

FALLING INTO FORM:
THE DOCUMENTARY FAILURES OF FICTIONAL FILM-MAKERS

by
JOANNA BROWNE SOLMON

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Dr. Forest Pyle

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Joanna Browne Solmon

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The medium of film presents us with an imitation-reality locked within an invisible narrative structure. The effects of this all-pervasive narrative structure on our daily lives, on how we construct ourselves and those around us, changes both with time and with technology. One way in which such effects make themselves manifest is in films in which a character plays the role of film-maker; in such films the camera becomes the character's method for negotiating between the real world and the expected and constructed realities of film narrative. I look at three such films: Dziga Vertov's 1929 Russian film *The Man with the Movie Camera*, Jim McBride's 1967 American film *David Holzman's Diary*, and Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick's 1999 American film *The Blair Witch Project*.

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INTRODUCTION

Film is an invisibly false, invisibly constructed medium. While music and writing lack visuals, painting and photography lack motion, and a stage play is restricted to a confined space, film is able to provide us with the most precise, expansive, and seemingly effortless re-creation of our own reality. And yet, of these arts, film is also paradoxically, as Walter Benjamin says in his 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the most involved and complex in its execution. Referring to the numerous workers and equipment necessary on the set of a film, Benjamin writes:

The shooting of a film...presents a process in which it is impossible to assign to a spectator a viewpoint which would exclude from the actual scene such extraneous accessories as camera equipment, lighting machinery, staff assistants, etc.—unless his eye were on a line parallel with the lens...The equipment-free aspect of reality has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology (232-3).

Benjamin illustrates how, in film-making, as in so many other industrialized processes, maximal work, energy, and manpower must be expended for minimal return. The movie set is a place of mechanical unreality in which months of twelve-hour work-days are mined to produce two hours of imitation reality through “the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the mounting of the shot together with other similar ones” (233). However the effort poured into the creation of the false reality of film is inevitably invisible to the audience. Editing combines shots into scenes, stitching together distinct slices of plot to create a seamless imitation of reality. It is not only the smooth progression of plot which erases the unreality of cinema, it is also its pace. On screen, one event pushes the next into being in an inexorable forward flow of narrative so that, as Benjamin says, “no sooner has

[the spectator's] eye grasped a scene than it is already changed" (238). This constant change leads to what Benjamin calls "the shock effect of film" (238), a constant jarring of audience consciousness which forces the viewer to pay careful attention to the film in order to string together distinct visual images into a plot. Yet, at the same time, this shock effect focuses the viewer's attention exclusively on the screen, providing a distraction which locks the viewer's mind into the manufactured reality of the film and renders him unable to challenge this pretend reality by comparing it with that of his own daily experience.

Film techniques such as the reverse shot, the insert shot, and the tracking shot, though they pass by on-screen largely as unnoticed plot development, fundamentally change the ways that we, individuals living lives immersed in film narrative, understand and interact with the world. A sort of cinematic psychology is developed in which the film viewer expects, on some unconscious level, to be able to always play the role of viewer and for his or her life to play out as though it were on the screen. This cinematic psychology, which changes over time with the dominant modes and technologies of film, makes itself known on-screen when we are presented with characters who themselves take up cameras and then direct those cameras at the world around them. The three films which I will discuss in this thesis represent different time periods, different places, different directorial aims, and different awareness of and response to what I have termed the cinematic psychology of their times. In *Man with a Movie Camera*, Russian director Dziga Vertov, working in 1929, the early days of film and of the new Soviet state, gives his anonymous cameraman the task of deconstructing traditional theatrically narrative film, replacing it with a new purely cinematic model. Thirty-eight years later, moving from the collective universality of a young USSR to the personalized individualism of mid-century America, Jim McBride directs *David Holzman's Diary* in which the character David Holzman labors under a naive belief that a 16mm camera will illuminate the great truths of his life. Finally, in 1999's *The Blair Witch Project* Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick create three student filmmakers whose 16mm and video documentary is an exercise in career-building rather than truth-seeking. I believe

that each of these films, though they admittedly stand as singular and thus somewhat anecdotal and arbitrary examples, nonetheless can be viewed as emblematic of the issues and concerns facing both the construction of cinema and the ways in which this construction affects thinking of individuals within the cinematic society.

Dziga Vertov was only too aware of how traditional narrative cinema, even in its relative infancy in the silent era, created certain feelings and expectations in the viewer. He and a loose group of collaborators dubbed themselves kinoks (a blending of the Russian words for eye and film) and began producing anti-theatrical cinema manifestoes in 1922. Coming out of the blending of Marxism and Futurism that produced Russian Constructivism, Vertov and the kinoks saw theatrical, acted film as mere bourgeois/capitalist entertainment, an easy play to the emotions which committed the unpardonable sin of distracting without educating. In the face of these theatrical distractions Vertov advocated what he called kino-eye. Kino-eye is a non-fictional cinema which uses the camera's ability to expand and clarify reality through techniques like slow-motion and close-ups to create symphonies of images rhythmically tied together to provide visual education. Vertov argued that this technique, more accessible to illiterate workers than intertitle-laden narrative films, could provide a real and practical socialist education to the workers, rather than the sentimental one offered by more traditional films. *Man with a Movie Camera*, virtually a filmed manifesto, is a conscious attempt to subvert such sentimental narrative cinema by presenting a film which is at once a how-to manual for Vertov's non-fictional cinema and the realization of that ideal. The film is an autochthonous creation in which a universal and anonymous cameraman uses his camera, with its whirring gears and opening shutter, to awaken a city and crank it into motion. Vertov's is a supremely positive vision of cinema, one which finds every mechanism of the camera echoed in the movement of the bodies and industry which surround it, and which posits that the camera, once freed from the bounds of theatrical narrative, is the ultimate revealer, constructor, and instructor of reality.

Vertov was able to successfully envision a new model for cinema (even if that new model was not taken up by many later filmmakers) because he so thoroughly understood both the traditional cinema that he was reacting against and the ideas that he wanted to actualize through the camera. His was a universal and collective, rather than a personal and private, project. As such it stands out in stark contrast with Jim McBride's 1967 film *David Holzman's Diary*. If Vertov's cameraman is the Constructivist setting out to order and record the industrial glory of the new Soviet state, McBride's David Holzman is lost in the tiny realm of his singular life. It is a personal crisis and not a grand ideology that sets Holzman to his movie-making task. David Holzman is a twenty-something New York bohemian, living on the Upper West Side, who decides to film a diary of his life when, in a single day, he loses his job and receives a draft classification of One-A. He buys a 16mm camera and sets to work, believing, as he says in one of many long addresses to the camera, that once his life has been transferred to manipulable celluloid it will somehow become understandable. Unlike Vertov, who carefully creates rules and systems to tease the desired revelations from his camera, Holzman's faith in film is blind; he has no justification for his belief that film offers truth and no method for accessing that imagined truth. Though he is surrounded by made films, he has no access to an emulative model for film-making. Indeed, a lifetime of watching movies, a lifetime passively immersed in the Hollywood narrative structure, seems to have left David Holzman believing that transferring his life to film stock, regardless of the techniques he employs to get it there, is all he needs to do to find understanding. Camera in hand, Holzman's life suddenly becomes a movie and he cannot understand why this movie does not conform to the expectations of the narrative. He claims to seek truth through cinema, unaware that his life and thinking are already so thoroughly saturated with cinematic narrative that there is nothing left for the camera to expose. *David Holzman's Diary* presents us with the opposition between the documentary Holzman who seeks simply to record the events of his life, and the subconsciously narrativized Holzman who cannot help but take the camera's presence as a cue to attempt to restructure his life as

though it were a film. A tension is constantly present in the film between Holzman's desire to record things as they are and his desire that what is recorded should resemble established models for filmed events, namely Hollywood cinema.

If Vertov uses his camera to create a new model for truth and David Holzman uses his to seek out truth, truth ceases to be any concern at all to the three student film-makers in *The Blair Witch Project*. As the "project" in the title suggests, their film-making is a task rather than an art. Their film about the Blair Witch is a student project intended as just another necessary step in the process of education and the progress toward employment and monetary gain. Their approach to their equipment reflects this: while the camera is a powerful constructive mechanism for Vertov and a source of truth for Holzman, it is reduced the role of tool (the 16mm camera used for the "official" shots) or toy (the video camera) in the hands of the three *Blair Witch* filmmakers. Their approach to film is no less a product of societal models than David Holzman's; however, by 1999, the models which they have to follow are drastically different. With the 16mm camera (which they were no doubt taught how to use in school) they produce icily staged shots of talking heads which ape documentary models. The video footage, recreational and non-serious, is loose and choppy and filled with hammy behavior. Unlike Holzman, whose only models for film come from Hollywood narratives with invisible camerawork, the *Blair Witch* filmmakers are able to model their behavior, both behind and in front of the camera, on virtually plotless reality shows like *COPS* and *The Real World*, and on the private example of the home video. While Holzman's precisely choreographed shots of reality and elaborate explanatory monologues show his inability to escape from the constructs of narrative film, the *Blair Witch* filmmakers' acceptance of the aimlessness of these reality shows enables them to film casually without attempting or expecting any kind of narrative order emerge. Ironically, in *The Blair Witch Project*, narrative arrives externally in the form of the unseen voices and unknown objects which begin intruding on the expectedly unconstructed reality of the three filmmakers. While David Holzman uses his camera to search for the narrative drive that his

life is lacking, the *Blair Witch* filmmakers expect to produce a plotless and meaningless distraction but find themselves trapped in an external and deadly narrative trajectory, one which choreographs their doom as neatly as any Hollywood narrative. They set out to make a movie and instead find themselves in the midst of one being made by somebody else. Here plot and order come from outside and act as a threat; rather than seeking refuge in the neat confines of Hollywood narrative, these filmmakers find such an escalating narrative thrust onto them by outside forces. Plot becomes a trap rather than a beacon of truth.

The progression from *Man with a Movie Camera* to *David Holzman's Diary* to *The Blair Witch Project* demonstrates many things about changing attitudes toward the power of cinema, about how film affects us, and about how we feel empowered to affect film. As the technology for film-making becomes increasingly available, the medium is demystified so that the *Blair Witch* filmmakers see no special significance, outside of entertainment, in their video camera. With this demystification comes the loss of any ideals which might equate film with truth, whether those ideals be David Holzman's blind faith or Vertov's carefully designed restructuring of film form. Instead the camera becomes, over time, a literal extension of the eye; a way of precisely recording visual experience which, thanks to the smallness and portability of the video camera, does little to interfere with the simultaneous experience of life. It is an ironic realization of Vertov's vision of the kino-eye, but one in which the camera-eye is not super-human as Vertov desired, but rather a recording mechanism congruent with, and thus as limited as, the human eye. Similarly, the video camera can be made to function with the simple press of a button, focus and light adjustments are automatic, and picture and sound are no longer recorded by separate devices; when the camera's operation becomes supremely simple, there is less sense of obligation regarding the planning of what is put before the camera. The demystified camera, now virtually an extension of the eye, no longer demands Vertov's elaborate reconstruction in the editing room or Holzman's carefully chosen mise en scenes. This is both because of the casual ease of its use and because its users are now surrounded with models, most of

them television, for a cinema of reality which reflects the banality of life at the expense of intricate and elaborate plots. Between 1929 and 1999 we progress from a time when it seemed possible to completely redefine the dominant mode of cinema, to a time when Hollywood narrative was so subconsciously ingrained that it inevitably intruded on any attempt at film-making, to the present when the easy availability of technology and reality-based models of film have completely demystified its process so that the camera can be either a tool or a toy but no longer a source of truth.

MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA:
ENVISIONING THE CAMERAMAN

Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* is a circular film whose means are its own end and whose end is the presentation of its means. The film is both a chronology and a demonstration of its own creation, intended to serve as the model for a radically new kind of cinema. This radically new cinema was to be a reflection of the equally new Soviet state. Coming out of the same schools, collectives, and journals that had nourished Constructivists like Kasimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin, Vertov shared with them a desire to remake capitalist and bourgeois art forms in the collective and functional image of the new Russian state. A large part of Vertov's desire for cinema was to transform it from portraying theatrical narratives, which Vertov saw as purely esthetic bourgeois distractions, to providing a functional education through documentary images. In order to achieve this Vertov had to create a model for how to completely redefine cinema; this model is *Man with a Movie Camera*. In this film, he re-envisioned the cameraman so that the camera is no longer the invisibly omniscient observer of pretend drama but rather a conscious and intrepid traveler who risks life and limb to record and transmit the fascinating reality of the world around him. However, even with his strictly-defined cinema philosophies, Vertov is unable to completely escape the language and clichés of the theatrical narrative and his attempt at a new cinematic order seems doomed to occasionally fall under the spell of the supremely dominant form of narrative cinema.

Vertov's film theory grows out of his contempt for narrative cinema, and is best expressed in the writings and manifestoes which he published with a group of like-minded people who called themselves kinoks. In a 1924 publication explaining his earlier effort *Kinoglaz* (Cinema-eye), Vertov writes that

We are not employing a single director, actor, or set designer in this mighty film-battle. We renounce the convenience of the studio; we sweep aside sets, makeup, costumes. Just as you cannot describe the battles of a war that's just been declared, you cannot write an audience scenario for our film campaign. Proceeding from material to film-object, and not from film-object to material, the kinoks are seizing the last (most tenacious) stronghold of artistic cinema in the literary scenario. The scenario, whether in the form of a fascinating short story or a so-called preliminary editing sheet must disappear forever as an element foreign to cinema (39).

Here Vertov is seeking to invert the traditional order of film-making. No longer should the single auteur first plan what to put before his camera, then order others to conform to his bidding while he stands behind the camera. Instead, in Vertov's re-envisioned cinema, the camera and reality take precedence. A film is manufactured not in the screen-writing but in the editing, in the piecing together of slices of reality into a watchable whole. The creator's role comes not at the outset of the process but rather in the assemblage of what has been collected. This transforms the filmmaker, to continue with Vertov's wartime analogy, into a sort of battle historian, assembling disparate pieces of information into a comprehensible presentation. In this vision the camera, which initiates the film-making process, is an instrument with a power for portraying truth in and of itself.

Vertov believed in recording only the real world but he did not subscribe to the *cinema verité* school of documentary film-making. Though he abhorred the external constructs of dramatic plots, he believed that the camera played too crucial of a revelatory role to allow it to be relegated to the invisible place it tends to hold in such documentary cinema. Vertov believed very strongly in the ability of the camera to present truth invisible to the naked eye. This is a belief which he came by very early in his artistic career, when he was the subject rather than the director of a film. A cameraman filmed the young Vertov jumping one and a half stories from the roof of a house, recording Vertov's every

expression as he approached for the jump, hesitated, and then finally took the plunge.

Vertov recalls that in the film

[a] man approaches the edge of a grotto; fear and indecision appear on his face; he's thinking: "I won't jump." Then he decides: "No, it's embarrassing, they're watching." Once again he approaches the edge, once again his face shows indecision. Then one sees his determination growing, he is saying to himself, "I must," and he leaves the grotto edge. He flies through the air, flies off-balance; he's thinking that he must position himself to land on his feet. He straightens out, approaches the ground; once more his face shows indecision, fear. Finally his feet touch the ground. His immediate thought is that he fell, then that he's got to keep his balance. Next he thinks that he jumped nicely but should not let on that he has, and, like an acrobat who's performed a difficult maneuver on the trapeze, he pretends that it was awfully easy. And with that expression the man slowly "floats off."

From the viewpoint of the ordinary eye you see untruth. From the viewpoint of the cinematic eye (aided by special cinematic means, in this case, accelerated shooting) you see truth (xviii).

In this description the camera, thanks to slow-motion playback, is able to provide the viewer with the kind of extended internal monologue that would seem to be the exclusive province of literature. The camera extends time to reveal moments which pass by too quickly for the eye to grasp. Vertov's approach to cinema, as outlined here, borders on the scientific. Like Edward Muybridge taking the first photographic motion studies to prove that all four of a horse's feet are sometimes simultaneously off the ground, Vertov believes in using the tricks of the camera not to create a simulated reality but instead to unpack and reveal the hidden truths already present but invisible in our own reality.

The kinoks called the film-making they advocated kino-eye. It is a philosophy of cinema which posits that, in traditional cinema, the camera is "reduced to a state of pitiable slavery, of subordination, to the imperfections and shortsightedness of the human eye" (14). Kino-eye sought to use the tricks and abilities of the camera to augment the human eye and to reveal visual truths which would remain hidden without the aid of cinema. In an essay entitled "From Kino-eye to Radio-eye," Vertov writes

Kino-eye plunges into the seeming chaos of life to find in life itself the response to an assigned theme. To find the resultant force amongst the million phenomena related to the given theme. To edit; to wrest through the camera, whatever is most typical, most useful, from life; to organize the film pieces wrested from life into a meaningful rhythmic visual order, a meaningful visual phrase, an essence of "I see" (88).

Kino-eye was theorized as Russia was undergoing its industrial revolution, and it is to a great extent a glorification of the machine through the glorification of the camera. Just as the factory enables a more consistent quality of product than individual production, the camera is an industrial improvement on the human eye. And it is one which Vertov wishes to actualize with very clear political goals in mind. One hope which he expresses in his first manifesto is that the film will enable workers to see themselves at their own tasks and that this visual information will enable them to improve on their performance “bringing [workers] closer to the iron rhythm of advancing—crawling, driven, and flying—machines” (11). This is the active portion of Vertov’s aims; his other aims are more educational. He writes that

[t]he basis of our program is not film production for entertainment or profit (which we leave to artistic drama) but a film bond between the peoples of the USSR and the entire world based on the platform of the communist decoding of what actually exists (50).

Under Kino-eye, the camera, when combined with the equally important step of editing, is able not only to decode the moment-to-moment thoughts of a man jumping off a roof but also to use images to expose the injustices which Vertov saw as inherent in capitalist and class systems around the world. Vertov sees no limitations to the possibilities for what the camera is able to reveal and expose. He believes that everything is available to be communicated visually and that it is the role of the camera to record this information and that of the editor to organize it so as to expose what was previously obscured.

Vertov firmly believed that “Film drama tickles the nerves. Kino-eye helps one to see” (48). His problem lay in convincing both the state, which controlled funding for filmmakers, and audiences, whose attendance influenced state funding for filmmakers, to agree that his methods were preferable to narrative film. Vertov consistently argues in his writings that his films, though not popular amongst what he termed the urban bourgeois, were nonetheless very popular with rural peasants and with workers. He believed that his lack of subtitles and his ability to transmit information exclusively through images enabled his films to be more directly accessible to the largely illiterate peasants. Indeed Vertov

continually argues that, among the population new to cinema and thus not indoctrinated with dramatic narrative, the kino-eye film is always preferred. He describes one instance, in 1920, when a cinema-train reached a remote village. The film shown was an overly-dramatic propaganda piece about the revolution which paints the Whites as cruel, lazy, and ignorant and the Reds as patient, saintly, and determined. Vertov tells us that

[t]he viewers—illiterate and uneducated peasants—don't read the titles. They can't grasp the plot. They examine individual details, like the drawings on the decorated train...

These still unspoiled viewers don't understand artificial theatricality. A "lady" remains a lady to them, no matter what "peasant clothing" you show her in. These viewers are seeing the film screen for the first or second time; they still don't understand the taste of film-moonshine; and when, after the sugary actors of a film-drama, real peasants appear on the screen, they all perk up and stare at the screen.

A real tractor, which these viewers know only from hearsay, has plowed over a few acres in a matter of minutes, before their very eyes. Conversations, shouts, questions. There's no question of actors. On the screen are their own kind, real people. There isn't a single false, theatrical moment to unmask the screen, to shake the peasants' confidence (61).

Vertov's anecdote illustrates how we are trained to accept and understand dramatic film and how those unfamiliar with the pretend reality of methods and conceits find it to be patently false and uninteresting. The peasants understand that the drama on the screen is fiction, is their lives being played out by someone who lives a far easier life than they do; they are completely uninterested in watching a poor re-creation of their own lives. In the same piece, Vertov describes the peasants looking at paintings of riders on the side of the cinema-train and dubbing the horses "actors" because they are shown incorrectly shod. For those unfamiliar with the guidelines of narrative cinema, those unwilling to accept its seemingly real inventions, everything which shows itself to be factually incorrect becomes an "actor," and acting becomes the equivalent of lying. For the uninitiated, the distinction between pretending and falsification implicitly agreed upon by filmmaker and audience does not exist, enabling them to dismiss dramatic films outright as pure uninteresting fallacy. What interests such an audience is not distraction but reality which pertains directly to their own lives. The tractor in Vertov's example, a tangible object which would have the power to completely transform his audience's lives, is completely uninvolved in any kind of drama or

narrative. It is simply an image of reality; the tractor scene is one which uses the moving image to transmit a piece of factual information: there is a machine called a tractor and it is able to plow acres in minutes. The tractor scene provides the peasants with exactly what Vertov's thinks they need: information about the world around them. Later in the same piece, Vertov describes himself asking viewers to choose between Petrushka (the Punch of Russian theater), Vertov's derogatory name for dramatic film, and life.

“Petrushka,” answered the hopelessly infected. “We already know life—we don't need life. Keep life, boring life, from us.”

“Life,” answered those viewers who were not hopelessly infected, or free of infection. “We don't know life. We have not seen life. We know only our country village and the ten versts around it. Show us life” (62).

Vertov's anecdotes create a dichotomy in film viewers between the initiated and the uninitiated. Narrative film, which he often refers to as “film-vodka” or “film-moonshine” becomes an addictive substance which, once its falsehoods have been swallowed, destroys the viewer's ability to accept and appreciate the real world around him. Narrative cinema is an escape which removes the viewer from the world rather than a portrayal of reality which ties the viewer to the world and reminds him of his place in that world. The difference between the melodrama and the tractor is the same as the difference between narrative film and Vertov's desired cinema. The melodrama, through its passive consumption, encourages a similarly passive approach to life which sees one's own existence as mundane and fictional entertainment as a necessary source of escape. In contrast, Vertov's approach, as the peasant-audience's lively and engaged reaction to the tractor demonstrates, is one which encourages awareness and active participation in the workings of the world.

