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The Film Maker Speaks

Log: In the Company of Men

by William Greaves

FIRST I GOT A CALL from Willard Van Dyke to say that he had suggested me to James ("Denny") Crimmins, of *Newsweek* magazine, to do a film for them. I was quite pleased at the idea of doing a film for such a large national magazine. But when I learned that *Newsweek* wanted a film on the hardcore unemployed I couldn't get excited by their offer. My lack of enthusiasm stemmed from the fact that *Newsweek*, being an establishment-oriented publication, would not, or could not, permit the level of candor necessary to treat the subject matter properly. Nevertheless, I felt I should at least explore their offer.

At the magazine's Madison Avenue office, Denny Crimmins, Lee Weston and *Newsweek* vice president Bill Scherman spelled out the interests of *Newsweek* in making the film. It was to be a public service to the many *Newsweek* advertising customers who were largely found in the ranks of America's leading corporations. It was to be *Newsweek's* gift to the National Alliance of Businessmen, to assist in their campaign to find jobs for the hardcore unemployed. Research had revealed to some members of the Alliance that one of the biggest stumbling blocks in employment of the hardcore was the problem of communication between them and the supervisory personnel of a company. An inordinately large percentage of the national hardcore came from minority groups; foremost among them the lower income black workers. The communication problem was thus seriously compounded by the problem of white racism and black hypersensitivity to it. In order to make headway it was necessary to deal frankly with these conscious and unconscious attitudes and behaviors within and between the two groups which leads to communication breakdown.

I expressed my lack of enthusiasm for doing the film because I felt that I could not get from *Newsweek* the free hand I required in order to do a creditable job. Denny Crimmins, then the project supervisor, hastened to assure me that I would have a free hand in designing the concept and substance of the film, so long as it met the overall *Newsweek* requirements of improving communication between foremen and hardcore men. No film maker can resist this kind of persuasion, so I set out to research the film.

Bill Scherman made an interesting observation, of which I became only too aware as I studied the subject: For the most part, neither the middle class foreman nor the lower class hardcore man want to have anything to do with one another. My research revealed that this aversion stems from the fact that the foreman has the problem of keeping up and increasing his productivity in order to hold on to his job. He is, as a consequence, quite unsympathetic to the idea of adding trainees to his work force. If the trainee comes from another cultural frame of reference, the task of transmitting information becomes more difficult for the foreman. Moreover, if the foreman does not like, hates or despises the trainee's cultural origins, the probability of his bringing the trainee successfully to a competitive level of productivity is considerably lowered. The situation for the foreman is further aggravated by the fact that his company may have gone on record officially with the community and the Federal government to hire lower class, other subculture unemployable types, and he is told, in no uncertain terms, that he must fish or cut bait. He is therefore trapped between top management and the hardcore man, and he doesn't like it one bit.

Hardcore man vs. supervisor

The hardcore man, however, has often sustained immeasurable negative, even traumatic, experiences at the hands of a sometimes insensitive, sometimes plainly prejudiced foreman. Moreover, he has often been brutalized, psychologically at least, by a frequently hostile white society. If he is especially sensitive, or made hypersensitive, then he will not wish to place himself in a situation in which he will be subjected to the same type of painful experiences that he has had in the past. He sees the white supervisor as a symbol of rejection, of authoritarian racist America, intent on inflicting pain, and he wants no part of this. He feels that he will not get promotions, equal pay or civil treatment on the job. If brought in contact with the supervisor he will tune him out, i.e., not listen to what he says. He will come late and leave early to avoid contact with his foreman. He will take long coffee breaks, and he will argue trivialities. He will unconsciously foul up the job in a wish to be fired, i.e., set free from the supervisor.

To further aggravate the situation, if the government, by one means or another, insists or tempts the hardcore man through financial incentives to look for work, then he is thrust into a situation that he really does not want any part of, and he doesn't like this position one bit.

Here we have a classic dramatic situation: Two characters, who want no part of one another, must relate to each other if each is to survive. In a way, it is a not-too-inaccurate image of black and white America as we move into the next decade. Is it possible for America to survive? Is it possible to get the mental and emotional mechanisms of these two groups to gear into one another and develop a productive relationship? If it is possible, then how in the hell is it done?

