

FOURTH EDITION



DIRECTING THE DOCUMENTARY

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CHAPTER 3

ELEMENTS OF THE DOCUMENTARY

This chapter covers

- Film language and the audience's experience of it compared with literature
- The raw ingredients of a documentary
- Modalities and categories of documentary
- Documentary as a genre that has work to do in the world

ON THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

All art, including film art, exists so we can vicariously experience realities other than our own and connect emotionally with lives, situations, and issues otherwise inaccessible. Reacting within a new context, we open up to other people and their conditions, and experience other ways of seeing what once seemed familiar.

Because the film arrived so recently compared with the other arts, the potential of its language and effect is not completely understood, the more so because it is still in vivid evolution. At a cellular level, two film shots placed together form a suggestive juxtaposition that changes when their order is reversed, so we can be sure that relativity and comparison are the heart and soul of film language. To complicate matters, the factual content of a few documentary shots cut together communicates a lot more than what the material "is." Reacting to the order and juxtapositions chosen by the film's makers, we make further associations and interpretations, which are affected not only by our individual interests and experience but also by the cultural perspective of our place and time. This is the crucial difference between what a film passage *denotes* (is) and what it *connotes* (suggests by cultural association) to us.

Film language functions differently from the language we know best, that of speech and literature. Film is a medium of immediacy, while literature is one of distance and contemplation. Reading is pensive and lets the reader move at his or her own pace while creating the story in his or her head. Literature easily places the reader in the past or in the future, but film holds the spectator in a constantly advancing present tense. Even a flashback quickly turns into another ongoing present.

We can say, therefore, that watching *film is a dynamic experience in which the spectator infers cause and effect even as the events appear to happen*. Like music, film's nearest relative according to Ingmar Bergman, the screen grasps the spectator's heart and mind with existential insistency. Usually the audience never stops, slows, or repeats any part of the show and thus is unlikely to grasp the extent of its emotional subjugation or question the legitimacy of the means by which it was persuaded. Watching film is more like living or dreaming than is the meditative experience of reading. Many aspects of the viewing experience never rise into the viewer's consciousness at all unless he or she happens to be analytical and takes time to ponder what he or she saw afterward.

Film's ability to put an audience into something like a dream state is attractive, but it holds responsibilities for its makers, particularly in documentary. Though the fiction film is always and evidently a show, the realism of documentary lulls the audience into passively watching "events" as though real and unmediated by any authorship. Critical analysis, particularly of older documentaries, shows how much the genre contains of its makers and how little of the objectivity that people associate with the genre. No less than the fiction films they resemble, *documentaries are authored constructs*.

Today, with the movement toward films having a more obvious authorial "voice," films can directly consider the ambiguities and contradictions inseparable from any full account of human life. Digital equipment helps this evolution because filmmakers can easily filter, freeze, slow motion, superimpose, or interleave texts at will. By imposing a more subjective and impressionistic treatment on live action footage, these techniques unshackle the screen from the tyranny of real time and its byproduct, realism. They help the filmmaker comment, not merely reproduce.

Your job as a filmmaker is to refresh film language by journeying inward, recognizing your own emotional and psychic experience and finding its equivalency to use on the screen. Only in this way will you deeply impress us with other realities—those of your subjects, and those of yourself and your associates.

SIZING UP THE INGREDIENTS

Though embracing definitions of documentary are in short supply, there are a number of generalities we can look at, beginning with techniques and construction methods central to a documentary's aesthetic contours. Consider first how few are the ingredients from which all documentaries are made.

PICTURE

Action footage

- People or creatures doing things, carrying on their everyday activities, such as work, play, and so on
- Shots of landscapes and inanimate things

People talking

- To each other with camera presence unobtrusive, perhaps even hidden
- To each other, consciously contributing to the camera's portrait of themselves
- In interviews—one or more people answering formal, structured questions (interviewer may be off camera and questions edited out)

Re-enactments, factually accurate, of situations

- Already past
- That cannot be filmed for valid reasons
- That are suppositional or hypothetical and are indicated as such

Library footage—can be uncut archive material or material recycled from other films

Graphics, such as

- Still photos, often shot by a camera that moves toward, away from, or across the still photo to enliven it
- Documents, titles, headlines
- Line art, cartoons, or other graphics

Blank screen—causes us to reflect on what we have already seen or gives heightened attention to existing sound

SOUND

Voice-over, which can be

- Audio-only interview
- Constructed from the track of a picture-and-sound interview with occasional segments of sync picture at salient points

Narration, which can be

- A narrator
- The voice of the author, for example, Michael Moore in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002)
- The voice of one of the participants

Synchronous sound, that is, diegetic accompanying sound shot while filming

Sound effects—can be spot (sync) sound effects or atmospheres

Music

Silence—the temporary absence of sound can create a powerful change of mood or cause us to look with a heightened awareness at the picture

All documentaries are permutations of these ingredients, and it is the associations and traditions they call on, their structure, and the point of view imposed on them that summon shape and purpose.

DOCUMENTARY MODALITIES

Michael Renov in *Theorizing Documentary* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993) divides the documentary into four fundamental modalities. They are to:

1. Record, reveal, or preserve
2. Persuade or promote
3. Analyze or interrogate
4. Express

As he points out, these categories are not exclusive; any film sequence can use more than one. A film in its entirety can use the full range while favoring perhaps two such modalities. Let's try assigning the commonest to a list of nonfiction genres that is by no means exhaustive.

<i>Nonfiction film genres</i>	<i>Records, reveals, preserves</i>	<i>Persuades, promotes</i>	<i>Analyzes, interrogates</i>	<i>Expresses</i>
1 Analytical (essay)			•	•
2 Anthropological	•			
3 Art (films on)	•		•	•
4 Biographical	•		•	
5 Cinéma vérité (documentary catalyzed by makers)	•		•	
6 City symphony	•			•
7 Combat (war)	•			
8 Committed (political or social activist)		•	•	
9 Compilation (interprets archive material)		•	•	
10 Cross-section (sociological survey)	•		•	
11 Current affairs		•	•	
12 Diary	•			•
13 Direct cinema (observational, non-interventional documentary)	•			
14 Docudrama		•		•
15 Educational		•		
16 Ethnographic	•		•	

CHAPTER 5

TIME, DEVELOPMENT, AND STRUCTURE

This chapter explores the relationship between the chronology of documented events, their development in story form, and the way dramatic imperatives may lead you to reorganize the order of events to make a more effective story. This chapter deals with

- The uses of the traditional three-act structure in making documentary
- The use or reorganization of time in storytelling
- Types of documentary that preserve chronological time
- Types of documentary that reorganize the original chronology
- Lecturing your audience or stirring up a dialogue

THE THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

The classic *three-act structure* was developed in theater but is equally useful when applied to the contents of a single sequence or to a whole film. Here are the divisions.

