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SMARTPHONE STYLO

Connecting across Cultures

Abstract

Con la diffusione degli smartphone abilitati alle riprese video, l'auspicio fatto nel 1948 dal regista francese Alexandre Astruc di usare la cinepresa come una penna stilografica (la *caméra stylo*) così da creare film allo stesso modo in cui si scrivono romanzi sembra finalmente avverarsi. È sottinteso, tuttavia, che per "scrivere" con una videocamera non basta premere il tasto "record": occorre impadronirsi di una grammatica delle immagini in movimento per passare dalle riprese casuali all'articolazione di un messaggio condivisibile con un pubblico. Se poi a questi filmati si aggiungono i sottotitoli (operazione oggigiorno eseguibile con una certa facilità) appare evidente come questo tipo di audiovisivo abbia la potenzialità di ingaggiare spettatori appartenenti a svariati contesti culturali.

Data questa premessa, durante l'ultimo decennio ho incentrato la mia attività didattica e scientifica presso l'Università di Siena e la University of Rochester (USA) sull'utilizzo dell'audiovisivo come strumento per la comunicazione tra le culture diverse. Il saggio che propongo illustra questa mia esperienza sia in Italia che negli Stati Uniti, inquadrandola in un contesto più ampio, dove si valuteranno le possibilità effettive di creare in ambito accademico micro-documentari finalizzati alla comunicazione tra le culture.

La parte introduttiva del saggio affronterà l'evoluzione storica del cinema documentario concentrandosi soprattutto sul cosiddetto *observational documentary*. Successivamente, si analizzerà la proposta di Astruc inerente al *caméra stylo*, e le conseguenze che quest'approccio ebbe sulla *Nouvelle Vague* francese (in questo senso si valuterà anche il ruolo svolto dai registi del neorealismo italiano, e di Roberto Rossellini in particolare). Dopodiché si esplorerà la vena autobiografica nel documentario statunitense (Ross McElwee e Ralph Arlyck), così da ipotizzare una sintesi tra documentario di osservazione e documentario autobiografico che potrebbe risultare particolarmente adatta alla produzione di micro-documentari per la comunicazione inter-culturale. Nell'intento di valutare quest'ipotesi verranno esaminati alcuni micro- documentari prodotti sotto la mia guida durante l'ultimo decennio dagli studenti dell'Università di Siena e dell'University of Rochester, documentari che hanno di per sé una forte caratterizzazione multiculturale in quanto realizzati da studenti provenienti da svariati paesi, tra cui la Cina. Tra gli argomenti affrontati dagli studenti figura anche l'esperienza di *lockdown* causato dalla recente pandemia. Questa incresciosa circostanza ha ribadito l'importanza

di una comunicazione trans-culturale audiovisiva, e ci ha offerto una fondamentale occasione di verifica dell'efficacia della stessa.

After conducting a seminar on cross-cultural communication at the University of Siena in Arezzo for a group of students from the University of Wenzhou, China, it became clear to me that in addition to the canon of traditional cinema, screening short, student-made video documentaries regarding their personal realities was an effective way of introducing the host culture to foreign visitors. This paper illustrates how today it is possible to assist students in producing such documentaries with relative ease. The essay is organized in three sections. It begins with a historical overview of documentary cinema's dedication to the representation of the real world. Particular attention is paid to Albert Maysles' and his contribution to this goal and his role in Direct Cinema. It highlights how the use of compact and more versatile filming equipment opened the way to an unobtrusive observation of reality. Finally, we see how the development of digital video subsequently helped Maysles better achieve his goal. In this initial section, the role of Alexandre Astruc is also taken into consideration examining how his approach to non-fiction cinema through a *caméra stylo* looks towards the possibility of 'writing' the world, independently of traditional moviemaking. Amateur photography and cinematography are also considered, as they, too, are key elements in the growth of independent, auto-produced cinema. The following section of the paper considers the importance of the transition from film to analogue video, and from this to digital video illustrating how these transitions advanced the filmmaking process to the point that today it is possible to use a smartphone and a personal computer to create a movie. The final section is dedicated to specific examples in my experience in teaching students how to create short documentaries, and giving an outline of the 'pre-production', 'production' and 'post-production' phases in filmmaking to use as a guideline in education.