To translate all of this into cinematic terms, I used first the agency of psychodrama, which includes sensitivity training and role playing. I was privileged to have attended countless sessions at the Moreno Institute in New York, and was thus familiar with the technique of psychodrama. Secondly, I also decided to use *cinema verité* technique in the filming to add to the conviction and life of the film.

Having convinced *Newsweek* of the value of these two techniques, I next faced

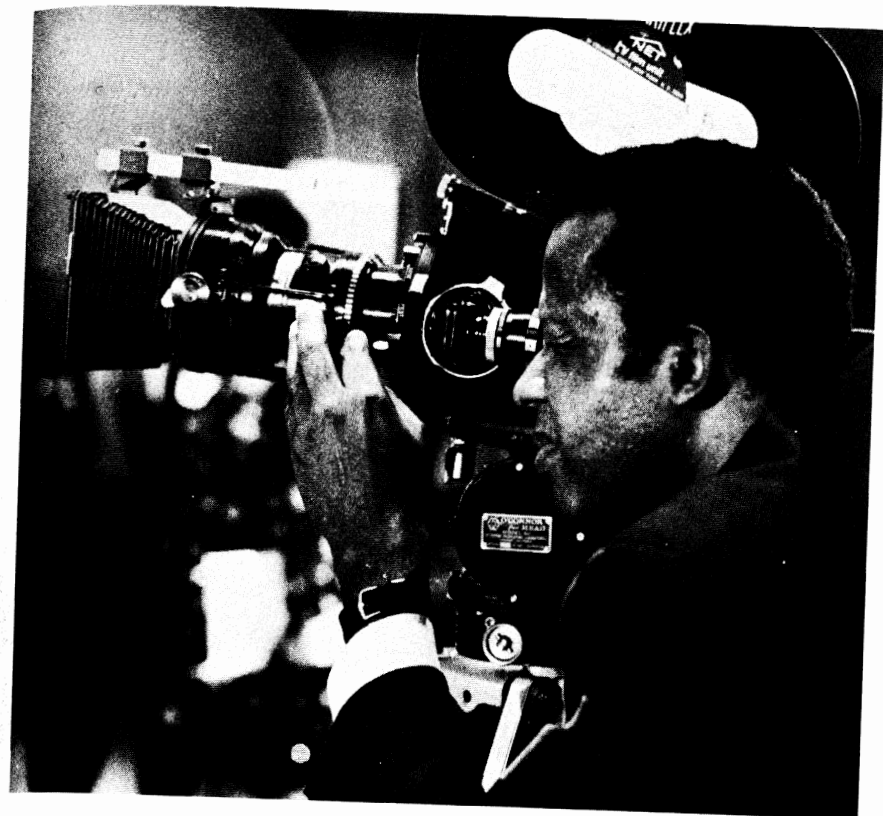


Photo by William Greaves

the problem of developing a treatment, and then finding the people who would breathe life into it.

The solution to the first problem seemed to me simple enough. Get some foremen, have them discuss and role play among themselves the problems they encounter on the job with hardcore men; have them role play between themselves their experiences in job situations. Stir well, then bring the two groups together in a psychodramatic encounter involving reverse role playing. The second problem was far more tricky to solve. It involved the task of convincing General Motors, i.e., from the foremen to the highest executives of the organization, that the film would be of positive value to them. This was achieved through consultations which Weston, Crimmins and I held with the Detroit "brass" and through the cooperation and skill of psychodramatist Walter Klavun in his dealings with the white foremen. It was fascinating to both Walter and me, that the southern white foreman was much closer to and more candid with his emotions than were his northern counterparts. It was virtually impossible to get the northern white foremen we filmed to express their feelings honestly.

The recruitment of the hardcore man was largely done in Atlanta in the economically deprived Kirkwood area. A largely random selection of young black men off the block was done through the magnificent cooperation of Dr. Denis



Stanford Sherman - The Bronx School



Joe Scorsone - Cheshire Reformatory



Veronica Glover - New Haven, Conn.



Al Stacey Hayes - Shelby, Miss.

