



The Who's In Charge? debate — conclusion

King of the mixed-media metaphor

by Stephen Block

Question: How many psychiatrists have to be employed to change an unemployed person?

Answer: Well first of all, you have to know that the answer is none because nothing can change an unemployed person unless he or she wants to change.

The other part of the answer is ten: two to watch the patient, two to help him or her cry "somewhere", two to explain that "we sometimes feel deceived", and four to share in the "experience."

Sound convoluted? Well, you should have seen *Who's In Charge?* Unfair and perverse it may be to call Alan King sadistic, sinister, voyeuristic for the way he used a panel of psychiatrists and group dynamics experts to bring out the feeling of despair and misery of 28 unemployed people and *capture it all on film*. Irrelevant is perhaps a better assessment. What seems relevant is whether King's undertaking succeeded in doing what it set out to do.

What King says he was out to do was *film* the feelings of despair experienced by unemployed people to show that "unemployment can be horribly painful and disorienting." Does he do this or is his audience left wondering about issues peripheral to this theme such as: Why did the panel members *seem* so callous? What is group therapy anyway? What is it like to sit in front of a camera, with floodlights full in the face while fielding personal questions within the pressure-filled scenario of a group encounter?

King says that it is understandable

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that some group members felt deceived, persecuted and attacked. This is a common feeling "in times of stress or anxiety - like being unemployed for example." Being unemployed can be one example of a stressful situation. But what about being in a situation completely alien to one's experience - like being on camera, or in group dynamics? One must be cognizant of the fact that anyone not familiar with a therapeutic process, whatever that may be, will likely show signs of disorientation. If we add to that a theme of unemployment, and ask ordinary people, not used to expressing themselves publicly, to speak candidly about their feelings and their experiences, the result is a pretty confusing message.

Setting aside the most serious problem with the film, its focus on *individuals* who are already forced to spend too much of their time focusing on their trials as unemployed people (King could have been asking much tougher questions about what was happening to our society and its institutions), does King's film inform the viewer? Not really. Instead, it leaves the audience suspicious of the therapeutic and the cinematographic process. It draws focus to the mechanics of the film. There is a structured, stagey feel to the conference as it is filmed. The whole thing *looks* deliberate, even if it was not, which in itself becomes hard to believe.

The film says relatively little of the plight of unemployed people, *even if* as King claims some 20-odd of them were enriched by the experience of the conference. There are over 50,000 times that many unemployed people in Canada. Understanding those numbers means understanding this is a political issue and not just a psychological one - especially not first and foremost. It was the conference's stated policy to steer clear of political and economic issues. The exact reason for this is never made clear. Presumably it was to keep the focus on the suffering of the unemployed and present this to the viewing public in a clear, direct, unambiguous way. This would seem to be a noble gesture, and an important one from the point of view of informing the public. This is why the failure of the film must be carefully explored and understood.

It seems clear that the failure lies in the fact that a documentary's success relies in part, but heavily, upon its being perceived as a project that was not too preconceived. Certainly documentary filmmakers' intentions and personal views often come through in the films they make, but this really is not a problem, nor an issue unless the film appears "cooked up." If so, the audience will naturally come away wondering what the film was a documentary of, or perhaps more pertinently, an experiment in. Then one looks for motives, just as members of the "control" group did.

In King's own defense of his motives, intentions and success of his project, he exposes the very problems which were present in the film. The woman who cried on camera "had in fact wanted to cry *somewhere*." What does this phrase mean, to say someone had wanted to cry *somewhere*? Was her crying bitter-sweet? Did she like the job she once had? Did she have an opinion on working conditions and prerogatives for working people in Canada? Did the state of her personal life or social situation before being laid off ever get her down? Did she feel confused, defensive, stressed on camera? Was it the job of the panel members to 'facilitate' her in

her "need" to cry? If so, then was this therapy, in which case how important or relevant is therapy to a documentary on unemployment? King evokes these questions in defending himself against his critics, but he never succeeds in answering them in his film.

The tragedy of this event called documentary is that it did have many ingredients which could have been used to really do something and/or say something. It is not as if documentary-style films have outlived their usefulness, as has been suggested by some. It is that this attempt fails because it is of two minds. Listen to King's post-mortem again: The conference was an offer to unemployed people to "explore their experience of employment and unemployment and communicate" with their fellow citizens. But the structure of the conference was largely about group dynamics where a panel acted as facilitators in an essentially therapeutic process. What kind of "experience" was being explored then, and what kind of communication did we see? We in fact did see a man throwing a chair and charging at the convenors. What did this tell us about unemployment? that unemployed people get frustrated when they are ignored? How does this reaction differ from the reaction of an *employed* person? Are unemployed people emotionally disturbed or dysfunctional *because* they are unemployed or do their inability to express feelings have a different origin, one which may have stemmed from their being *employed*?

