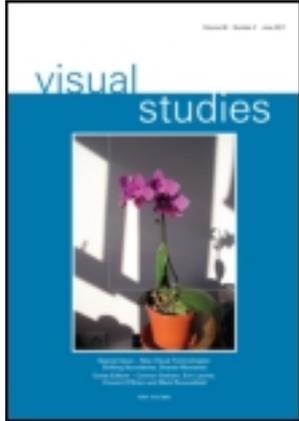


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### Real films to believe in: Richard Broadman

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## Review Essay

### *Real films to believe in: Richard Broadman*

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Richard Broadman's documentary films are a revelation. They make visible the people and processes essential to modern American life while dazzling viewers with a panoply of rarely seen visual documents. Frequently hailed by peers as 'the independent's independent', Richard Broadman remains a pioneering hero among independent filmmakers. And, regrettably, he has been granted the pioneering independent filmmaker's most typical fate: obscurity. That is until now. Broadman's untimely death in 2000 has spurred a renewed attempt to showcase and distribute his work. Documentary Educational Resources (DER), the celebrated film archive and distributor, has taken a lead role in making Broadman's films more widely available. This review profiles five of his most definitive films in anticipation of their public re-release.

Working primarily during the 1970s and 1980s, Broadman chronicles a rapidly paced moment of social and economic change in the United States by zeroing in on the micro-local. He does this with a clear-eyed mission that rejects the easy sound bites and the usual stereotypes. What is most notable is that Broadman seeks to document how cities actually work and he gets it right. His films are not abstract treatises on economic flows or violent populations but an unflinching probe of how people really live, and why. Broadman lived in the Mission Hill section of Boston and draws much of his cinematic inspiration from the large-scale changes enveloping this neighbourhood during urban renewal. As a result, the city of Boston and its residents are frequent topics of his films. However, this does not limit the scope of his work. In fact Broadman produces a type of universal filmic vocabulary by closing in on the locally specific. Tight shots describe individuals, a street, a house, a single transaction and render them legible as part of a larger set of national processes. This camera work is complemented by rich archival research firmly establishing each film's historical context. In the end Broadman's body of work substantially expands the range of intellectual analyses required to consider America's twentieth-century social history, particularly as it relates to urban development.

Broadman's most enduring legacy, in my view, lies in his deft ability to excavate social processes over and over without telling the same story twice or as you heard it

first. How can the story of urban renewal be surprising? How can sanitation history be suspenseful? I asked myself these very same questions. Broadman's sprawling body of work defies easy cinematic categorisation but his educational mission is clear. Whether chronicling the promise and neglect of America's public housing developments (*Down the Project*), urban renewal (*Mission Hill and the Miracle of Boston*), the municipal circulation of water (*Water and the Dream of the Engineers*), the history of romance (*Love Stories: Women, Men and Romance*) or the vanguard of the 1960s anti-war movement (*The Collective*), Broadman consistently unmasks twentieth-century America's forceful attempts to build itself on the backs of politically vulnerable populations and how these citizens responded.

A defining feature of Broadman's filmic technique is the reliance on first person narrative as a kind of central document ordering and determining what follows. He moves beyond the classic convention of a talking head to something more personal, interior and almost novel-like in its ability to expose the inner struggles and wishes of individuals navigating a bevy of existential crises. Two men recline casually in a living room and detail their journeys from Ireland to America. A father and daughter huddle around a Christmas tree laughing as a single streetlight glows outside. With a filmmaker's careful direction these images do not deliver sugary nostalgia but gritty emotional platforms for examining national change.

*Down the Project: The Crisis of Public Housing*, 1982, 60 minutes

Directed by Richard Broadman and produced by Richard Broadman, John Grady, Don Gillis, Byron Rushing and John Pennington