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In January 2020, I held a seminar on Italian neo-realist cinema for a group of Chinese students participating in an exchange agreement between the University of Wenzhou and the University of Siena in Arezzo. This gave me the opportunity to reflect yet again on the effectiveness of cinema in introducing a foreign country and its culture to people who are unfamiliar with it. On the same occasion, I also screened documentary footage made by University of Siena students on different aspects of their own personal realities, and found, not surprisingly, that this stimulated even further the Chinese students' curiosity about Italy. The following pages will illustrate the development of documentary as a means to learn about the world, and will evince how, through digital filmmaking, today's students can effectively use a smartphone as a *stylo* with which to create stories about their lives to share with others.

1. *A brief historical background*

The strength of non-fictional filmmaking in representing the real world has been acknowledged throughout film history[1]. From the birth of cinema itself different documentary filmmakers have contributed to the development of this particular genre, making it a commanding tool for deepening our knowledge of the world.

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[1] On the general history of documentary cinema see E. Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, London, Oxford University Press, 1993; R. Barsam, *Nonfiction Film*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992; J. Ellis, B. McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film*, New York, Continuum, 2005.

The American documentary filmmaker Albert Maysles is one of the key figures in film history who has contributed to this task. In my efforts as an academic, an educator and a filmmaker, his films and work within the field of non-fiction cinema have been inspirational, and on a practical level have triggered my attempts to use digital content to foster communication and understanding among different cultures.

Maysles position in documentary history is as one of the creators of Direct Cinema[2]. He authored seminal films as *Salesman* (1968), *Gimme Shelter* (1971), and *Grey Gardens* (1976), which today are considered classics of world cinema. In 2001, Albert Maysles accepted an invitation to give a masterclass to students at the Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia of the University of Siena in Arezzo[3]. On that memorable occasion, Maysles finished his class by inviting the students to buy inexpensive video cameras and to go out and represent their worlds. Many students took his idea to heart.

Maysles approach was that of a humanist. He firmly believed that documentary filmmaking could help make the world a better place. According to him, this was thanks to documentary's ability to represent the lives of people around the world, thus enabling everyone to better know and understand one another, and to discover that human beings are essentially the same across the planet[4]. Maysles felt that the realization of a common humanity could help in overcoming suspicion and intolerance towards foreign people,

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[2] On Direct Cinema see S. Mamber, *Cinéma Vérité in America*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1974; L. Marcorelles, *The Living Cinema*, New York, Praeger, 1973; P. J. O'Connell, *Robert Drew and the Development of Cinema Verité in America*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1992; D. Saunders, *Direct cinema. Observational documentary and the politics of the Sixties*, London, Wallflower, 2007; F. Siniscalco, *Il Direct Cinema e la rappresentazione della realtà: appunti sulla scrittura audiovisiva*, in *Non solo storia. Saggi per Camillo Brezzi*, edited by M. Baioni, P. Gabrielli, Cesena, Il Ponte Vecchio, 2012, pp. 217-224.

[3] "School of Humanities" in English. This was changed, 2013, into the Dipartimento di Scienze della Formazione, Scienze Umane e della Comunicazione Interculturale (School of Education, Humanities and Intercultural Communication).

[4] On Albert Maysles see J. Vogels, *The direct cinema of David and Albert Maysles*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2005; F. Siniscalco, *Albert Maysles and Documentary Cinema*, in *Catalogue of the 42° Festival dei Popoli*, Florence, Festival dei Popoli, 2001, pp. 72-73. See also my video interviews with Albert Maysles, F. Siniscalco, F. Varesco, *L'arte del documentario secondo Albert Maysles*, documentary film, Ravenna, Varesco Produzioni, 2001; F. Siniscalco, F. Varesco, *Direct Cinema: l'arte del documentario*, documentary film, Ravenna, Direct Film productions, 2007.

