 1980: 139). Within this crucible of stylistic osmosis lay Pennebaker, Leacock and the Maysles brothers. Though they were not interested in overt confrontation (and were still against anything approaching *agit-prop*), they nonetheless were sufficiently cognisant of which aesthetic and narrative devices were at variance with the cultural undercurrent of progression towards an idea of cinematic maturity; after Drew's influence declined, American observational cinema found an appropriate artistic locus.

The Beatles came back to America, in August 1964, for a second, frenzied tour, ending their run on 20 September with a charity concert at the New York Paramount Theatre. During the show, a skinny, curly-haired young man repeatedly invaded the stage and was escorted away several times by security men until he was eventually recognised as an acquaintance of the band. The supposed interloper turned out to be Bob Dylan, a poetically-inclined protest singer of cult repute whose perceptive, melodic albums were talking points amongst cosmopolitan aficionados. When the concert finished, Dylan accompanied the band back to their hotel rooms to talk about music and enjoy philosophical discourse over alcohol, cigarettes, and – most crucially – pot. Earlier in the tour, at some undetermined yet decisive moment, Dylan had introduced the British band to marijuana, a gesture that would impact upon pop music's future with immeasurable weight.<sup>27</sup> The Beatles went home feeling inspired to diverge from what they knew in the way of generic pop and to explore symbolism as a route to potential fulfilment. In the few months that followed, Dylan's American and international following grew; he was no longer just a curio who set intelligent verse to song, but a figurehead for adherents to the growing 'counter-culture'. The world's first 'spoilt generation' was about to challenge prevailing mores, and direct cinema, emancipated from the strictures of network commission, concomitantly established an affinity with the youth movement that would yield its most celebrated films.



## 7 | THE SYSTEM FIGHTS BACK

Our arms must be mighty, ready for instant action, so that no potential aggressor may be tempted to risk his own destruction.

– President Dwight D. Eisenhower<sup>1</sup>

It was like the fantasy life of a kid. I'd played cops and robbers as a kid, so when I saw what was happening in Nam, I really wanted to cash in on it. Why not? It was like being invited to play with the big kids ... Nobody in the unit was over twenty-one.

– Anonymous veteran (quoted in Baker 1982: 56)

In the summer of 1970, Frederick Wiseman visited the US Army Training Centre at Fort Knox, Kentucky, to film over the course of nine weeks – the entire duration of basic training from induction to graduation. What the filmmaker found during his days at the camp was a politically timely combination of human contrivance and feral atavism. Reminiscent in equal measure of *The Green Berets* (1968) and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), *Basic Training*, completed in 1971, depicts an installation whose straightforward public remit – to turn boys into soldiers – belies disturbing paradoxes. Alumni numbering many thousands, from high schools like Northeast, graduated into the army in the late 1960s and found themselves in a world as familiar as it was strange; Fort Knox was not only a school, but also a rite of passage engineered by the necessities of a war in freefall.

### DROPPING IN: JUST LIKE A MOVIE

The film begins with a sequence of initiation routines, as the recruits arrive at camp. This introduction evokes the customary 'arrival' prelude of the generic war film, and in this sense *Basic Training* is strikingly atypical of Wiseman's work. We see new trainees alighting from a bus, carrying their personal belongings in small luggage cases; they nervously dab their trousers and swipe their soon to be shaved hair with their hands. Vital statistics are taken; bunks are allocated by number; and the depersonalisation ritual is completed by the application of electric clippers to scalps. The troops receive inoculations, and pose for photographs against the Stars and Stripes, a globe (meant to intimate their potential or honorary kingship of the world upon joining the American forces) held in front of them by the photographer's assistant. 'Say something nice about George Wallace, huh?' says the white photographer to a black subject; the trainee does indeed smile at what

is a refreshingly honest admission of political insidiousness. A drill sergeant asks, in the usual bellicose tones of an army trainer, if the assembled troops have their duffle bags and dog-tags ready and packed; the concerted reply is 'Yes, sergeant.' Already, the scene is set for a routine of drilled compliance.

Wiseman follows this montage with something equally redolent of generic narratives: the induction speech. An affable general takes the podium to the fanfare of 'The Caissons Go Rolling Along', and welcomes the young men to Fort Knox:

I think you're gonna find that training here could be described as rigorous, probably also described as demanding, but you're gonna find that it's well within your capabilities ... What we are going to try and do, is give you the military training, which, backed up by your native instincts and native intelligence, is going to turn you into a soldier, so that your reactions in times of stress are going to be a combination of instinct, native ability and intelligence, reinforced by the military training that will give you the skills to react effectively.

So basic training is as much about instinct as it is discipline – at the camp, a contradictory, confusing sense of primal ordinance is instilled right away: a good soldier, so the recruits have been told, is an animal that obeys rules laid down by a distant elite to lay claim on territory. The inductees cannot know their own function within this new microcosm, and so are edged into submission through the familiar process of the double bind. If the young men are to fight, then they cannot at the same time ruminate; the nature and ethics of warfare regarding Vietnam were being questioned and highlighted by ubiquitous, arresting images and distressing testimony from the front line. 'There's nothing wrong', comments Susan Sontag in an essay on the emotional effects of war photography, 'with standing back and thinking' (2003: 106). In civilian life, this is observably true. In war without mandate, however, philosophical enquiry is insidious exactly because, as Sontag continues, 'Nobody can think and hit someone at the same time' (ibid.). Lt. Hoffman, 'your Company Commander', makes things plain in another speech aimed, as many (including Benson and Anderson (1989), and Barry Keith Grant (1992)) have noted, at pre-empting dissent in a similar manner to the teachers of *High School*: 'You start trying to fight the system, that's when you get in trouble. If you go along with the system, it's fine; it's when you buck it you come into the problems.' 'All we ask', continues Hoffman, 'is that you go along with it.' In contrast to the students of Northeast during their lessons in the liberal arts, however, the trainees seen in close-up appear rapt – perhaps unsurprisingly, given that they are doomed to stigmatisation or court-martial if they wish to escape.

Wiseman returns to certain recruits repeatedly in *Basic Training*, and, although there are no true protagonists, there is demonstrated within the film an empathetic regard for the institutionally subjected that is arguably lacking in *Titicut Follies*, *High School*, *Law and Order* and *Hospital*. Wiseman also abides by generic custom in *Basic Training* to the point of utilising dramatic stereotypes and narrative conventions for reasons other than simple formal or ideological subversion. As Grant writes, Wiseman evinces 'a greater interest in formal matters than [in] the earlier

documentaries' (1992: 80), and this is a rhetorical strategy. The filmmaker wants the spectator to consider the relationship of notional fiction to notional reality, and to draw inference from a broad context of filmic representation. 'The essential concern of the [typical] war film', writes Grant, 'is to show the importance of a group working together to achieve a common goal; individuals must be welded together into a unit, a platoon, in which each works for the good of all and a clear, mutually accepted hierarchy is established' (1995: 118). Troops embroiled in the melee of Vietnam frequently declared, hinting at what was a psychologically protective (and thus necessary) sense of unreality, that the experience of fighting was 'just like a movie', because that was the frame of reference most beneficial to their coping strategies. Wiseman, by imposing generic conventions upon reality and highlighting popular mythology's appropriation of history, comments on and echoes this dubious means of comprehending, via the mental formulation of archetypes, an increasingly complex world. There was, in Vietnam, no unambiguous John Wayne figure to lead America's charge, but the trainees must still be shown moral examples, even when they do not properly exist. Despite the best efforts of generals and presidents to reiterate the need for victory, the methods and motives compelling the instructors – and, by extension, the war itself – were mired in confusion.

