What is cinema verite?

Cinema verite is responsible for the way things happen in modern movies and TV. But too few people understand where it came from and why we still use it. Let's be a 'fly on the wall'...

Have you ever watched a movie and found the acting or dialogue to feel stilted? Maybe the action was all over the place or felt unmotivated? This happens when a story is removed from the reality of life, the honesty of our experiences and it is almost a little too "staged".

That might partly be because filmmaking took a lot of its cues from the theater, and many of those stylistic choices and conventions have stayed in the process. It's not always bad, it's just a method like any other.

But when Jean Rouch and others began to develop the idea of "Cinema Verite" things began to change again as a new raw ingredient was being mixed into the cinematic batter.

But let's back up a moment and ask an important question:

Cinema verite definition

Cinema verite, which translates to "truthful cinema," is a manner of capturing the story on screen. It is a style of filmmaking characterized by realism, most often associated with documentaries, avoiding any artificial or artistic embellishments.

Perfect examples of French cinéma vérité are Jean Rouch’s Chronique d’un été (1961; Chronicle of a Summer) and Chris Marker’s Le Joli Mai (1962).

What are the key elements of cinema verite?

Verite films tend to have these specific qualifications:

1. Filmed on location with non-professional actors
2. Featuring handheld shots
3. Focusing on everyday situations and lives of characters
4. Unscripted action and dialogue
5. Focusing on social and political issues
6. Always using natural lighting
7. Often featuring some overlap between filmmaker and subject

How did the verite film expand across the globe?
As cinema verite left France and made its way around the globe, it began to overlap with other definitions. American filmmakers took the idea of cinema verite and created "direct cinema," which left filmmakers as a fly on the wall but still provoked subjects. Other filmmakers across the world also used the ideas for their stance on "observational cinema."

Great Britain called it "Free Cinema."

Cinema verite overlaps with observational cinema and direct cinema.

Tobias Deml created this Venn diagram on Cinema Verite

Credit: Wikipedia via Tobias Deml
How did all these styles of verite film come up at once?

Technological advancements allowed filmmakers to do things they never dreamed of before. Camera equipment got less bulky, handheld, and even sync sound was able to go portable. This allowed filmmakers to go to different places and explore more freely.

Via PBS:

*The invention of relatively inexpensive, portable, but thoroughly professional 16-millimetre equipment—and the synchronous sound recorder—facilitated the development of a similar movement in the United States at just about the same time. Sometimes called cinéma vérité, sometimes simply “direct cinema,” its goal was essentially the capturing of the reality of a person, a moment, or an event without any rearrangement for the camera. Leading American practitioners were Ricky Leacock (Primary, 1960), Frederick Wiseman (Titicut Follies, 1967), Donn Pennebaker (Monterey Pop, 1968), and the Maysles brothers (Salesman, 1969).*

How do you create a cinema verite film?

Since strict adherence to cinema verite comes only in the documentary form... you'd have to make a doc!

Verite docs involve the documentarian provoking the subject over and over. It also involves stylized setups and interaction between subjects. Since the overall idea is to represent truth, the camera and the idea of filming has to be acknowledged outright so the subjects get comfortable and are willing to be themselves.

This can involve breaking the fourth wall and prompting the subjects with tasks or suggestions.

If you're setting out to make your own cinema verite documentary:

- Consider the subjects you have access to easily
- Explain what makes your story interesting to viewers
- Plan what kind of story you want to tell and how you'll do it
- Always be ready to move the camera
- Figure out what lies at the soul of your story
- Provoke the subjects to get a response

These are just tips, but you don't have to take my word for it, according to Wikipedia, Edgar Morin wrote:

*“There are two ways to conceive of the cinema of the Real: the first is to pretend that you can present reality to be seen; the second is to pose the problem of reality. In the same way, there were two ways to conceive cinéma vérité. The first was to pretend that you brought truth. The second was to pose the problem of truth.”*

What are some examples of cinema verite documentaries?
The Act of Killing, by Joshua Oppenheimer, is an incredible documentary that embodies the best of cinema verite for a modern audience. Its filmmaker provokes and interacts with the subject, making him come face to face with the horrific acts.

Credit: BFI

Some documentaries from the evolution of cinema verite are *Titicut Follies* by Frederick Weisman and *Pour la suite du monde* by Pierre Perault. They both focus on people dealing with their lives. The first is about inmates in a psychiatric prison. It has graphic nudity, torture, and sex in it.

So I decided to share a photo from the one about people fishing for whales instead.

*Pour la suite du monde* starts out being about fishing, but it actually becomes a gripping story of memory and the life of these elderly villagers.
How did cinema verité change Hollywood?

We've talked about how it changed documentary, but how did cinema verité change Hollywood?

The easiest thing to point out is how a natural style of acting and directing began to creep into the mainstream. There are a lot of factors that led to this beyond verité. In the same time frame method acting became popularized, as did Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave. All brought for a disruptive and raw style and energy that got audiences into more emotional situations, and the story was less 'presentational'.

What are some examples of cinema verité's influence on film and television?

I think one unforeseen byproduct is the rise of reality television. TV shows like COPS became a cheap, easy, and audience-pleasing way to program. As these shows got more and more popular, they took time slots away from traditional television.

They rely on producers provoking people and putting them in crazy situations. Think about how shows like Survivor and The Bachelor take basic tenements of documentary and incorporate verité ideals to prompt responses out of the participants and thus connect them with the audience.

Aside from reality TV, look at how the idea of verité slipped into our sitcoms.

Shows like Modern Family, The Office, and Parks and Rec all use the "mockumentary" format to pretend to connect to real life. This strategy gives us another layer of connection to the characters. But it doesn't always have to be done in that style.

The tenements of cinema verité are also applicable to many modern movies. Look at films like Rachel Getting Married, United 93, Fish Tank, Fruitvale Station, and The Blair Witch Project. They all use handheld, realistic styles to make the stories feel intimate and to bring the audience as close as possible.

Credit: IMDB
Where is cinema verite going now?

As we look forward, it's hard not to see how reality television has taken over the network and streamers. Shows like *Queer Eye, Great British Baking Show*, and *Botched* all have viral followings and are cheap to create. Most of the drama has to do with paying hosts or the number of seasons, and you get the benefit of not having to pay that many recurring cast members.

Pushback on this stuff is the rise in tentpole films with total reliance on CGI like *Fast and the Furious, Marvel, DC, Star Wars, and Jumanji*.

These kinds of movies are the anti-verite. They allow audiences to step outside the real world and enter a fantasy land.

Still, as cameras and sound go digital and get even cheaper, cinema verite will always be a huge part of our experience, albeit not theatrical.

Look at all the blogs and shows on YouTube now. There's an unlimited number of people using their webcams and go-pros to connect with people online.

We're at the cusp of the next versions of cinema verite and the best is yet to come.

Useful Resources

3. [https://nofilmschool.com/what-is-cinema-verite](https://nofilmschool.com/what-is-cinema-verite)