cultures and the other. At the beginning of the cold war, Maysles went to Russia and documented local psychiatric institutions. As an aspiring young psychologist, his trip and his filming were sponsored by a New England broadcaster that equipped him with a movie camera, confident that the final product would be a documentary demonizing the Soviet Union, in line with the viewers expectations. It turned out that the broadcaster made a poor investment, at least according to his original goal: Maysles' film humanized the institution's patients and staff, highlighting moments of empathy and care. Such an approach characterized his entire career. In fact, one of Maysles' dreams was to make a documentary in North Korea, showing simple moments among its people, weddings, funerals, get-togethers, and affirm a common humanity that made the North Koreans very similar to their American counterparts, in disavowal of the general perception of that Communist country. Maysles never finalized this project; he was unable to find sponsors to finance the film[5], but a common humanity surfacing against unfavorable odds, in defiance of prevalent misconceptions, is a theme which recurs in almost all of his work.

The aim of Direct Cinema, the documentary cinema approach that Albert Maysles, together with his brother David, and co-filmmakers Robert Drew, Ricky Leacock, and D. A. Pennebaker helped come about, was to record the real world in the least invasive and disruptive way possible. This was made viable, at the end of the 1950s, by a series of technical innovations in cinematography which made film cameras and audio recorders lighter and more compact, thus enabling handheld usage. Furthermore, film stock became more sensitive to light, which meant that it was possible to shoot without cumbersome lighting fixtures, and synchronization between camera and tape recorder could be achieved without the use of a cable, thus enabling greater freedom of movement to the camera operators. This meant the possibility of getting closer to the film's subjects in ways that would highlight their humanity. When, in the 1990s, digital video became available, Albert Maysles felt that his aim of making the world a better place through documentary became even more achievable.

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[5] The disappointment with the difficulty of financing such a film came up often during my conversations with the filmmaker.

Everything about the new digital technology excited Maysles. He truly felt that he could continue the representation of the real world on his own forces. His favorite video camera was the Sony PD150, a staple among independent cinematographers at the beginning of the century. He found that the camera's sensitivity to light enabled him to film even in the most difficult situations, and that the numerous automatic functions, such as auto-focus, auto-exposure, and auto-volume control, enabled him to concentrate on the surroundings, the people, and the actions that he was aiming to capture on video.

My own experience attests to his trust of the new medium. In 2000, I met with him at his home in New York City to conduct an interview on his filmmaking career. I was equipped with a small audio-recorder as I intended to transcribe the interview on paper. Maysles immediately encouraged me to record a video instead and indicated that I use his PD150 camera. When I consented, he also proceeded to give me valuable advice on ways of framing, and how to steady my shot. It was my first cinematography class with a master[6]! In the following years of our acquaintance, he generously offered more treasured advice on the art of documentary.

Throughout the years, his never-ending enthusiasm for new digital video technology was admirable. Maysles died in 2015, a bit too soon to appreciate the full videomaking potential of today's smartphones. In tune with his character, he most probably would have espoused the technology, seeing it as a further advance towards his goal of connecting people throughout the world.

The desire to film the real world in all of its manifestations, with-

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[6] The fact that Maysles offered technical advice while I was interviewing him might be misleading, as Direct Cinema strongly rejects interviews in favor of a more spontaneous approach in capturing people's opinions. He was simply giving advice to a neophyte. On conducting interviews with the new digital video technologies see F. SINISCALCO, *In the 'Old Country': Memories to Passion*, in *Ambassadors: American Studies in A Changing World*, edited by M. Bacigalupo, G. Dowling, Rapallo, Azienda Grafica Busco Edizioni, 2006, pp. 281-288; F. SINISCALCO, *Americans Who Have Made Tuscany Their Home*, in *Stranieri di carta, stranieri di voce*, edited by L. Anderson and others, Roma, Editoriale Artemide, 2017, pp. 183-195. With today's less invasive technologies interviews are not as problematic as they were at the birth of Direct Cinema, and may even fit well within an observational documentary. For their importance within an oral history context see D. RITCHIE, *Doing oral history. A practical guide*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2015. Within a cross-cultural context see I. BARBASH, L. TAYLOR, *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, pp. 341-57.

out staging or acting, was obviously not born with Albert Maysles. It is, in fact, as old as cinema itself. The Lumière brothers started doing precisely this when they pointed their *cinematograph* towards the train arriving in the station, or towards the workers exiting the family factory. Indeed, in this respect, early cinema showed a similar determination not dissimilar to photography to satisfy people's curiosity about the unfamiliar, the remote, that which was not visible to the naked eye[7].

