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On the Bowery

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Abstract

Lionel Rogosin (1924–2000) spent four months in 1955 making his first film—a documentary about the life of men living in New York City’s famous skid row, the Bowery. In this film he shows what these men’s lives consisted of: their coping, their friendships, their suffering, and their addictions. He does this by creating a fictionalized account of one itinerant railroad worker’s three-day experience living on the Bowery. The documentary thus produced can be seen historically as a combination of elements of earlier, staged documentaries, such as *Nanook of the North* (1922) by Robert J. Flaherty, and the more engaged style of post-World-War-II Italian Neorealism. It can also be seen from the more abstract viewpoint of documentary modes. While initial reception was mixed, *On the Bowery* is now considered a milestone in American documentary cinema.

Keywords: cinema, documentary, social commentary, Lionel Rogosin

キーワード: 映画、ドキュメンタリー、社会問題、ライオネル・ロゴシン

Introduction

Bums and winos, homeless hobos, lying on the sidewalk sleeping it off, sitting up for a moment’s blurry wakefulness to coax the bottle upside down and drain it, as if a drop of dregs could fix a drink. Unshaven, unwashed and unashamedly unkempt, spare-a-dime panhandlers wobbling among the flophouses and dives. No stores, no churches, no movies, not even a thrift shop; no pawnshops—nothing to hock; no Laundromats, no cleaners; not a barber, not a business, not a warehouse, not even a whorehouse. Just bars and Bowery bums between the lighting wholesalers and the restaurant suppliers. Skid Row. A ghost town, filled with living ghosts, and not long for the living, either. The Bowery. (Ferrara 1)

The Bowery is the name of a street and the surrounding neighborhood in the southern part of Manhattan in New York City. It occupies a roughly sixteen-block, north-south rectangle bordered by Chinatown to the south, Little Italy to the west, the East Village to the north, and the Lower East Side to the east. The Bowery (from *Bouwerij*—Dutch for farm) has a long, colorful history. Beginning as an Indian trail and later becoming part of the Post Road that connected New York and Boston, the Bowery has worn many guises. It was the site of New York City's largest slaughterhouse. It became the city's first entertainment district and over the years catered to both lowbrow and highbrow clientele. The Bowery served as the early training ground for the likes of Irving Berlin, Eddie Cantor, and George M. Cohan. Tap dance, vaudeville, and, more recently, Punk Rock were all born here. The Bowery has featured in American literature, providing the setting for both Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and the climax of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900). Over the years many writers and artists have made the Bowery their home: both composer Béla Bartók and writer William S. Burroughs resided in the Bowery for long periods. Much of the power of New York City's infamous Democratic Party political machine, Tammany Hall, was centered in the immigrant communities living in and near the Bowery.

As illustrated in the quotation above, however, the Bowery's main fame lies somewhere else:

From the middle of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth, the Bowery was the world's most infamous skid row. Under the shadow of the elevated Third Avenue line, the sixteen-block stretch of lower Manhattan was jammed with barber schools, bars, missions, men's clothing stores, slop joints (cheap restaurants), flophouses and tattoo parlors. The estimates vary, but in its heyday somewhere between 25,000 and 75,000 men slept on the Bowery each night. (Isay xiii)

The heyday period of the Bowery as skid row ran from roughly the end of the Civil War until World War II. After World War II, because of the G.I. Bill and other government benefits, the normal post-war swelling of the homeless ranks failed to materialize, and the homeless, derelict population of the Bowery sank so that "by 1949, there were only 15,000 men left on the Bowery." (Isay xiv) This number, in turn, sank to approximately 5,000 by the mid-sixties.

It was this post-war Bowery of the 1950s that filmmaker Lionel Rogosin chose as the setting and subject for his first film—a documentary chronicling a three-day period spent in the Bowery by itinerant railway worker Ray Salyer. The purpose of this paper is three-fold: 1. to

consider the origins and development of Rogosin's documentary method, 2. to summarize the story at the center of the film, and 3. to examine what Rogosin finds to be the key elements of life for those living on the Bowery.