- Act I Establishes the setup (establishes characters, relationships, situation, and dominant problem faced by the central character or characters)
- Act II Escalates the complications in relationships as the central character struggles with the obstacles that prevent him or her from solving the main problem
- Act III Intensifies the situation to a point of climax or confrontation, when the central character then resolves it, often in a climactic way that is emotionally satisfying

Note that when applied to sequences, the climax of a scene often leads to failure or the unexpected, which initiates a new round of problem, complications, escalation, climax, and resolution.

When you are covering re-created scenes or scenes where the participants tackle real issues between them for the camera, you should be able to tell where the situation is in relation to the three-act structure and whether to *side-coach* (make suggestions to participants in a low voice about possible action) to break the log jam when a situation has become hung up. You might even call “Cut” so that you can confer with your participants. This degree of intrusion presupposes a high degree of collaboration, of course.

My point is that once you accept how often drama falls into the classic three-act divisions, you will begin to find them in every aspect of life. The three-act structure applies to the long painstaking business of building a log cabin in the Life Television Canada series *Pioneer Quest: A Year in the Real West* (2003), where there are plenty of obstacles, and the resolution is shelter from the coldest winter for 120 years. The same divisions apply in miniature to a human problem such as opening a gate with your arms full or eating slippery noodles with chopsticks for the first time. Human life is composed of cycles. Every event is a cycle that breaks down into problem, intensification of complications, climax, and resolution.

TIME

Many elements influence how to structure a film you have shot, but deciding how to handle time will be paramount. Documentaries often have trouble giving an adequate sense of development, so the power to abridge, and to make comparisons between past and present, is important if you are to show that change is indeed taking place. In *Breakaway*, a BBC series I worked on, we preempted this problem by building change and development into the series formula itself. By focusing on individuals making a major change in their lives, we avoided the frustrating and familiar documentary that has no movement at its heart.

All satisfying stories need a sense of momentum, of going forward. This requires some organizing principle that usually can be found in the subject matter. A project about the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, for instance, can be confidently planned under predictable headings: how it started; how it spread; how people tried to stop it; how far the fire got before it waned; why it died down; and what the consequences were for people and the city. These groupings are inherent in the course of any extensive fire, and a lot of subjects contain the structural stages of any story about them in this way.

Other narratives, however, will tell their tale out of chronological order because there is a valid reason for organizing them differently, or because chronology is weak, absent, or unimportant to the angle of the story.

Following are some common documentary genres, gathered under the opposite polarities you can take in handling time—chronological time on one hand, and time fragmented and reorganized for some special purpose on the other.

TIME CHRONOLOGICALLY PRESENTED

The event-centered film: Here a significant event is the backbone of the film. It might be the launching of a ship, a rodeo, or the capture of a notorious criminal. Each event tends to have its stages, and into their forward movement you can plug in sections of interview, pieces of relevant past, or even pieces of the imagined future, such as a criminal might have as he says what he fears will happen while armed police are moving to surround him. The event may need more than one camera to cover it well, and you plan around the development and dynamics pegged out in advance by what is typical. Shooting with multiple mobile cameras without the cameras inadvertently shooting each other takes a quasi-military organization and timing.

Leni Riefenstahl's dark classic, *Olympia* (1936), follows the process of the Olympic Games in Berlin. With extraordinary, seductive virtuosity, it places Adolf Hitler, godlike, at the center.

Juan Francisco Urrusti's *A Long Journey to Guadalupe* (1996) centers on the yearly phenomenon of the mass migration to worship at the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City. First the pilgrimage is examined conceptually from an historical and cultural perspective. Then, charged up with ideas, we watch the mass migration itself, a spontaneous enactment by a poor and deeply religious people of their suffering, history, and faith. The latter part of the film concentrates, as only film can, on the actuality of the pilgrims' passion and shows how impossible it is to represent such cardinal human longings in words.

The process film: Most documentaries include many of life's processes (for example, making a meal, building a shed, taking a journey, or a court case). Documentaries usually are modular and present a succession of events in which each is a process having a beginning, a middle, and an end. Mostly they follow the sequencing inherent in the event (you can't put the roof on a house whose walls are only half built), but sometimes films use parallel storytelling by cutting between sequences that advance in parallel. A father may be at work in a factory while his daughter is in class at school getting the education that allows her *not* to work in a factory. Each sequence advances in steps, and the characters and their predicaments develop in a linear fashion. This lets you condense each sequence to essentials and thus helps with *narrative compression*.

Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967) shows the inmate's every stage, from induction to burial, at an institution designed to warehouse the criminally insane. Memorable is one seemingly sane man's desperate efforts to extricate himself from its nightmarish embrace. The film's episodes, which lead the viewer progressively deeper into the surreal logic of the institution's personnel and their "treatment," are organized as side trips away from an ongoing show, the institution's annual review.

Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams* (1982) chronicles the shooting of *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), a Herzog feature about an opera impresario who contrived to bring a river steamer over the Andes (Figure 5-1). Through Herzog's own struggle in the jungle to get a steamer up a mountainside, Blank reveals Herzog's dictatorial obsessiveness and the risks to which he exposed his workers. By showing how realizing a cherished project can become more important than human life, Blank implies that totalitarianism can masquerade under the guise of art.