Throughout *Basic Training* (one of the earliest American films concerning Vietnam), we are invited by Wiseman's tessellation of a cinematic template to question the role of fantasy in the shaping of real life, and to consider what reality might ultimately entail for the often reluctant soldiers who we see being methodically 'welded together'. Active service is clearly more ruinous to potential than the conformist indoctrination evinced in *High School*, and, despite the numerous comparisons invited by *Basic Training's* motifs, more scourging of innocence; Vietnam was a deadly destination, whether one was a draftee or volunteer. In *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1969), playwright and veteran David Rabe's Sergeant Tower tells his recruits: 'Where you think you are? You think you in the movies? This here real life, gen'l'men. You actin' like there ain't never been a war in this world ... Don't you know what I'm sayin'? You got to want to put this steel in a man' (2002: 39). Tower, though, seems more honest and less equivocal in his intent than Fort Knox's instructors in *Basic Training* – Wiseman's 'war film' without heroes.

Wiseman, following the orientation speech, cuts to a film the trainees are being shown that demonstrates how one should clean one's teeth to 'avoid cavities while in the army'. Regimenting the most simple of individual ablutions to a surreal degree, this programmed enforcement of a particularly Western ritual is a diversion aimed at steering somatic attention towards the cosmetic and superficial. Despite Vietnam historian Mark Woodruff's claim that 'American troops are not trained to be mindless automatons' (1999: 239), it would nonetheless seem that they could not be trusted to carry out their own dental care regimen without group habituation effected by the screening of an indoctrinatory movie. Headed for an environment in which any kind of bathing was usually impossible, the troops would have little opportunity for tooth-brushing in the field of combat. After the students happily partake in the practical exercise, to the aural accompaniment of the educational film's jingoistic march, Wiseman offers his response to this method of filmic tute-

lage: holes in their teeth, so the filmmaker implies by apposition, were the least of their long-term worries.

### MAKING PEACE WITH THE GUN

The gun is emblematically part of army training, and a longstanding totem of masculine endeavour in a world almost defined by precarious relationships of arms to counter-arms. An M-16-A1 was the combat soldier in Vietnam's standard tool, and the recruits in *Basic Training*, after their lesson on dental care, are ritualistically taught about its protective qualities by sergeants whose enthusiasm for the rifle is disconcertingly fetishistic:

The M-16-A1 rifle ... Study it very carefully, nut-for-nut, screw-for-screw, rivet-for-rivet – and you will find very shortly that it is exactly, *exactly* my friends, the same as the one I have in my hand. Millimetre-for-millimetre, square inch-for-square inch, the weapon you have in your hand is exactly the same as I have in my hand.

A member of the assembled company asks if these mass-produced, identical (and hence 'perfect') 'guns' have been used before, worried about handling something that may have despatched Vietnamese soldiers. The sergeant, however, is more concerned about inappropriate terminology, and relishes again the chance to speak its name: 'Guns! Alright, this, is an M-16-A1 ... weapon; rifle; piece; or what-have-you. At no time, under any circumstances, will you refer to this piece of metal in my hands as a *gun*: a *gun* is a high-trajectory weapon.' Chastised, the recruit repeats his question, modifying his language: 'Have these weapons ever been used before? To kill people I mean.' 'Not yet', replies the sergeant. A muffled voice insists that, 'They never will, either', and a second senior officer intercedes to make the situation as clear as he feels is comfortable:

We're getting pretty heavy on this discussion right here. It's like discussing religion: I don't discuss it with anybody because I don't believe I have any right to discuss whether you should kill a man or you should not kill a man.

He does, however, go on to do just that, incorporating, like his colleague, an ostensibly pointless list of synonymous terms:

I do know one thing, gentlemen. If a man attempts to shoot me, kill me, slay me or murder me, I definitely will attempt to stop him in the fastest way possible. There's a lot going on about this nowadays, and I do believe you got a right to sound off about it, but what I'm saying is, when you get out in the jungles in Vietnam, I don't believe the thought of killing a man will enter your mind when you get hit from three sides ... You probably won't have anything on your mind but 'survive, survive, survive'. The man is out to kill you, gentlemen ... If you [think] he's not going to kill you, you're going to Cam Ranh Bay in a body bag ... If you want to get back from Vietnam, then you'd better learn how to use this black lickin' stick, and use it properly.

The truth about the M-16-A1, for all the discursive pedantry employed by military trainers to eulogise it as a triumph of engineering, is that it was not a reliable weapon in the arena of Vietnam; dirt, water and debris clogged its intricate mechanisms on many occasions, leaving troops vulnerable to attack by Viet Cong and NVA armed with the simpler, sturdier and easier to clean Kalashnikov provided by the Soviets. Far from being the American soldier's trusted friend – the venerated 'black lickin' stick' – the M-16 was, in the field, a despised liability, as noted by this anonymous veteran:

[The M-16] was a piece of shit that never should have gone over there with all the malfunctions ... I started hating the fucking government ... There were times when we'd rather use [enemy] weapons than our own. I once took an AK-47 from a dead NVA and used it instead of my Mattel toy [M-16]. (Quoted in Shay 1994: 17)

Obviously, this man survived to tell his story; he was, however, understandably aggrieved and left permanently distrustful of hierarchical superiors. The soldier quoted above saw the provision of faulty weaponry as a betrayal by officers whose seniority meant that they themselves were not dependent on deficient rifles. The sergeants' 'black magic language'<sup>2</sup> when describing the M-16 in *Basic Training* might well be symptomatic of a desire to mask any doubts and interpolate any potentially undermining discourse by destroying the recruits' trust in their own linguistic ability; if the soldier loses faith in his weapon, something psychologist Jonathan Shay describes as 'more richly invested with emotion and symbolism than any other material objects he is likely to use' (1994: 141), then he is ineffectual as a military functionary. Tautology inculcates what the inexperienced troops will not be qualified to contradict until they arrive in the squalor of Vietnam: above all the M-16 must be trusted, loved and addressed correctly, because its owner's life, honour and success in combat depend on it.

After a short scene featuring men marching (*Basic Training* includes many such scenes, rightly construed by most critics as redolent of *High School's* messages about 'keeping in step'),<sup>3</sup> Wiseman cuts to a rifle range, outdoors. A senior officer demonstrates the firing of an M-16, resting the butt on various parts of his body, to the amusement of the trainees:

Next he will unlock the weapon, and put the butt on his thigh, and fire one round downrange [the demonstrator fires – there is impressively little recoil]. He will next put the butt of the weapon – this is the one I like – in his groin [there is laughter from the trainees]. Now if this hurts, let's face it, he's a married man, he's not going to do this [more laughter, and the demonstrator fires again, from a phallic angle]. And when I say now, he will fire all twenty rounds on automatic [the man fires a short burst, and the recruits (in inserted close-ups) gasp in awe].