The Method

What we wanted was to extract a simple story from the Bowery itself. . . . Not a 'typical' or 'symbolic' story, but an essence of the truth of the place to expose (not dramatize) the hopelessness, the aimless dread and fear of such lives—without an arrogant sentimentality or too-generous morbidity on our part. . . . Our actors were taken from the street, and would speak their own argot. . . . We went into the bars, two at a time, unshaven, dressed in Bowery clothes, feigning drunkenness, forced to swallow glass after glass of the foul, flat beer they serve. Sitting in the midst of the agitated ferment of drunks, we became part of the smell, the gargoyle faces, the sleeping and retching, the whole agonized disturbance. (Sufrin ⁽¹⁾)

At first glance, Lionel Rogosin seems an unlikely candidate to make a documentary film about the Bowery. Born in New York on January 22, 1924, the only child of a successful Russian immigrant, he grew up expecting to take over the family textile business. He graduated from Yale with a degree in chemical engineering, and, after two years in the navy during World War II, he returned to New York to work at his father's Beaunit Mills. He rose to be head of the textile division of his father's company, but, largely because of his experiences during World War II and his travels in Europe and Israel after the war, he began to feel that his true vocation lay in raising his voice against social injustice.

In 1954, therefore, he resigned from his father's company with the intention of making an anti-apartheid film in South Africa. There was just one problem: he had never made a film before. The solution he hit upon was to "to make a short film that was dramatic enough to impress people." (*The Perfect Team*) The resulting film was *On the Bowery*, which became, according to Rogosin, "my school of learning to make a film." (*The Perfect Team*) For *On the Bowery*, Rogosin drew his inspiration from two disparate sources: 1. pioneer documentary filmmaker Robert J. Flaherty and 2. post-World-War-II Italian Neorealism.

Robert J. Flaherty's 1922 silent film *Nanook of the North* is considered to be the first full-length, modern documentary. Flaherty was known for his research methods, which typically involved living with his subjects for extended periods, simply observing. This and other films

by Flaherty were noted for the sympathetic treatment of native cultures, the combining of documentary subjects with a fiction-based narrative structure, and the overall poetic treatment of the material presented.

The making of *On the Bowery* reveals the heavy influence of Flaherty. First of all, for research, Rosalind Kossoff—famous art film distributor and a mentor to Rogosin—suggested Rogosin follow Flaherty’s lead: “If you’re going to be like Flaherty, you just observe six months or more, just walking around, up and down the streets, in the bars, in the flophouses, in the mission, in all places, getting to know the men. No camera.” (*The Perfect Team*) The exotic, “native cultures” that Flaherty treated so sympathetically became the more mundane “native culture” of those living on the Bowery. While Rogosin and cameraman Richard Bagley had initially envisioned a completely script-free film with no sets, no actors, and no dialogue, they, just as Flaherty, found it more effective to incorporate some artifice into the film. Echoing Flaherty, they, therefore, included some scripted scenes within a loose fictional narrative. The poetry of *On the Bowery* is visual and centers largely on faces. Rogosin, in fact, conceived of this film as “a study of faces.” (*The Perfect Team*)

When cinematographer Richard Bagley asked Rogosin what look he wanted for the film, the director pointed to his Rembrandt paintings and said, “That.” It’s Hendricks, as seen through Bagley’s lens, who takes the film to an exquisite peak of Rembrandt-ness, as his character studies the faces of old men sitting in a bar, a wash of pearly sunlight slanting in from the windows. It is Bagley watching Hendricks watching the men, a lyrical visual duet about mortality, empathy, despair and the kind of intelligence behind the eyes that a so-called “Bowery bum” isn’t supposed to possess. (Boone)

Italian Neorealism, illustrated by such masterpieces as Vittorio De Sica’s 1948 film *The Bicycle Thief*, involved, more than anything else, taking the camera to the streets. It was “characterized by stories set amongst the poor and the working class, filmed on location, frequently using nonprofessional actors.” (“Italian Neorealism”) *On the Bowery* contains all of these elements. The story in *On the Bowery* centers on what many might consider to be the dregs of American society, was filmed entirely on the streets and in the bars and flophouses of the Bowery in New York City, and featured no professional actors.

Bill Nichols, in his excellent *Introduction to Documentary*, has suggested that documentaries

can be understood as products and/or reflections of three things: periods, movements, and modes. He, however, sees the concept of modes as an all-encompassing framework for the analysis of documentaries:

Periods and movements characterize documentary, but so does a series of modes of documentary film production that, once in operation, remain a viable way of making a documentary film despite national variations and period inflections. . . . Modes come into prominence at a given time, but they persist and become more pervasive than movements. Once established, though, modes overlap and intermingle. Individual films can be characterized by the mode that seems most influential to their organization, but individual films can also “mix and match” modes as the occasion demands. (Nichols 33, 34)

In addition to considering *On the Bowery* from a historical perspective—i.e., period and movement—it would be useful, therefore, to examine it through the filter of Nichols’ concept of documentary modes.