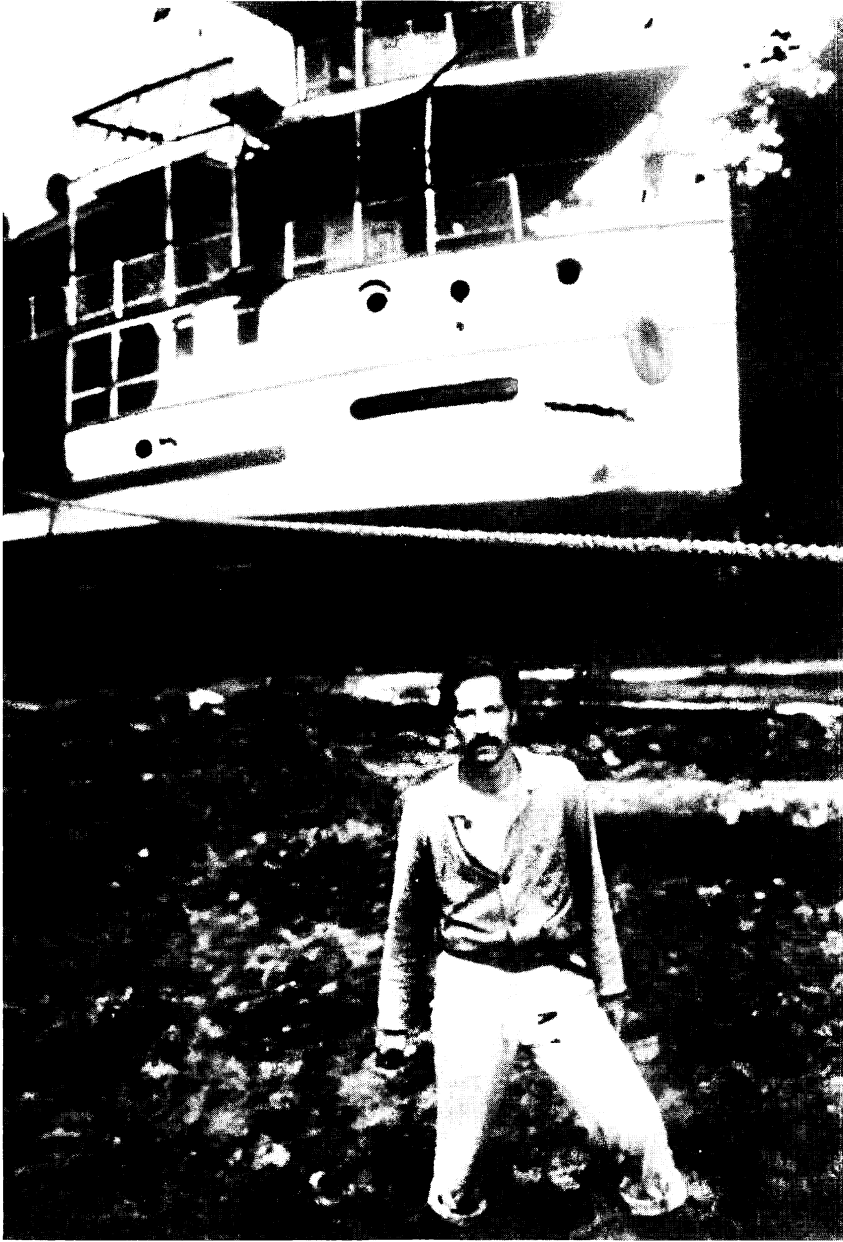


FIGURE 5-1

Werner Herzog and the boat he hauls up a hillside in Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams*.
(Maureen Gosling)

The journey film: In the film industry they say that no film set on a train has ever failed. The journey's allure, with its metaphoric overtones, inbuilt rhythms of movement, and characters in transition who face tests and obstacles, is usually a natural choice for a documentary.

Basil Wright and Harry Watt's *Night Mail* (1936) shows the teamwork and camaraderie on an overnight mail trainrunning between London and Scotland. By revealing the postal workers' pride and confidence in performing their intricately phased operation, the film raises the dignity of the blue-collar worker, at that time usually seen on the screen only as a buffoon. Poetically it dramatizes how letters are the oxygen of ordinary lives. Though the movie has the look of poetic observation, it belongs with the Flaherty school of recreating reality and is artfully contrived at every level. If there is any central character it is the great steam train itself.

Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1989) takes General Sherman's destructive journey during the American Civil War as its starting point and then, bored with his chosen subject, turns into a parallel journey by McElwee himself, encountering old girlfriends and new in a bid to end his status as a single man. McElwee discovers that the General is still with him, but more as an instructive metaphor for an ignoble end.

The historical film: All films reanimate the past, so all are to some degree historical journeys. Bill Nichols prefers to call actuality "the historical world,"¹ and this makes all the more sense when you consider that each film or video frame literally turns into history the moment it is recorded. Film ought therefore to be a good historical medium, but it seldom imparts a convincing relationship between events and time. Chronology, the essence of history, is also its enemy because histories must so often digress in pursuit of other chains of contributing cause and effect.

As Donald Watt and Jerry Kuehl point out, screen histories don't always satisfy their makers.² History films are beset with problems. They

- Bite off more than they can chew
- Force specific images to become backdrops for generalizations
- Skate hurriedly over large quantities of time or events simply because no archive footage exists
- Are unbalanced whenever particular coverage is not available
- Make TV executives terrified of making demands on the audience
- Try to sidestep controversy as school textbooks do
- Often fail to recognize that the screen is different from literature or an academic lecture
- Are often dominated by unverifiable interpretations

¹ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 5.

² Donald Watt and Jerry Kuehl, "History on the Public Screen I & II," in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal, 435–453 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

- Leave their audience unable to tell what strings come with funding or know how much any particular work is dominated by its maker's desire to build a monument

Then again, the screen, by its realism and ineluctable movement through time, discourages contemplation and diffuses whatever cannot be well illustrated. Because the meanings of history are abstractions, the screen seems like a singularly poor vehicle.

The incisive historical documentary usually takes as its focus a main issue, character, or thesis. Good examples are extremely diverse both in purview and language. Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1955) leads us to confront the implications of Auschwitz. But it first takes us on a nightmarish journey, beginning from the bucolic, present-day images of the camp. We go back and forth in time, led by the evocative narration from poet and Holocaust survivor Jean Cayrol and the grimly gay music of Hanns Eisler. In imagination we become a hungry, terrified inmate, our life narrowed to surviving each mad, horrific day. The film leaves us looking over our shoulders for those among us capable of administering another such system.

