



More muddy morals: A reply to critics

by Allan King

The moral muddleheadedness to which I referred in my earlier article ("Ironic Ethics", Cinema Canada, No. 102) is exemplified exactly by Michael Dorland and Gary Evans in their peculiarly perverse reviews. The children and staff of

Allan King's controversial documentary *Who's In Charge?* will be aired on TV Ontario in mid-February.

Warrendale first gave me the key to the phenomenon many years ago. In those days newspapers publishing pictures of emotionally disturbed children obliterated their faces with a big black bar. Naturally the children were outraged. "What is so wrong with us that our faces cannot be seen or looked at?"

It is Evans' mean and misanthropic assumption that Jimmy, Clint and the other men in *Skidrow* are somehow shameful and that, therefore, their portraits humiliate them. The facts are quite the opposite. They were pleased to take part in the film and proud of it. And it was John Grierson, a great ad-

miration of the film, who pointed out that it was exactly their refusal to accept the humiliation life would put upon them that helps us, the viewers, keep in touch with our own humanity and theirs.

Secondly, *Warrendale* didn't earn renown because the BBC refused to broadcast it. They didn't. David Attenborough, then BBC Controller, chose not to buy it (a different matter) because he felt it was imperative to preserve the totemic sanctity of taboo words like "fucking asshole." His decision, which I found curious, went unnoticed in Britain. Lord Harlech, the former ambassador to the Kennedy administration

and then head of the British Censor Board, was eager to buy it for his own Harlech Television and run it on the ITV network. Whatever renown the film had came more, perhaps, from winning the Critic's Prize at Cannes and the British Academy Award for best foreign feature. It may even have merit in itself. Jean Renoir certainly remembered it late in his life as the finest documentary he had ever seen. His jury citation for it at the Montreal Festival particularly recognized the obvious and deep mutual affection the children, staff and film makers had for each other.

The same could be said of the regard

Richard Leiterman, Chris Wangler, Arla Saare and I had for Billy and Antoinette Edwards of *A Married Couple*, and they for us. We remain good friends.

What is equally clear to me is the thinly veiled contempt (no doubt unconscious) which Dorland and Evans reveal, not only for the people who took part in the above films and *Who's in Charge?* but also for the audience. They speak of the 'victims' of the filmmaker offered up as fodder for ravening, bestial viewers who otherwise spend their time wallowing about in the commercial filth of soap operas as if they were all incompetent gulls. Really? Rubbish.

Dorland also attempts a blatant bit of bootlegging by wrongly linking R.D. Laing to the Tavistock Group Relations Program. He had nothing whatsoever to do with it. However, the false linkage allows Dorland somehow to connect schizophrenia with the work of the Conference. Dorland, who calls up Sartre, should remember the central thesis of "Saint Genet." It argues that Genet's foster parents, projecting into him their own guilty fantasies of theft, caused many of the problems of his later life.

Evans' memory is muddy indeed. He frequently misrepresents events and confuses people at the Conference. He lumps them together as a mass, refusing to recognize that the members had quite diverse viewpoints and experience. I can't help him in his general muddle but I can clarify one point. I didn't offer to pay the litigants' costs for two reasons: first, I've not yet been able to pay off my own and, second, the litigants didn't have any costs. They were assured by the initiator of the action that they could sue freely and with impunity. So far as I know, they did.

Of the six involved, two have since expressed their great satisfaction with the film and their pride at having been part of it. Twenty of twenty-eight members felt the conference was a positive and helpful experience.

The lady who cried, for example, who insisted she had not come to the Conference to weep, said afterwards that she felt relief in having cried. Her feelings had been a great burden on her, she had a long talk with Gordon Lawrence (the Conference director) later in the evening which she found very helpful. She had in fact wanted to cry somewhere.

You see, some people *do* think crying or expressing feeling is shameful. This is awfully tough on people like the unemployed who may have intense feelings about their situation. It may be helpful to offer such people an opportunity to express their feelings.

This is not to say that one ought to induce people to express feelings or manipulate them to do so. And this, I insist, the consultants were scrupulously careful not to do. That some people experienced the conference as manipulative doesn't mean that it was. Indeed it is interesting that perceptions of the conference and exactly what was occurring vary widely right across the spectrum and also, over time, change.

For example, I have been working for some weeks now with one of the conference members on another project. He frankly acknowledges that our administrator had been perfectly clear in describing what the conference offered, that he said the opposite on camera at the conference and he agrees now that what he said on camera was not the case. It is my experience (and the member I was talking to says that it is his too)

that we sometimes feel deceived, persecuted and attacked even though we may not in fact be the object of an attack. This feeling is particularly likely to arise in times of stress or anxiety - like being unemployed, for example. It may be argued that to allow ourselves to express this feeling may help us to manage it. This was certainly the experience of the conference member to whom I am referring. And it is certainly one of the notions on which the conference was based.

The question of ethics came into acute focus at the most recent Grierson Film Seminar at Niagara-on-the-Lake this fall. Each year the Seminar brings together films, filmmakers and scholars from across the country and around the world. *Who's in Charge?* led off the week and sparked an intense debate which then shifted in turn to other films shown during the week. I realized with a sag of dismay that I've been listening to this debate on and off for over twenty-five years. And it hasn't budged an inch.