The proposal for *Man with a Movie Camera* that Vertov initially submitted for funding approval shows that he originally intended the film to present a transition from narrative to kino-eye film-making. Vertov's proposal has the film beginning in a “small but extraordinary land where all human experiences, behavior, and even natural phenomena are strictly controlled and occur at precisely determined times...people fight and embrace. Marry and divorce. Are born and die. Die and come to life” (263). These listed events,

which ironically all happen for real in the actual film, occur “at a film studio where a man with a megaphone and script directs the life of a fake land” (263). Suddenly, a cameraman “leaves the little fake world of the film-factory and heads for life. Life tosses him to and fro like a straw. He’s like a frail canoe on a stormy sea. He’s continually swamped by the furious city traffic” (286). Vertov’s tiny cameraman is lost in the unplanned chaos of reality. He finds that he “must give up his usual immobility. He must exert his powers of observation, quickness, and agility to the utmost in order to keep pace with life’s fleeting phenomena” (287). The cameraman’s first attempts at movie-making are failures until he learns to conform to the rough nature of reality after so much time spent in the ordered studio. He “assumes the defensive, begins to employ a whole series of special techniques (candid camera; sudden, surprise filming; distraction of the subject; etc.). He tries to shoot unnoticed, to shoot so that his own work does not hinder that of others” (287). The cameraman’s voyage is one of discovery which takes him from controlled narrative film to Vertov’s Kino-eye. The organic discovery of Kino-eye then leads the cameraman to the realization that

[l]ife’s chaos gradually becomes clear as he observes and shoots. Everything is explicable and governed by law. Every peasant with his seeder, every worker at his lathe, every worker-student at his books, every engineer at his drafting table, every Young Pioneer speaking at a meeting in a club—each is engaged in the same great necessary labor” (287-8).

This imagined early version of *Man with a Movie Camera* demonstrates the path which, in Vertov’s ideal world, every studio-bound cameraman should take. Yet, it is also highly ironic because, though the sudden change from ordered studio to chaotic reality would no doubt have made Vertov’s theories all the more visually evident, his proposed script is itself a narrative film. Though Vertov would certainly have used real scenes to represent the chaos of the real world, his script necessitates that an actor play the part of the cameraman and that this actor give a theatrical performance which conveys both a false ease in the world of a studio and a false confusion in the chaos of reality. Had he followed this scenario, Vertov would have undermined his own argument; this version suggests that the only way to create

a cinematic argument for Vertov's radical Kino-eye methodology is through dramatic narrative.

Vertov, of course, did not use this early scenario to make *Man with a Movie Camera*. Instead he made a film which manages to demonstrate its own construction while still remaining true to Kino-eye production methods and avoiding the clichéd constructs of narrative cinema. The first scenes in the film, which form a sort of prologue to the main action, serve to roughly outline Vertov's cinematic aims in the same way that the scenario cameraman's escape from the studio landscape would have. The first shot of the film is emblematic of what is to come: a camera pointed straight at the audience takes up all but the very top of the screen where a tiny cameraman has been superimposed, caught in the act of filming atop the massive camera. This establishes Vertov's idea that it is the technology of the camera which is chiefly responsible for the film which we are about to watch and that the human role is more that of guiding hand than creator. After this initial establishing shot, we next watch the cameraman duck behind a curtain and find ourselves in an empty theater. Vertov treats us to numerous still shots which emphasize the emptiness of the space which we are so accustomed to seeing filled with people. He shows us the still projector and then, as the projectionist enters the frame and begins to thread, the theater suddenly comes alive: the wooden theater seats open of their own volition, inviting the audience which suddenly comes streaming through the doors. The audience is seated and the musicians are shown, posed still and alert, waiting. The lights go down and then we see the connection made which illuminates the projector bulb and sets the musicians into motion as the film finally begins. This opening emphasizes the importance which Vertov places on technology and especially on film. Everything in the prologue is there in the service of the projector. When it begins to be set up by the projectionist, the whole auditorium comes alive in anticipation of the projector's activation. The audience sits at attention, the musicians are unable to move until they receive its signal, and the lights dim seemingly of the same invisible volition that made the chairs open. It is not until the projector's bulb is lit that the musicians are allowed

to move and the film can truly begin. Though the projectionist's actions are directly responsible for the functioning of his machine, and therefore also for the action that follows, Vertov shows us that what is important is not that he lights the bulb but rather that the bulb is lit. The key shot which initiates the action of the film is not the projectionist's action, but the uniting of the two coils and the illumination which they produce. The projectionist's role in the process, at least in Vertov's imagining, is simply to mind the machine and initiate its function. Just as the camera's eye takes precedence over the human eye because of its mechanical superiority, the projector, whose illuminated revelations are the whole reason for the existence of the theater and the attendance of the audience, is the catalytic force in the auditorium.

The projector introduces the body of the film in which the camera acts as a similarly catalytic force. Speaking in the voice of the camera in one of his many manifestoes, Vertov writes "I make the viewer see in the manner best suited to my presentation of this or that visual phenomenon. The eye submits to the will of the camera and is directed by it to those successive points of the action that, most succinctly and vividly, bring the film phrase to the height or depth of resolution" (16). The camera is supposed to guide the eye and mind of the audience so that they follow its images and realize imagistic realities that are beyond the reach of the human eye. But in *Man with a Movie Camera*, the camera's powers, like the projectors, seem to reach far beyond merely directing our gaze. Vertov creates his film in such a way that, rather than the city coming awake to action of its own volition, the camera's cranking seems to raise it, marionette-like, from its slumber. The city is first presented with the same still shots as the theater was; motionless dolls, stuffed dogs, empty streets, and still machines providing images devoid of all life and motion. Finally, the cameraman emerges from his apartment and drives to the railroad track where he is nearly hit taking perilous footage of a passing train. This near-miss is what seems to spring the city into waking motion. The near-miss jars a sleeping woman into wakefulness so that her morning rituals come to parallel the stirring motions of the city. She dresses and the cameraman changes

lenses. The cameraman cranks vigorously and the city begins to stir. The woman blinks her eyes after washing her face and the camera's shutter irises open and closed. Though the city, obviously, does not exist in the service of the camera, the camera is allowed to act as its conductor. As with the projector in the auditorium, these actions would not be recorded, would be dead to the world, without the camera's revelatory presentation. Thus in Vertov's world theory, like the theater audience, they are indebted to the machine. These parallel shots demonstrate how the camera is able to mimic both human and metropolitan actions and then uses this mimicry as an implicit justification for Vertov's inverted creation myth: that the camera's opening aperture calls the city into wakefulness.

Though it may seem a hyperbole, creation myth is a very accurate way to term Vertov's envisioning of his city. Though made up of real footage, the city which Vertov presents us with is wholly synthetic: an assemblage of scenes shot in Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa. The fallacy of this manufactured city seems to contradict Vertov's belief in the importance of portraying reality rather than fiction. However, using montage to create meaningful juxtapositions and augmentations was as important a part of Vertov's Kino-eye methodology as slow-motion film-making. Speaking again in the voice of the camera, he writes

I place you...in an extraordinary room which did not exist until just now when I also created it. In this room there are twelve walls shot by me in various parts of the world...

I create a man more perfect than Adam...from one person I take the hands, the strongest and most dexterous; from another I take the legs, the swiftest and most shapely; from a third, the most beautiful expressive head—and through montage I create a new, perfect man (17).

The camera, once again, has god-like powers which enable it to assemble its own realities so long as those realities are assembled from documentary footage rather than a prescribed scenario. The truth which Vertov wishes to extract from the world is pure image. Once the factual image has been recorded, Vertov believes that it maintains its truth because it is an image of reality. Thus assembling it with other like images can only reveal, illuminate, and instruct the viewer in the possibilities present in the real world.

Vertov calls attention to the importance of this assembly process in the middle of *Man with the Movie Camera* when he makes the editing process momentarily explicit. In the midst of the frenzied action of the mid-day city, the images suddenly stop moving. We are given still shots of laughing children but, because of the jarring jump between rapid motion and still image, these children seem eerily dead in their frozen immobility. The still images give way to shots of strips of film, consecutive images lined with sprocket holes, which suddenly expose the medium and mechanism for the film motion we've been enjoying. Next Vertov shows us still shots of the editing studio with its rolls of neatly labeled film. It is not until a still spool begins to wind that motion returns to the film. Then we see the editor in action as she cuts and splices being into action. This scene stops the forward momentum of the film to remind us that we look at twenty-four still frames each second and that the editor is almost as much a controlling force as the cameraman. However, like him, she is subject to the technology of the machine she uses. Vertov returns motion to the film not when she passes the strip of film through her hands, but rather when the mechanical spool begins winding the film. Once again, though the human role is key in the functioning of the machine, it is the machine whose action is paramount in the creation of the film.

The machine may rule Vertov's film universe and he may abhor the false constructs and characters of narrative cinema, but Vertov's cameraman nonetheless cuts a dynamic and charismatic figure. Though he seeks to remove himself entirely from the constructs of narrative film, Vertov still presents us with a cameraman who seems cut straight out of an adventure film. We watch as he tackles trains, scales bridges, hangs perilously over a river, and mounts his camera on a speeding motorcycle. These are all actions and scenes which imitate, in their presentation, the style and language of climactic chase scenes in the theatrical films that Vertov so abhors. Vertov shows his cameraman setting up his camera on the tracks as the train comes speeding toward him; next his near-escape is shown in quick-cuts between the speeding train and the wind-swept cameraman beside the track. This scene, with

the rush of the on-coming train, could be made nearly indistinguishable from the most clichéd moment in adventure films if we simply replace the camera with a woman tied to the tracks. Just like in such films, we are encouraged to identify with the cameraman. We feel fear at the approaching train, and twitch in our seats as though our own movements could encourage him to leap to safety in time. And, just like an adventure film, the scene which follows is a series of quick cuts which emphasize, through the massive speeding form of the train and the buffeted body of the cameraman, the extreme danger which our hero so narrowly escaped. This portrayal of the cameraman as adventure hero can be seen in two ways. The first is as a deliberate move on Vertov's part to elevate the cameraman to his titular role of hero, to demonstrate to the audience that documentary film-making is a more exciting and dangerous challenge than the pretend perils of narrative cinema. Yet, like his early narrative scenario in which the cameraman escapes the realm of the studio, this portrayal in many ways undermines Vertov's Kino-eye esthetic because he is once again using the techniques and language of the form he is fighting against in order to justify his new methodology.