Britain has produced some notable war series, such as *The Great War* (1964) and *The World at War* (1973–1974). America has produced its own blockbusters, such as *Vietnam: A Television History* (1983) and Ken Burns' *The Civil War* (1990). Compressed and heavily mediated by narration, these films deluge the viewer with facts. What he or she gains—a sense of virtue at having seen so much old footage, a sense of atmosphere and mood, patches of vivid and clearly remembered drama—is surely not the balanced and comprehensive understanding the producers imagined.

In France, Marcel Ophuls' *Sorrow and the Pity* (1972) and *Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie* (1988) (Figure 5–2) and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) have concentrated on developing an understanding of fascism through drawing out the experience of its grassroots operatives.

An extraordinary historical evocation lies in the family history of the Havelio family, told by the Israeli director Ron Havelio in his 6-hour, two-part film, *Fragments: Jerusalem*. Told modestly and informally in home-movie style by the filmmaker, his wife, and three daughters, his family's 150 years of residency in Jerusalem encompasses much personal experience of the vast changes and upheavals in the city's often tragic history.

What elevates these films and makes them memorable is that they don't approach history in the textbook way—as bygone events requiring closure by consensus pronouncement—but as the light of human experience that can show the way ahead through dealing with contemporary predicaments.

The biographical film: Chronology also is important to the screen biography. Following a single character through time is in any case a variation on the hero's journey. Point of view plays a significant part because the central character's sense of events is often contradicted by others in his or her life. The sense of the main character getting older and meeting test after test also contributes to the kind of reliable momentum that easily allows sidebar excursions along the way.

The Kartemquin collective's *Golub* (1990), directed by Gordon Quinn and Jerry Blumenthal, tells the life of its socially conscious New York painter subject

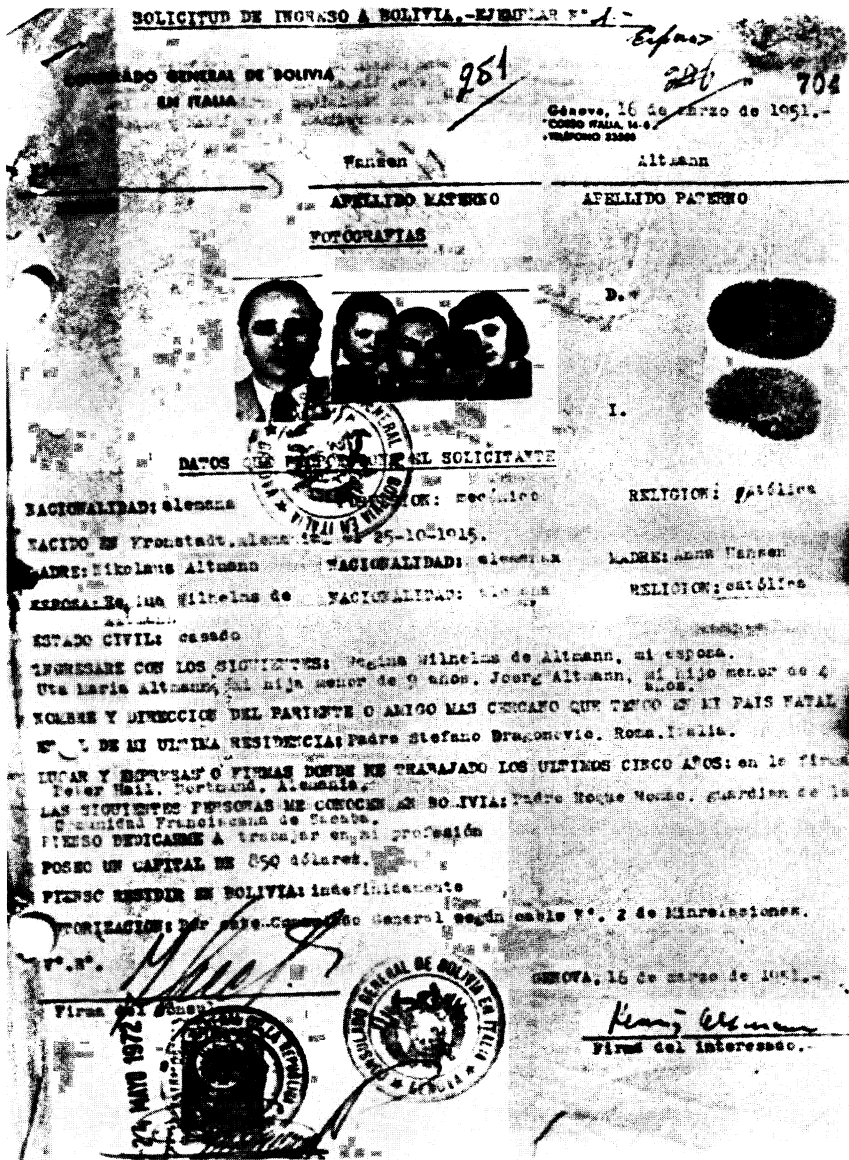


FIGURE 5-2

Incriminating document in *Hotel Terminus*—the false identity paper that allowed Klaus Barbie to enter Bolivia.

and incorporates elements of the process film by showing Leon Golub's artistic process as he develops a whole painting. The film is a well-developed argument for art that is responsible to the community and is politically conscious, something denigrated after Stalin initiated what Western critics called "tractor art."

Don McGlynn's *Mingus: Triumph of the Underdog* (1998) tells the main events of the jazz bassist and composer's life, but it goes further (as a biography surely must) by guessing at the complex roots of Mingus' lifelong frustration and feeling of outsiderdom. Being part black, part Swedish, part Chinese, and part German obviously had something to do with his feeling a misfit. Unforgettable, and painfully symbolic, is footage of the musical genius in deep depression, being evicted, and having his belongings heaped on the New York sidewalk by bailiffs.

