

Talking heads and people speaking

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There are some possibilities to introduce text in film. Until sound film was invented it was made with text-inserts. Only a happy few could read from the lips of the actors and were able to understand the sense and even more nonsense actors were talking during the shooting of a movie. In the beginning of the 30ties talking pictures became common and the synchronisation of sound and pictures became possible. The technique at the time was so heavy and slow, it only could be used in the studio or for special events, as the entrance of a very important person for example. For this reason a commentary became more usual in documentary films. Its technical handling was easier. In the beginning of the fifties portable synchronised cameras were developed. This permitted taking pictures and sound in the same time in the field. People started to talk to us directly in films. Not by accident Jean Rouch was involved in the development of the famous french camera called "Eclair". This was the first blimped and portable camera in Europe. Henceforth text was in documentary film foremost spoken language. Today there are basically four possibilities to introduce text in film: inserts, commentary, talking people in picture (in the "ON") and talking people out of picture (in the "OFF"). The last mentioned method can be near to commentary.

People speaking is one of the most important features - or may I say figures - of motion pictures. In fiction films as well as in documentary films. We cannot imagine fiction films without speaking people. As we have seen, documentary film has had more difficulty to integrate what people interests most: other people and what they have to say. That could be the reason why early documentaries deal so often with material culture. When the handling with synchro-sound

cameras became easier, speaking people in documentaries were so numerous as in fiction films. The film-interview was born.

The so called documentary recordings of speaking people shows from the beginning typical qualities. They relativate the objective character as a document. I would like to show you a recording, a so to speak incunabile recording which demonstrates already all these constitutive elements. The recording was made long before the invention of sound-film, that means in the first decade of our century.

Beispiel Rudolf Pöch: Bushman Kubi, Kalahari

What can we learn of this recording of a bushman in the Kalahari by Rudolf Pöch ? First we have to note the mise-en-scene of the recording. Pöch made first of all a sound recording of the speech of bushman Kubi. He was so impressed by the intensity of his expression that he decided to record with film the same scene again. As the disks for sound recording were very precious at the time, Pöch took a damaged one, so that it looked like a real recording. Perhaps it was also a trick to animate bushman Kubi to do his best a second time, because Pöch was able to replay the sound recordings to the bushmen, but not the moving pictures. Of course the nearly perfect synchronisation of separately recorded sound and picture was only possible later on an editing device. The artificial - or as we would say today - virtual character of every recording of picture and sound becomes already evident in this early piece of film.

In this recording we can see an other characteristic element of speaking people in film: the bushman Kobi knows obviously that he does not only talk to a machine. The machine is only a medium which permits him access to a large public. The bushman realises the possibility of the device

and this animates his expression and his intense speak to a cone of metal. He is conscious of the fact that he is recording for the future. This is a phenomena that everybody knows who has ever made a recording of speaking people. As soon as a camera starts to film the speaking gains on intensity. People are not only themselves, they play their role as if they would have an entrance in front of a public. They show in front of the camera what they can. They perceive the dead lens of the camera as if it were the eye of a future spectator. They move and behave in a manner to please a future audience. And like there are in fiction films bad, good and outstanding actors, in documentary films too the protagonists are very different in their skill to play their roles. Hence the quality of a documentary film depends very much on the ability of his protagonists. I will show you a very beautiful example of this:

Beispiel Chocker in Strecker/Lydall's film "The song of the Hamar herdsman"

The cinematographic method used in this example is normally called "interview". Indeed the word "interview" describes very well the subject. It derives from the french word "entrevue" which means "a (prepared) appointment". So, the expression "entrevue" contains artificiality which is part of every conversation in front of a camera. When I talk of "people speaking" in documentary and ethnographic film it means this arranged situation between the filmauthor, the camera and the people. It means not filming with hidden camera neither filming speaking people accidently who are not aware they are filmed.

Today the expression "interview" means different approaches to people. One of it I would like to call "journalistic interview". We all know it as consumers of news-papers, radio and TV. For the other method I prefer the expression "con-

versation in front of the camera". It is the method preferred by documentarists and ethnologists.