Bill Nichols proposes six documentary modes: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative. Each mode has a different emphasis (see Nichols 33):

- Poetic: emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization.
- Expository: emphasizes verbal commentary and an argumentative logic.
- Observational: emphasizes a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera.
- Participatory: emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subject.
- Reflexive: calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking.
- Performative: emphasizes the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker’s own engagement with the subject and an audience’s responsiveness to this engagement.

Among these, *On the Bowery* most clearly contains elements from the observational and poetic modes.

On the Bowery was initially conceived as a purely observational film. The intent was to create a film from the “fly-on-the-wall” perspective. With this in mind, Rogosin and crew first researched incognito, trying to blend in and become part of the Bowery. When filming began, they intended to just set the camera down, record, and later edit the results into something coherent and meaningful. Ultimately, though, Rogosin and his cameraman, Richard Bagley, found that this method provided them with nothing useful, so they decided to insert the narrative of Ray’s three-day experience in the Bowery to provide a framework and impetus for the film. Even with this compromise, though, *On the Bowery* is fundamentally a film shot in the observational mode. Rogosin used no professional actors and made an effort to keep scripting to a minimum. In fact, large sections of the film, such as the nighttime drinking scene mentioned below, were completely unscripted, undirected, and unrehearsed; in other words, these sections clearly illustrate the observational mode of documentary filmmaking.

Rogosin’s concept of the film as “a study of faces” echoes the “visual associations” within the definition of the poetic mode. One key aspect of the poetic mode is that it “sacrifices the conventions of continuity editing.” (Nichols 102) In spite of the fact that there is a basic story line that adds structure to the film, large parts of *On the Bowery* do abandon continuity editing. For example, at the opening of the film, the camera—accompanied by Charles Mills’ “affective musical score” (Crowley)—presents a series of shots that paint a lyrical picture of the Bowery trying to wake up. Similarly, in the long nighttime drinking scene ⁽²⁾, Rogosin relies on a long series of quick camera cuts to convey to us the full visual impact of the inebriation and concomitant chaos.

The Story

On the Bowery is framed within a three-day period during which itinerant railroad worker Ray Salver experiences life on the Bowery. The film opens with a shot of Bowery Street taken under the tracks of the iconic Third Avenue El. The camera then presents us with a series of shots showing bums along the street and sidewalks variously drinking, sleeping, staggering, stumbling, and being roused from benches by the police to be carted away in paddy wagons. Into this picture strides Ray Salyer, suitcase in hand. He pauses to take in the scene and then immediately makes his way to Round House, Restaurant Bar & Grill at 217 Bowery Street. A World War II veteran of about forty, Ray is clearly younger and fitter than most Bowery residents. As soon as he sits down at the bar and orders a beer, he is approached by a man who chats Ray up and then asks him to “join the party” at a table with his friends. “The party” appears to be pretty bleak until Ray starts buying drinks for the

men. As long as Ray is buying, his new “friends” are happy to stay and drink, but as soon as Ray stops paying, most of them disappear one by one.

In the end, Ray is left with old-timer Gorman Hendricks, who apparently has decided to help Ray learn the ropes. Since Ray’s money has been pretty much drunken up by his “party friends,” he asks Gorman about day labor possibilities. Gorman tells him that day laborers usually find work by going to Houston Street early in the morning. For immediate funds, however, Gorman suggests Ray sell something from his suitcase at Thieves’ Market. When Ray shows Gorman the contents of his suitcase, Gorman immediately notices the most valuable item, a pocket watch, and suggests that Ray sell that. Ray refuses to sell the watch and instead sells a pair of pants, the proceeds from which allow Ray and Gorman to bar hop their way to inebriation. Eventually, Ray lies down on the sidewalk and passes out. Gorman surreptitiously makes off with Ray’s suitcase, which he then uses as collateral for a room at a flophouse.

The next morning Ray makes his way to Houston Street and manages to get hired as a day laborer. After a day’s work loading and unloading trucks, Ray is again flush with money. When Gorman comes upon Ray and tries to persuade him to go for a drink, Ray says he plans to stay the night at the Bowery Mission, where, in exchange for sitting through a sermon, men can receive a free meal, a place to shower and shave, and a bed. He adds, “It’ll keep me out of the gin mills. I don’t want to drink anymore.” When Gorman presses him again to come out for a drink, Ray replies, “I’d like to have the drink, but I don’t want it.” Ray manages to get through the sermon and meager meal, but when he finds out that there are not enough beds and he’ll have to sleep on the floor, he gives up on his resolution, leaves the mission, and heads for the bars to get drunk with Gorman. At the end of the evening when Ray leaves the last bar and staggers into a back alley, he is mugged and all his money is taken.

