

October 31, 2004

Time-Lapse Lives: 42 Years in 10 Hours

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Photographs by First Run Features

Then and now, from left: Jackie (far left), Lynn and Susan, on slide in "7 Up!"; the same girls in "7 Plus Seven"; with the filmmaker Michael Apted in "28 Up!"; and in "42 Up!"

In 1964 a group of 7-year-old British children spent a day together, teasing a polar bear at the zoo, swatting balloons at a party and frolicking at a playground. Their adventures were filmed in a jerky black-and-white, as were interviews and B-roll of their daily lives of school and play. All this material was edited into a 40-minute television documentary whose narrator promised, over a curiously ominous score, "a glimpse of Britain's future."

Whether those words accurately described the broadcast was arguable, but they turned out to be prophetic all the same. If Granada Television had said goodbye to those children after their trip to the playground, "7 Up!" might have survived as an artifact of a bygone era when British television was a vehicle for starchy social consciousness and British schoolboys wore short-pants and striped neckties. Instead the program marked the beginning of one of modern documentary filmmaking's great experiments, an undertaking grand in its ambition and meticulous in its modesty. It became the first in a series of documentaries - six to date - that together make up a partial portrait of British society

during the last four decades, a kind of longitudinal study of mores, attitudes and life chances conducted with a small, sometimes reluctant population sample.

One camera operator on the original program, which was directed by Paul Almond, was Michael Apted, whose best-known Hollywood features have traced the exploits of characters ranging from Loretta Lynn to James Bond. The subjects that have seemed closest to Mr. Apted's heart - and the ones that do most honor to his reputation - are those 14 children, 10 boys and 4 girls, drawn from contrasting backgrounds of region and class. Every seven years, beginning with the first sequel, "7 Plus Seven," Mr. Apted has returned home to catch up with them. Audiences who have followed the "Up" series have watched these children grow through adolescence and young adulthood into middle age, rediscovering them each time like old friends after a long absence. The illusion of intimacy - the sense that, after a few decorous interviews, you know these people - is one of the series' strangest and most powerful effects. The new five-DVD boxed set of the "Up" films makes this feeling all the more intense, even as it also makes the gaps in individual and collective biography more noticeable.

Thanks to First Run Features, four decades of social and personal history can now be telescoped into just less than 10 hours of home viewing. Each film is presented in its original broadcast version, which makes for a good deal of overlap as the filmmakers update viewers by incorporating material from previous episodes. Some installments offer more surprises than others, but though there are divorces, revelations and changes of fortune that are unquestionably startling, these unfolding lives are not especially dramatic. As they grow, the "Up" children navigate a familiar course of schooling, marriage and career, and their conversations with Mr. Apted return to themes first broached when they were 7. They talk, sometimes in a general way, sometimes with an uncomfortable sense of personal disclosure, about love, ambition and opportunity.

They also talk a lot about class, with a frankness that may raise eyebrows in the United States, where the issue is cloaked by euphemism and taboo. To the extent that the "Up" project arose from an identifiable hypothesis - beyond the Wordsworthian suspicion that the child is father to the man - it was that the unequal distribution of opportunities and advantages would affect the lives of the children, who had been chosen for their differences from one another. Three little boys with posh public-school accents - John, Andrew and Charles - were presented in counterpoint to Jackie, Lynn and Susan, girls whose speech carries the imprint of working-class London. Tony, a scrappy East Ender who dreamed of being a jockey, contrasted with Bruce, a quiet pupil at a rigorous prep school who wanted to be a missionary like his father. There were also two middle-class lads from a Liverpool suburb, two boys living in a children's home in London, a pampered rich girl and a farmer's son from Yorkshire who wanted "to know all about the moon."

"Seven Up!" promised to show us "the executive and the shop steward" of the year 2000. The extent to which Britain has changed between then and now might be indicated by the fact that none of the youngsters quite ended up in either job description.

By "42 Up!" the contours of Britain's class system were still visible, but they seemed fainter and more complicated than that initial formulation would suggest. Tony, who for a short time was a jockey, went on to prosper as a taxi driver. John and Andrew followed the path from public school to Oxbridge to successful careers in law. Jackie, Lynn and Susan married young - Lynn and Jackie by the time of "21 Up!" - and tried to keep their spirits up while juggling work, marriage and motherhood.

But if class influenced the shape of these lives, it did not quite determine them. Social conditions matter, but Mr. Apted was never wed to a programmatic view of them, and the narratives that unfold as the children make their way in the world are governed as much by choice, chance, luck and grace as by money and position. At least that is how the children see it as they climb - easily or clumsily - up the ladder of life and burrow ever more deeply into the idiosyncrasies of their personalities. The larger fabric of British life - the rise of Thatcherism, the emergence of dynamic and contentious multiculturalism in that nation's major cities - quietly fades into the background.

But if these realities are not diagrammed or discussed, they are nonetheless suggested, and it is the incompleteness of the films that give them their cumulative power. People as they are, in everyday life, turn out to be not only fascinating, but genuinely mysterious, and some of that rich sense of enigma rubs off on the viewer as well. Mr. Apted redeemed the idea of reality television before the phrase was even coined. Nowadays, of course, it refers to a Darwinian artifice aimed at producing celebrity.

The children of the "Up" films never wanted to be famous, and a few dropped out along the way to protect their privacy. Instead, they collaborated in painting a vivid and unforgettable picture of what it is to be ordinary. After nine hours in their company, hearing them answer and evade polite, occasionally challenging questions, you don't really know them. But at the same time, it is impossible not to care about them, or to recognize their faces.