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Jackson, an Atlanta psychiatrist, who had an easy rapport with the men chosen to help us. For my own part, having grown up in Harlem as a "culturally deprived and disadvantaged youth," I had no difficulty whatsoever rapping and getting them to express their concerns on camera. As the director of the film, my background in Harlem was a tremendous asset. While working with them, I found myself speaking fluently in my native tongue, "Harlemese." My attire during the Kirkwood sessions was quite informal and it was exciting to return to my roots. My crew for the Kirkwood session was all black and they were a source of pride and inspiration to the men who were out of work.

My crew for the General Motors session was all white with one glaring but essential exception: Me. My problem with the white supervisors was a little more difficult, as I had to overcome any resistances on their part to the fact that I was a black man. This problem was solved in several ways. First, I decked myself out in full middle class regalia—white shirt, conservative tie, grey flannel suit. Next, I invoked my adult middle class background in speech and general behavior. Then I tried to see the problem of communicating with the hardcore man from the white foreman's point of view. Last, but not least, I played second fiddle to Walter Klavun in my first contacts with the white foremen, in order to reduce their anxieties, their feelings of being threatened by a dominating northern black. Walter, a white northerner, was obliged by me to reveal only Waspish, stereotyped white behavior, in his first contacts in order to allay southern anxieties. It was somewhat amusing to finally come from behind my second fiddle cameraman-director position into the total control status of producer-writer-director, as well as cameraman of the project. Having developed confidence in Walter and gotten past the fact that I was a black man, the white foremen began to relate to both Walter and me much more easily than at first. The biggest problem arose when the hardcore men arrived for the encounter with these white supervisors. I had made a terrible blunder in not having advised Dr. Denis Jackson and his group in advance that I would be wearing a grey flannel suit and shooting with a white crew. The first thing they did on seeing me was to give me a tongue lashing for my "duplicitous." They really tore me apart in a sequence which I filmed and hoped to use subsequently. I was actually delighted by their hostility to me, as it improved the possibility of the white foremen loosening up, based on the fact that the Kirkwood men were hard on middle class types, white or black. The foremen relaxed in the knowledge that the fellas were not as prejudiced as perhaps some of them were, since they were rejecting me even though I was black too. As a result, they were less inhibited in their behavior than I suspect they would have been. I knew that the guys off the corner could express themselves. I was not so sure that the foremen would and so my crucifixion was functionally useful in solving that particular problem.

Technically speaking, the actual filming of the project was done with the use of two cameras. One operated by the cameraman and one by me. Two shotgun mikes were handled by a single crewman accurately aiming the mikes at each speaker. Of course, the cameras were hand held and the amount of artificial light used was negligible.

It seems to me that the big trick in *cinema verité* shooting involves the capacity to function intuitively, utilizing the sixth sense continuously. The crew must be

sharp, on its toes at all times because it will get one chance and one chance only to get that take.

The director-writer-camera man is a special breed because he must develop the ability to recognize what is dramatic and what is not. What is informative, even instructional, and what is not. He must have a strong sense of the theme and objectives of his film because he cannot possibly know what form the action will take. The people in front of the cameras are unwitting co-writers and co-directors of the project. For successful *cinema verité* shooting, it is absolutely imperative that all members of the crew, consciously or unconsciously, subscribe to the Heisenberg principle of uncertainty. This principle, formulated by the physicist, states that we will never know the true nature of reality since the most sophisticated means of perception we have available, e.g.; the electronic microscope, destroys the very thing it attempts to perceive—the atom—during the process of perception! Similarly, in *cinema verité*, the cameras, crew, and other equipment, trying to apprehend and perceive the spontaneous life before them, by their mere ego-assaulting presence, stifle and kill the spontaneous impulses of live, everyday people. And the task of the film maker is to minimize the Heisenberg effect. This is done through the pursuit of paradox, i.e., by attempting to reduce the size and presence of the “electronic microscope”—the crew and equipment—to zero, while increasing its power to perceive. The smaller the camera, the better; the further away they are from the subjects, the better; the more powerful the microphone and lenses, the better; the less ego and personality presence of director and crew members, the better; the more the crew dissolves into the background scenery, the better.