The next morning Ray is woken in the alley by three Sterno⁽³⁾ bums, who revive him with a shot of Sterno and a cup of coffee. Gorman, in the meantime, has hocked Ray’s watch. When Gorman eventually finds Ray sitting forlornly in a bar, he offers Ray a drink to cheer him up. Ray rejects the drink by summing up his experience on the Bowery: “I came in with money after working all summer and started drinking that mess. [He points to the drink that Gorman has offered him.] One thing lead to another—drank a lot, spent a lot. Wound up in an alley over there with nothing in the world—no clothes, no money, nothing!” Ray has decided

to head to Chicago to “make his last stand”—if he can get the necessary money. “If I don’t make it this time, I’m giving up.” In the end, Gorman takes pity on Ray and gives him some of the money from the sale of Ray’s own watch. Hiding where the money really came from, Gorman intones, “We try to help each other out down here when we’ve got it [money].”

Later, Gorman explains to his drinking buddies about Ray’s leaving. Gorman tries to take all the credit, saying, “I can get anybody straight. I dressed him up, put money in his pocket, put him on the train. He’ll be all right. . . . He wanted to get off the Bowery, and I did the best I could to help.”

The Elements

This then is a brief outline of neophyte Ray Salyer’s three days on the Bowery. Rogosin uses Ray’s introduction to the Bowery to introduce us as well. Here are the principal aspects of the Bowery that Ray—and, vicariously, we—learn about:

Physical Conditions. Life on the Bowery is hard. The streets and sidewalks are cold and uninviting, and this is reflected in the physical condition of the inhabitants. Most men ⁽⁴⁾ on the Bowery are ill clothed; many have no coats or shoes. Some wander around in little more than an undershirt and ragged pants. During the winter, men die from exposure. Almost all are malnourished and/or sick. This is due in part to lack of money, but their health condition is certainly exacerbated by alcoholism in many cases.

Accommodations. The men of the Bowery have three primary sources of accommodation available to them: the streets/sidewalks, the missions, and the flophouses. The first two are free, but the last, although cheap, does entail money. A street or sidewalk is the first “choice” for many, primarily because it’s close by and free. Many “choose” this location by simply passing out after a night of drinking. Although free, the streets and sidewalks leave one exposed to the elements and can be dangerous. For example, in the opening scene of *On the Bowery*, Rogosin shows us sidewalks crowded with sleeping men who are being roused by their friends because the police are apparently making a sweep for vagrants. The second choice, the missions, provide food, shelter, and cost no money, but they do come with a price that many are unwilling to pay: “When you come in here, you leave the booze outside.” There is also the minor inconvenience of having to sit through a sermon. Finally, there are the flophouses, which offer “the shabbiest hotel accommodations imaginable for as little as \$4.50 a night ⁽⁵⁾” (Isay xiii) Most flophouses offer both communal dormitories and private rooms.

The “rooms” are tiny cubicles with little more than a bed, a locker, a bare light bulb, and a chicken-wire ceiling. Even so, both dormitories and rooms do provide shelter from the elements and the safety of sleeping behind a closed door.

Economics. For most of those living on the Bowery life has been reduced to the barest minimum requirements: shelter and sustenance ⁽⁶⁾. While this means life on the Bowery can be cheap, most inhabitants need at least some income to satisfy their needs. As Ray works on the truck during his second day on the Bowery, Rogosin cuts to scenes of two other Bowery men earning their livings for a day. By doing so, he shows us three representative ways that those on the Bowery use to get the money needed. Interestingly, the three ways clearly mirror society outside of skid row. First is the wage earner. During Ray’s second day on the Bowery, he becomes a day laborer—a wage earner—helping to load and unload delivery trucks as they make their rounds. Second is the entrepreneur, represented by Frank Matthews, a bowery resident who has a handcart in which he collects cardboard and other recyclables to sell. Last is the hustler: while Ray is busy doing physical labor for money, Gorman is begging on a sidewalk along an affluent uptown avenue. As he later opines to Ray, “I can think of a whole lot more pleasant ways to make a buck than working.”

Comrades vs. Marks. In spite of the fact that Rogosin shows us a few scenes of drunken arguments, for the most part Bowery residents seem to live in a largely peaceful, symbiotic relationship with each other. There is a sense of camaraderie that has been forged, perhaps, by living under the same harsh conditions and, in most cases, sharing a common addiction (alcoholism). Throughout the film, there are numerous instances of men helping one another. This climaxes with Gorman’s giving Ray money to get out of the Bowery. Rogosin, however, shows us some parasites as well. There is an undercurrent of dishonesty and a feeling that some of those on the Bowery are out to exploit those around them. This can be a very innocuous thing, such as bumming a drink, but it can also be more sinister, such as mugging.