Meaning, as is often the case in Wiseman's films, is imparted in this scene by both the pro-filmic content and Wiseman's textual selection and appropriation. The explicit aim of the pro-filmic event is to reassure the trainees that the M-16 is



The gun as mechanised phallus in *Basic Training* (1971)

comfortable and 'loyal', a miracle of the high-tech age that can only hurt the enemy; secondly, and maybe reflexively, the officer sexualises the rifle in the minds of his adolescent audience – it becomes a potent machine capable of ejaculating death, and a paradoxical, permanently readied lover and penis; thirdly, Wiseman, in his insertion of facial and mechanical close-ups as the guns discharge, suggests that we are indeed witnessing a ritual celebration of mechanised carnality: 'Why', asks Richard Fuller in reviewing this scene and the one previous, 'would you ever again need a woman?' (quoted in Atkins 1976: 106). The army, as poet Adrienne Rich wrote in 'Caryatid: Two Columns' in 1973, empowers young trainees like they have never been empowered before:

The capacity for dehumanizing another which so corrodes male sexuality is carried over from sex into war. The chant of the basic training drill: 'This is my rifle, this is my gun [my penis]; this is for killing, this is for fun' is not a piece of bizarre brainwashing invented by some infantry sergeant's fertile imagination; it is a recognition of the fact that when you strike the chord of sexuality in the ... [male] psyche, the chord of violence is likely to vibrate in response; and vice versa. (1979: 114)

For the recruits, this jovially implied endowment of the weapon with sexual meaning is humorous, and exteriorisation of a shared response bonds them as 'mature' cohorts; in the army's psychology of persuasion, though, it has a deeper purpose: to reach and stimulate the primal psyches of the civilised 'gentlemen' whose nature is being denuded in order that they might become soldiers, men of strident

instinct. 'In retrospect', observes Barry Keith Grant of *Basic Training's* gun scenes, 'Kaminsky's mad monologue in *Titicut Follies* about the connection between American military aggression and sexual pathology would seem to possess an unsettling quality of prophecy' (1992: 93). Rather than proposing a *direct* anthropological link between territorial assertion and male instinct, however, Wiseman, in *Basic Training*, chooses to expound upon the psychological means by which those who are susceptible can be manipulated.

One way to engage young men's interests is with base symbolism – visual similes appeal more directly to our cognitive faculty than relatively abstract political or ideological terms. Although the 'silent majority' of Americans at home still supported the war as a righteous crusade whose ends were essential to US interests, the anti-war voice, with its colourful slogans, brash films and rock music backing, was by far the loudest and most resonant in the young. Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) was one of several fiction films released in the late 1960s to feature ballistomaniacal protagonists fighting authority figures. For Clyde, the gun – in lieu of intercourse – becomes an ersatz means of releasing sexual energy; for the boys at Fort Knox leaving their girls behind, it may yet come to take on similar import in rendering sex into aggression. It is not surprising, given the politically charged nature of the times and the militancy of domestic dissenters like the Black Panthers, that the US Army wished to reclaim the discourse of weaponry for itself and channel worship of the gun toward fighting faceless enemies overseas (see Hoberman 1998). In *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, Sergeant Tower tells his recruits: 'This an M-16 rifle ... You got to love this rifle, gen'l'men, like it you pecker and you love to make love' (Rabe 2002: 169). Rabe – in an unobtrusive mode that Wiseman swiftly abandoned – juxtaposes action and sound to underscore the connection between sexual urges, technology and warfare: as we see and hear the sergeant, stage left, Pavlo, at stage right, is seen having sex with a prostitute. 'To some people', claims a veteran, 'carrying a gun constantly was like having a permanent hard-on. It was a pure sexual trip every time you got to pull the trigger' (Baker 1982: 146). In *Basic Training*, the officers both perpetuate this dangerous, unhealthy association and deftly exploit a perhaps natural, inextricable link between male concepts of sex and destruction. As Loren Baritz writes, 'The power of technology to convert boys into men, to bestow potency in the weak, caused many young American males to think of machinery and sex as the same thing' (1998: 52). More sinisterly, so Baritz hypothesises, such notions were not confined to hormonal youngsters in the lower military echelons: 'The war's leaders in Washington had similar, if vastly more sublimated, attitudes. It was partly the thrill of domination, but it was more than that. They loved weapons' (ibid.).

In one revealing scene, the M-16 is once again positioned as a phallic totem endowed with a protective aura. The parents and siblings of an eager recruit visit their prodigal kin, and lavish upon his gun an almost obscene veneration:

Mother: Don't touch it! Nobody touch it! Nobody touch it! Isn't it ... Ooh, it's a beauty – M-16. Don't touch it! It's so beautiful.

Older brother: How much does it weigh?

Recruit [proudly]: Six pounds ... Hundred and fifty-five dollars.

Mother: Is it clean?

Recruit: I'm almost done.

Father: You better do it right, gotta get it exact.

Mother: Spotless, it has to be spotless ...

Recruit: Twenty rounds, in three seconds; nine hundred rounds in less than a minute [the smiling younger boys look impressed, and inspect the weapon] ...

My elevation is fourteen and my windage is fourteen ... I feel good.

Father: The only thing is you do what you're supposed to do at all times.

Mother: If you don't come out of here and become a true man, by the time you're done here, you'll never be a man ... A true American soldier.

Recruit [kissing his little sister]: Happy birthday, tyke!

Evidently, as Wiseman communicates here, the boy is fitting in and is well on his way to manhood, via his conforming to the training programme and appreciation of the literal (if not the symbolic) power of his 'beautiful' M-16. The father seems keen that his son 'gets it exact', offering encouragement to the younger man so as he might better prove his commitment to what Baritz identifies as contemporary affinities of the 'masculine' American:

The teenage boy cruising the streets in his tail-finned car in the '50s, or on his roaring motorcycle in the '60s, was training himself to love machinery, and to use the internal combustion engine as a surrogate for sex or as the means to make himself more sexually attractive. The more powerful the machine, the stronger the connection. The most manifestly powerful machines are those that kill. (1998: 52)

By turning the M-16 into something symbolically (if perversely) similar to Hendrix's guitar, an instrument of dramatic sexual potency, the army hoped to give its fledglings a sense of purpose and potential that was weakening rapidly for those engaged.

In 1966, years before de-escalation was at last effected (by Nixon), even Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara expressed his doubts in a speech that seemed less replete with political rhetoric than the guilty venting of emotion. '[Man has] a near-infinite capacity for folly ... the ambivalence of technology grows with its own complexity', he said. 'The real question is not whether we should have tools. But only whether we are becoming tools' (quoted in Hendrickson 1996: 244). By 1970, senior officers in the field had begun to question whether the war was viable anymore on an ethical basis, and Commander-in-Chief Nixon received letters from such dissenters in quantity. One communication to the president condemned 'a war in which few of us believe. This leaves us with nothing but survival – kill or be killed – as a motivation ... It seems very possible that if the war is allowed to continue much longer, young Americans in the military will simply refuse en masse to cooperate' (quoted in Hammond 1996: 370). Within the ranks, a crisis of faith was growing, and the problem of 'troublemaking' had to be addressed at an early stage in a soldier's career if he was to enter the arena with conviction.

## HICKMAN: 'O FOR

In the midst of se tests of bodily pro faced, skinny dra *Titicut Follies*, Hic at work in the inst unsuitability to an ate. The trainee fit shouldered military is 'a real-life Sad S Costello in *Buck P* the comic misfit' (1 his colleagues dur revisited by Wiser spectator warms t to behavioural mo 'Very quickly the s who gives a frighte and claw: 'The lea strength ... Everyb men as Hickman s the training given a warts. As the clich recruit to a new ide

'You better thir says the drill serg ence'; 'Now go ar his feet and grinnin step, Hickman', inc we next see Hickn who concernedly a Wiseman cuts to a Hickman's 'motivat dencies' and comes In the chaplain's off self by 'swallowing about making the b everything right, ya

So, it turns out comic misfit but a b iting compassion ot The common 'cry f drawing attention to mous Private Humn