TIME REORGANIZED

The poetic film: This type may want to render an atmosphere or put forth a thesis; it is less concerned with deriving its structure from events. Usually it relies on powerful imagery and uses verbal narrative sparingly. Often it will depict unfamiliar worlds, or familiar worlds seen in unfamiliar ways. A poetic first-person narrative like Vincent Dieutre's *Lessons of Darkness* (2000) structures the film by its maker's thoughts, memories, and feelings. In this case, a gay man is falling out of love while journeying between three European cities and finding solace in the erotic solidity of the men in Caravaggio's paintings. Other kinds of structure reflect how the film was made. Michael Rubbo's reflexive *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* (1970) investigates the impact of the American occupation on the Vietnamese. The film is driven more by the logic of Rubbo's contemplation than by considerations of space and time.

Wim Wenders' *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999) is not much ruled by chronology. To be sure, he has to find where the club once existed in Havana and locate the people who once played there, and then show them playing in different international venues. But once the music begins, the film can weave concerns with interviews and footage exploring the crumbling elegance of this most neglected of cities. There is no evident structure leading us from song to song, apart from the associations in the stories that each character tells.

The weakness in the poetic film is that it forgoes dramatic tension and forward movement for the delights of the moment, which is fine in principle but can make a film seem wandering and arbitrary if one wearies or is not caught up in the texture and ideas being fomented.

A favorite reorganization of time, one that feels far more secure, is to show an event and then backtrack in time to analyze the events and interplay of forces that led up to it, as in Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky's *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (1996). The film opens in West Memphis, Arkansas, with the terribly sad sight of the bodies of three murdered 8-year-old boys. The rest of the film follows the trial of the three local teenagers who were accused of killing them in a satanic ritual and casts much doubt on the validity of the evidence, much as the filmmakers did in their earlier film *Brother's Keeper* (1992), which was about some reclusive rural brothers accused of mercy-killing a sick sibling.

The walled-city film: Societies and institutions define their boundaries, close in upon themselves, and beget their own self-perpetuating code of conduct. The walled-city film usually investigates a microcosm in order to imply criticism on a much wider scale of the macrocosm. Its organization in time is often less rigorous than other structures because an organism, like a café, hospital, or

park, has many activities that run simultaneously. Movement between activities can be thematically juxtaposed rather than straightened into the linearity of a chronology.

By concentrating on starving villagers in a remote Spanish village and by defining the various forces that prevent them from helping themselves, Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* (1932) angrily exposes the pattern of neglect afflicting the poor that was sanctioned by church, state, and landowners. Using a Brahms symphonic score and speaking ironically in the style of mellifluous travelogue, the narration guides us from one horror to the next as though hardly anything were out of place. Using montage governed by narration rather than any elaborate processes, the film has an unintentionally reflexive moment when a member of the crew steps into frame to examine the ulcerated throat of a dying child. Commandably humane sympathies sometimes turn observers into participants.

Any of Frederick Wiseman's films qualify as walled-city films, notably *Titicut Follies* (1967), *High School* (1968) (Figure 5-3), and *Hospital* (1969). Each implies a critical examination of mental health and normality, how we prepare the young for democracy, and how American society condones violence, both self-directed and that which is visited on others.

Two films by Nick Broomfield, *Soldier Girls* (1981) and *Chicken Ranch* (1982), also qualify as walled-city films but differ significantly in approach from

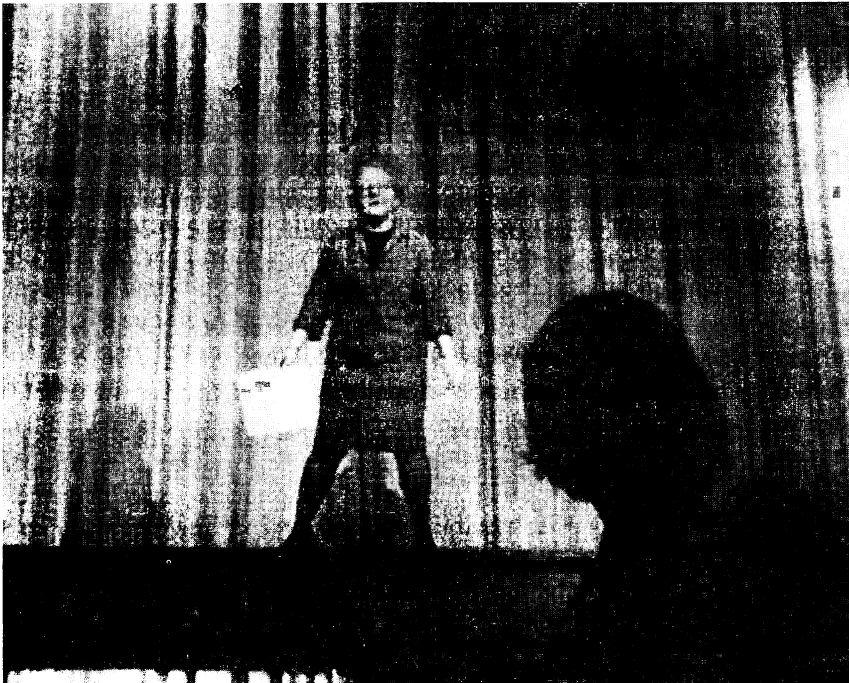


FIGURE 5-3

High School (1968) by Fred Wiseman. A walled-city film that looks at our attitudes toward preparing the young for democracy. (Zipporah Films, Inc.)



FIGURE 5-4

The ladies in Nick Broomfield's *Chicken Ranch* pose with their madam.

both the narrated and the direct cinema observational approach. One is about women soldiers doing basic training and the other about women and their customers in a brothel (Figure 5-4). Each shows how institutional life attempts to condition and control its inmates, and each leaves us more knowledgeable and critical, though neither film pretends to be neutral or unaffected by what it finds. By letting us see a discharged woman soldier embrace the camera operator or by including the brothel owner's harangue of the crew for filming what he wants kept confidential, both films admit where the filmmaker's sympathies lie and let us guess at the arrangements, liaisons, and even manipulation that made each phase of shooting possible.

The thesis film: This is any that sets out, like an essay, to educate, analyze something, or prove a hypothesis. Exposés or agitprop, experimental, or activist films are seldom structured by extended processes, but instead use montage to develop and assert ideas for the audience's consumption. For instance, if you want to convince the audience that, far from draining the local economy, poor immigrants to a large American city add economic value, then you must establish how and why the immigrants came, what work they do, what city services they do or don't use, and so on. You are building an argument and advancing the stages of a polemic so that you can convince even the skeptics in your audience.