*Down the Project* rewinds the story of America's twentieth-century foray into public housing. Bracketed by the voices of early housing activist planner Catherine Baur and former tenant leader Joann Barboza, this film charts decades of political and economic changes that have shaped contemporary life within US housing projects. More significant than a screed on errant federal policy or the intractability of urban poverty, Broadman's visual document reveals the vibrant social allegiances birthed and sustained by public housing communities. In the context of the 1980s' political assault on public housing and its residents this film represents nothing less than a startling moment of truth telling. There are no Reganesque Welfare Queens driving Cadillacs or

sentimental paeans to the deserving poor. Viewers are instead brought into the hallways, living rooms, courtyards and personal discussions of real people. In this way Broadman and his research team reset the poles of an important national discussion, bypassing public housing's most prominent fictions. Broadman's myth-busting urban study is bold and necessary. Moving back and forth between several Boston housing developments including Mary McCormack Projects, Columbia Point and D Street, Broadman offers a probing account of the varying successes of these developments couched within America's changing views of the poor. The film relentlessly disrupts the viewer's ability to create types whether in reference to people, social institutions or buildings. Racial and economic caricatures are excised and replaced by living subjects fighting for a real shot at America's promises.

But it doesn't stop there. *Down the Project* also examines the benefits of public housing and, significantly, the potential road to its rehabilitation. This is an unexpected twist. Broadman is not satisfied with merely exploring the popular assertion that public housing is a failure. His production team, led by long-time collaborator John Grady, directly challenges and then subverts this claim. On-screen subjects analyse, synthesise and author alternatives. Sweeping shots of abandoned buildings are interspersed with boisterous conversations among a group of men who have maintained their boyhood friendships. These men swap lively stories of eating dinner at one another's homes, playing together in the streets and the loyalty necessary for successful fistfights. An obvious intimacy and family-like bond connects these former neighbours. John Pennington and crew capture this beautifully with tight shots and relaxed lighting framing each member. As viewers, we know we are being granted direct access to knowledgeable insiders. The visual contrasts of laughter-filled camaraderie among this interracial group and the forbidding emptiness of unoccupied buildings produce an emotionally jarring effect. These scenes enact loss and remembrance while poignantly dismantling the thesis that residents' so-called social pathologies caused the decline of US public housing.

*Water and the Dream of the Engineers*, 1983, 80 minutes  
Directed by Richard Broadman and produced by Richard Broadman, John Grady, Sam Bass Warner, Roy Rosenzweig, John Angel Grant, Larry Johnson and John Pennington

Spanning New Orleans, New York and Northern California, this film investigates the water-based circuits powering the US economy. A vast watery web linking reservoirs, public sewage, garbage disposal and western

agriculture undergirds yet jeopardises contemporary modern life. As the film's narrator warns: we ignore this essential infrastructure at our own economic and ecological peril. This is a compelling, cautionary tale; however, it lacks the verve and authority of other Broadman films. The heavy use of voice over works to connect gaps in the narrative but ironically tends to highlight moments when the narrative doesn't exactly hold together well. Despite these minor shortcomings, the film provides a fascinating glimpse into the rarefied worlds of urban miners, high-ranking bureaucrats and sanitation engineers. The rueful commentary of the 'last surviving founding member' of the American Water Works Association is a particular gem.

A central ecological issue threatening to unravel the nation's water network frames each of the film's case studies. Agribusiness in California has depleted the water supply for residents in a nearby town (Bishop). Interviewed at local shops and on the streets, residents lament the loss of water and cogently detail the cause. A verdant town once boasting peaches, plums and almonds has been transformed into a virtual desert. In New Orleans chemical contaminants drain into the Mississippi River and jeopardise the public drinking supply as well as the life of the beloved Brown Pelican. The film reveals the tight link between water distribution and US economic growth at the end of the nineteenth century. While engineers may have dreamt of the development of 'civilisation' as an abstract measure of human progress by redesigning the environment, private developers and industrialists aggressively pursued new profit-driven uses for the environment.

In the end this film is about three limitations: the limitations of growth in a capitalist economic model; the limitations of engineers as material analysts tasked to subdue the natural environment; and the rational limitations of everyday actors unwilling to comprehend how their way of life threatens their own existence. Broadman reports these limits using a nearly boundless array of landscape images and personal interviews to describe just how past environmental decisions have created new problems demanding new solutions. An engineer discussing how much waste is dumped in the ocean is interspersed with a shot of carefree swimmers enjoying the waters of New York's Jones Beach. Narration detailing the water's 'greasy, green, slime' accompanies images of babies playing on the beach. A swimmer comments, 'I don't want to think about what they dump out there'. This is Broadman at his best – never heavy handed or melodramatic but skilfully supplying enough information for viewers to form their own opinions and reactions. Broadman's film

well documents how competing environmental interests are expressed in high profile land-water battles; however, the viewer is left with only a vague and worrying sense of how this might be resolved.