HICKMAN: 'O FOR A MANLY LIFE IN THE CAMP'<sup>4</sup>

In the midst of several scenes featuring bayoneting and boxing – hand-to-hand tests of bodily prowess in combat – Wiseman introduces Private Hickman, a fresh-faced, skinny draftee who wears thick glasses. More so even than Vladimir in *Titicut Follies*, Hickman succinctly represents an embodiment of the processes at work in the institution under scrutiny; we feel – largely because of his physical unsuitability to an army career – that Fort Knox is forcing nature, corroding to create. The trainee fits the stereotype of a 'dork', and is far removed from the broad-shouldered military ideal, Whitman's 'strong man erect' (*ibid.*). As Grant opines, he is 'a real-life Sad Sack, in the tradition of Charlie in *Shoulder Arms* (1918) and Lou Costello in *Buck Privates* (1940) ... He is, in short, a marvellous found example of the comic misfit' (1992: 91). Hickman is unable, or unwilling, to march in time with his colleagues during drill exercises (once more the theme of keeping 'in step' is revisited by Wiseman), but seems to take this 'deficiency' in good humour: the spectator warms to the incompetent Hickman because of his inability to conform to behavioural models imposed upon him by superordinates and their feral logic. 'Very quickly the situation becomes primitive', remarks an anonymous veteran, who gives a frightening, Darwinist description of life in boot camp as red in tooth and claw: 'The leaders are automatically the biggest ... Everything is relegated to strength ... Everybody understands brute force' (quoted in Baker 1982: 15). Such men as Hickman should not be going to their deaths in Vietnam, of course, but the training given at Fort Knox may convert even the weak into unquestioning stalwarts. As the cliché goes, the army breaks down a boy to make a man; to build a recruit to a new ideal, one must first excoriate the old from him.

'You better think about what you're doing, Hickman, or you'll never make it', says the drill sergeant, contradicting the induction speech about 'native intelligence'; 'Now go and join your chums.' Hickman continues his cakewalk, dragging his feet and grinning in either embarrassment, or bravado, or both. 'You're out of step, Hickman', inculcates the sergeant, enervating the boy in the process. When we next see Hickman, he is being taught how to tie his bootlaces by an officer who concernedly asks him, *in loco parentis*, if he has eaten breakfast that day. Wiseman cuts to another officer making a phone call to the chaplain explaining Hickman's 'motivational problems', and we learn that Hickman has 'suicidal tendencies' and comes from a broken home, a stigmatising provenance in the 1960s. In the chaplain's office, the diffident recruit is asked why he attempted to kill himself by 'swallowing a bunch of pills'. 'All the guys bug me constantly ... Last night, about making the bed ... They threatened to give me a blanket party if I didn't do everything right, ya know.'

So, it turns out, Hickman's smiles were defensive; he was not so much a comic misfit but a bullied child who needed a way out but could see no way of eliciting compassion other than to take a marginally excessive dose of tranquilisers. The common 'cry for help' of Western malcontents was the prevalent means of drawing attention to mental anguish in boot camp: in Rabe's 1969 play, the eponymous Private Hummel, after being attacked by his comrades, attempts something

similar to Hickman. According to an unnamed veteran, 'We had one guy drink a can of Brasso ... I saw a couple of guys snap. But by the time you get to the end of [basic training], you feel like you're the baddest thing that ever walked the earth' (quoted in Baker 1982: 17). As the unnervingly sanguine chaplain (of whom, Benson and Anderson note, a 'bland acceptance of the army' (1989: 178)) says: 'If you fall down in the mud, you have to be willing to get up.' Hickman, the human centre of *Basic Training*, has been broken so that the readying for war may begin.

### BENDING STEEL: THE PROCESS OF GETTING AHEAD

Young males of all primate species engage in play fighting. Furthermore, this sort of play heightens imagination, teaches role taking, and affords the child an opportunity to come to terms with war, violence and death.

– Jeffrey Goldstein (1998: 53)

The trainees are seen enthusiastically play-boxing, crawling in the dust and receiving food. One young man is reprimanded by an officious officer for bringing a can of soda, concealed in his pocket, onto the range. 'You think you're real hot today, coming out here with a soda in your pocket trying to sneak one through ... If you don't wipe the smile off your face I'm gonna knock your God damn teeth out ... Get outta here.' After a recruit has bragged to his colleagues about an encounter with a \$15 prostitute, three career soldiers, with reference to the then recently released *Patton* (1970), discuss reincarnation – a major theme of Franklin J. Schaffner's film – and the likelihood of Atlantians having infiltrated NASA. Again, as in *Titicut Follies*, we are encouraged by Wiseman to question the relative sanity of enforcers to their charges; does the army command, if its concerns are not in concert with its juniors', have a viable place in an American scheme of nominal pragmatism and practicality? Wiseman provokes incredulity at the sheer earnestness of a discussion that is not so much speculative as downright fanciful: a prostitute fulfils a basic need; wild imaginings and conspiratorial theories are a symptom of paranoia in the wake of assassinations, national guilt and civil unrest. A professional whose remit is to make war against others – the ideological enemy – must find justification wherever, or however, he can. Karma, for these men who view George Patton as a personification of nobility, is less a theoretical, nontheistic Buddhist tract than a game of tit-for-tat, a way of explaining an unfair and illogical world in the lexis of supernatural justice. They are coming to terms, in their own way, with the cruelty of human life. 'Nobody ever won a war by dying for his country', ran *Patton's* tagline: 'He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country.' *Patton* was Richard Nixon's favourite film.

A generation previous to the baby-boomers' had fought a war for what was, by consensus, a noble cause. But things were now different for the more perspicacious and wealthy, who could see the illogic of comparing the two conflicts. One veteran, whose parents held the patriotic view, lamented this short-sightedness by authority figures and admitted his fears:

My old man, when the war came, he says, 'Oh, go. You'll learn something. You'll grow up to be a man. Go.' Shit, if my folks had to send their little poodle, they would have cried more tears over that than over me. But I'm supposed to go, because I'm a man. (Quoted in Baker 1982: 13)

Most blue-collar, rural and patriotic youngsters, however, were 'seduced by World War Two and John Wayne movies', and the notion that fighting for his country is 'what a man does with his life' (Baker 1982: 12). (John Wayne and Ray Kellogg's *The Green Berets* had instilled both training for and warfare in Vietnam with this sense of 'duty' and adventurous Americanism. Almost universally condemned by critics as a virtual recruitment advertisement, patriots see *The Green Berets* as a morally rightful tract against Communists.)<sup>5</sup> Successful trainees, like the boy with the M-16 in *Basic Training*, felt good with their new mission in life as 'true American soldiers' because they were sequacious products of the system; in other words, they were *High School's* true success stories out to get 'the other dumb bastard' because that was what popular culture and their parents had told them was right. Tough, white, all-American movie star John Wayne was a role model for many GIs; as he killed marauding 'Injuns', so his idolaters slew 'gooks' in a real-life movie of their own. Blacks, however, still marginalised as they were in many ways (if not as hated by whites as the Vietnamese), had no such idol to whom they might look – America had not created one.

Wiseman follows the M-16-worshipping vignette by cutting to Lt. Hoffman's office, and to the first of two similar scenes featuring black recruits who, in contrast to the white trainee we have just seen flaunting his gun, are not keeping in step, and not accepting easily their military remit. Hoffman says to a private: 'I understand that this morning you failed to make reveille [bugle] formation with the rest of the company. It is my intention as your commanding officer to give you an article 15 for failing to make reveille. Now, I inform you that you do not have to accept this article. You may, if you wish, request a trial by court martial; this is up to you.' Against the wishes of the lieutenant, the recruit opts for the court martial, and to 'go to jail, period'. It would appear that the soldier would prefer anything – even incarceration – to continuation of his military service. The second scene reiterates and expands upon this theme; this time, though, the private is eloquent and persuasive, drawing attention to uneasy truths about race relations in the US Army of the late 1960s.

Private: I'm takin' the court martial. Actually, the thing that I did, it's minor, it's less than minor...

Sergeant: You slept on fire guard, right?

Private: No, I just ... I just refused fire guard ... To each his own...