Christine Choy and Renee Tajima's *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1989) chronicles the murder of a Chinese-American man outside a Detroit bar by a drunken white car worker. It seeks answers to how and why the self-confessed killer never served a day in prison, and its subtextual conclusion is that in America the lives of Asians are far less valuable than those of whites. This is not stated but revealed—through painstaking inquiry into the failures at all levels of the so-called justice system. Here, as in Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), the film's structure, after introducing the murder, leads backward through layers of trial procedure and detection. Because we know the outcome, it is the miscarriage of justice that must concern us.

Pare Lorentz's *The River* (1937) is an essay film with a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end. Like a symphony, it has an inherent augmentation as, stage by stage, the film leads us from the beginning trickle all the way to the ocean. Along the way the river floods, and the film is memorable for its evocation of the powerful forces of nature sweeping away the flotsam of human homes, possessions, and lives. During the floods, only the amount of water and destruction determines where the shot belongs. There is no other marker, as there would be in a simpler process, to dictate where the shot should go.

TIME MADE UNIMPORTANT

The catalogue film: This is a documentary whose main and enthusiastic purpose is to examine something comprehensively rather than critically. A film about steam locomotives might organize their appearance by size, age, construction, or other logical classification. Unless the film takes the restoration through time of an old engine, say, as its backbone, then time won't play a centrally organizing role. Catalogue films usually are made by enthusiasts and seldom have much to say that is socially critical.

Les Blank's films, usually described as celebrations of Americana, are really catalogue films. There is *Garlic Is as Good as Ten Mothers* (1977), *In Heaven There Is No Beer* (1984), and the delightful *Gap-Toothed Women* (1987). All are good-natured forays into an enclosed world, and were they not so innocent they probably would be called voyeuristic.

The travelogue, the diary film, and the city symphony are frequently montage-based catalogue types.

When no time structure predominates: There may initially be no obvious time structure. For instance, a film about stained glass windows may have no discernible time structure in the actual footage. It could be arranged by historical dating of stained glass windows, by technical developments in glass, or by the regional origin and idiosyncrasies of the glassmakers. You decide which option to take by deciding what you want to say and what your material best supports.

Absurdist documentary: This is a rare form that is well suited to a playful handling of the outlandish or appalling. As her mother descends into Alzheimer's disease, Deborah Hoffmann's *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* (1995) uses dark humor to explore what would otherwise be a crushingly sad situation (Figure 5-5). What organizes the film's progression is the daughter's journey from early consciousness of her mother's growing eccentricity, to fearing that her mother



FIGURE 5-5

Deborah Hoffmann and her mother in *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* (1995). [Photo by Frances Reid courtesy of Deborah Hoffmann].

will turn into the pathetic shell of her former self, to realizing that her mother is actually becoming her more essentially humorous self.

MONOLOGICAL VERSUS DIALOGICAL FILMS

This brief review of documentary language and its uses suggests, I think, that the genre is becoming less monological and more dialogical. Still, old habits of disseminating improving tracts to the unwashed masses die hard, and far too much that circulates as documentary still has the aura of the classroom or the privileged traveler's slide lecture.

A new generation of filmmakers is dragging the documentary away from corporate bureaucrats and embracing the audience's eager longing for films that provoke an active inner dialogue. Slowly and surely, documentary is acquiring the complexities of language, thought, and purpose that once were confined to more mature art forms such as literature and theater. The old order is giving way to documentaries made by men and women who see the audience as equals and who are willing to investigate our inmost thoughts and feelings.

CHAPTER 9

PROJECTS: CRITICAL WRITING

This chapter is about critical writing as a means to study documentary in depth. It covers

- The benefits of writing and the way it helps you go farther
- Academic writing norms and how to write effectively
- A project for analyzing a film for its structure and style
- A research project in which you develop a point of view on a director's vision and how this connects with his or her life events

Analyzing a documentary and writing about what you discover makes you pay close attention to how every aspect works. In some strange way this lets you take possession of a film. To write is not just to report on what you know, but to set about discovering what it is that you *don't* know. Writing forces the mind to examine itself and then go farther. A friend used to say, "Nothing is real until I have written about it." She was right.

Your job as a critic is to illuminate and enhance a work. If the reader has already seen it, what and how you write should make that reader want to see it again. By writing, you not only travel outward into the film and its context, but inward toward your personal reactions, tastes, impressions, feelings, memories, associations, and biases. Critical writing will develop you as a director because you gain a more detailed and articulate grasp of your own values, and unconsciously you are making resolutions as you go. Small wonder that the French New Wave began as a movement by critics (such as Godard, Truffaut, Rivette, Rohmer) complaining in highly articulate articles about all that was wrong with French cinema of the time.

When you are viewing, be aware of your own interior processes because they are much like other people's and, used intelligently as a key to what you address,

will help the reader decipher his or her own responses. Your writing should be in clear, direct, formal, active-voice prose that is well structured, develops your arguments logically, and supports each assertion with concrete examples from the work under review.

Scholarly work should reflect not only the writer's judgments and values, but put them in the context of what other scholars and critics have already said. You can take issue with other writers if you wish. Expect to write and rewrite multiple drafts before you have a "final." Let each draft sit for a day or two in a drawer, or you won't be able to read your work with fresh eyes.

Making a digest of available opinion is not sufficient because the goal is a publishable piece of writing and you must show evidence of original reaction and thinking. Be aware that it is academic theft to use someone else's ideas or observations without citing the author, publication, date, and page number.