A journalist has an other goal as an ethnologist. He is mostly interested in a particular problem of actuality. His work is sort of research bringing in a extremely short time the most possible transparency in a problem. Ethnologists are in a different position. Their goal is to get to know an ethnics, a whole community. Both - journalist and ethnologist - seek after "the truth". But the ethnologists approach is more universal and less focused on daily problems. Therefore there is room for all subjects people are concerned with: from hard economics to dreams, from social structures to religion. In opposing keywords we can see the following differences:

Interview

- embarrassing situation
- quick
- conversation dominated by the function of a person
- focused on news
- statements are proving a thesis
- functional curiosity

Conversation in front of the camera

- "natural" situation
- slow
- conversation between equals
- improving of knowledge
- statements are part of reality
- universal curiosity

Psychological differences

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| - distrust | - trust |
| - pattern: fight | - pattern: exchange |
| - strange / unfamiliar | - friendship |
| - stressed | - relaxed |
| - the forced moment | - the right moment |

Differences of recording technique

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|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| - rather harrassing | - because of preparation integrated |
| - rather heavy equipment | - small team or even lonley hunters |
| - rather clumsy | - light and flexibel |

Economic differences

- | | |
|--|--|
| - Time is money | - "Money" is time |
| - short investment of time (hours, days) | - long investment of time (weeks, months, years) |
| - big money | - low costs |

As we have already seen, the conversation in front of a synchro-sound-camera establishes a completely new relationship between the person and the dark eye of the camera. Beforehand the person was the object of the filmmaker. He could put everything he liked on the movements of the lips of the person with inserts or commentary. Introducing direct sound people gain a lot of identity. The fact is, people play their roles with their own language, mimicry and gesture. At least during a not-edited take they are themselves. They dominate what the picture shows of them and the sound transmits of them. What they are saying is genuine even when they lay. Being a spectator we believe to be able to judge, if people speaking in pictures tell us the truth or not. And this might be the same like in daily situations. People speaking in documentaries make either an authentic or in contrary an unauthentic impression on us.

Example "Kleine Freiheit (Little Freedom)" by Hans-Ulrich Schlumpf, 1978

This example shows us that speaking people in documentary films figure as a witness. The meaning is more evident in German. The German word for witness derives from the word "ziehen" which means to draw, to pull. So a witness is one who is drawn or pulled to the judge or in better English, brought to justice. In our case the witness is brought to the camera. As spectators we turn into the role of the judge, evaluating and estimating the case brought to the court represented by the screen. The example beforehand, showed how the judge depends from the work done in advance by the authorities of inquiry. If all these people have worked fair, complete and to the best of their knowledge and belief, our sentence can be fair. The analogie to the work of a filmauthor or a filmdirector of documentaries is obvious.

This concerns in particular the editing of a film, which always is as well a manipulation. Therefore the credibility of speaking people in film must be strongly relativated. Unfortunately I cant get in to the exciting questions of dramatic technique which derives from these point of view.

I think I have pointed out the importance speaking people have in moving pictures. In particular in documentary and ethnographic filming the value of the method of speaking people is very high. Nowadays this method has a reverse side too. I come to speak about the mutation that changes speaking people to talking heads. Television and a big part of its audience have a non satiable greed for "true storys". And the most true storys are the ones narrated by those who lived them, who suffered them and standed them. They are brought to witness in all these talkshows and self-celebrations. Only those who perrished are obvisously not helpful for ratings. A German newspaper - the Süddeutsche Zeitung - reported that in Germany in 1995 26'000 persons had their coming-out on television. For 1996 specialists estimate the number even about 30'000. There is a market where so many people do the same. And this market wants to be cultivated. A certain Carsten Helm from Munich has recognised the signs of the times. He founded an agency with the name "Real Life Casting" and administrates 3000 files of candidates. They all long for the disclosing of their little secrets in front of the cameras in order to be famous for a short moment. The secrets have to be a little bit intimate and with preference a little bit dirty. Otherwise their market value is to low. Looking at it in a positive way it reminds me of the fair with the heaviest woman of the world, the siamise twins ore the man who cannot remember anything anymore. The abuse of a formerly emancipating method in an allcommercialised society strokes back on the method ! New ways of seeing come up. They denounce often the people speaking about the "condition humaine". The

mutant "talking head" loses his credibility or becomes a metaphor for banality and oddness. Who guarantees that all these revealed secrets are not invented and written by an author, played by actors engaged for talkshows ?

More disastrous is the bombardment with talking heads for the formal and aesthetic domain. As in the science-fiction film "Blade Runner" it becomes more and more difficult to separate the mutants from the originals. Estimating film as a form of artistic expression we have to ask ourselves: Where does the method of "people speaking" still make sense? I have not enough time to discuss this question. But it is obvious that we have to look for new ideas to beware credibility of speaking people in documentary and ethnographic films.

At the end of my speech I would like to show you a sequence of the film "Emigration N.Y. - The history of an expulsion" of the Austrian filmmaker Egon Humer. The film was created in 35mm-technique and is an impressive example of a very modest formal concept that works: 80 percent of the film are speaking people. I can affirm you that in a cinema-screening the experience is even more impressive - in spite of the duration of 3 hours.

Example Egon Humer - "Emigration N.Y. - The history of an expulsion", Part II.

Zürich HUS/PAM 16.5.96/21.5.96