

“A Breakthrough Moment in Reality Filmmaking”

By Robert Drew

In a booklet he wrote decades later, this is how Robert Drew described this breakthrough moment in reality filmmaking:

I followed the candidate through a doorway holding a microphone overhead. My sound recorder was connected by a wire to the camera in the hands of Richard Leacock.

It was 1960, the year of a presidential election. I had selected as a subject of my first candid film a young senator, John F. Kennedy, who was running in the Wisconsin Democratic primary. The urbane Kennedy faced a Midwestern senator, Hubert Humphrey, an opponent who was a favorite of Wisconsin farmers.

For John F. Kennedy, winning the primaries could be a political breakthrough. For ourselves, passing through that doorway, linked by a wire whose signal would allow us to edit our film and sound tape together, we were joyously aware that this passage was a breakthrough for candid filming. Leacock carried the only camera that had been synchronized to my [audio] recorder.

Kennedy and Humphrey quickly forgot the camera and those of the other photographers I had assigned to work with us: Albert Maysles, Terence Macartney-Filgate, Bill Knoll and, for one evening, D.A. Pennebaker.

For five days and nights we recorded almost every move the candidates made, the sights and sounds of the campaign and the way the public responded.

For one sequence at a sensitive time, Leacock and I split up. He filmed alone the tension in Kennedy's hotel room as election returns came in. Four cameras converged on Kennedy's victory.

With twenty hours of candid film in hand, I was able to plan the editing of a story that would tell itself through characters in action, with less than two minutes of narration.

The first reaction to *Primary* from the networks, Time Inc., and viewers of the five Time-owned television stations that aired it, was an overwhelming silence. Then came the Robert Flaherty Award, American Film Festival Blue Ribbon, word from the greats—John Grierson, Jean Rouch—and imitation by [Jean-Luc] Godard.

After JFK's election and before his inauguration I screened “Primary” for the President-elect and Mrs. Kennedy at their compound in West Palm Beach. A few minutes after the screening began Kennedy shouted, “Get Joe out here!” and his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, appeared.

Kennedy appreciated our filming as a form of history. I proposed to make a next film on him as a President having to deal with a crisis. "Yes," he said. "What if I could look back and see what went on in the White House in the 24 hours before Roosevelt declared war on Japan?"

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