The parallel between early non-fiction cinema and photography is significant also in regard to the diffusion of these technologies among non-professionals. Amateur photographers and filmmakers helped to shape many future advances which, to some degree, culminated with the advent of digital media-making devices such as the smartphone[8]. Both amateur picture-taking and filmmaking were exponentially increased in conjunction with the invention and distribution of specific products which made these new forms of expression more accessible. In photography, it was the Kodak Brownie camera, introduced in 1901, which universalized "point and shoot" photography and established the widespread diffusion of family snapshots. In cinema, it was the gradual reduction in weight, size, and cost of the film cameras[9].

A detailed account of the numerous inventions and innovations which expanded the world of amateur cinema is beyond the scope

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[7] For a general, introductory overview on the beginnings of cinema see K. Thompson, D. Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, Boston, McGraw-Hill, 2009. On photography see A. Gunthert, M. Poivert, *L'art de la photographie*, Paris, Citadelles & Mazenod, 2007; and *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph*, edited by R. Lenman, New York, Oxford UP, 2005.

[8] On the importance of amateur moviemaking within the history of cinema see R. Odin, *Il cinema amatoriale*, in *Storia del Cinema Mondiale, Teoria, strumenti, memorie*, edited by G. P. Brunetta, Torino, Giulio Einaudi, 2001, pp. 319-352. For amateur photography see K. Moore, *Amateur photography*, in *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph*, edited by R. Lenman, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 26-28.

[9] This reduction was made possible and went hand-in-hand with the manufacturing of film stock which was safer to use, easier to develop and smaller in size. Original film contained a light sensitive emulsion made of silver nitrate, which was extremely flammable. The original emulsion was substituted, in 1923, by reversal film, which was less flammable and did not require an internegative in order to be screened. Film gauges also became more manageable for the non-professional when 16mm and 8mm gauges were added to the original 35mm one. See R. Odin, *Il cinema amatoriale* cit., pp. 319-352. For a technical description of film and video formats see S. Ascher, E. Pincus, *The Filmmaker's Handbook, A Comprehensive Guide for the Digital Age,* New York, Plume Penquin Group, 2007, 3rd Ed, pp. 23-53.

of this essay. It is interesting to note, however, that there appears to be a constant progression that slowly exemplified and universalized the process of creating moving images with sound, an arc that went from the original *cinematograph* to today's digital devices. Clearly, in the professional sector these developments followed different patterns, and have been integrated in diverse ways, but within the world of independent, non-professional and amateur cinema these innovations have had far-reaching consequences, which seem to incarnate Maysles' movie-making approach.

Another area where technological innovations have had long ranging effects is that of film editing[10]. Editing, or cutting footage, is what enables the transition from 'natural-time' to 'film-time'. The process entails the elimination of moments which are deemed superfluous or redundant in the representation of a particular action. At the start of filmmaking, the cutting would be quite literal: a portion of film would be cut from a longer strip of film with a pair of scissors or some other sharp instrument, and then the strip would be reconnected with glue or tape. With analogue video recorded on tape, which took hold in the 1970s, the editing process became electronic: a special video editing console was used to playback the tapes, extract certain portions from them, and move them to a new virgin tape. This system allowed greater freedom than film, but it was still laborious and limited by its linear, analogue nature. The real revolution came about at the end of the 1990s, with the advent of digital video and non-linear computer editing. It was now finally possible to apply continuous revisions, with extreme ease and without loss of image quality. The change is comparable to what took place in writing when the typewriter was substituted by the computer.