The cameraman may be presented like an action hero, but he is still primarily an empty vessel. He takes daring action but remains almost entirely colorless. If we are to take the film we see as the product of his efforts and desires, then we have to conclude that he is an intensely curious man but one with little in the way of specific, character-defining interests. He is portrayed as a hero, but he is a completely universal and colorless hero, one whose thoughts and desires remain obscure. This is in keeping with Vertov's desire to both present the cameraman as an ideal to be emulated and his need to avoid characterization. It is also in keeping with the need for an objective camera which records only what it sees, not what it wants or feels. However, there are a few strange moments of departure from the anonymous objectivity of the cameraman's persona. When the cameraman visits the pub, we find his miniaturized image showing up inside a glass of beer. He watches as the customers drink and a machine repeatedly uncorks champagne bottles until, perhaps simply

from the atmosphere, we find that the camera tips drunkenly over the table and sways its way outside to the street, whirling around until an image of Lenin on the side of a building sobers him into steadiness. This is one of the rare moments in which the camera/cameraman's subjectivity is portrayed for us. Yet it is a pretend subjectivity, a subjectivity of action rather than thought. We are never given a sense of the cameraman's joy in or desire for drink, we only know that he is tipsy. In fact, the moment seems more like an excuse to present inventive visual effects, especially given the cameraman's quick recovery, than it does a genuine moment of reality. This moment is doubly disturbing because it seems to fly in the face of Vertov's determination to stick to reality rather than drama. It seems clear that the cameraman would not actually be drunk. Yet, at the same time, the reeling camerawork is difficult to justify as revelatory in the same way that slow and fast motion or super-imposed images can be used expand and clarify reality. Similarly, early on in the film, we are shown a young woman sleeping on a bench. Then there is a cut to a head-on shot of the camera with an eye super-imposed over the lens. We see the eye dart back and forth suggestively and then the camera moves to focus on the woman's legs. The camera and eye are shown again and then the woman wakes, sits up, glares into the camera, and hurries away. This is a moment in which the cameraman's sexual desires are made explicit through the medium of the camera; and, if we discount the drunken camera as an unnecessary visual trick, it is also the only moment in which he escapes from the subjectiveless ideal that Vertov has so carefully created. It is a moment which plays strangely in relation to the rest of the film because it has the contrived feel of cheap comedy, of the easy sight gag of the peeping tom caught in the act. However it also serves a reminder of how constructed, how narrated, so many of the cameraman's on-screen moments must be. This moment cannot be justified through Vertov's principle of uniting documentary images in order to compound their individual realities. We come to realize, thinking about how such a sequence must have been created, that, while the camera's staring lens may be

the product of more incidental footage, the darting eye could only be the result of instructed action; it could only be the eye of someone pretending to ogle, the eye of an actor.

Clichéd though they may be, these two scenes, the drunken cameraman and the ogling cameraman, are also the only scenes in the film which present intricate and non-self-evident interactions. The vast majority of the people in the film are caught in the midst of a continuous activity: the swimmers swim, the motorcyclists ride, the workers tend their machines, and the stylists cut hair. They are all anonymous people defined exclusively by their actions; their import in the film coming about as much from the rhythm of their movement as from the function of their actions. They present images of their tasks, their motion, rather than images of individuals. There are some people, such as the waking woman at the very beginning of the film and the magician who entertains a crowd of awed children, who are given extended screen time and allowed to perform a series of actions, creating mini-narratives out the progressive build-up of their tasks. The waking woman rises, dresses and washes her face; the magician's tricks are mini-narratives in themselves which rely on the attentive observer's keeping careful track of his actions. Yet both of these people remain anonymous, lacking both personality and desire, they are still isolated within their tasks. The drunken and ogling cameraman present clichéd narratives but they also demonstrate a self-consciousness which is absent from so many of Vertov's other human figures who becomes automatons in the service of their social duties. The cameraman ogles the woman's legs because he desires her; no such emotion is evident in the magician who seems to perform his tricks simply because he *is* a musician. It is instructive that the only moments in the film which seem to reveal character are those which depart from Vertov's strict anti-narrative ideology. This suggests that purely visual character revelation, even when it is clichéd, must be transmitted through the codified language of narrative film.

Of course Vertov was never the slightest bit interested in creating characters or individuals. His concern was with the collective and with the portrayal and creation of the ideal reality, be it human or metropolitan. *Man with a Movie Camera* manages to be a film

truly unlike any other: it grabs attention purely through the power of its images, holding the audience rapt without needing to resort to plot, characters, or words. In 1958, toward the end of his life, Vertov looked back on *Man with a Movie Camera* and explained that

[w]e felt that we had an obligation not just to make films for wide consumption but, from time to time, films that beget films as well. Films of this sort do not pass without leaving a trace, for oneself or for others. They are essential as a pledge of future victories (155).

Man with a Movie Camera, so effective in its execution, might well have begot many more films of similar imagistic purity had it not been made in 1929, two years after the first sound film. By the early nineteen-thirties, the silent film would be all but dead and the restrictions placed on sound recording would tie the camera firmly to the studio. Sound provides a solution to the problem of addressing an illiterate audience with intertitles and enables narrative cinema to dominate completely. With the ability to transmit information aurally as well as visually, films were no longer bound to explain their stories exclusively through images; the camera could now transmit dead space as the audio track provided context. Sound was not the end of Vertov and kino-eye, the kinoks went on to make several successful sound films in the mode of *Man with a Movie Camera*, but sound did so effectively advance the cause of narrative cinema that Vertov and his non-conformist like have since been effectively banished to the minuscule audiences of the art-houses.

DAVID HOLZMAN'S DIARY: THE SEARCH FOR NARRATIVE

David Holzman, the fictional filmmaker played by L.M. Kit Carson in Jim McBride's *David Holzman's Diary*, is similar to Dziga Vertov's cameraman in many ways. Holzman lives in New York and, like Vertov's cameraman, relishes the chance to record his city on film. Both are fascinated by the process of film-making and by their equipment and both share a desire to show this equipment and process in their film. Yet, David Holzman is also fundamentally different from Vertov's anonymous cameraman because his film project is essentially a personal one. Holzman creates a film diary which focuses most intensely on his feelings and on his personal life while Vertov all but obliterates his cameraman's personality so that he becomes an observational cipher whose gaze is all that we are allowed to know of him. Both *Man with a Movie Camera* and *David Holzman's Diary* begin not *ab Ovo* but *ab Homunculo*, not with birth but with conception, with the initiation of the essential material elements of film's existence. As films as much about the creation of film as the images which they portray, they must begin not with narrative but with machine initiation: with the opening of the shutter and the exposing of the negative. For Dziga Vertov, working at a time when cinema itself was in its nebulous stages, camera, projector and audience hall spring into being through mutual generation; they provide a demonstration of his universalist cinematic philosophy mediated through the purely cinematic language which he sought to create. Thirty-eight years later, when Jim McBride sets David Holzman to the task of creating his film, the language of the Hollywood narrative, so different from Vertov's, with its emphasis on the individual and on

linear plotting, has become the default method of story-telling in film. Thus the key conception which initiates David Holzman/Jim McBride's film is not the symbiotic uniting of filmmaker and audience but rather the monetary transaction which enables the individual author to actualize his cinematic desires. Those first blurry and confusing shots in the film are David Holzman testing his new Eclair Noiseless Portable Reflex camera in the electronics store. Indeed what follows is as much the camera's life as it is Holzman's. Though the trajectory of Holzman's existence extends unseen at either end of the eight days spanned by the film, the camera's life lasts only from its purchase on July 14, 1967 through to July 22, when it is stolen from Holzman's apartment. What happens over the course of those eight days is a negotiation between man and technology, between imagination and recorded image, between notion and reality.

Holzman begins his film, after the disorienting seconds spent whirling amidst the televisions and glass windows of the electronics store, addressing the camera and seated amongst the stuff of his apartment. Before a mirror reflecting the camera, a wall covered in movie stills, and an editing table, Holzman declares that he is embarking on his film diary because of Jean-Luc Godard's maxim that "cinema is truth twenty-four times a second." Holzman puts his faith in the materiality of film, of time captured in consecutive 16mm rectangles, believing, as he says, that "if I put it all down on film and I run it back and forth and I put my thumb on it and I stop it when I want to, then I got everything...I should get it, I should get the meaning, I should understand it." Holzman's formula for truth is virtual alchemy; he believes that somehow the dross of his recorded experiences, once their temporality has been made physical through celluloid, will spin truth if only he is able to touch, review and manipulate their transformed physicality. His profound belief in the truth of film works like a naive echo of Dziga Vertov's Kino-eye philosophy: like Vertov he believes that the camera can become the perfect eye to catch what the feeble human eye is incapable of comprehending, but unlike Vertov he lacks any kind of articulated theory or

method for putting his naive belief into practice. Instead he seems simply to feel that the medium itself will supply the meaning so that he need only point his camera and record.

Yet, David Holzman is not so much a film-maker as he is made by films. His apartment and his speech are both cinema-saturated. Posters for Alfred Hitchcock's *Suspicion* and Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* decorate the walls of his apartment. When he takes his camera on a walking tour of his neighborhood all he can think to point out are the long-defunct hang-outs of either actors like Humphrey Bogart or else William Randolph Hearst and Al Capone, powerful and charismatic men brought unforgettably to the screen by the likes of Bogart. Alongside these classic Hollywood films, and references to Vincente Minelli, Debbie Reynolds, Paul Muni and Margaret Rutherford, Holzman also pays homage to the new wave of European films which were playing to packed art-house audiences in the nineteen-sixties. He lets Jean-Luc Godard inspire his whole project, quotes from Francois Truffaut's diary, and christens the woman in the apartment across from his in honor of Luchino Visconti's film *Sandra of a Thousand Delights*. There is a tension, both in Holzman's mind and in the film which he produces, between the traditional Hollywood films that he adores and the more avant garde, deconstructionist work of Godard and Truffaut. Though Holzman lays claim to Godardian inspiration, and clearly regards himself as a new wave rather than a mainstream filmmaker, it becomes increasingly clear that he may seek to create a Godardian film, but he wants to live a Hollywood life. This desire for the ease and utopia of Hollywood narrative and character is most apparent when Holzman turns his camera on his personal life.

Filming for Holzman can never be as simple as pointing his camera and recording. The camera itself signifies cinema which brings with it a whole collection of rules and systems, both evident and hidden, which Holzman steps into seemingly unawares. The countless films which Holzman has seen provide him with a narrative language, a default method for telling a story using moving pictures, which is put into play the moment he steps behind the camera. British film theorist Stephen Heath describes the necessary elements of

narrative cinema in his essay "Film, System, Narrative." He argues that narrative film is entirely evidentiary, that, like Chekov's smoking gun, any element introduced over the brief span of a film narrative, must ultimately come into play as a central element in the story. Heath also points out that, unlike fiction where the expected descriptive limitation of words allows the author to mention only elements key to the plot, film relies on a feigned resemblance to the real world and thus each scene, in order to provide a setting commensurate with the viewer's experience of reality, must be filled with extraneous details of the real (134-6). Narrative cinema, in Heath's view, is awash with similar contradictions and paradoxes; on the one hand it must pretend at the expansive realism of our everyday experience, yet simultaneously it must limit itself, through the constraints of time and plot, to presenting only a very limited and precisely delineated series of closely tied events. Heath sees the frame, the visible rectangle which determines what we are and are not shown, as also emblematic of this paradox. The false construct of the frame constrains the bounds of what we see, just as the plot constrains the bounds of what we know, and these two essential aspects of cinema work together to de-realize the pretend reality of its moving photographic record even as they provide the limitations necessary for the film to provide us with an understandable narrative. Heath also points out that narrative film relies on keeping a single subject, an individual, as the constant focus, that in film "the crux is the maintenance of a violence, a heterogeneity, from the position of subject unity. The position of realism is the position of intelligibility and the guarantee of intelligibility is the stability, the unity, of the subject" (137). David Holzman, because his film is also his diary, represents an extreme case of Heath's stable subject. Holzman is able to be both subject and creator; as the viewer's sole guide and contact point, he is able to dictate what the viewer knows and thinks through his voice-overs and monologues.