For the most part, though, most Bowery residents fall somewhere in between. Perhaps Gorman’s relationship with Ray best illustrates this. From the beginning of the film, Gorman seems to latch onto Ray to see of what benefit Ray can be to him. He gets drunk at Ray’s expense and steals Ray’s suitcase to use as collateral for a room in a flophouse. In the end, he even pawns Ray’s watch. Along the way, however, Gorman gives Ray advice, such as where to sell his clothes and how to get a job as a day laborer. Finally, he gives Ray money to leave the Bowery, realizing that if Ray leaves there will be no further benefit to him. Of course, the

money Gorman gives to Ray is the money he got by selling Ray's watch, but a true parasite would have kept all the money for himself.

Alcoholism. Addiction to alcohol is one of the most prevalent aspects of life on the Bowery⁽⁷⁾. In fact, alcoholism seems to be the driving force behind much of the action and many of the relationships. Many of the Bowery men work, beg, borrow, and/or steal just to support their addiction. At the same time, most of the men in the film seem to equate friends and companions with drinking buddies. *On the Bowery* presents us with two varieties of the alcoholic in the persons of Gorman and Ray. Gorman is presented as the resigned alcoholic, the addict who has given up fighting his addiction and knows that alcohol will eventually kill him⁽⁸⁾. Ray, on the other hand, is the alcoholic who is still fighting his addiction. On both his second and last days on the Bowery, Ray indicates his intention to stop drinking. We see him fail on the second day, but the film ends before we can find out about his second attempt.

Hopelessness/Tiredness. *On the Bowery* is permeated with an atmosphere heavy with bleakness, despair, weariness, and exhaustion. Visually, this is reflected in the faces, posture, and movements of inhabitants. As mentioned earlier, Rogosin conceived of *On the Bowery* as "a study of faces," and several interludes in the film consist of little more than close-ups of faces. With few exceptions, Rogosin's camera finds wrinkled faces with sagging features and lackluster eyes. Stopped men shuffle down sidewalks and into bars. Nowhere is there a hint of optimism or vitality.

Conclusion

The initial reception of Lionel Rogosin's *On the Bowery* was mixed. *The New York Times* panned it:

Not to be churlish about it but simply to state the case as it appears to a cheerful film reviewer and ex-reporter in the byways of New York, this is a dismal exposition to be charging people money to see. You can see the same thing in many places in this city without going too far from where you live. Indeed, it is merely a good montage of good photographs of drunks and bums, scrutinized and listened to *ad nauseam*. And we mean *ad nauseam*! (Crowther)

However, in September 1956, *On the Bowery* became the first American film to win the coveted Best Documentary prize at the Venice Film Festival and went on to be nominated

for an Academy Award. Over the years, the reputation of *On the Bowery* has continued to rise, especially after the 2006 restoration by Cineteca di Bologna, the resulting re-release of the film to theaters, and the 2012 DVD/Blu-ray release of the restored version. With its effective blend of documentary influences and modes and its powerfully accessible depiction of a part of American society that most would like to ignore, *On the Bowery* is now rightly considered to be a milestone in American documentary cinema.

[Notes]

- (1) Mark Sufrin was Rogosin's initial collaborator on *On the Bowery*.
- (2) Rogosin viewed this as the central scene of the film. It was said to remind him of an orgy from Dante's *Inferno*.
- (3) Sterno or "Canned Heat" is denatured, jellied alcohol that is intended for use as a fuel for cooking and heating; however, because of its alcohol content, it is also used by some for intoxication.
- (4) Although women appear in passing in a few scenes of *On the Bowery*, for the most part Rogosin shows us men.
- (5) 1993 prices.
- (6) Of course, for many of those living on the Bowery, alcohol, rather than food, is the sustenance most sought after.
- (7) In the 1950s, when *On the Bowery* was filmed, the primary addiction of those living on the Bowery was to alcohol. In later years, of course, other objects of addiction, such as heroin and methamphetamines, became common.
- (8) This was true of Gorman in real life. When *On the Bowery* was being filmed, Gorman was suffering from advanced cirrhosis of the liver and had been told that one more drinking binge would kill him. He agreed to curtail his drinking for the duration of the filming, but as soon as filming ended, he went on a drinking binge that soon killed him.

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