King says the intention of the film was to do the "real work of puzzling a question through." Yes, but which question? How unemployed people feel about their lives? How people who have never been in therapy *nor* on camera cope with all that hubbub while trying to answer a question and express themselves clearly and honestly? How therapy can alleviate the problems of the unemployed? Why therapy is actually useless in the face of the enormous social problem of unemployment? Who can even discern what questions are being posed let alone puzzled through?

The conference, according to King, offered an alternative to the feeling that "we can be rescued from the hard work of dealing with reality." But in the conference how was reality portrayed? Was it meant to be conveyed through hard-bitten psychological technique? Were the therapists and convenors merely the conveyors of the hard knocks we all have to face? Are these the same kinds of hard knocks encountered in "reality"? Are these the same hard knocks which "we" all face? Were the panel members then putting themselves forward as signposts of our common hard-knock reality by being callous, calculated, impersonal, exact and aloof? Is this part of the therapeutic process? Does it reflect something about reality or something faulty about the *attitudes* people have when facing this "reality"? If it was the intention of the panel members to represent themselves as the signposts of King's perception of reality, i.e., hardboiled, exact, imperious, then that intention ought to be admitted and made clear. It may put the whole undertaking in a better light, not a worse one.

But if this was not their intent, the purpose and the results of the film are even a greater muddle. All that we are left with is King's (*conscious* or *unconscious*) desire to explain to the unemployed that "we sometimes feel deceived."

Who the "we" is here is not very clear. Is it the "we" of us who do not know when we are being deceived and when we are not? Is there an explanation for why this may or may not be the case, aside from the fact that unemployed people sometimes feel deceived, attacked, persecuted? Are they ever really deceived, attacked persecuted or is it all in their minds? This is an interesting question given King's censure of those who he says are condescending toward the unemployed.

Is it an important part of the film's statement to show that people's suspicions are not really justified? But then, if they are not justified when directed at King, are they justified when directed at those who *are* in charge? Here again, it becomes difficult to understand which person in authority is being railed against. King seems to think that this reflects unemployed people's inability to come to grips with the fact that nobody is at fault and that their destinies are in their own hands. But is it true that no one is at fault, that the question can be reduced to a purely psychological one? Given the rules of the conference, that political and economic issues were not to be explored, that only people's "experience" of employment was to be explored, can political and economic issues really be kept separate from the experience of people's being employed or unemployed?

The quasi-psychological style runs not only throughout King's self-explanations and responses to his critics, it exposes the gist of his fully evolved style of filmmaking. His critics are guilty of "projecting", of "preserving a paranoid position of fight or flight", of "feeling a need" to do such and such. Psychology is an important ingredient in the way he views and understands everything. But is it an informed psychology or is it the psychological offering of someone in the process of "puzzling a question through?" Do his psychological retorts properly address his critics' queries, or are they merely defensive barbs hurled at to an audience who has never read (Christopher Lasch or) whoever (else) was being paraphrased?

Many more questions remain about the film, its direction, its conception, the way the conference was set up, the questions it raised as opposed to the ones it perhaps ought to have raised, its vision or lack of vision, and so on. For instance, how were the group members selected? Were they all selected for specific reasons? Were they all unhappy about being unemployed, less happy than when they were employed? Were they of those people who had rewarding jobs or among those who could look forward to jobs they found rewarding? Was it just a question of their finding employment again, somewhere, somehow? Did being unemployed give them pause concerning the quality of the life they had been leading? Is the quality of life of the average *employed* person in Canada very good? If not, why not? What are the prospects for the quality of life improving? If they are not good, is this an important social issue, or merely a lesson we all have to take to bed with us at the end of the day?

King offers us an explanation for his critics' motives. They are political. He, the innovator, is stirring up things that some people would prefer be kept undisturbed. What was "disturbing" in this way about his film is not evident, at least not politically anyway. In fact, his critics were attempting to charge him with not facing the real tough political

issues; as they were criticizing his film for lacking insight, substance and political conviction.

Clearly, with every new venture into documentary filmmaking, especially by a filmmaker who intends his film to be controversial and radical, even the question of what is radical and controversial must be "puzzled through" as well. One would have hoped that the vision as well as the mechanics of such an undertaking, as complex and as potentially influential as this one could have been, would have been "puzzled through" *before* the conference was convened and the film was shot. Because of the unclear messages, roles, boundaries, in the film and in the conference, and the lack of a clear conception of what the film or the conference was supposed to achieve, or what the most appropriate technique (therapeutic or not) was to achieve it, the audience cannot possibly have come away knowing very much about what King or anyone else wished to communicate. It is equally unclear, for the same reason, what "experience" we were all sharing in. Certainly it was not an experience that would have informed Canadians on the ever-increasing problem of unemployment, unless of course it was meant to be yet another ironic lesson in how to sweep a problem under a rug.

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