It should be apparent at this point that some of the intuitions and hopes of earlier filmmakers regarding the possibility of producing films individually became considerably more realistic with the diffusion of digital video. We have seen Albert Maysles's enthusiasm regarding digital video, an enthusiasm that he expressed at the beginning of the digital revolution. An analogous intuition came to

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[10] There are many publications on film editing, going from the more historical and theoretical ones to the specifically technical ones. For a good overview covering all three of these aspects see K. DANCYGER, *The Technique of Film & Video Editing, History, Theory, and Practice,* Burlington, Elsevier Focal Press, 2011. For a more technical guideline see C. J. BOWEN, *Grammar of the Edit,* New York, Routledge, 2013.

the French critic and filmmaker Alexandre Astruc, shortly after the end of World War II. In his seminal essay for Écran, Astruc cherishes the possibility of writing with a movie camera, just as people had done for centuries with pen and paper. With an admirable degree of self-confidence about the potential of this new style of writing, Astruc notes:

> …a Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16mm camera and some film and would be writing his philosophy on film: for his *Discours de la Méthode* would today be of such a kind that only the cinema could express it satisfactorily[11].

Astruc's idea of cinema in some ways foreshadows the French *Nouvelle Vague* in criticizing the Hollywood studio approach to film production, and in calling for a much more circumspect process. In this respect, he seems to adhere to the production methods of the Italian *Neorealismo*, where the industrial way of making films is substituted by a considerably more artisanal mode that enhances an adherence to the real world, much in the manner of documentary cinema[12].

Commercial cinema's dependence on dramatic structure and on entertainment are seen as limiting factors by Astruc. Without necessarily rejecting these aspects of cinema, he welcomes contrasting expressive potential made possible by independent filmmaking:

> After having been successively a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to boulevard theatre, or a means of preserving the images of an era, it is gradually becoming a language. By language,

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[11] Alexandre Astruc's article was originally published in France, A. ASTRUC, *Naissance d'une nouvelle avant-garde*, «Écran», 144, 30 March 1948. The English translation, where the quotation is taken from, was published in 1968 (A. ASTRUC, *The Birth of a New Avant Garde: La Caméra-Stylo*, in *The New Wave*, edited by P. Graham, London, Secker and Warburg, 1968, p. 18).

[12] For a good English language introduction to *Neorealismo* and its emphasis on direct representation of the real world see P. BONDANELLA, *A History of Italian Cinema*, New York, Continuum, 2009, pp. 61-126. On the *Nouvelle Vague*'s origins, also in connection to Astruc, see. R. J. NEUPERT, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2007, pp. 45-72.

I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel. That is why I would like to call this new age of cinema the age of caméra-stylo (camera-pen). This metaphor has a very precise sense. By it I mean that the cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language. This art, although blessed with an enormous potential, is an easy prey to prejudice; it cannot go on forever ploughing the same field of realism and social fantasy which has been bequeathed to it by the popular novel. It can tackle any subject, any genre. The most philosophical meditations on human production, psychology, metaphysics, ideas, and passions lie well within its province. I will even go so far as to say that contemporary ideas and philosophies of life are such that only the cinema can do justice to them[13].

What Astruc seems to be envisioning here is a non-fiction cinema that can be autonomously produced and cut loose of the cumbersome production apparatuses involving numerous professional figures that have traditionally been connected to filmmaking. It is a striking intuition, considering that at the time he wrote this essay there was not even a glimmer of the possibilities that one day would be offered by the digital revolution.

Astruc's essay enables us to trace, within the history of cinema, a special vein which emphasizes the possibility of creating personal cinema, or, to adopt a terminology more in tune with the latest technological innovations, personal digital content capable of circulating ideas and experiences across the globe[14]. Connecting the dots even

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[13] A. ASTRUC, *The Birth of a New Avant Garde* cit.*,* p. 19.

[14] See B. SØRENSSEN, *Digital video and Alexandre Astruc's* caméra-stylo*: the new avant-garde in documentary realized*, «Studies in Documentary Film», 2, 2008, 1, pp. 47-59.

further, what starts to take shape as a concrete possibility today is using the camera as a writing instrument, or better still, to use a smartphone as a pen with which, as Maysles suggested, to describe one's reality for the benefit of others. In an educational context, we are finally at a stage where we can assist students in the use of their smartphones, or some other video making device, to connect across cultures.