For the sponsored film, *cinema verité* can be a spectacular asset in that it increases the credibility of the sponsor, a virtue all sponsors worship. The problem is getting this anarchic thing called life to conform to the message you are trying to send. Here is where the art of editing must be invoked to the fullest. Through a proper juxtaposition of real life events those logical and thematic inferences which the sponsor seeks to convey begin to surface. It is in the editing room *cinema verité* must fight for its life, its integrity. It must yield only to higher levels of consciousness to survive. The editor, producer, writer, and sponsor must have an important statement to make. That is more important than the simple fact of a real piece of life captured for the screen. If it is really important to life in general, then *cinema verité* lives in the editing room. It thrives. If what the producers have to say is not very important to life, *cinema verité* turns upon itself, losing its credibility, and committing suicide in full view of producer and sponsor. Both Jack Godler (*Newsweek* project supervisor and co-writer with me on the commentary) and I found out how easily this kind of tragedy could occur.

Needless to say, the completed version of *In the Company of Men* was screened for both foremen and the so called hardcore men who had participated in the project. The value which they attached to the film was gratifying. I regret that *In the Company of Men* is now history, but I must now deal in the here and now of my forthcoming feature film, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm—Take One*.

In the Company of Men has already won prizes at The Job Film Fair, San Francisco International Festival, Chicago International Film Festival and the New York International Film and TV Festival.

Film Reviews

Edited by MASHA PORTE, Film Librarian, Dallas Public Library

Anansi The Spider

10 mins., color, \$140.00. *Producer:* Gerald McDermott, 1969. *Distributor:* Landmark Educational Media, Inc., 1600 Broadway, N.Y.

—reviewed by a children's specialist

This first production in Gerald McDermott's projected African Folklore Series is an animated film which uses the colors and forms of Ashanti folk art. Anansi, the spider with human qualities, is the wise but mischievous trickster-hero of the Ashanti people, and in this film he tumbles into trouble and is saved by his six sons, who are named See Trouble, Road Builder, River Drinker, Game Skinner, Stone Thrower, and Cushion. Storytellers will recognize this as a motif found in many countries. Included is a parable about the God Nyame and the origin of the moon.

The film opens with an introduction in which the narrator, Athmani Magoma, African Information Officer for United Nations Radio, discusses Ashanti folklore, culture, oral traditions and art. Joseph Campbell, noted folklorist and scholar, is the consultant who is responsible for the authenticity of the material. Thomas Wagner's background music, based on African tunes and rhythms, blends beautifully with the narration. Authentic African instruments from the American Museum of Natural History were used in the soundtrack recording. McDermott has here mastered a cinematic flow and grace that was a promise in *The Stonecutter* and *Sunflight* (International Film Foundation). One hopes that future titles in this series will have the same high standards of production and direction, for such a timely series has great potential.

This most interesting film can be enjoyed by children of all ages as well as by adults. The action, vivid colors, and story line are strong enough to hold the

attention of the pre-schoolers, although they may become restless during the introductory segment. School-age children and others will find the introduction informative and the story lively and exciting. The film can be used in book talks, story hours, lectures on African folklore, and for general programs.

Augusta Baker

—and reviewed by a film specialist

It is not surprising that Gerald McDermott should turn in his latest film to African folklore. For the simple bold patterns of his previous films seem to find at least one ancestor in the colorful striking patterns of African art and clothing.

Thus, in *Anansi the Spider*, McDermott's backgrounds seem to have more point and usefulness than ever before.

Lewis Archibald, free-lance writer on film, contributed recently to the *New York* magazine . . . Augusta Baker is New York Public Library's Coordinator of Children's Services . . . Joan Clark, audio-visual consultant for the New York State Library, is FLIC's Chairman . . . Penelope Jeffrey is Group Work Specialist in New York Public Library's Office of Young Adult Services . . . Philip Levering is the audio-visual consultant for New York's Suffolk County Cooperative Library System . . . Irene Porter is Assistant Film Librarian, New York Public Library . . . Mimi Ritti is at the Regional Film Center of Philadelphia's Free Library . . . William Vickrey is film librarian at the public library of Flint, Michigan . . . Don Walker is a supervising librarian on the staff of Lincoln Center's Library of the Performing Arts in New York.