Sergeant: In a combat situation, if you don't do what you're told sometimes, you can be shot, too.

Private #2: He might be a good soldier.

Private: But we're not in war. You're talking about being in war. I don't want no medals. I don't want to be here, period. I don't want no medals.

I want my life. That's my medal, and my heart. I want to function, out in society, not in here. Outside.

Sergeant: This is your country, too.

Private: No, it's not. No, it's not. Now you, now let's be frank with each other. Now you know it's not my country ...

Sergeant: A man without a country, huh?

Private: Right.

The private has not 'made his peace with war' (Benson & Anderson 1989: 191), and sees no reason why he should go along with the army's intentions. 'He's trying to break me', says the resilient recruit, '[but] that's just like trying to bend steel. He's gonna wear his own self out.'

*Washington Star* journalist Paul Hathaway spent several months interviewing black soldiers in South Vietnam, concluding that the vast majority were unhappy with the military's treatment of them, and with the attitudes of 'hicks' – uneducated and economically lower-class whites – who constituted a high proportion of America's troops. Many black people understandably decided that they were fighting 'a white man's war', 'and wondered whether they should be home fighting for their own people' (Hammond 1996: 175–6). By early 1970, a subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee had begun investigating inter-racial disturbances; the delay was attributed, by black columnist Carl Rowan, to 'arrogance on the part of white liberals within the Johnson administration who believed they knew more about black problems than did blacks themselves' (quoted in Hammond 1996: 177). Denial was in itself exacerbating the problem:

Information officers, for their part, often found themselves caught between the fact of continuing racial tension and their superiors' apparent inability to define the scope of the problem ... Learning of an increase in the number of racial incidents during the summer of 1970, the chief of information for U.S. Army forces in South Vietnam, Col. Alfred J. Mock, thus argued vehemently against any announcements to the press. (Hammond 1996: 181)

'The mere acknowledgement of a rise in racial incidents would serve no useful purpose and be self-defeating', Mock told the deputy commanding general, in an effort to quell public doubts about the army's supposedly good record in the way of race equality (quoted in *ibid.*). Wiseman, ever cynical about media representation, seeks redress here: by his inclusion of the lengthy, taut dialogue between the black trainee and his sergeant, he gives voice to the black soldier in Vietnam ('a man without a country') and asks if it really is their America, too. 'Leaders avoid talking about a war which is being fought every night in barracks and other places where our soldiers gather', said Lt. Col. James White during a February 1970 briefing (quoted in *ibid.*). Likewise, the sergeant in *Basic Training* is unwilling to continue this 'self-defeating' discourse, and leaves the room having changed the subject and asked the now chagrined private to wax a floor. Jonathan Shay

puts it in simple terms: 'Men segregated themselves rigidly along racial lines in the rear ... Racially motivated killings and riots were common in Vietnam. American soldiers in the rear were not safe *from each other*.' (Shay 1994: 60)<sup>6</sup>

Hoffman, however, is clearly getting along well in the army. He is promoted, in the subsequent scene, from lieutenant to captain, while his family look on (or at least this is Wiseman's editorial implication) proudly. 'You have equal opportunity now', declares the officer conducting the ceremony, and, by phrasal conversance, Wiseman refers us to the black soldier in the previous scene: Lt. Hoffman, unlike the trainee, is a man *with* a country, who will go 'all the way down the line' as a true American soldier, a man of provision and virility. As Hoffman's mother says, holding his baby, 'I think he's found his niche in the world!' We cannot disagree. Another natural warrior, the sergeant and veteran who has just told the black trainee that it was his country, too, addresses the company in a bid to instil some national pride with mention of the boys' 'forefathers, and theirs before them':

They fought to keep this country free. They got your independence; it all started back, way back then about the Boston Tea Party, and it kept working up, we fought many a hard battle ... No matter where they put me over there, I'll do my best. And if some of you men come over there, I'll risk my life to save yours if you're in a spot. And I expect the same of you, 'cause that's the way I was trained, and that's the way I'm trying to train you. We take care of our people over there, believe you me. I know. I've seen a lot of young men like you that didn't make it ... They went out there to do a job. I've seen some of them try to save another life, and they got it. This is part of combat – the part we don't like.

Benson and Anderson, though acknowledging the absurdity of the sergeant's final words ('what part of combat *do* we like?') (1989: 194) note that the speech is a sincere means of conveying the idea of the army as arcane brotherhood, the fraternal nature of which demands that lives are offered up: 'I am only a body doing a job', 'I am not worth it'; Bob Walters' words resonate through the scene, a reminder that all must be subsumed to the greater good of the army if one is to be an effective soldier.

Once more the trainees march, before they are subjected to a simulated gas attack. They wear masks until they are told to remove them, and then choke, vomit, cry and expectorate as quietly as they can manage.<sup>7</sup> Yet another scene of marching follows, including a low-angle shot of legs, boots, arms and fists as they seem to merge into one like the limbs of a centipede, totally in sync as an organ of one organism. 'Left, right, left', chants the sergeant, as the young men – a unit now – move towards a huge American flag and its emblematic potency. The recruits, still synchronised, are seen massed in an auditorium to watch two didactic films (which we do not see) that are introduced by a portly officer:

Our first one is an old one, but it stars some of your favourite characters such as Robert E. Lee and, urr, General Andrew Jackson – it's on the achievements and traditions of the United States Army. Our second one, which I know you're looking

forward to, in which some of you may play a part in the next one, is on Vietnam – the reasons why we're there, and how we got there.

The legendary forefathers ('your favourite characters') are invoked as the exceptional soldiers they were, even though Jackson was a slaveholder who sent three thousand Native Americans to their deaths during the Trail of Tears, and Lee a Confederate whose loyalty lay with Virginia and not Lincoln. By now, we may sense an Orwellian purpose in the army's jingoistic melding of domestic history to a uniquely modern, overseas war – a conflict pursued not in the name of change, but for the furtherance of a regime pleasing to America's elite. 'Our dead revolutionaries', as Carl Oglesby mused to an anti-war Washington crowd in 1965, 'would [today] wonder why their country was fighting against what appeared to be a revolution' (Oglesby 1970: 183).<sup>9</sup> The announcer continues:

The objectives of these two movies are first of all, for the first one, to find out the winning tradition we have in the United States Army. If you think about some of the teams in sports – which I know you follow – either amateur or professional, all the great champions that you can ever thought of [*sic*] never went undefeated the whole time. The United States Army has never lost a war: it is undefeated. Think about that. That's quite a record and you're part of this army at this time; it's up to you to carry on this tradition.

Yet in a few years, the great champion America, whose endemic hatred of losing is epitomised in *High School* via 'Casey at the Bat', would 'strike out' in Indochina.

*Basic Training's* closing scenes depict the trainees' physical practice for what awaits them, and are less dependent on dialogue than is usual for Wiseman. After they are lectured about the offensive potential of a Claymore mine, and how many casualties they inflict ('eight per cent of US kills'), the film follows the final few steps of the recruits' progress from placid boys to fighting men. Hickman reappears as a volunteer in a demonstration of how to kill a man by strangulation or bludgeoning; he is by now assimilated, and welcomed back into the fold with hearty applause. We see Hickman having camouflage paint applied, ready for an exercise, and realise that, without his glasses, he is as his comrades: no more or less a handsome potential hero ('PAVLO MOTHERHUMPIN' HUMMELI') (Rabe 2002: 53). At night, the boys patrol the forest, feeling for imagined mines and ducking under barbed wire. Guns are fired, obstacles are surmounted, and there is no doubt that the course has almost run because the recruits are obviously *enjoying* it. On the infiltration field, the trainees move in concert; in the forest, they move together as a pack of hunters, the memories of nine weeks ago wiped by highly effective schooling.