*Love Stories: Women, Men and Romance*, 1987,  
85 minutes

Directed by Richard Broadman and produced by Richard Broadman, John Grady, John Bishop, Judith Smith, Kersti Yllö, Stephen Olech, Susan Steimer, Kate Davis and Barbara Ehrenreich

This film deserves to be retitled 'Women and Women: Beyond Romance'. Broadman's subjects are men and women who are variously single, married and divorced. But more than an exposition on male-female heterosexual romance, as its name would suggest, *Women, Men and Romance* explores the shifting tangle of historical expectations that have defined women's social roles in the US. Beginning with the Victorian period, the film shows how 'romance unfolded in the industrial city'. The male industrial leader provided a home where women were expected to create a comfortable family environment. Thus the city itself and its many physical changes are cast as another provocative sub-subject of this film. Panning shots of Boston's downtown, popular shops and surrounding neighbourhoods position the film's human subjects in physical time and place while also substantiating Broadman's central thesis that the history of America's urban economic changes directly informs gender roles. Anchoring this study with stunning archival photographs and footage, Broadman then begins his chief objective of deconstruction. Lush Victorian housing interiors illustrate how race and class circumscribe sexuality for the middle classes in ways irrelevant to working class immigrants also inhabiting the industrial city. Two friends remember what it was like growing up in an Italian immigrant household in Boston's North End. As young girls, they were expected to focus on finding a husband whereas their brothers were pushed to establish goals and careers. Another woman describes the excitement she felt when a suitor expressed interest and then her ultimate disillusionment when the relationship turned abusive. These are women's stories of coming of age and challenging the highly restrictive social roles given to them. Pre-dating but nearly echoing Eve Ensler's internationally acclaimed 'Vagina Monologues', the narratives here sharply critique the ubiquity of patriarchal norms. Black women and white women, young and old, simply tell the stories of their lives. In the process a potent, new social history unfolds live on screen.

The film also investigates the shifting gender roles of men. Just as industrialisation, migration, war and

economic boom times sketch a modern flow-line for women's changing relationships to work and domesticity, this same can be said for men or so the film suggests. Deindustrialisation and the rising numbers of women entering the workforce following the Second World War alter the assumed pathways for male social ascension. Broadman's crew presents and then deconstructs social orthodoxies of the time while exposing the profound ambiguities this produces for men and women. Documents, photographs and carefully chosen archival footage historicise the interviewees' commentary while placing their experiences in a national context. Broadman and his talented research team have a keen knack for creating film that documents and interrogates archival representations. This analytical nuance means that Broadman's films are themselves archives of archives. Thus a kind of double documenting stylises Broadman's films as visually dramatic research events as much as social commentary. Both outcomes provide viewers with critical tools for rethinking dominant cultural norms once branded as timeless truths.

*The Collective: 15 Years Later*, 1985, 60 minutes

Directed by Richard Broadman and produced by Richard Broadman, John Grady, Fred Simon, Daniel Hartnett, Stephen Olech and Anne Robinson

*The Collective* revisits the social unrest of 1960s era. This film captures the reflections and history of a radical Boston activist group known as The Collective. Formed in the heat of 1960s anti-war protesting, the Collective was a kind of non campus-based student protest organisation spinoff. Paying homage to the hybridised political message of James Brown and the Black Panthers, anti-war protesters shout: 'Say it loud. Say it proud. Power to the People'. Broadman's use of archival footage of this protest chant produces a powerful visual and aural synthesis of multiple political agendas converging as new organising possibilities at the end of the 1960s. The Collective situates itself here. This small cluster of working class young people would grow into an uncompromising vanguard of the new left.