David Holzman's consistent self-presentation serves a two-fold purpose: first it ensures that his film has a continuous central character, and secondly it is a way for him to constantly assert interpretive control over the events which occur on screen. Though he

expresses his own weakness and confusion, especially toward the end when his girlfriend has left him and he realizes that he is failing to find truth, it is always within the easy confines of his own apartment, with his own sets as backdrops. He may display his vulnerabilities but he does so in a situation of his own creation and he does so framed, news-interview style, as a talking head. This talking head presentation, which he uses for himself throughout the film, is another safety net. It provides him with a forum which is supposed to be confessional, expository, and narrative; and which is also supposed to be direct, truthful, and passive. By filming himself in such a manner, Holzman cushions his monologues within the codified expectations for a person addressing the camera as it does. We see how important this self-image is to Holzman because he keeps such a tight control over his presentation in the film that he never appears on screen with anyone else. He films himself with photographs of Penny and shows photographs of himself with others in the background, but Holzman never allows others into the carefully set-up *mise-en-scene* of his own monologues. Other people have a factor of uncontrollability about them which means that they could force Holzman to depart from the carefully constructed self which he presents to the camera. Instead, he faces other people through the camera, preferring to erase himself behind the lens and become an invisible observer rather than risk becoming an interactor unable to control his own response. Holzman, as we shall see later, is in the hypocritical position of wanting to catch other people unawares while simultaneously presenting a tightly controlled vision of himself.

Holzman's talking head shots of himself are not only the result of his desire to maintain tight control of his own presentation, but simply show him following existing models. He has an understanding of the mode of documentary film and thus documents himself as a talking head. He addresses the camera from a still position and presents his explanatory monologues. This form of address is symptomatic not just of the quasi-documentary aims of his project but also of the medium in which he chooses to execute it. This becomes apparent at the very end of the film when a very different Holzman performs

for a very different medium. After his camera is stolen, he records a record of his final voice-over and then stops at a photo booth to take a series of mug shots of himself and his record. Once he is transferred from film to photograph, Holzman's behavior changes drastically. He is no longer the stiff and reserved talking head; instead he responds to the photo booth atmosphere and mugs: pulling silly faces and holding the record in front of him in one elaborate pose after another. In the photo booth he provides the expected and clichéd candid shots just as before the camera he provides the expected talking heads.

In front of camera he is on display against carefully chosen backdrops, but when he steps behind the camera, he wants to disappear, to erase his own existence through the camera's screen-gaze. We can see him expressing this desire in the still photo that his girlfriend shoots of him with his equipment: he has one finger across his lips in a conspiratorial "Ssssh." Ironically the camera helps him in his desire to disappear; wrapped up in his equipment he is no longer a functional human being capable of interacting normally with those he films. Even as his equipment identifies and calls attention to his obsessions and desires, it also keeps him safe from any chance of their actualization. This machine isolation keeps Holzman firmly locked into the position of observer and in that position he expects a movie-like narrative. Holzman may think like a strict documentarian when shooting himself, but when he turns his attention to the people in his life, the talking-head model is replaced by the model of Hollywood narrative. Such narrative inevitably posits the camera, and thus also the viewer, as an omniscient observer which is precisely the position that Holzman feels he should hold when he steps behind the camera to record others. The narrative films which he consumes so eagerly determine not only *what* David Holzman thinks about but also *how* he thinks. He reveals, both in his expository moments before the camera and in his directing hand behind the camera, a mind conditioned to think and imagine entirely in terms of the cinematic narrative; his is a visual imagination of carefully chosen images, laden with meaning and revelation, whose supposed significance resounds beyond the realm of verbal explanation. Like Jimmy Stewart in Alfred

Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, Holzman is already an unwitting filmmaker who uses his window as a camera and his attention as a scene splicer. This is most evident in how he relates to the two women he spends much of the film focused on. His reactions and approaches to the women are often verbally narrated rather than visually filmed, revealing a fundamentally cinematic psychology, which precedes his acquisition of the camera.

The main woman in the film is his girlfriend, Penny, a model. Before Penny makes a physical appearance in the film, Holzman introduces us to her through her photographs. He tells us, seated on a bed surrounded by glamour shots, that what he most loves about her is watching through the window as she goes out to buy breakfast Sunday mornings. There is a moment, he tells us, when she steps over a grate while crossing the street. This moment, spied through the frame of the window, happens identically every Sunday morning. Even without his camera, Holzman focuses on it as though it were the telling insert shot in the film of his relationship with Penny. He is trying to construct her, or to reveal her, just as Audrey Hepburn's Holly Golightly has her character exposed in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Watching through the eyes of George Peppard's attentive upstairs neighbor, the viewer of this film learns to adore Hepburn, to understand her character as one of endearing pretensions, feigned amorality, determined innocence and, of course, underlying sadness, through a series of unconscious gestures with which she reveals more about herself than she intends. Her over-long cigarette holder intrudes on other conversations at a party and we are charmed by her eager, though unsuccessful pretension at high class; she fills her house with Argentinean artifacts and opines too loudly about her own happiness so that we understand that she is actually just miserable to be marrying the Argentinean aristocrat. Holzman manufactures moments in which Penny reveals herself in a similarly cinematic fashion. His approach to her is like that of an imagistic detective: he is utterly uninterested in what she wants to communicate intentionally, focusing instead on the game of catching her unawares and adoring what she lets slip, what she chooses not to show him. "That's touching to me," he says of her stepping over the grate. "It touches me to see her do that. I

do love her.” He loves her for the truths that he imagines she is revealing in her unknowingly cinematic moments, moments which are entirely his own creation and in which she is allowed to take no conscious part.

The anonymous woman who lives in the apartment across the street from him acts as a surrogate, and purely cinematic, Penny. Without fail, every time that Penny runs out on him or refuses to answer his phone calls, Holzman turns his camera on the surrogate. Because he never speaks to her and only watches her through the windows, this woman is pure cinema. When he films her he is recording a plot already made cinematic by the frame and suture of their window relationship. She leaves the room and there is a cut; she turns out the lights and there is a fade-out. As in Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, all of the essential elements of cinema are naturally present and Holzman is left in the place of a film audience, imagining to fill in the narrative gaps between one shot and the next. As with Penny, Holzman obsesses over the woman’s small, unconscious gestures. He watches her flick her hand after throwing something into a trash can and expands this tiny movement into character-defining essence. “[She] gives herself away to me by her moves,” he says, quoting Truffaut’s comment about Debbie Reynolds in *Singing in the Rain*. It is instructive that Holzman quotes Truffaut speaking about a film he watched rather than one he directed because, like Holzman, Truffaut speaks as viewer rather than as creator. It is also important that Debbie Reynolds’ “gives herself away” through the deliberate moves of an actress, one who must convey emotions and intentions broadly so that they can be read by a cinematic audience. Unlike the woman Holzman watches, who is simply going about her daily routine, Reynolds’ trade is to communicate through her body. Holzman’s observation of that tiny flick of the wrist, that unwitting giving away, leads him to take a kind of colonial ownership of the woman. He knows from her mailbox that her name is S. Schwarz but, like an astronomer finding a comet, he presumes that knowledge and discovery are the same as possession and christens her Sandra after Claudia Cardinale in Luchino Visconti’s film *Sandra of a Thousand Delights*.

The possessive exoticism which Holzman finds in his so-called Sandra disappears the moment that he tries to make contact. Late in the film he watches through the window as she passionately kisses her boyfriend and then telephones her. It is as though he has forgotten that the fictionalized movie, the invented narrative that he has built up to explain and fill the spaces between her window appearances, is just that: fiction. It is not until he calls and sputters out “Sandra?...Sarah?...Shannon?...” that he is made to realize that, for all his careful observing and imagined explanations, she is, as her accent proves, completely foreign and unknowable. Though he often films her through the window, Holzman’s relation with Sandra is not mediated by his camera. She never even seems to be aware that he is watching her, let alone that he is doing so with a camera. Indeed it is not the camera but the window which provides the frame through which Holzman sees Sandra. All of her episodes in the film could easily have happened whether or not Holzman had the camera; she is a movie he watches and assembles in his head, evidence of an innate cinematic psychology, rather than one he constructs with his camera.

If Sandra is a movie Holzman watches then Penny is one he has to direct. And ironically, though he has seemingly always viewed Penny through the same cinematic eye that he turns on Sandra, it is when he becomes a filmmaker, when he is able to channel the film playing constantly in his head through a camera, that he becomes unacceptable to Penny. The camera becomes a physical manifestation of his voyeuristic obsessions, a metal extension of eye and brain which magnifies and projects his every gaze and thought. This alienates and then drives away Penny. The first time that she meets the camera, Holzman orders her around his apartment so that she can take a photograph of him with his equipment, treating her like a director would an actress. Finally she curls up in a chair, obviously uncomfortable. Holzman seems oblivious to this fact and keeps telling her to “just ignore the camera.” This is impossible, of course, because of its size and noise and because, as the still photograph which she shoots demonstrates, Holzman is so encased in his metal equipment that he is virtually incapable of normal human interaction: particularly

the close relations expected between a couple in the supposedly private confines of their domestic space. When he refuses to stop filming with Penny in his apartment, Holzman is locked into a cameraman's paradox: through the eye of the camera he is able to maximize his normal cinematic perception so that he conceives of himself as the watcher, psychologically invisible. Yet, at the same time, the equipment renders him supremely physically visible and separates him from the ideal reality which he creates through the lens of his camera. The camera acts to remove him from the scene of the action which he shoots, as though he were already watching the footage in a theater rather than living it in reality. Because of this Sandra, the surrogate Penny, is in many ways more ideal than the real Penny. By remaining oblivious to the camera she cannot demand that Holzman step out from behind its lens or try to interact with him; she enables him to remain fixed in his theatergoer's seat, purely the observer and never the interactor.

As the film progresses Holzman seems to become more and more locked into his perceived role as an invisible framer of images. One of the most intriguing and disturbing scenes in the film occurs toward the end when Holzman, riding the subway with his equipment, begins filming the woman seated across the car from him. She is very obviously aware of being filmed. Her discomfort is palpable and she keeps her head down as though avoiding eye contact. Like Sandra she is just across the way from him, there to be observed; but Holzman seems unaware that this time there are no streets and windows to disguise his spying. When she hurries out at the next stop, he follows her, chasing her through the station and up into the street. She walks away quickly, trying to outrun him without letting on that she's seen him. Finally she turns around and yells "beat it." This scene sticks out from the rest of the film because it is accompanied by neither Holzman's explanatory voice-over nor the radio news stories that he so often uses as background noise in his documentary tours of the streets. We are given only the whirl of the camera and the noises of the subway, of their footsteps, and finally of her scared and angry "beat it." What Holzman produces here, apparently unintentionally, is a perfect imitation of a Hollywood

point-of-view chase scene. Like an unseen predator, the camera unflinchingly captures the woman's vain attempts to remain calm in the face of her own fear and then sadistically waits until this fear gets the better of her before giving chase. This scene runs like an absurd and satiric recreation Orson Welles' point-of-view camera chasing down Janet Leigh in *Touch of Evil* ; a recreation in which this very point-of-view camera subsumes the human aggressor it supposedly represents to become the sole source of aggression and terror. But here, as when Penny cowers in the chair and begs him to turn off the camera, Holzman seems to forget the absurd machine-monster which his equipment transforms him into, to be unaware that he is the instigator of the action he captures. It is as though he is so enthralled by watching his own movie that he forgets that he is in the midst of shooting it. He fails to recognize that the woman's fleeing terror is a reality which he has created and not a fictional narrative unspooling for his voyeuristic enjoyment. This moment is odd because of its lack of sound or narrative explanation; it seems to lay somewhere between the documentary images which Holzman creates of the city and the more personalized, narrated, records that he makes of his life. Watching this scene in the film, we are keenly aware of the cameraman's presence, but never of his presence as the character we've come to know as David Holzman. It is odd that Holzman, who is otherwise so intent on presenting himself and on elaborately explaining his every action and interaction, should choose to leave this portion of the film completely unexplained. It remains a strange anomaly, perhaps a failed attempt at objective camerawork whose subject refused to properly cooperate.