## GRADUATION

*Basic Training* culminates in a ritual whose typically Wisemanian function – for both the film and Fort Knox – is to demonstrate the training process's perfection

as a 'mechanism of assimilation' (Janowitz 1972: 167). Heralded by a bugle call, the graduation ceremony begins with a brass band-led parade. Wiseman employs a montage technique here that conveys, through rhythm and selection, the pomp, uniformity and pride on display. First we see the lone bugler in close-up, his polished, fixedly horizontal instrument shining in the sun; a drummer then raps his snare, again shot in close-up; a conductor keeps time with suitably vigorous precision; and the Stars and Stripes is held aloft at the front of the assembly, as Wiseman zooms in on a flag-bearer's bumptious expression. The physical mechanics of generating a percussive prompt – a regular beat to which all the recruits are now happily marching – become important for Wiseman here; in its metronomic rigidity, this music (with which Wiseman synchronises his cuts) urges the troops towards their collective destiny, guided by a tradition passed down through generations of American militarism. If through circumstance or upbringing one had either no alternative or no inclination to offer defiance, then the army, as always, offered a more concretely graspable objective: acceptance into the fraternity of the warrior.

Lt. Hoffman introduces the winner of the American Spirit of Honour Award, 'in recognition of outstanding qualities of leadership, best expression of the American spirit, honour, initiative [and] loyalty'. The square-jawed recipient takes the stage to give his acceptance speech, and he is, as Benson and Anderson opine and as we must expect, a 'blandly handsome ideal soldier', who delivers a succession of clichés imbued with predictable, 'earnest wholesomeness' (1989: 198).

Whether one prefers to call today's exercises 'graduation' or 'commencement', it matters not. But may I suggest to you keep both words in their individual connotative and denotative meanings in mind today. 'Graduation' signifies an end, while 'commencement' is of course a beginning ... We came here from different places with different backgrounds ... we arrived in blue jeans, sandals, tennis shoes, and t-shirts. We are now emerging as trained fighting men in the uniform of the US Army.

Wiseman inserts a shot of assembled graduands, all of whom look nearly identical at even a short distance. The director then moves in to frame their faces, but we do not see anyone we recognise from earlier scenes – Hickman, for example, or the good son with the M-16. We do, though, realise that although the soldiers' faces are still disparate, their fixedly severe countenances are not. The private continues:

We are now at the end of basic training. We leave the classes we've had, the weapons we've fired, the friends we've made, and the officers and drill sergeants who've gained our respect ... For some [the army] may be a sojourn of a year or two, for others a way of life. However, it is now up to each of us to carry on in the tradition of those who have gone before.

The award which I have the honour and pleasure to receive today is entitled 'The American Spirit of Honour Award'. This is what we are now entrusted with and must carry forth: the American spirit of honour. It was born in the snow of Valley Forge, nurtured midst the smoke of Gettysburg and San Juan Hill ... When fascism reared

its ugly head, the American spirit came forth and slew the dragon ... And now South-east Asia. Laying aside the political controversy surrounding this conflict, we see once again displayed that American spirit of honour: fighting men dying for their nation and democracy ... Lord, give us the strength to meet the challenge. I thank you.

The audience claps with a reverential lack of verve, and the commanding general thanks the speaker – presumably for his appropriate ‘expression of the American spirit’ – by shaking his hand and saying, ‘Well said, son.’

American ‘honour’ is evoked and any pertinent meditation dismissed in favour of rhetorical comparisons to entirely different campaigns. The phrase ‘the weapons we’ve fired’, nestled as it is between terms such as ‘friends’ and ‘respect’, is indicative of the private’s conditioned attitude to firearms and their new place in his life, as is his romanticising of Gettysburg, the bloodiest battle ever fought on American soil. Our ‘favourite characters’, heroes of what Walter A. McDougal calls the ‘victory culture’ (1997: 86), again are summoned to validate new actions by evoking old deeds (which more fiery historians have argued were essentially predicated on ‘Indian hating and empire building’ (ibid.)). It is at least acknowledged that some of the recruits (now ‘fighting men’) will be killed, but their lives will be lost not for their nation’s security, unity or sovereignty, but for a cause that was, for most, more obscured by the passing of a decade than Valley Forge’s was by a lapse of nearly two centuries.

Stanley Hoffman argues that Americans commonly use history as a ‘grabbag from which each advocate pulls out a “lesson” to prove his point’ (quoted in Jervis 1976: 217), and this is frequently borne out in *Basic Training*.<sup>9</sup> If fascist Germany was a ‘dragon’, a dehumanised catchall of mythically evil proportions, then Vietnamese Communists could not be so labelled for fear of ‘controversy’, false accusation or improper professional conduct along racial lines (in the field they remained for the Westerner exotic, wily ‘gooks’ – the mysterious Other; see McDougal 1997: 205).<sup>10</sup> The recruits’ civilian clothing – ‘blue jeans, sandals, tennis shoes and t-shirts’ – has been stripped away; they are commencing a new life away from the discourses and paradigms of what they know, and away from an environment of relatively cosseted safety. During 1970, a period of supposed ‘de-Americanisation ... with all deliberate speed’, 6,065 Americans were killed in Vietnam (Nixon 1978: 741). When these fresh-faced adolescents get to Cam Ranh Bay (the real point of ‘commencement’), they will forever be ruined; if they make it back, the traumas of a nightmarish ‘sojourn’ will never leave them.

### CONCLUSION: CAM RANH BAY IN A BODY BAG

The same revolutionary belief for which our forebears fought is still at issue around the globe, the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God ... Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

– President John F. Kennedy (1962: 7)<sup>11</sup>



You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both.

– John Ruskin (2004: 14)

*Basic Training*, like so many of Wiseman's films, is about a (or *the*) 'system', a force so powerful and relentless that it can send naïfs like Hickman to Vietnam and show no compunction in so doing. *Basic Training's* conclusion implies a beginning of sorts; as witnessed in this ritual 'commencement', the graduands are expertly transmogrified, and the hopes of the early 1960s similarly become, at decade's end, disintegrating memories of misguided idealism and illusory political progressiveness. As the Right resurged to fill the vacuum created by the New Left's implosion and the undeclared war went on, Wiseman criticised not just functionaries, but the broader issues that lay behind self-interested US policies of military containment.

The senior officers, of course, are only themselves components, politically impotent and gagged by a duty to serve the interests of their employers – successive and mostly liberal presidents who feared embarrassing Cold War defeats and heeded 'domino theory's' ominous prophecies.<sup>12</sup> Wiseman duly does not scapegoat the army for strategies begun by Truman in response to multifarious global events; indeed, sharing James Alden Barber's opinion that to 'blame all that is bad in our foreign policy on the man in uniform ... is an evasion of the real issues, and no more likely to contribute to a solution to our problems than is any other form of scapegoating' (1972: 309), the filmmaker orchestrates his narrative around a central premise of inexorability. 'This film', remark Benson and Anderson of *Basic Training*, 'is not about Hickman, or the rifle-rack soldier, or the man who hired a prostitute in Louisville. It is about a system of basic training that, whatever happens to those particular men, will continue' (1989: 200). We may or may not remember the many faces Wiseman has shown us, but we can be sure that they will not be the last victims of the American system's methods.