2. *Digital video opens the way*

Since the aforementioned 2001 Maysles master class in Arezzo, I have dedicated several university courses to this end. In the process, I have been fortunate to operate on an international level with students from different countries. What follows is an overview of the most significant moments of this experience, which I hope will be of use to colleagues who might be inspired to pursue a similar activity. Given the long stretch of time through which I have carried out this model of teaching (nearly twenty years) some basic techno-logical developments will also be highlighted.

As a premise, it should be said that my own research and teach-ing focuses have moved from a text-centered theoretical approach to a digital content-based one, or to put it differently, they have moved from writing and teaching about documentary films to creat-ing films and to helping students do likewise. However, this should not be simply seen as a passage from theory to praxis. As Astruc pointed out, it is possible today to write even philosophy with a *camèra stylo*.

Following my work on Albert Maysles and the other Direct Cinema filmmakers, I realized that their style of documentary could function as a window to American society for my American Studies students at the University of Siena. It became apparent, however, that differently from fiction films, the dialogues in these documen-taries, which were recorded on location, without the possibility of dubbing, were rather challenging to follow for a foreign audience. This led to the founding of a digital video subtitling facility[15] where

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[15] In 2006 the Digital audio visual Intercultural Documentation laboratory (DavID) was established in Arezzo, at the Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia. The facility also housed

students transcribed dialogues, translated them into Italian, and added them as subtitles on the video.

Working with digital video for subtitling purposes opened the way to the creation of digital content itself. Within my research, I started producing observational documentaries focused on issues relating to cultural communication between Italy and United States and to the Direct Cinema filmmakers[16]. My students worked together on the documentation of significant aspects of the local culture for the benefit of foreign audiences.

In the first stages of this teaching experience the students worked in groups, as the equipment, due to cost, was somewhat limited. Notwithstanding this initial limitation, from an educational perspective there were a number of interesting developments. Arezzo, where my school is located, hosted a small group of American university programs that expressed an interest in engaging their students in the production of digital content which focused on intercultural communication. This induced me to design a variety of courses where Italian students worked together with students from the University of Rochester and the University of Oklahoma. It proved an ideal condition as it generated meaningful interactions between the students which focused on the identification of noteworthy topics to mediate through digital content.

Gradually, through the years, further innovations in the means of digital content creation came to our aid. Equipment became more and more affordable, compact, and user-friendly, until it became apparent that video recording could be carried out with the students' personal smartphones, and that editing could be done on their personal computers.

Before looking into this particular mode of digital filmmaking, I would like to make reference to a separate teaching experience carried out at the University of Rochester in Rochester, NY. In this particular case the students had access to a fully equipped video

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an archive of short documentaries created by the students.

[16] The expression "observational documentary" is commonly used today, also to encompass Direct Cinema and the French *Cinéma Vérité*. The "observational" approach to documentary filmmaking is well delineated in B. NICHOLS, *Introduction to Documentary*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2017, pp.132-158. It should be noted that in the United States the two expressions "Direct Cinema" and *Cinema Verite* (sic.) are used interchangeably by film scholars, and by the filmmakers themselves. Maysles preferred the expression "Direct Cinema".

production studio and to sophisticated computers and software. It should be underlined that the course developed in Rochester, which I had the opportunity to repeat in subsequent years, was, just as in Arezzo, not specifically aimed at media students, but rather at students from different curricular backgrounds, and with no required experience in digital media creation. This gave us the opportunity to verify the possibility of maintaining a *caméra stylo* as well as a Maysles-like minimalist approach, even while using professional equipment. The experiment was successful; the students understood that the scope was using digital media as a means to foster connection between cultures, not to train people for media professions. Even though we were operating within a professional video production studio, we behaved as amateurs, unhindered by the preoccupations and needs that characterize professionals. Back in Arezzo, I subsequently focused on what appeared to be the opposite problem: making sure the digital media produced with smartphones and personal computers alone rose above a casual, erratic, selfie-inspired level.

3. *Teaching basic filmmaking skills*

As can easily be imagined, the observations made at the close of the previous section represent the crux of the matter, which we will dedicate our attention to in this final section of the paper.