Along with Penny, Sandra, and the woman on the subway, there is a fourth female character who puts in an appearance in the film. She is exactly the opposite of the other three women: while they are observed and almost entirely silent, it is this third woman who observes Holzman and who presents herself directly and explicitly to the camera. In fact she turns tables on him, applying the same imagistic detective work that he uses on Sandra and Penny to him. He is the one controlling the camera so he is supposed to be the observer, but she insists on observing him and on seeing the same significance in his handling of his

equipment that he sees in Sandra's throwing away her garbage. As soon as she drives into view she goes off in an obscene litany of sexual single entendre: "What are you looking for, uranium? You should put a rubber on that, you'd be right in business baby... You got no dick, what do you do?... Where's your dick, honey? What do you do, hide it or wrap it?" Hers is an absurd onslaught of a monologue, one which makes everything in her vicinity somehow emblematic of sex. Later she points to an elderly woman entering an apartment building down the block and says "Did you see that sexy look she was giving me?" Her absurd and obviously false sexual interpretations of the actions of those around her are like satiric imitations of Holzman's earnest descriptions of Sandra and Penny's private gestures. Her sex-obsession is an active echo of Holzman's passive cinema-obsession; just as he quietly transforms everything in his life into a movie unspooling for his benefit, she interprets everything to her own sexual advantage. But hers is a supremely active obsession, one which relies on direct interaction with those around her, while Holzman prefers to erase himself from the picture and simply sit back and watch. This fact becomes explicit later on in their exchange after she has repeatedly and aggressively, if perhaps somewhat facetiously, offered him sex:

Woman: Listen, do you wanna get laid or dontcha?

Holzman: I'd rather make movies.

W: Oh yeah? What do they call that? A person who doesn't like both...either?

H: A voyeur.

W: Oh, a voyer, what's that? Something new?

Faced with a direct enticement to action, Holzman can only demure and confess that he prefers to remain the passive observer. The fact that this woman, otherwise so knowledgeable about all fields of sexuality, seems to be as unfamiliar with the term "voyeur" as she is unable to pronounce it, demonstrates how foreign Holzman's passive, cinematic approach to life is to this supremely active and interactive woman. The effect that she has on Holzman can be seen in his hesitant responses to her gloating questions and speculations about his sex life and penis size.

For most of her time on-screen this woman seems like a movie he cannot turn off, an uncomfortable situation that he is not sure quite how to extricate himself from. Ultimately, though, he does. After several minutes of interviewing, the sound of her voice is suddenly cut off, though we see her continue to speak and gesture through the window of her car. Holzman's voice replaces hers as he explains, hesitantly and almost guiltily, that "Unfortunately for her, the street goddess never got to find out whether I had a hairy body or not...at about this point the tape ran out and...and it was...there was a crowd of onlookers beginning to get too big and...and it was beginning to be too much of a hassle so I terminated the interview." The way that Holzman says that it was at "about" this time that the tape ran out suggests that he is making excuses, that the termination of the interview was much more a matter of choice than coincidence. The woman, with her frank sexuality and invitation to action, threatens everything that Holzman has built himself up as through his insular camera world. She demands that he answer her, that he step out from behind the camera and interact with her, that he explain himself and his cinema obsession. With this assault she is able to violate everything that David Holzman has tried to establish himself as throughout the film. He keeps himself and his on-camera appearances tightly controlled so that he is only shown as he wishes to be shown, and then only with his own carefully narrated construction and explanation of his every action. He remains behind the camera as an invisible observer or else steps in front of it as a knowing guide; he is not supposed to be reduced to the stuttering responder that he becomes in the face of the street goddess's onslaught. She forces him to expose his own hesitancy and confusion above and beyond the carefully choreographed revelations which he treats us to in his apartment. With her he is allowed to be neither passive observer nor authoritarian director; instead he becomes secondary and exposed. And, as their interview progresses and they acquire a crowd of onlookers, this secondary position becomes increasingly uncomfortable for Holzman because he is being exposed, being observed, being put into the position of Penny or Sandra, before more and more people. The only way, ultimately, for him to regain control is

through his technology: he is able to use the powers of his editing table to deny the woman her voice and reassert his own control through a return to his assured, explanatory narration. This moves the plot forward, returning the film safely to Holzman's hands and to a guiding narrative trajectory.

But there are many parts of the film which do not fit into this narrative trajectory; moments of documentary abstraction which have no direct connection to David Holzman outside of the fact that we know that he is the one holding the camera. This is the third influence on David Holzman; aside from his talking head self-presentations and his attempts to make others fit into Hollywood narrative, Holzman takes his camera to the streets of New York to return with beautifully filmed and plotless sequences of anonymous city-dwellers. These deconstructional and documentary moments show Holzman escaping from the trap of narrative cinema and seem to fit into a third type of film which Stephen Heath discusses in the essay "Repetition Time: Notes Around 'Structuralist/materialist Film.'" Heath's definition of such a film is that it "stresses process, a film in its process of production of images, sounds, times, meanings, the transformations effected on the basis of the specific properties of film in the relation of a viewing and listening situation" (165). Such films constantly call attention both to their own construction processes and their own materiality, as well as to the fiction inherent in so many film conventions that we have come to accept as on-screen reality. Structuralist/materialist films also must alienate the viewer by failing to provide a protagonist or a narrator to identify with; Heath explains that

what is intended...is not a spectator as unified subject, timed by a narrative action, making the relations the film makes to be made, coming in the pleasure of the mastery of those relations, of the positioned view they offer, but a spectator, a spectating activity, at the limit of any fixed subjectivity, materially inconstant, dispersed in process, beyond the accommodation of reality and pleasure principles (167).

Structuralist/materialist films fail to provide their viewers with the safe confines of thought that traditional narrative films do; the audience cannot lose themselves in an emotional identification with the protagonist and intellectual engagement with the advancement of the plot. The "shock effect" of consecutive images that Walter Benjamin described as so key

to the functioning of film narrative is absent from Heath's vision of structuralist/materialist films. However, Heath's version on non-narrative cinema is distinct from Vertov's; although he abhorred actors and narrative, Vertov still wanted to net the viewer with Benjamin's "shock effect," to create a series of consecutive images which guide the viewer's thoughts inside the context of the film rather than alienating the viewer and forcing him to face his position relative to the screen.

Vertov never manages to achieve the necessary austerity of one of Stephen Heath's structuralist/materialist films, but David Holzman, usually so influenced by narrative cinema, comes close in many of his purely documentary moments. At times *David Holzman's Diary* seems like the accidental cross-cutting of two completely different films, possibly by two different filmmakers. There is the neurotic David Holzman obsessively showing us his life and explaining its minutiae to us; but there is also the silent cameraman who provides so many unforgettable documentary images of New York streets and street life. The first Holzman, Holzman the diarist, is the obsessive chronicler of self who insists on trying to explain his life by subjecting it to the rubric of traditional Hollywood narrative. He explains and describes everything, introducing and organizing people and events so that the viewer can easily follow the plot of his life. The documentary Holzman is quite a different character. The film's documentary scenes show up, in the midst of an otherwise supremely personal film, entirely free of both Holzman and his ubiquitous narrative explanations. They stick out as moments of departure, slips into the abstract purity of Stephen Heath's strictly defined structuralist/materialist films, and ironically, if we look at the film as David Holzman's rather than Jim McBride's production, they are also the most esthetically successful moments in the film. Holzman might not find truth in his personal life, but he is able to capture resonating images of the unfamiliar in the streets around him. The strange dichotomy between the two styles of film-making becomes apparent very early in the film when Holzman gives two quick tours of his neighborhood. The first is simply architectural: row houses shot with a wide-angle lens from across the street and accompanied by his coy

descriptions of the Hollywood and business luminaries that once inhabited them. The images here are simple and, though some of the buildings loom, their images alone would be dead and meaningless, completely insignificant in the absence of Holzman's gossipy narrative. Immediately after this first tour, though, he commences with his second. The only discernible break between the two is on the audio track: the cessation of his narrative and a change in the radio broadcast from guitar music to a news report about anti-police riots in New Jersey. For this second tour, Holzman shuts up and brings his camera down to eye level, now pointing it straight ahead of him as he walks down the street, the wide-angle lens cutting a visual wake as it funnels passers-by to one side or the other. This lens also has the curious effect of seeming to expand both time and the faces of those that pass by so that we are treated to extended examinations of the ordinariness of Holzman's multi-ethnic neighborhood as it goes about its daily business. These elongated images give a sense of the pulsing activity of city life stretched out to provide the viewer with the opportunity for a microscopic examination of attitude and personality. There is a sense here of super-reality; of reality set out for us in so elaborate and extensive a display that its apparent revelations call themselves into question through their very existence. This image is the apotheosis of Holzman's hopes for magical truth through cinema: it is the lens, the level of super-reality which could only be achieved through the camera, that gives this moment its sense of undefinable meaning. Here reality is able to expose its deeper levels solely because of film; there is no need for extraneous explanation or narration because the images are able to provide everything. David Holzman has nothing to say about these people; he does not know them personally as he does Penny, nor does he watch them in an obsessive attempt to know them as he does Sandra, nor do they care to know him as does the so-called street goddess. Because he needs nothing from these anonymous passers-by, and they seem to want nothing from him, Holzman is able to remove his presented self, the self who must constantly explain and second-guess his own intentions, entirely from his filming of them. Ironically, Holzman comes closest to realizing his quest for truth in the 16mm medium

when he is able to remove himself from the filming. Those things closest and most important to him are necessarily funneled through the Hollywood psychology which demands constant narrative, explanation, and manipulation. It is only when he is struck by something completely outside of himself, something in which he can have no conceivable personal investment, that Holzman seems able to escape from this internalized cinematic structure and use his camera as he had originally hoped to: as a tool for the revelation of truth.