Layering archival images with group and individual interviews, Broadman gathers a broad range of ideas and perspectives to drive the film's main narrative. What is most remarkable about Broadman's collection of interviews is the depth of reflection he is able to coax from his subjects. Long takes and quiet moments create organic pauses while documenting the way subjects process and connect their own ideas. While this may not sound noteworthy or compelling as cinematic drama, it very much is. This approach to on-screen interviewing is also a core feature of Broadman's documentary method,

patiently allowing subjects to think and enabling the audience to watch as they do it. Certainly the choice could have been made to edit out these scenes and save the audio as voice over for B roll but Broadman doesn't do this. These kinds of filmic decisions reflect Broadman's commitment to uncovering social meaning embedded in human actions and visual evidence as an act of co-production. As a result, viewers are introduced to a historical study deeply informed by the actors' own interpretations. The critical work of narrative interpretation is shared and often led by the subjects themselves. Long interview takes capture a thought process performed onscreen in full view. The potency of this hermeneutical approach is fully realised toward the end of the film. Having discussed their personal backgrounds, reasons for involvement and adult lives afterwards, Broadman's subjects begin an evaluation of their own history as radical activists:

We were confused sometimes, and sometimes we made mistakes.  
In any other country in the world, someone like me would be dead or in jail.  
We can not afford an unexamined political heritage.

These quotations mark a poignant moment of late twentieth century documentary filmmaking. Humility, self-reflection, gratitude and regret converge on-screen to produce riveting emotional content. These closing scenes are provocative not just because they reveal personal reactions often shielded from public view but mainly because they interrupt the self-righteous hysteria brand often associated with radical organisers. Several objectives of anti-war organisations such as the Collective were attained: the draft was repealed, America ended its war in Vietnam, MIT ceased formal sponsorship of the Draper Labs. Yet, the Collective's members are doubtful and speculative about their contributions to America's social history. The democratic populist vision they espoused points forward and not back.

*Mission Hill and the Miracle of Boston*, 1978, 60 minutes  
Directed by Richard Broadman and produced by Richard Broadman, John Grady, John Pennington and Roy Rosenzweig

Broadman's award-winning masterpiece documents the story of a Boston neighbourhood caught in the grip of urban renewal. Stock visuals of evil wrecking balls and innocent families typically pepper urban renewal narratives but Broadman deploys these familiar images to tell a radically new story. Images of litter-strewn stairwells, broken windows and empty buildings

evidence not dangerous, uncaring residents but the political establishment's unconscionable level of disregard for urban communities during the go-go years of suburbanisation. During this period, city residents of private and public housing find themselves battling land-hungry institutions eager to participate in a new economy dependent on services and Broadman is right there to capture it all.

The film's supreme analytic power draws directly from residents' personal accounts and critiques. Here residents are neither passive narrators nor embattled victims but forceful and determined critics of urban America's brand of market-led politics. These residents fight back with words as well as action. Whether owners or renters, Mission Hill's residents subvert simplistic racial and economic analyses by telling compelling stories based on their own experiences. The film interrogates why older cities like Boston fail to provide space and housing for the very populations that have enabled their growth. In conclusion, we learn that the promise of housing for working people living in the city has remained almost as elusive as legitimate representations of their needs, concerns and dreams.

Broadman showcases a nationally broadcast public hearing during which a fiery Mission Hill resident delivers testimony that could very well serve as the mantra of the film:

I never took nothing for nothing in this town. I've always worked . . . I don't want nothing from nobody and I don't intend to break the tenth commandment: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's goods. And that's exactly what urban renewal does. It corrupted this town. Turns people against people. The church against the people even. I'm sick of it. I want it out.

The camera then cuts back to a quiet living room interview with a couple (the Killileas) who conclude, ' . . . and that's really what happened. The beginning of it all. We won and we lost'.

Broadman's incisive editing follows residents as they collectively document a history that typically excludes them.

As a signature Broadman film, *Mission Hill and the Miracle of Boston* combines meticulous primary source-based research and insightful first person testimonies to create an edgy, intelligent film of exceptional depth and bite. Ideas typically play starring roles in a Richard Broadman film and *Mission Hill* is no exception. Land development policy, the decline of industrial manufacturing, the history of public housing

and penetrating analysis of the wealth that created cities like Boston are all explored and critiqued. The essential drama pivots on how these subjects converge to script the city's hierarchical social world based on race, class and location.