When the Kodak company introduced the inexpensive Brownie still-camera and opened the way to mass photography, it promoted it with the so called "point and shoot" philosophy: 'you just push the button and we will do the rest' (develop the film, print the pictures and return them to you). Something analogous happened with filmmaking, in 1965, with the introduction of Kodak's Super 8 film cartridges, which drastically enlarged the home movies market. Both of these markets, as the names imply, were predominantly focused on the family. The goal was to create family mementos to share, remember and recognize. The problem was that outside of the family that produced them, these documents lost their intelligibility and ability to trigger interest[17]. Something analogous still

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[17] See R. Odin, *Il cinema amatoriale* cit.; and K. Moore, *Amateur photography* cit.,

exists today in the smartphone age, though further elements come into play, such as social media platforms and the action of "posting". Nonetheless, especially with video content, obtaining the attention of viewers beyond the circle of family and friends implies passing from what can be defined as casual shooting to a type of shooting which adopts a basic grammar of the moving image, and which incorporates, if the process is to be successful, an editing session that organizes the shots into a coherent story.

Albeit doable, this is still an engaging process, and within our limits can only be briefly addressed[18]. Naturally, the starting point is to help students understand which aspects of their worlds they would want to represent. This type of preliminary work in filmmaking is referred to as the 'pre-production phase'. During this initial phase, students also learn basic information on shooting video. This implies notions of picture framing and an understanding of the basic types of shots and camera movements.

Once suitable topics are found, and basic filmmaking notions introduced, students enter the 'production phase', which implies the actual shooting. The emphasis here is to go beyond the 'point and shoot' attitude; it means moving away from a casual pushing of the 'record' button to shooting with the idea of articulating a specific message or point of view. One of the most crucial notions to grasp in this phase is the so-called 'shooting to edit', which implies evaluating each shot carefully and moving the camera in such a way that will facilitate the next and final stage of the filmmaking process, the 'post-production', or editing, which is when the story as a whole comes together.

This final stage, as can be expected, is extremely critical. In order to proceed, students have to familiarize themselves with an editing software. The hardest task, however, is mastering some basic editing

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pp. 26-28. Naturally, as both authors point out, family photos and home movies also have a historical and anthropological value which is of interest to scholars in these fields.

[18] An articulate, yet concise, overview of the documentary production process, which I often use with my students, is the one offered by A. ARTIS, *The shut up and shoot documentary guide*, New York, Focal Press, 2014. A brief overview which is mainly focused on an independent, low key production approach is offered by R. THOMPSON, *Get Close: Lean Team Documentary Filmmaking,* New York, Oxford University Press, 2019. Extremely useful, and also publicly available as a PDF download, is N. KALOW, *Visual Storytelling. The Digital Video Documentary*, Durham, North Carolina, CDS Publications, 2011.

rules which enable a compression of time and a sense of continuity, so that the many cuts that will necessarily have to be executed do not seem too apparent.

Perhaps the procedure in its entirety may strike the reader as rather overwhelming. Indeed, to reach a professional level of proficiency requires time, practice and dedication. It should be remembered, however, that the aim here is to bring students to a level of competency that makes their documents comprehensible and interesting for potential viewers. Based on years of experience, it can be affirmed that such a level is reachable within an academic semester.

In conclusion, we can return to the opening remarks on Albert Maysles' ambition to make the world a better place through documentary. This ambition rests on the assumption that the more people learn about each other, the easier it will be to overcome fear and intolerance that often lead to conflict and violence. In a very small way, my students' short videos seem to confirm this. Their recurrent topics are family life, the hometown community, career expectations, ethnicity, assimilation, emigration and immigration, job searching, local arts and crafts, traditions that risk extinction, artworks and monuments that are presented with pride. Often, these short documentaries are screened to students who are visiting from different countries, and inevitably the outcome is fascinating. Not only is such an audience taken by what they see, feeling that they have an opportunity to get closer to the culture of the country they are visiting, but they usually express the desire to create similar documentaries about their own countries. They are encouraged to take their smartphones and to go out and represent their worlds, in remembrance of Albert Maysles' masterclass twenty years ago.