

# CONNECTION

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## Why David shot himself

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"David Holzman's Diary," shown recently at the Museum of Modern Art and the New York Film Festival, is the sort of film which eventually had to be made. Given the state of filmmaking, with an ever increasing emphasis on personal cinema, it would have been just a matter of time before someone decided to point a camera at himself and started to show the ultimate in film candor and intimacy: a filmed diary. Though several underground movie makers have focused their cameras on their most intimate actions, including one filmmaker who films himself while he makes love to his wife and then films the birth of the child resulting from this union (the ultimate movie conception), none has ever used the diary form.

David Holzman, just fired from his job, decides to search for the truth within him and resolve his hangups by putting himself on film. By recording his life and reviewing it on celluloid, he hopes to attain "the truth twenty-four times per second," as in Godard's by-now-clichéd phrase. Holzman's camera becomes a witness to his life, recording scenes in his neighborhood, conversations with friends, and long hesitating soliloquies by himself. The camera becomes a protagonist when Holzman's insistence on filming his girl friend results in her leaving him. Rather than learn anything about himself, Holzman begins to live only through his camera. At one point, he realizes his dilemma, revolts against the camera, which he begins to treat as a person, only to revert to its powerful sway over his life. The theft of the camera at the end of the film resolves a conflict which Holzman has been unable to handle.

There are many brilliant moments in the film, for it is more than a record of one man's soul, it is also a record of a world in which all of us live. The scenes of old people on a 72nd Street bench with an accompanying soundtrack of a UN Security Council vote, the record of one night's television fare filmed in time-lapse, the constant background noise of WABC radio during several scenes in Holzman's apartment, all of this reveals the efluvium in which we spend our lives, seldom aware of it until art or film shows it to us in the mirror of others' lives.

This diary is the ultimate development of cinema verite, for not only is the film supposed to record the truth, but in the process of making it, it is supposed to reveal hidden truths to the filmmaker. But cinema verite is based on the supposition that what is record-



ILLUSTRATION BY BARLOW PALMINTERI

ed by the camera is indeed the truth. As David's Puerto Rican friend notes in the film, how can this be the truth if the filmmaker is constantly interacting with his subject, changing relationships and destroying the truth, as in some massive Heisenberg principle applied to real life?

The film's content is characterized by the fact that it is always concerned with immediate actions, feelings, reactions, sentiments. Because this diary is filmed instead of written, it does not contain the thoughtful introspection, reminiscence and generality which are characteristic of literary diaries. We know little of what Holzman does for a living, what his politics are, how he reacts to the world outside; instead, we are very aware of what happens to cross his mind at particular moments. By this phenomenon the past and the future, the outside world, in fact everything except the here and now as it is experienced by Holzman, never makes it as far as the consciousness of the viewer.

The film is also the ultimate in cinema verite technique. It is composed entirely of long takes, with no visible editing which might exclude some part of the truth. One shot in particular would be the envy of any documentary maker. Holzman starts shooting a girl in the subway, follows her as she gets off the train, walks up a flight of stairs onto the street, runs in order to keep up with her, and is finally forced to protect himself as she turns and threatens him. The beauty of the shot, the smoothness of this long period of continuous movement, the immediate compensation for different light levels, the sparing use of zoom, the continuously changing angle, combined with the tension of the chase in the scene, add up to a summation of the best qualities of the cinema verite shot.

We never really penetrate into Holzman, for cinema verite can only show us externals, substituting immediacy for insight. But we are given an excellent portrait of the Werther of our age, the sensitive young filmmaker. Holzman is

the embodiment of the film buff who constantly quotes from Godard and Truffaut, but never from literature; his visual orientation is clearly linked to the voyeurism which manifests itself in the film. He is at the same time the child who is constantly rediscovering the world around him, and the technologically-oriented adult who is powerless without the film equipment through which he looks at everything. He takes childish glee in violating taboos (as in a remarkable soliloquy on the virtues of masturbation), yet he is disoriented when his subjects upset the conventions he has set up for his film. For Holzman is trying to do what many artists attempt: in an age of alienation, the filmmaker tries to control a portion of the real world by recreating it in the world of the reel.

If the preceding were a complete characterization of the film, then "David Holzman's Diary" would be a mediocre even though somewhat original film. What makes the film great is the fact that it is a fiction film. The idea of using cinema verite technique for fiction films is fairly common; everyone from Godard to Mailer has done it. But no one has ever made a cinema verite film; the very term seems to be a contradiction, for cinema verite is based on the idea that reality is shown through spontaneity while fiction films show reality through a pre-conceived plan.

The fundamental difference in these two approaches creates a tension for the viewer as it becomes slowly apparent that this film is not cinema verite. Though there is nothing in the manifest content which betrays the fact that it is a fiction film, there are certain shots which are too incredible to be real. It might be the interview with the 35-year-old woman with hot pants who seems just a little too candid, or it might be the long shot of the woman in the subway, a shot which is a little too perfect not to have been rehearsed.

At some point the viewer begins to doubt that this is all really spontaneous. This doubt creates a tension between the spontaneous and the rehearsed, the real and the fictional, the true and the imagined. The heart of the concept of film—the suspension of disbelief—is totally ripped apart. Unlike a Hollywood film or even a Godard film which we know is fiction, yet believe to be real as we watch it on the screen, unlike the cinema verite documentary in which we are actually watching a spectacle, while we believe we are seeing intimate truths without interference, "David Holzman's Diary" forces the viewer to question what he accepts as real and what he thinks is fictional.

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