

The Faces of Change series of 25 films, funded by the National Science Foundation and produced by Norman Miller, was an unusual and innovative project for its time, the early 1970s. Although films had been used for decades in American education, most were of the illustrative-didactic variety, constructed as lessons in which a voice-over commentary dominated the images. Now changes in camera technology and new objectives in documentary filmmaking were beginning to challenge this approach. The 1960s saw the development of a more observational style of documentary, evident in the Direct Cinema and cinéma vérité movements pioneered by such filmmakers as Richard Leacock, Albert and David Maysles, Michel Brault, and Jean Rouch. Their films were attempts to record events from the point of view of an actual observer present at the scene. They were inevitably personal and interpretive in what they showed, but they imparted a sense of witnessing life as it is lived, seen through the sensibility of a particular filmmaker. Somewhat like fiction films, they also required the audience to make sense of what they saw, rather than giving them a set of predetermined conclusions about it.

This approach had been tried before in education, most notably in the Netsilik Eskimo project of 1963-68, directed by Asen Balikci and Guy Mary-Rousselière, and also funded in part by the National Science Foundation. The objectives of the Faces of Change project, however, were somewhat different. The Netsilik project had aimed to immerse school children in the daily life of a remote people, from which it was hoped they would derive certain general principles about human societies. The Faces of Change project was structured around a comparison of five different societies in different geographical and cultural settings and was primarily concerned with social and economic change. Moreover, it sought to examine this by focusing on the experiences of adolescents and young adults growing up in those cultures. The objective was not to communicate a set of concepts about change but rather to engage filmmakers and anthropologists in using film to explore processes of change as they were actually occurring in different circumstances.

My role in the project was to conduct one of the film studies in northern Kenya in collaboration with James Blue, a filmmaking colleague, and Paul Baxter, an anthropologist who had done his doctoral fieldwork in the area some two decades earlier. The focus was on the Boran people and, as the project evolved, specifically on two teen-age Boran boys who had very different life prospects. At this time I was also in contact with David Hancock and Herb di Gioia, who were conducting a parallel Faces of Change study in Afghanistan. We four filmmakers had all been inspired by the possibilities opened up by observational documentary and were keen to apply this approach in new ways to ethnographic filmmaking. Each of the studies benefited from the advice of an anthropologist who knew the people and area involved, but ultimately it was up to us as filmmakers to understand and convey the situation of the individuals we were filming. Each study set out to make one major film—Kenya Boran and Naim and Jabar, respectively, in the Kenya and Afghanistan projects—and to produce additional footage from which further "satellite" films could be edited. Kenya Boran was intended to be viewed as one continuous film but upon its release was split into two parts for distribution purposes. Fortunately this is no longer necessary, and the film can now be viewed in the form it was originally meant to be seen.

Our approach in Kenya, and the approach of Hancock and di Gioia in Afghanistan, was to look for situations in the lives of our protagonists that revealed some of the fundamental social and economic forces affecting their lives. In the Kenyan context, these were the introduction of agriculture, a growing money economy, modern education, the construction of a major road through the area, and the pragmatism of the Boran, who were a predominantly pastoral people traditionally dependant on cattle, camels, and goats. We felt that it was only by observing the interaction of these forces on the ground under specific conditions that one could gain a reasonable understanding of how they operated both historically and on a larger scale. This kind of filming, we also believed, provided an ideal way for students to learn about change, by witnessing the kinds of contradictions and difficult choices it threw up for our protagonists. As for our filming method, it meant identifying a set of themes we wished to explore and then spending long periods with our protagonists so that whenever these themes emerged in actions or conversations we were in a position to film them. Because our approach was based on observing and filming spontaneous events, we refrained from asking our subjects to enact any scenes for the film, although at times we did bring certain individuals together in order to film their interactions. We also filmed our conversations with our protagonists, in which we tried to find out their ideas and feelings about the problems that confronted them.

The Faces of Change project helped consolidate the development of observational cinema as a viable form of documentary for education, as did the projects of such other American filmmakers as John Marshall and Timothy Asch. Further developments occurred in Canada, France, and Britain, including British television, which actively encouraged observational approaches to documentary in the 1970s and 1980s. Today the legacy of this kind of filmmaking has passed largely to independent filmmakers, while much of television has retreated to the more conservative ground of illustrated lectures delivered by on-screen and off-screen presenters. Looked at in retrospect, the Faces of Change project represents educational filmmaking at one of its boldest and most innovative moments. It produced a body of work of both historical importance and continuing value, for the best of these films remain as fresh, intimate, and intellectually relevant as when they were made.

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