A particularly barbed critique of Boston's white elite is lobbed by Mr. Killilea the 'money they had (came) from rum and slaves. It was ill-gotten and there was no respect for the money. . . It was a false idol'. The historic battles between Boston's Yankee Protestant aristocracy and working class Irish are legendary but rare is the public platform for understanding these grievances as described by the actors themselves. Similarly, southern black families who migrated north are rarely tapped as knowledgeable informants or analysts of US history. Broadman's work corrects these omissions and produces radical social commentary in the process. Legendary activist Anna Cole details the housing options available to blacks new to Boston. Archival footage underscores Cole's description of rural southern life as well as the Hollywood-inspired dreams of many northern-bound migrants. Ad-splashed magazine pages line bedroom walls as housing insulation and teasing reminders of lives of plenty elsewhere. This visual paradox is brilliantly captured by the Broadman team's skilful blend of research, archival documents and feature interviews. Cole's experience of living in urban tenement housing and then moving into Mission Hill's deteriorating public housing is a bittersweet reminder of the limited housing opportunities for Boston's black residents. But her story is not allowed to end there. Wrapping newsreel of Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy and Andrew Young famously crossing the Pettus Bridge alongside the 1962 Newark insurrection and Boston's three-night Welfare uprising, Broadman's research team recreates the fiery political context for Cole's analysis. This is historical documentary at its best. Broadman pinpoints social conflict zones and builds a foundational narrative outward from there. The result is an expansive story rooted in the richness of local specificity yet bypassing parochial sentimentality.

Instead of a cast of professorial talking heads from leading universities, Broadman stocks his films with people most directly affected by the topic of his investigation. Also, by collaborating with residents as lead interpreters, he rejects the academic bias against first hand witnesses as authoritative intellectual sources. This is the realism animating his body of work. In keeping with a kind of 1970s expression of American neo-realism Broadman launches a bold critique of urban industrial disinvestment from the perspective of displaced workers and their neighbours. Like a non-fictional East coast version of Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977), this

film lays bare the frustrations of individuals coping with the reality of economic decline. Quiet scenes of children playing, neighbours talking and homes decorated with care punctuate both films and document vibrant, socially thriving communities. The organic nature of the city is expressed as human co-existence in multi-racial, multi-ethnic metropolitan neighbourhoods and not merely as a justifying metaphor for unbridled market expansion.

Less about images of abandoned buildings and scenes of downtrodden men and women, Broadman's documentary realism captures the raw emotional honesty of actors' voices as articulated by the actors themselves. They are not just interviewees but protagonists, lead narrators and co-producers. More than a neo version of neo-realism working to illustrate the constrained choices of everyday working people facing a social structure they do not control, Broadman's realism confronts a wide range of actors. Whether presenting members of a land-grabbing real estate board or a factory owner excessively self-conscious about his physical height, Broadman's populist conversation includes wealthy decision-makers in addition to working-class actors. Simplistic binaries of the oppressed and the oppressors are deleted from a narrative that typically thrives on them. Instead, nuanced storylines populated with breathing people, not types, are presented in full. By humanising working class subjects *as well as* their elite bosses, Broadman avoids creating a romantic, self-righteous tract on urban destruction and instead demystifies a city's essential actors. The formerly nebulous 'they' and 'those people' are shown together to the audience perhaps for the first time. The effect is mesmerising.

For film lovers Broadman's minimalist yet high-impact production style – linking unforgettable first person witnesses and a barnstorm of archival materials – will satisfy even the toughest post-modern critic. For students of urban history, I suggest you put down whatever you're reading now and watch these films today. Get ready for a rip-roaring ride through the best archives that you've never seen. The shock for you will come when you realise that Broadman's best work significantly predates popular historical studies prescribing a return to archives and local informants to restore a deeply wounded urban historiography (Radford 1996; Sugrue 1996; Hirsch 1998; Self 2003; Parson 2005). And lastly, for Boston fans, Broadman offers a treasure trove of authoritative images and voices that boldly reframe the city's defining twentieth-century street-level dramas beyond facile and sensationalised tropes of racial turmoil. And if you don't relate to film buffs, urban historians or Boston boosters, you can enjoy

Broadman films simply as compelling visual education that also entertains. These films neither overplay nor sugar-coat the twentieth century's social challenges. The industrial production of human society is given a clear-eyed review, synthesis and judgment. Public housing, water circulation, urban revitalisation, the 1960s quest for political alternatives and the ongoing social negotiations between men and women within the racial and ethnic communities that organise them – all of these constitute a symbolic grammar of modernisation and reveal the essential processes and actors determining US daily life. The result is not only believable but a thought-provoking call to action.

*Richard Broadman's films are distributed by Documentary Educational Resources (www.der.org)*

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