THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

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Directors turn lens on self

Documentaries are back in style, and that world-class curmudgeon Michael Moore deserves a big share of the credit.

When his "Bowling for Columbine" premiered at last year's Cannes film festival - where it won a special prize - the provocatively titled film struck some as fearless journalism, others as liberal-slanted muckraking that could never catch on outside the festival circuit.

Eleven months later, Mr. Moore is having the last laugh. The Oscar-winning "Bowling for Columbine" is outdoing his 1989 classic "Roger & Me" at the box office, proving again that audiences will flock to a nonfiction film if they find it engrossing and entertaining.

Moore's huge success has energized nonfiction filmmakers and piqued moviegoers' curiosity about fare drawn from real life, and encouraged distributors to put more documentaries into theaters.

But this doesn't mean his style of documentary - sardonic, polemical, and propelled as much by his own ego as the cause he's fighting for - will now dominate the field.

Many of the nonfiction films this season veer in different directions. If a single figure can be called the granddaddy of the current scene, it's not Moore but Frederick Wiseman, a pioneer of the cinema verite style that values fly-on-the-wall observation over political pyrotechnics.

Spawned in the 1960s and priding itself on alertness to both social problems and individual personalities, the watchful spirit of cinema verite hovers over several new and upcoming releases:

* "Love & Diane," first-time filmmaker Jennifer Dworkin's portrait of an African-American family in New York, plagued by poverty and addiction (see review, page 15).

* "Stevie," in which "Hoop Dreams" director Steve James follows the travails of a young Midwesterner whose life took troubling turns - culminating in his indictment for a sex-abuse crime - in the years after Mr. James served as his mentor in a "big brother" program.

*** "My Architect," director Nathaniel Kahn's chronicle of his search for understanding about his father, the fabled architect Louis I. Kahn, who died when filmmaker Kahn was a child.**

What distinguishes "Stevie" and "My Architect" from cinema verite classics like Wiseman's "High School" and "Titicut Follies" is that the directors are part of their own story, interacting on-screen with the people they depict. They don't do this in Moore's feisty manner; Mr. James and **Mr. Kahn are more prone to quiet questioning and indirect revelations of their own involvement with their subjects. Still, they don't hesitate to weave themselves into the stories they're telling.**

This approach has a long pedigree, evident in 1960s and '70s classics like "Chronicle of a Summer" and Martin Scorsese's "American Boy," where Mr. Scorsese lets us hear him directing the "sincere, spontaneous" words of a person he's interviewing.

Some filmmakers dislike such interaction for muddying the "objectivity" of a movie. Others feel the most objective thing documentary-makers can do is to acknowledge the presence of their camera. As with other questions about documentary, there are no right or wrong answers, just differing points of view.

For a famous example, controversy has raged over Robert Flaherty's seminal documentary "Nanook of the North" since 1921. The filmmaker not only lived with his Eskimo subject, but coached him into reenacting activities for the camera (hunting, igloo-building) and even passed off a specially designed igloo - with a wall missing to let in enough light for photography - as Nanook's actual home.

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Some consider this a falsification of reality. Others note that every film is an artificial construction, with the filmmaker choosing what to show, how to shoot it, and how to juxtapose it with other shots.

"There's no such thing as 'objective truth' in films," says Haskell Wexler, a renowned cinematographer and director of both documentary and fiction movies.

"Every film is a story the filmmaker wants to tell, and he tells it the way he thinks is best.... Don't look for 'truth' in documentaries, because you won't find it."

How much verite?

Ms. Dworkin doesn't appear on-screen in "Love & Diane," but she places her film outside the cinema verite category because in addition to its filmed records of events and conversations, it contains subjective material "that comes out of people's thoughts," as she put it in an interview.

In traditional documentaries, she continued, "there's an ethic of nonintervention - of not affecting the subject you're filming. But this film wouldn't have been honest if I didn't get personally involved with the people.

Despite their differences from pure cinema verite, movies like "Love & Diane," "Stevie," and "My Architect" do share that style's conviction that the best way to explore social situations and individual lives is not to take openly polemical stances, but to depict everyday details as faithfully as possible.

This raises ethical conundrums that documentary-makers have wrestled with for decades.

One is the question of intervention that Dworkin faced in making "Love & Diane," which required her to spend five years with the family she was portraying. Should she maintain an "objective" distance between herself and her subjects, or take action to help them with their emotional and financial problems?

Her solution was to do some of both. She remained an outsider to the household, but took care to have off-camera conversations with family members, and gave them some financial assistance behind the scenes, helping them buy computers and pay for courses to enhance their employment prospects.

Financial aid like this is taboo in print and broadcast journalism. There are no rules in filmmaking, however, where directors and producers are free agents and the only goal is to complete a movie that audiences will want to take seriously.

James has done the same, giving financial help during the shooting of "Hoop Dreams," about poor teenagers and their families. He sees this as the right thing to do, but he acknowledges the difficulty of deciding whether to keep it off the screen.

The ethics of filming

Another moral dilemma is the question of whether filmmakers are exploiting the people they depict by putting their lives and problems onto movie screens for all the world to see.

"It's an age-old issue," James says. "I had a [prior] relationship with Stevie, and when I got caught up [as a filmmaker] in his [history of] crime, and his family, and my own desire to play a role in his life, I realized that the film had to take account of this. Otherwise it would have been exploitation." James began "Stevie" as a small-scale short aimed at festivals rather than theaters. It took a quantum leap in complexity when its central figure, Stephen Fielding, became the subject of sexual-abuse charges that shocked everyone in his life, including the filmmaker. The documentary has won prizes at both the Sundance and Amsterdam film festivals.

James's trepidations about proceeding with the project are part of the documentary, including anxious conversations with his wife, a social worker who deals with sex-crime cases and was reluctant to let Mr. Fielding spend much time in their home.

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While the completed film is primarily about Fielding, it is also an account of James's relationship with him, and of James's own feelings as the project took its course.

"This kind of film, where you're with people over a period of years, is a process of discovery," he says. "In the case of 'Stevie,' I was often fearful - that he'd hurt someone, or hurt himself, or go to prison.... I didn't know where it was headed, and that's something I wanted to capture."

Which is more easily said than done. "You want to make a dramatic and potent film that affects people," James added. "But on a personal level, you often feel you're trafficking in people's misfortunes. That's why most documentary-makers I know are pulling for happy endings!"

The risk of exploitation is reduced when the subjects of a documentary feel they're getting something in return for their self-exposure on the screen.

"Love [Hinson] has a passionate belief in honesty, in telling it like it is," says Dworkin, referring to one of her film's central figures. "She and Diane saw other [documentaries] about women who are addicts and live in poverty, and they were scathing about these because [the films] didn't show how hard it was - the pain, the struggle - or they were negative and dismissive. Love and Diane wanted to create an honest film as badly as I did."

Kahn faced these questions from a somewhat different perspective, since the central figure in his documentary was deceased. But since that person was the filmmaker's own father, the possibility of exploitation still demanded serious thought.

"One of the great commandments is to honor thy father," Kahn told me. "So I had to ask myself what it means to honor someone. It doesn't just mean saying nice things about them, it means learning to know them. So my goal was to honor [my father] in my own, very personal way...."

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