Critical or analytical writing should follow scholarly norms, that is, it should

- Give detailed examples from the films or texts to illustrate your views, but doesn't assume the reader knows the films in any detail
- Seek support for its views from other critics but take issue with aspects with which you disagree
- Give citations, either as footnotes or endnotes, for any ideas you have borrowed or any quotations you have reproduced

PROJECT 9–1: ANALYZING A DOCUMENTARY FOR STRUCTURE AND STYLE

In this project you log the contents of a documentary, then write about the way its structure and style make its content available, what thematic statement it makes, and how choices of structure and style may contribute to this. The following should be covered in your essay, but not necessarily in this order:

1. Pick a documentary, preferably no longer than 30 minutes, whose subject you can show is a special interest of yours.
2. Using the Film Analysis Form in Appendix 2 or something similar, log the documentary, stopping after each sequence to record pertinent details. Define the beginning and ending point of each sequence, give it a tag description, and calculate its length in minutes and seconds.
3. Write a brief description of the documentary's content and what it handles.
4. Looking at the flow chart of sequences, describe the film's structure, pointing out what principle or factor seems to have determined the film's organization, and show how and where the film might be divided into acts (see Chapter 5, "The Three-Act Structure"). Consider the length of sequences in relation to what each contributes.
5. Discuss the film's style and what seems to have determined it.
6. Discuss the thematic impact of the film and its overall effectiveness. What made you care about its characters and their situations? What did it make

you feel? What did you learn from seeing the film? Should other people see it, and why?

Assessment: See Project 9–1 in Appendix 1. Be sure to check the assessment criteria before you start writing.

PROJECT 9–2: ASSESSING A DIRECTOR’S THEMATIC VISION

This project asks that you assess the themes of at least two films from a director’s body of work and relate them to the director’s emerging philosophic vision. If a director works in both features and documentary, you may want to compare films from both genres.

Pick a director whose output you either know or know by reputation and whom you find interesting.

1. View two or more films by the same director.
2. Note what feelings and thoughts the films evoked.
3. Do a bibliographical search and assemble photocopies and Web printouts of any relevant articles or essays by or about the films or the director.
4. View your chosen films again, this time making notes of each sequence’s content so that you have a complete running order list. (A *sequence* is a block of material whose unity is determined by a location, piece of time, or subject matter.)
5. Research the director’s biography and write a 7- to 10-page essay (typed in double spacing) assessing the themes of the two films and how they fit into the director’s life and emerging philosophic vision. Demonstrate the connect-edness of his or her themes and vision to two or more of the following, noting in your essay which of these parameters you have chosen:
 - A. The director’s personal and professional history
 - B. The intention implicit in the films to change the audience’s perspectives in a particular direction
 - C. The degree to which the films’ “social awareness” component is (or isn’t) revealed organically from within the subject
 - D. The degree to which the films correctly or incorrectly anticipate audience reactions, especially ones that are biased
 - E. Visual, aural, or other special considerations of cinema form that you find are successfully or unsuccessfully used
 - F. The way your own attitudes to the subject evolved as a result of seeing the films and writing the paper

Other (specify)

Assessment: See Project 9–2 in Appendix 1. Be sure to check the assessment criteria before you start writing.

CHAPTER 15

INITIAL RESEARCH AND THE DRAFT PROPOSAL

This chapter handles

- An overview of preproduction and research
- Overview of steps in developing and refining the draft proposal
- Addressing aesthetic concerns
- Assembling plans, schedule, and crew
- Prior work with crew to assure communications and shooting standards
- Developing the final version of the proposal as a means of fine-tuning your directing intentions
- Getting support: creating the treatment, rough budget, and prospectus

ON PREPRODUCTION

A documentary's preproduction period follows research and covers all decisions and arrangements prior to shooting. This includes choosing a subject; doing the research; deciding who and what are going to be the subject of the film; assembling a crew; choosing what equipment will be necessary; and deciding the method, details, and timetable of shooting. It may also be a time in which you assemble final funding and distribution.

Seasoned filmmakers never rely on spontaneous inspiration because once you start filming, the pace and demand of the work are all-encompassing. Werner Herzog, questioned after a screening about “the intellectual challenge during shooting,” replied caustically that “filmmaking is athletic, not aesthetic.” Most filming, he told the startled audience, is so grueling that rarefied thought is all but impossible. François Truffaut makes a similar point in *Day for Night* (1973). Its central character is a director whose fiction movie runs into a thicket of

problems and compromises. Played by Truffaut himself, the director confides that at the start he always thinks the film is going to be his best, but halfway through shooting he can only think about surviving until the finish. My own fantasy, which returns at least once every shoot, is to escape further filming by miraculously turning into the owner of a rural grocery.

The thought and planning you invest before shooting, and how thoroughly you anticipate problems, go far to ensure a successful and trouble-free shoot. Most importantly, they help ensure that the movie is a coherent entity. Directing a documentary, contrary to the impression of spontaneous *auteurism*, is always founded to some degree in preliminary conclusions reached during research. Depending on the kind of film you are making, this may mean that shooting is largely collecting evidence for underlying patterns and relationships already identified. Or, in less controlled situations, it is a solid preparation for what is normal so that, when an atypical event begins, you can react immediately to developments that would otherwise pass you by.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

In summary, the purposes of research are to

- Assemble a context and basic factual information
- Get to know the whole scene so that you can narrow down to what is significant
- Become known and trusted by potential participants
- Communicate your motivations and purposes for making a film
- See a lot of characteristic activity so that you know what is normal and what is not
- Understand who represents what so that you can make representative choices
- See who will make a good participant and who won't
- Develop a proposal indicating intended content, theme, and style so that you can try out your ideas on other people and raise funds or other support
- Decide what the ultimate purpose of making the film should be
- Assemble all the human and material resources so that you can shoot

Let's assume you have chosen a subject and are starting the initial research phase that will culminate in developing a written proposal. No two people research alike, but some steps are fairly universal. Research methods hinge on the exigencies of the subject, so you must first be sure you have the makings of a film. No documentary can be made from good intentions, only from what can be captured with a camera. What film is possible?

Following are some recommended steps, which I will elaborate upon later. Often you will be forced by circumstances to take these steps out of any ideal

order or to take several concurrently. Whenever you hit an impediment, turn and work elsewhere so that you don't waste time. Filmmaking demands lateral thinking; progress in one area affects what you have decided in another, making you constantly readjust your idea of the whole. This may be frustrating until you get used to it.

The following list of steps is for those doing exhaustive research, but because documentary makers usually have several irons in the fire, most proposals are written from partial rather than conclusive research. There is a Form and Aesthetics Questionnaire in Appendix 2 that will help you decide what stage you have reached. Even when research is rather complete, there is usually a fallow period while funds and sponsoring organizations are being sought, so you should always expect a last-minute hustle just before shooting begins.