Year after the same preoccupations: voyeurism, free consent, exploitation and manipulation. The debate is carried on with unremitting ferocity, with venomous imputations of unethical behaviour on the part of others - those disagreed with politically, those whose films are disliked. Yet how curious that in all the years of going to such seminars, I can't recall a single filmmaker who didn't seem totally dedicated and fanatically scrupulous in his or her work. (Journalists I've met have generally seemed to me to be the same.) This suggests that the issue may be, in some curious way, a smoke-screen to hide something else - just what, I'm not sure.

But one notion did occur to me during the Grierson discussions. It's this. If you described the work we carry on - whether as artists or journalists - the words might go like this: we take in the experiences of other people (their lives, if you will), we chew them over, digest them, grunt and groan, and finally produce them in some formed expression. Now that describes something a lot more serious than voyeurism or manipulation. You could call it cannibalism.

So maybe our work stirs up in us a lot of primitive fantasies and feelings of which ordinarily we may be unaware, no matter how scrupulous we may strive to be in our work with our subjects or, indeed, however innocent we may be of actual malpractice. And since the artist and the consuming audience both take part in this work, that's a lot of anxiety to be got rid of. I mean, clearly I am not a cannibal and I can make damn sure that's clear by projecting the heinous crime onto *you*. That is, by projecting my guilt onto you so you will carry it for me - unless you're swift enough to project it onto someone else.

At the Grierson Seminar this process of projection went on in flamboyant fashion, everyone jumping up and down screaming, "Not me!", "Not me!" And they were right. Not guilty of bad ethics, not guilty of conscious deception but clearly guilty of unconsciously projecting their own fantasy guilt onto others, fantasies which had in fact little or nothing to do with the actual filmmaking on view.

It may be that I am a sinister sadist as Dorland and Evans suggest. But what I think is both sad and sinister - at least in the sense of their left hands not knowing what their right hands are doing - is the self-righteous and contemptuous way they put their own destructive feelings into others.

Perverse misreadings

by George Robertson

I read the pieces on Allan King's documentary, *Who's in Charge?* with astonishment. They are so perverse in their judgements as to suggest a wilful misreading of his intentions.

A picture caption identified King as a "sinister documentarian of the future." The meaning of this ambiguous but presumably unflattering description is found in a paragraph in Michael Dorland's article which states: "To identify the infliction of pain experienced by a small social group for the entertainment of a larger social group is to understand it as sadism. And it was the sadism of the program that constituted the real novelty of *Who's in Charge*, Allan King's contribution to the sinister television documentary of the future."

You assume that "the infliction of pain" was Allan King's intention, was even what the program was about. You therefore assume that his declared intention, and the intention fully understood by the participants, that is, to attempt to explore the meaning of what it felt like to be unemployed by observing people as they worked out for themselves their thoughts and emotions on the subject, was a smoke screen, that Allan King and the CBC were simply involved in a "sadistic" exercise which would make voyeuristic viewing. To see the program thus is not merely uncharitable, which a critic is entitled to be, it places the critic's entire intellectual apparatus under grave suspicion.

The review by Gary Evans purports to place King's work in a long perspective, from *Skid Row* in 1956 to the present, and the common thread of King's documentary work appears to be that "the subjects of these films were either helpless... or unwilling... to call the filmmaker to account for his public display of their private lives."

This description might, of course, apply to any number of documentaries, including the bulk of Fred Wiseman's work: to regard the subjects of King's films as somehow defenceless is to miss the point, or

several points, one of them being that it is not whether the subjects of documentary films are inclined to "call to account" the filmmaker for his invasion of their privacy, but the nature of the understanding, whether legally binding or verbally implied, between subject and filmmaker, that is relevant. That, and the ultimate purpose of the film: what do we learn from turning our cameras and microphones upon real people? Why do we do it?

I knew Allan King in Vancouver, when *Skid Row* appeared in 1956. That documentary (when television documentary was in its infancy) succeeded in opening windows into the lives of men, the derelict alcoholics of Cordova St. and Water St., of whom most of us had known nothing. It was neither cruel nor sentimental: it simply observed. And far from feeling that they had been exploited by the camera, most of those men later told King they'd liked it. You may question what weight can be placed upon that kind of expression, as you undoubtedly will question how much weight to be given to the expression by the *majority* of those participating in *Who's in Charge?* that they had benefited from the experience. Question it, but admit that it hardly squares with your notion that King has built his career on doing films about people who were helpless or unwilling to call him to account.

Allan King's documentary record reveals a filmmaker concerned with exploring, and revealing, the meaning of people's lives. Not meaning in the theological sense, but in the sense of going behind patterns of behaviour to the living, breathing, sometimes joyous and sometimes suffering person within. His honesty of observation in *Warrendale* and *A Married Couple* have taught us things not only about other people, but about ourselves. He has always been a filmmaker of risk. The record of his arguments with broadcast authorities suggests a dogged, and often self-defeating, determination to pursue the truths that lie behind the usual glib assertions of the popular media. He is far from being, even in a whimsical sense, the "sinister documentarian of the future." Anyone who has known him and worked with him knows at what cost to his own career he has sought for an understanding of human behaviour.

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