Expository, narrative, and structuralist/materialist film modes blend together in the last real scene in the film revealing how Holzman interrelates them. The night before his camera is finally stolen, and just after the prolonged monologue in which he curses both himself and the camera for failing to provide him with any truth, we are presented with silent night footage of the camera walking down the street and peering into windows. The screen remains black for long periods of time, illuminated only by the bright moments that windows provide. This scene, through its silence and because it presents us with strangers, seems to fit in with Holzman's abstract documentary footage. It also reflects Holzman's voyeuristic tendencies in that the illuminated rectangles of the windows seem a bit like momentary movie screens or channels flipped past on the television while the completely silent soundtrack ties it back to the woman on the subway and the sleeping Penny filmed unawares. Yet the anonymous faces of the people he captures inside of the windows and the constantly moving, almost incurious manner in which the camera moves down the street ties the sequence most closely to Holzman's purely documentary street scenes. It seems more like an anthropological look at the night lives of New Yorkers than the voyeuristic assemblages that he tries to build out of Penny and Sandra. However what seemed a purely aimless piece of filming suddenly comes to have meaning when, before a large window through which we can see the silhouette of a woman, the soundtrack suddenly clicks on and Holzman's voice-over announces: "This is Penny's house and that's Penny." Suddenly the movement of the previous shots, which seemed a purely esthetic progression much like

Holzman's earlier wide-angled stroll down the New York streets, loses its aimlessness and becomes a purposed narrative. We realize that he was not merely creating a window montage of New York, but instead walking intentionally toward Penny's house so that he could film her, waiting until she was on-screen to add sound to picture. What seemed to be a documentary presentation of incidental reality instead becomes merely another of Holzman's elaborate cinematic set-ups, another attempt to snare Penny into the narrative of his camera. The viewer is put through a second twist as Holzman's voice-over narrative continues: "This is the way I ended my shooting adventures Friday evening." When he says this we realize that the soundtrack was not recorded with the footage, as seemed to be the case when Holzman began speaking, but instead added after the fact. And the reason for this after-the-fact add-on quickly becomes apparent. "I was halted by this man," Holzman explains just at the moment that the camera pans to show a police officer advancing quickly toward him on the street, "Watch him, watch him, he's gonna hit me now." At that moment the screen goes black. Holzman's voice-over, timed to perfectly match the camera's movements, is an attempt to make bad comedy out of a humiliating moment. He is again asserting his own narrative power, his power as cameraman and editor, in order to ensure that events are seen through the screen of his interpretation. When Holzman voice-overs "Watch him, he's gonna hit me now," he essentially re-shoots the scene; Holzman the cameraman may be surprised by the cop's sudden approach and his humiliating arrest, but Holzman the narrator and editor sees it coming and is able transform it into an inevitable moment of black comedy. Holzman's assertion of narrative control is important because it means that he is the only one allowed to talk; as happened earlier with the similarly threatening street goddess, we see the officer's lips moving as he yells at Holzman but the only sound we are able to hear is Holzman's reassuring voice-over, telling us exactly what will happen. This scene juxtaposes the three types of film-making which Holzman uses over the course of the film so that we can clearly see which modes take precedence. He creates the abstract street documentary footage when in search of acquaintances who he can push

into a narrative of his own creation (the woman on the subway seems to be further evidence of this) but when these narratives go awry, he is both eager and prepared to re-assert himself as the controlling and explaining force.

Dziga Vertov creates a strict theory of non-narrative cinema, yet he is unable to keep himself from slipping occasionally into the narrative mode. David Holzman, by contrast, has no stated film esthetics; he claims to only be searching for truth. Truth, of course, proves to be elusive. Instead Holzman finds that the bulky machines which he thought would somehow magically provide his life with a sense of order create barriers which separate him from the rest of the world, leaving him isolated behind the lens and within the metal confines of his own equipment. What little truth emerges from his efforts comes to illuminate the viewer, not Holzman, as we realize the extent to which his every thought and action have been mediated by the elaborate constructs of narrative cinema. Rather than explaining some internal logic inherent in his life, Holzman's film-making equipment exposes his cinematic psychology to the world and alienates him from it.

THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT: VIDEO CASUAL

Man with a Movie Camera and *David Holzman's Diary* both present us with quests for truth; the filmmakers in these films believe both that there is truth to be found and that the camera will provide with a route to that truth. Yet both of these films were made during a time when cameras and the ability to make films was a relative rarity, when the cost of equipment and development was sufficiently high to make film-making an impossible hobby for the majority of the population. Films, or the only films most people saw, even as late as 1967, were something made by vast numbers of people working with vast sums of money. Cost and technology made the dream of becoming a filmmaker nearly as unrealizable as the dream of the life of a character portrayed on the screen. This is not the case today. Now video technology has made home movie cameras available for as little as \$250 and the opportunity to become a filmmaker is a common one. David Holzman was creating his film diary in the absence of any model for what a single person should do with a camera; he had only the Hollywood narrative model to follow and thus expected his life and film to reflect this, the only example accessible to him. Today, though, the ubiquity of video technology means that we are surrounded by models for what is expected of video cinema. Television gives us reality-based shows like *COPS* and *The Real World* while our friends and families have their own home videos to show. Between the mass-produced and the private, an expected form for video film-making has been developed which is distinct from the directed Hollywood narrative. Rather than being scripted, video productions are marked by an expected lack of narrative; they feature people putting on heightened displays

of their normal selves and ironic imitations of real, broadcast camerawork. The motivation behind such home videos is, of course, far different from that of films intended for wide distribution; videos serve a private function and are intended essentially as moving photographs, records of moments in our private lives. Even with video dominating at home, in the theater, on the big screen, we still expect traditional narrative cinema: elaborate plots, beautiful characters, and elegant cinematography. So it comes as a shock when we go to the theater to see *The Blair Witch Project* and find that, when the house lights go down and the screen is illuminated, the usually wide cinemascopic ratio of theatrical screenings has been cut down to the boxy confines of television dimensions. The near-square in which this film takes place, which seems so disjunctive in the context of the movie theater, alerts its audience to the fact that what unfolds on the screen will follow the rules of home video rather than the rules of narrative film. This, certainly, is what the three fictional filmmakers at the center of the story expect will happen because, unlike David Holzman, they see themselves as participants in the non-event of home video rather than in the ordered trajectory of narrative film.

The Blair Witch Project presents us with two films simultaneously: the serious 16mm footage for the documentary which the students are filming and also the recreational video footage which they shoot for fun. Unlike David Holzman, who seemed to make no distinction, at least in editing, between his personal and documentary recordings, these filmmakers establish a clear distinction between their serious work and their entertainment. The line between 16mm and video is also the one which separates subjective from objective film-making. The 16mm portions of the film are blatant imitations of television documentaries completely devoid of any personality while the video footage is almost purely subjective, treating us exclusively to the skewed perspective and commentary of the character holding the camera. In this film there are three different subjectivities because there are multiple filmmakers. While *Man with a Movie Camera* and *David Holzman's Diary* present the filmed visions of single individuals, *The Blair Witch Project* is the

collective work of three authors whose unequal access to the camera, and therefore also to the power of self-expression, dictates how they relate both to the camera and to each other. Heather is the director and organizer of the project and the owner and principal user of the video camera. She is the guide and leader of the expedition and the controlling hand behind most of the video footage. Josh is the director of photography who operates the 16mm camera; and Mike is the sound man who runs the DAT recorder. Both Josh and Mike tend to take secondary roles in the film-making process and also to react negatively to Heather's constant control of the camera and the situation.

While most of the video footage is the product of one of these characters' subjective consciousness, the 16mm portions of the film remain largely objective. The 16mm camera, borrowed from their university, requires a formalized process in its operation that makes it distinct from the video camera. Its operator must measure the distance between the camera and the objects being shot so that it can be focused manually; light readings must also be taken so that the film will be properly exposed. While the video camera can easily become an extension of the eye because it operates correctly with the mere push of a button, the 16mm camera requires that its user carefully measure and consider the surroundings in order to be able to record an accurate image. It is a device which requires both experience and training in order to be properly operated and the footage which our filmmakers shoot with it is a formalized reflection of the elaborate process necessary to make this camera function. The first such piece of 16mm film-making which we are presented is in the Burkittsville cemetery. We see the formal black and white image of the Burkittsville sign, then a shot of Heather standing in the cemetery. As we are shown still shots of tombstones, she explains that in the 1940's there were an unusually high number of child deaths and that "no one seems to remember anything unusual about that time, not to us anyway. Yet legend tells a different story, one whose evidence is all around us etched in stone." When Heather speaks for the film her voice and manner become as formalized as the staid black and white footage they accompany. Like David Holzman, these filmmakers are attempting to

conform to the expected norms of the documentary medium. Heather gives a stilted, overly written voice-over which contrasts sharply with the easy, informal speech we hear from her in the video footage. Though she turns herself into a talking head for her speech, she is not influenced by the confessional form as is David Holzman, or even by film documentaries; instead her primary influence is television. Heather's speech comes off sounding, both in vocal tone and in the abysmal metaphor, like bad TV news reporting. The 16mm format still encourages a documentary approach, but the model followed for this approach has changed from the cinematic to the televisual.

Though she follows the documentary model of filming, Heather is also influenced by the expectations of the Hollywood narrative which affects her approach to the stories that the interviewees tell her. They may be filmed as straight-forward talking heads, but the interviewees roles in Heather's film is to provide invented, folkloric narratives which should (to her mind) conform to the expectations of horror film plots. Her expectations become apparent in her interviews with the Burkittsville townspeople; she is constantly interrupting their stories, hurrying them along, and attempting to augment and re-interpret their narratives with her own improved insertions. At one point a fisherman tells her about his strange encounter along the riverbank:

Fisherman: I saw like a white misty thing that I can't tell what...

Heather: Like a vapor, a gray vapor rising out of the trees?

Fisherman: Right out of the water...

Heather: Right out of the water.

Fisherman: ...up the side of the tree and disappeared up them.

The fisherman's description is not poetic, not evocative enough for Heather who tries to reword his statement in order to present a clearer visual image. She replaces the vagary of "white misty thing" with "gray vapor" and gives the fisherman's apparition a definite location by saying that it is rising out of the trees. This guiding impulse that we see in Heather is similar to David Holzman's constant attempts to manipulate his documentary subjects into performing as though they were a part of a filmed narrative. Both seek to lock those around them into familiar, codified visual images. Also like Holzman, Heather comes

to see her documentary subjects as being in the service of the camera. Outside of Mary Brown's trailer, she tells Josh and Mike: "I'm gonna grab her and pull her out, why don't you see where the best light is?" This is not a statement brimming with concern for the humanity of her subject; rather it shows that Mary Brown has become merely another object, like the cemetery's gravestones, to be placed in front of the camera in the best possible light.

With the 16mm camera the filmmakers create a selective reality; they invent a documentary narrative by excising specific sites and moments from the world which surrounds them. Their process is the inverse of the documentary approach advocated by Dziga Vertov; rather than collecting random images of reality and then creating meaning through uniting disparate scenes, the *Blair Witch* filmmakers essentially create a scenario for their documentary which relies on reading pre-written words at consecutive pre-selected sites. The 16mm camera is supremely picky about what it films, but the video camera is exactly the opposite. It is on constantly, something which becomes much more acceptable to the person controlling the camera than it is to the one being filmed. At one point, as the filmmakers find themselves increasingly lost, Mike becomes angry at Heather who is constantly recording:

Mike: Why you gotta tape every conversation?

Heather: I've got a camera. We're making a documentary.

Mike: We're making a documentary about a witch.

Heather: Trust me. We'll all look back on this and laugh heartily.

This debate between two people, one on either side of the camera, demonstrates a conflict between two different ways of approaching the camera and the idea of documentary. Mike does not have the video camera and his role in the project is to record the sound with the 16mm footage; he is tied to the formal, documentary side of the project. To him, documentary means the shots taken with the 16mm camera; that is objective presentations of the documentary subject, not incidental recordings of the process of making that objective documentary. To Heather, who has control of the video camera and thus sees their expedition through its home-video filter, everything should be recorded because, as she

says, they will want to be able to remember and laugh at the process which produced the formalized film that Mike sees as their main objective. It is easier for Heather to claim that they will look back at the footage and laugh heartily because it is she who controls the camera for the vast majority of the time; she is the one controlling the images which are recorded, the records which are made, so it is her subjectivity which will be represented. For Heather the camera becomes an extension of the eye, recording the events around her so constantly and so invisibly that she seems to forget that it is there. Like David Holzman she is mostly oblivious to the moments when its recording eye angers those around her and she leaves it turned on in moments of extreme emotion and physicality such as when she attacks Mike for kicking the map into the river. The video camera, with its automatic focus and light adjustments, enables the cameraman to literally have the kino-eye which Vertov idealized; however its practice is, ironically, precisely the opposite of what Vertov would have hoped. Where Vertov wanted his camera to expose what the human eye could not see, the video-eye is limited to reproducing exactly what the human eye sees, providing nothing more than a visual echo whose jerkiness and faded coloration muddy rather than clarify the reality which they record.