Television networks in the late 1960s began to breach Department of Defense vetoes and broadcast material critical of US conduct and 'imperialist' motives. Although always denounced as disreputable or seditious by patriots and government representatives, these films (that were frequently shot in the field of combat) nonetheless exposed disingenuous falsehoods perpetuated by State Department spokesmen.<sup>13</sup> Overt anti-war rhetoric was becoming commonplace, and an almost *de rigueur* tactic employed by fervent documentarists working in territories both hostile and friendly.<sup>14</sup> Characteristically, Wiseman did not make an unequivocal case for cessation of engagement, instead looking beneath specific iniquities to the causal malaise within not the Pentagon but the unnamed 'system' at play. The chaplain in *Basic Training* asks for God's help, as if America's aspirations to govern and police the world were a divine right; 'Lord, give us the strength to meet the challenge', echoes the Spirit of Honour Award-winner, evoking an assumption held by his ancestors that Nature and God concurred in their endorsement of proselytising and territoriality. Jefferson envisaged a future in which 'our rapid multiplication will ... cover the whole northern if not southern continent, with people speaking the same language, governed by similar forms, and by similar laws'

(quoted in Perkins 1993: 170), a longing common to early American statesmen that would later be crystallised in John O'Sullivan's phrase 'manifest destiny'.<sup>15</sup> As the 'empty' continent was filled – and the natives subdued by gunpowder – a politico-economic ethos based on capital security grew to encompass an isolated, insular nation suspicious of most revolutions or insurgencies despite its own heritage.

As John Quincy Adams said in his Fourth of July address of 1821: 'America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy ... she might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit' (quoted in McDougal 1997: 36). Pearl Harbor, of course, forced America to abandon its isolationist stance that reached a crest in the 1930s; after World War Two, the 'welfare-warfare state'<sup>16</sup> began a campaign of global meliorism that would become the ostensibly benevolent motivation for the Vietnam War, a conflict Harry G. Summers describes as

the international version of our domestic Great Society programs where we presumed that we knew what was best for the world in terms of social, political, and economic development and saw it as our duty to force the world into the American mould – to act not so much as the World's Policemen as the World's Nanny. (1984: 229)

Kennedy's inaugural boast that Americans would 'pay any price, bear any burden', is well known; but, he elaborated further:

To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required – not because the Communists might be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich. (1962: 7–8; see also Riddell 1987: 6)

Wiseman's core contention in *Basic Training* is that a country such as America, despite good intentions, has no God-given right to assume control of other countries, or its own young men's destinies, because the great 'City on the Hill' is riddled with contradictions, folly, hypocrisy and an overwhelming sense of its own divine duty to 'truly light the world' (Kennedy 1962: 10). Sermons like Kennedy's were basically well-meaning, but invited intellectual criticisms aimed at problems within the United States of crime, civil disorder, inequality, extensive bureaucracy, drugs and injustice – valid complaints that find a voice in Wiseman's early films. As Carl Oglesby of SDS iterated in 1965: 'This country, with its thirty-some years of liberalism, can send 200,000 young men to Vietnam to kill and die in the most dubious of wars, but it cannot get 100 voter registrars to go into Mississippi' (quoted in Teodori 1970: 184). By 1970, the social revolution proposed by the New Left and the wider Movement had not yet been realised: the system, gradually and surely, prevailed.

The processes revealed in *Basic Training* reflect the larger society's functions and maintain a ceaseless, insidious momentum that drives the officers towards their own, selfish fulfilment whilst compelling the recruits to acquiesce. Hoffman sacrifices his right to a political voice for the chance to climb a career ladder and achieve status amongst his colleagues;<sup>17</sup> the chaplain sacrifices his morality to play a part in the desolation of his captive flock and, with no less hypocrisy than a television evangelist, denounces materialism and then 'offers salvation in exchange for a full collection plate' (Benson & Anderson 1989: 195). The majority of recruits, fighting as they were for the interests of richer men (whose own lives and sons were never in danger), were being used by a state that so cherished 'freedom' and detested poverty that it was willing to send thousands of its own poor to their deaths to establish American ideals in a small, ex-French colony in Indochina.

Unlike the Hollywood and Office of War Information films the film frequently evokes, the putative rite-of-passage narrative of *Basic Training* ends in a confounding suggestion of cyclical and inevitable subsumption; the viewer is not offered a satisfying resolution or even the certainty that any of the film's until-now prioritised subjects do eventually graduate. We are left wondering, 'What happened to Hickman, or the man "without a country"?' Wiseman followed the recruits for the full nine weeks, but chose not to focus on familiar individuals at the film's end, as to do so would imply that *Basic Training* is centrally about individuals, and less about an unstoppable process by which America fights to proliferate values that Wiseman deplors. When the soldiers we expect (or hope) to see do not appear, we infer that they have been, as Wiseman insinuates, perfectly effaced by the system, and are no more important in the scheme of things than any other graduates of boot camp during this or any war. The implication here is not, as the National Mobilization Committee asserted in 1968, that America then possessed 'one of the most reluctant armies in histories [*sic*].' Wiseman's contrary illustration of basic training is that, after nine weeks of 'bullying and blinding', its outcome is successful and the soldiers proud and ready. Paul Potter asked the March on Washington:

What kind of system is it that justifies the United States or any other country seizing the destinies of the Vietnamese people and using them callously for its own purpose? What kind of system is it that disenfranchises people in the South, leaves millions upon millions of people throughout the country impoverished and excluded from the mainstream and promise of American society, that creates faceless and terrible bureaucracies and makes those the place where people spend their lives and do their work, that consistently puts material values before human values – and still persists in finding itself fit to police the world? What place is there for ordinary men in that system and how are they to control it, make it bend itself to their wills rather than bending them to its? (1985: 220)

Answers to these questions, as Wiseman suggests in *Basic Training*, might be found in the paradoxes of the American Way: the timeless need to impose prescribed stability on disorder, make a garden out of a wilderness, and trade freely at whatever cost to moral integrity; the Promised Land was also a Crusader State,

and the Garden a seedbed for industrialisation. 'We embrace contradictory principles with equal fervour and cling to them with equal tenacity', writes Eugene V. Rostow. 'Should our foreign policy be based on power or morality? Realism or idealism? Pragmatism or principle? Should its goal be the protection of interests or the promotion of values? Should we be nationalists or internationalists? Liberals or conservatives? We blithely answer, "All of the above"' (1993: 22). In 1972, Democrat George McGovern would fight the presidential election on a platform of total and immediate withdrawal from Vietnam; he subsequently garnered the lowest share of the popular vote ever achieved in a two-way contest.

Frederick Wiseman, perhaps the most sagacious of American documentarists, continues, like so many commentators and artists first emergent in the 1960s, to query the machinations of the system in his own, less than blithe but never less than extraordinary rejoinders to Samuel Smith's hymn:

My country, 'tis of thee,  
Sweet land of liberty,  
Of thee we sing:  
Land where our fathers died,  
Land of the pilgrims' pride,  
From ev'ry mountainside  
Let freedom ring!<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSION

### Culture-Bound

American film does not merely have a history – it also *is* history. Movies are a continuous inscription and interpretation of American experience through time and in the world. Films are traces of specific moments in specific spaces mediated by human beings who are always culture-bound.

– Vivian Sobchack (1980: 293)

The true revolution of the Sixties – more powerful and decisive for Western society than any of its external by-products – was an inner one of feeling and assumption: a revolution in the head.

– Ian MacDonald (1994: 24)

This book's rhetorical design is three-tiered. It has been my intention to explicate the content of the films under discussion by providing immediate socio-cultural context; to posit the direct cinema filmmakers within their epoch's most salient political and intellectual imperatives; and to trace the roots from which direct cinema emerged as extending further into American thought than technological, dramaturgical or anthropological analysis has so far allowed. The transformative bearing of the 1960s on documentary form was catalysed by factors other than an urge for aesthetic probity, and beyond a response to didacticism and television's lacklustre treatment of actuality. Had reactive observationalism come to fruition outside the United States, it would have been quite different in intention and scope; indeed, it is possible that the direct cinema movement *could not* have sprung from any other time and place than the American Sixties. The fibre of direct cinema, it follows, is predicated as much on a philosophical reawakening as on the portability of equipment: roving camera-sound systems, developed at first to assist orthodox journalistic or anthropological endeavour, eventually became totems of a new-found cinematic transcendence.