The video camera remains visually an extension of the eye, a means for making permanent record of the eye's experience, throughout the film. However, the manner in which the camera is used, particularly in relation to how the person filming narrates and explains the images he or she is recording, changes drastically over the course of the film. At the outset of the film, as the camera records the mundane happenings of a camping trip, it is provided with the expected comical disorder of home video. In this early atmosphere, the camera is simply a way of recording the ironic detachment of the filmmakers. However, as the film progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that what the video camera is recording is no longer the random mundanity of everyday life. As they begin to wander in endless circles in the woods and regularly discover mysterious assemblages of sticks and rocks hung in their path, it becomes increasingly clear that the filmmakers have been subsumed

within some larger narrative. As they become sucked up into this foreign plot, the filmmakers lose the safe randomness that they have come to expect from their lives and instead find themselves locked powerlessly within the confines of the woods. They realize that, rather than continuing to be their own filmmakers, they have become actors in somebody else's movie. We can see the terror that such an idea has for them when, after they have been in the woods for several days, Josh turns the camera on Heather and speaks to her as though she were an actress he was directing.

OK, here's your motivation. You're hungry. You're lost. And no one is here to help you...There's a fuckin witch and she keeps leaving shit outside your door. There's no one here to help you...That's your motivation...You gonna write us a happy ending, Heather?

Josh's words show how conscious the filmmakers are of the fact that they have been put into someone else's movie; that an unseen force is now dictating all of the events of their lives and they are powerless to fight against it. Josh's attack on Heather, and her horrified, cowering response, demonstrate how the thing that these filmmakers fear most is to be trapped inside someone else's movie. It is when they feel most trapped that they play at being actors rather than directors. The controlling exterior hand which slowly becomes evident over the course of the film is diametrically opposed to the lazily comic video footage which the characters shoot at the beginning of the film. As their peril grows, they begin to change how they relate to the video camera so that, though it begins as a way of recording ironic asides, it slowly becomes an evidentiary and argumentative tool, a confidant, and even a source of absolution.

The video footage which we see early on in *The Blair Witch Project* is chatty, ironic, and supremely self-conscious. The camera is usually treated as a mock-friend by the person doing the filming who will confidentially explain the events being recorded. This video footage is intended purely as private entertainment, as the record of a mildly adventurous outing. Thus when the filmmakers address the camera, they are in essence addressing themselves at a later date. Unlike David Holzman, who must explain himself completely to the anonymous audience which he assumes will eventually see his film, these filmmakers

need only provide bits of information intended to jog their own memories at a later date.

Their commentary is suggestive rather than explanatory and their footage reflects an extreme self-consciousness both of themselves as filmmakers and of the pre-existing models for video film-making which they constantly measure themselves against. This self-consciousness makes itself felt most strongly in the ironic approach which they take to everything. The camera is treated like both a friend and a record-keeper, their way of mediating between their own real existence and the images and rituals which their possession of the video camera suggests they should take part in. Buying supplies in the grocery store, Heather zooms the camera in on all of the products in the shopping cart, pushing the camera's lens into the bag of marshmallows so that the image goes blurry as she says "Soft....soft." This scene is, on its most obvious level, a person fooling around with a video camera, hammily over-using the zoom. Yet it is also a moment which stretches the traditional bounds of even videotaped cinema because it calls attention to the physicality of the camera and especially to its lens. When we see the camera's lens depress the marshmallow bag we are reminded of the mediating bubble which separates both the viewer and the filmmaker from the action, reminded of the impossibly passive role which the filmmaker must play even in his or her own film because of how the camera acts to separate the filmmaker from the world.

The early *Blair Witch* footage is also full of moments in which the filmmakers self-consciously imitate and then deconstruct pre-existing film-making models. At one point either Mike or Josh points the camera out into the forest where Heather can be seen far in the background. The person with the camera asks mockingly, "Is that the Blair Witch? No, it's Heather out taking a piss." The joke here, the reason for recording this moment, is that the footage seems to resemble a wildlife show in which the desired animal is caught in the camera and identified. The person pointing the camera is playing with the ability that the camera grants for creating imitations of television genre shots. A similar thing happens when they are about to shoot their very first 16mm scene. This means the creation of their

first slate, the board which is filmed briefly in order to identify which scenes come where in the editing process. The filmmakers create a mock-ceremony around their first slate; Heather and Josh kiss it and then Mike, showing off for the video camera, bites into it. The ritualized ceremony of kissing the slate is ridiculous and each of the characters is careful to overact his or her part so that it does not become serious. The filmmakers really do care about their first shot, because they really do care about making a good film; however, by ironically over-acting and ritualizing their ceremony, they manage to keep the moment safely distanced and ironic. Here the camera plays the key role of recording what is genuinely an important moment in the making of their documentary. Yet, because the nature of the video-camera is such that it is not supposed to film seriously, this important moment must be played up for maximum irony if it is to be recorded on video.

As the filmmakers begin to realize that they are lost, that they may wind up spending more time in the woods than they had originally planned, their relationship with one another begins to get more and more tense. As blame for who got everyone lost and who knows where they are going gets passed around, the video camera begins to take on another important role. It is now less a source of mock-documentation and imitation news-style shots and becomes instead a repository for documentation, access to an outside sympathetic audience which might be swayed more easily into agreement than fellow hikers. Heather, who mostly controls the camera, is the principal character to do this. After the rock piles are left outside of their tent, Josh and Mike insist leaving quickly in order to get home in time to return the equipment. Heather lags behind, pointing the camera to the rock piles, and says "I can't believe we have to leave just when shit's getting interesting." She is confiding in the camera because it represents a record which will not be examined until the journey is over; she is imagining that, upon their safe return, everyone will regret not having stayed longer to investigate the rock piles further and that her own stated desire to do so will serve as lasting evidence that she was right, that they should have listened to her. She is also willing to lie, or at least present half-truths, to the camera in order to prove her point. Right

after we see Josh demanding that they do a map check and Heather insisting that she knows where they are, there is a cut to a shot focusing on the back of the hiking Josh. Heather is controlling the camera as the following exchange occurs:

Heather: All right, we just did a map check and it seems like we're still pretty much on track.

Josh: [turning to look into camera] That's not what I said.

Heather: No, I think we're alright. Let's just keep going.

Heather is using her control over the camera to erase both Josh's doubts and her own failings as a navigator. Much like David Holzman cutting off the street goddess' sound, Heather is trying to use her position of power over the technology to obliterate what she does not want revealed from the record. However, Heather's approach to the technology is different from Holzman's. Holzman simply explains that the tape ran out, leaving him with no choice but to terminate the street goddess' interview; he would say that his technology is completely objective and other from him so its failure is an unhappy coincidence and not a reflection of his desires. Heather shows that she seems to have quite a different relationship with her video camera. Though its small size means that she is significantly less intimate with her video camera than Holzman is with his Eclair, Heather seems nonetheless to treat the camera more as a friend and confidant than a mere objective recorder. Her explanation "We just did a map check and it looks like we're pretty much on track" could easily be seen as her confiding her side of the story in a friend. She seems almost to turn on the camera as source of comfort and reassurance, like a friend, as it becomes increasingly clear that she has managed to get them lost and as tension builds between the three filmmakers.

As their situation grows progressively worse, Heather's relationship with the camera grows stronger. More than just a friend or confidant, it begins to be the device through which she channels reality, how she assures herself that she is living rather than dreaming. After Josh has disappeared and they discover a small bundle of sticks tied together by a strip of his flannel shirt, Heather films herself as she very gingerly moves the bundle away from the tent, chanting the whole time "OK, OK, I'm just going to move it away from the front of the tent...I'm taking it away." Now when she is speaking, she is no longer

speaking for the camera's benefit but rather for her own. She has become so terrified that she must speak aloud to assure herself of her own actions and also to give herself the courage to continue in those actions. She may not speak for the camera's benefit but the camera's recording gaze comes to serve the same purpose as her panicked monologue. She is creating a continuing record of her actions which enables her to initiate a kind of momentum to keep up the courage to continue in spite of her fear. She uses the camera again as documentary courage just after this. She has opened up the bundle of sticks and discovered a small cloth bag filled with blood and guts. After this discovery, she films her hand in tight close-up as she dips it in the stream to wash it, again chanting "OK...OK...OK, see?" This time the camera serves to provide her with documentary proof of her washed hand, of her ability to clean off the blood and recover from what she has just discovered. The camera comes to be a source of courage whose recording gaze reminds her of the fact that she is living and that she is still able to take steps which change and alter the world around her. As things grow increasingly bleak, the camera's recording ability becomes a metaphoric reminder that, like the camera, she, too, will continue to click forward through time.

Finally, just before the end of the film, the video camera is used simply for its intended purpose: making a record. In the tent, on that last night, Heather puts her face up close to the camera and claims responsibility for their dire situation. Here the camera takes on the role of a confessor; its value to Heather lies not in any special skill it has at listening but rather in the simple fact that it becomes increasingly likely that the camera will outlive her. At this moment of extreme desperation, she puts the camera to its most primitive use: no irony, no layers of newscast imitations, no pretensions of extracting truth; she simply wants to record. At this point the camera loses all of its social significances, all of its institutional and narrative implications, and becomes simply a recording device. We are back to 1895 when the workers come pouring out of the Pierre and August Lumière's factory; the camera only knows to record what is in front of it and it does so without the constructs

of narrative cinema, without the constructs of kino-eye, without the constructs of home video. As is the case with so many other things, in moments of desperation, even the video camera loses its constructed aura and becomes simply a tool.

CONCLUSION

Film-making operates on a series of implicit assumptions and rules which remain invisible in the vast majority of narrative films. However, even if we are not aware of it, we are a society steeped in film and television and the grammatical elements of film language are absorbed subconsciously and affect our thoughts and our interactions. It is difficult to gauge how such invisible superstructures affect people in everyday society; however, if we look at films in which characters attempt to record the world around them on film, we find that the subconscious struggle between experienced and cinematic reality is played out in the films within films that these fictional characters attempt to construct.

Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* cameraman sets out to create an emulable model for pure, non-narrative, non-character cinema. Yet he himself winds up as his film's chief character and his portrayal is not significantly different from that of a narrative hero. Similarly, Jim McBride's film-maker David Holzman decides that he will understand himself if he can only record his life on film and play it back. However, he discovers that his attempts at documentary film-making are overtaken by his own expectations that any filmed story imitate Hollywood narrative. The student film-makers in *The Blair Witch Project* think that they are involved in a plotless joke of an excursion to make a college documentary for a project. They live in the age of the video camera and no longer share David Holzman's desire for plot and order. Yet they find just such a plot thrust upon them in the form of a terrorizing entity in the woods which forces them into a re-examination of their approach to the medium of video.

These three films span virtually the whole history of cinema and half the world. They come about as the result of drastically different artistic intentions, intellectual aims, and commercial hopes. Yet each features a film-maker/character who demonstrates, through his or her struggle for accurate representation in the medium of film, the profound extent to which societal models for how and with what technology a film story can be told unconsciously influence the making of their films.

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