The films I have appraised are canonical works. They comprise a broad, chronological sample of direct cinema's most cherished and remembered records not because of a disregard for Robert Drew's post-*Crisis* achievements, but in order to contemplate why some direct cinema productions of the 1960s abide, whilst others do not. The Maysles brothers, D. A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, Michael Wadleigh and Frederick Wiseman attenuated their modes of expression to incorporate and comment upon what mattered about their nation as it entered a period of discursive change and existential craving; they outgrew the Living Camera tem-

plate because they saw *themselves* as alive and creatively more central to a true understanding of the world than a belief in the power of lightweight equipment to go anywhere – to show everything. The objectivity/subjectivity argument hereafter becomes redundant, a notion perhaps as bogus as Drew's faith in 'real life coming out of the film'. As Peter Graham insightfully observed in 1964, shortly after Drew's Associates had dissolved: '[The Maysles brothers, Drew and Leacock] present not *the* truth, but *their* truth. The term *cinéma vérité*, by postulating some absolute truth, is only a monumental red herring. The sooner it is buried and forgotten, the better' (1964: 36). After its gestation under network control, direct cinema broke free: *cinéma vérité* became a term loaded with callow implications, raising more questions about empiricism than ontology. What is apparent is an abjuration of the pseudo-scientific study of modernity in favour of transcendent, musical and oblique commentaries on Western humanity and its struggles against fear in a wealthy yet confusing age of proliferating information. To paraphrase Dylan, America did not need a weatherman, but a turnabout in and a revivification of its national consciousness that could effect a renaissance of compassionate, community politics.

Despite David E. James' assertion that direct cinema of the late 1960s 'failed to engage the most pressing social issues of the day' (1989: 213) and therefore represented a less valid form than the more obviously confrontational avant-garde, there is bountiful evidence that suggests a *modus operandi* in keeping with prevalent counter-cultural hopes. Charles A. Reich, responding in 1970 to the apparently stymied circumstances of political momentum on the Left, proposed a 'revolution through consciousness' as a substitute for entrenched methods of dissent: 'Must we wait for fascism before we realise that political activism has failed?' he asked (1970: 252).<sup>1</sup> Concurring with Reich, Theodore Roszak was circumspect but still hopeful that the nation's youth would 'strike beyond ideology to the level of consciousness ... building the good society is not primarily a social, but a psychic task' (1971: 49). Correspondingly, the direct cinema filmmakers were not attracted to either combative or liberalist advocacy; rather, they occupied a sagacious political province that Todd Gitlin, in his more moderate and reflective phase, shared: 'Right now it is a question of whether the living consciousness that a new world is possible – free of material misery, hierarchy and useless work – can encounter the more traditional needs of the rest of the American people without abandoning its integrity' (1987: 457). This, as the 1960s wore on, was a quandary increasingly vital to reformers. Traditional liberals prosecuted the war in Vietnam as vigorously as the war on poverty; both gave higher taxpayers a reason to elect Nixon, who summoned no victory in either crusade, but had plenty of hard-line rhetoric against 'the deterioration of respect for the rule of law' (Nixon quoted in Gitlin 1987: 338). New Deal and Great Society principles, for Drew's alumni, were thus too contentiously illusory, too sweetened a placebo to countenance as a way of ending endemic hatred, distrust of others and the abject despair sustained by corporate-government relations. The post-Old Left, post-industrial *milieu* called for a contrapuntal cinematic art, one that might make evident the unshackled potential – the essential joy – of life lived beyond submission to anger, or to clichés of reportage or resistance;

what Leacock, Pennebaker, the Maysles brothers and Wiseman bespoke was a desire for the realisation of multi-dimensional thinking: a revolution in the head.

Inevitably, what was once a manifesto for a new artistic attitude in documentary has, since its brief domination of the genre, been vitiated. Hand-held footage now serves as a shorthand cipher for candid honesty, appearing in television 'docu-soaps' and dramas, 'reality' shows, feature films and advertisements to lend a semblance of Robert Drew's avid vision. There is promise, beyond these chimeras, still left in direct cinema's aesthetic tradition. Numerous high-profile filmmakers, including Michael Moore, Nick Broomfield, Morgan Spurlock, Ric Burns, Barbara Kopple and Molly Dineen, have lucratively appropriated the candid method by incorporating its visual immediacy into engaging stories, polemics and character studies; moreover, with the ever-proliferating abundance of cheap, digital cameras further democratising the practice of reality filmmaking, everybody with an interest can emulate what took years to develop at Time-Life. Yet, as Leacock notes, 'Anyone can use a pen, but how many people can write great novels?'<sup>2</sup>

As of May 2007, Leacock, Pennebaker, Albert Maysles, Frederick Wiseman, Michael Wadleigh and Robert Drew continue sporadically to create (with varying degrees of commercial interest) according to their own ideals. But, or so it would appear, the times are not as ripe as they once were. 'I had a sense that we had really opened up a whole new world, and that the horizons were limitless', said Leacock in 1984. 'Somehow it ran out of steam ... I still don't understand. It seemed to run into a vacuum. Maybe that's my problem' (quoted in O'Connell 1992: 209). Perhaps, as the moribund dream of a new consciousness gave way to the penitent 'vacuum' of the 1970s, so direct cinema correspondingly subsided as a cohesive proposition; certainly, a mantle of sorts was passed to the New Hollywood's recalcitrant young auteurs, who profitably absorbed (among myriad cinematic influences of chiefly European and Japanese provenance) American reactive 'observationalism's disavowal of 'the tyranny of technical correctness' (Biskind 1998: 17).<sup>3</sup> Adroitly cynical projections of post-1960s trauma, often upon allegorical or fantastical situations, largely superseded – at least in terms of public profile – the candid recording and restrained presentation of reality. Hollywood's short-lived rebirth represented a brashly invigorating purge: in a violent and morally culpable climate, the baby-boomers again brought market forces to bear upon channels of expression, rendering direct cinema's ongoing, understated critique obsolete. What is more, notes Jeanne Hall, 'the movement quickly fell out of fashion as contemporary film theory called into question the apparently obvious nature of the cinematic sign ... by the end of the decade, film studies programmes were teaching ideology, interpellation and subjectivity ... *Cinéma vérité* filmmakers ... became easy targets indeed' (Hall 1991: 27). Although it traced the Sixties' high-rising arc of political upheaval and cultural dynamism with unusual acuity, the observational movement was, by 1970, once more largely relegated to television and diminishing returns.

Leacock, his muse apparently deserted and his innovations subsumed, lapsed into ennui before embarking on a high-profile teaching career and the supervision of avant-garde theatrical productions; Pennebaker devoted himself almost exclu-

sively to filming performers, who, since *Dont Look Back*, have proved his natural subjects; Wiseman's annually released films generate much discussion to this day, though they have lost intensity in recent years; Albert and David Maysles produced one more masterpiece, *Grey Gardens* (1975), before David's premature death; and Robert Drew entered the 1970s with a film about Mariner IV, thereafter continuing to make edifying, sponsored television programmes such as *Saving Energy: It Begins at Home* (1974), *Men of the Tall Ships* (1976) and *Build the Fusion Power Machine* (1984). 'The flower of art blooms', wrote Henry James, 'only where the soil is deep' (1984: 320). For the filmmakers discussed herein, the seedbed of the long, strange Sixties was fertile indeed.