Begin the initial stages:

1. *Define an off-the-top-of-your-head working hypothesis for the subject* (see Working Hypothesis and Interpretation section of the documentary Project Proposal organizer later). Don't reserve all judgments until you feel confident that you know enough. It will never happen, so get going with the imaginative work that begins an imaginative documentary.
2. *Begin site research.* That is, familiarize yourself with
 - A. *People and situations* that you plan to film
 - B. Find out what's *typical* in the world you are going to film
 - C. Find out *what's unusual*, unexpected, and particular in the one you are looking at
 - D. *Stay loose.* Keep any explanations broad and tentative so that you don't paint yourself into a corner
3. *Do background research*, that is,
 - A. Use the resources of the *Internet* to pull up all the references and ideas you can find
 - B. Study *publications* covering your subject, such as magazines, newspapers, professional journals, and even fiction, any of which may offer useful ideas and observations
 - C. See the *films* on the the subject, but *not* if you feel vulnerable to their influence
 - D. *Talk to any experts* who will share what they know. As a documentarian you routinely depend on others in this way. Your expertise rests in bringing a special world and its issues to a first-time audience, so being an ignorant outsider actually helps you decide what that audience needs, something that is beyond most experts.
4. *Develop trust.*
 - A. *Communicate.* Make yourself and a broad version of your purposes known to everyone you may want to film. Let them question you if they need to find out your values and purposes.
 - B. *Learn.* Put yourself in the position of learning from your subjects, because they are the experts.

- C. *Hang out.* Spending a period of time with your subjects is the most valuable thing you can do, both to absorb everything you need to know and to make yourself available so that people can develop trust in your character and purposes.
- 5. *Make reality checks* to ensure that
 - A. You have *multiple perspectives* on each person, fact, or facet, especially when there are ambiguities (see the Form and Aesthetics Questionnaire in Appendix 2)
 - B. *What you want to film is accessible*
 - C. *People are amenable* and cooperative
 - D. *Releases and permissions* will be forthcoming
 - E. The *resources* you will need are not beyond your means

Develop the first draft of the proposal:

- 6. *List the action sequences* and decide how far action and behavioral material alone would make an interesting and coherent observational documentary. To envision making a coherent silent film is the litmus of how cinematic your film is and, conversely, how much it will need to rely on speech for narrative guidance.
- 7. *Preinterview*
 - A. *Audition.* Using video very informally, interview those you're considering for the film. Ask no searching questions—reserve these for when you shoot.
 - B. *Casting.* Watch the tape with a few trusted friends to see how potential participants come across. This is analogous to casting. Good quality audio can be used later as voice-over.
 - C. *Don't push yet.* Avoid being intrusive or divisive. Discuss only the ideas your participants suggest and in nebulous terms that delay all decisions to the future.
- 8. *Rewrite the working hypothesis* as new information alters the basis for your intended film. Reworking the hypothesis (described later) is the best way to reconfigure your thematic purpose. Expect this to change as your knowledge grows. Avoiding this work will leave you unsure what or how to shoot, and you'll end up shooting everything that moves.

Refine the proposal:

- 9. *Narrow the focus, deepen the film.* Always seek the center of your film by assuming that you may not yet have it. Narrowing its scope always benefits a film because it makes you seek and expand its essence. Tightly focused films that go deep are always better than broad, generalizing films that skimp on specifics.
- 10. *List points your film must make* so that you forget nothing important as you direct. For instance,
 - A. List *expository information* that the audience must have, and plan to cover it several ways
 - B. List the *thematic or other goals* that you want your film to fulfill

- C. Make sure you shoot material so that you can *show what or who is in conflict*, and that you contrive to bring the antithetical forces together in *confrontation*.
11. *Develop your own angle* or point of view, defining what exactly you want to say and what emphasis you may need to impose so that you can collect the materials to do it.
 12. *Write a three-line description*. If you can summarize your film and its purposes in three lines, and people react to it positively, you may be ready to direct it. If you can't, you aren't.
 13. *Make necessary remaining choices*, that is,
 - A. *Casting*. Decide finally which people and places you want to use, and define their rhythms, routines, and the imagery such as cityscape, landscape, workplace that is emblematic of their condition
 - B. *List what's typical and atypical* to guide your filming when you are ready. You will want the best of both
 - C. *Expunge clichés*, then list what can you show that is fresh, surprising, and different compared with other people's work
 - D. Decide *central character* or characters (ask yourself from time to time whose story it is)
 - E. Define *whose point of view* the various parts of the story should favor
 - F. Define the essential *dialectics* of your film—the central point and counterpoint of its argument—so that you can be sure to collect all the materials you need

Address aesthetic concerns:

14. *Style*. Define
 - A. The style that best serves *each sequence*
 - B. The style that serves *your point of view*
 - C. The *stylistic characteristics of the film* as a whole
 - D. *Anything to avoid*
15. *Seek inherent myths, emblems, symbols, and key imagery* by deciding
 - A. What *life-role* each person is likely to enact in the drama you are beginning to perceive
 - B. What *images* you have seen or expect to see that convey the heart of what you have to say
 - C. *Key actions* whose connotations have special meaning for the central purposes of your film
 - D. *Which type of story yours is*. What is closest to it in the world's repository of stories? Any parallels that suggest archetypes, myths, or legends will strengthen your film by moving it toward the universal.
16. *Test your assumptions*.
 - A. *Pitch* your ideas to anyone who will listen and solicit their reactions. Alter your pitch to maximize the audience response, and consider how these changes affect the film you intend making.
 - B. *Ask people to read the proposal* and comment on what it makes them expect. Do they see the film that you see?

Getting near to shooting time:

17. *Make the final draft of your intentions.* Even if you have nobody to satisfy but yourself, work over all the considerations prior to shooting. Originality does not come from talent (whatever that is) but from the work of sustained, determined thinking. Writing makes you think. Check back with the Form and Aesthetics Questionnaire in Appendix 2.
18. *Make a rough budget* (see the Budget Planning Form later in this chapter).
19. *Write a treatment.* This is optional and consists of writing the film you see in your head after developing the research. A treatment and a sample reel may be necessities when you apply for money (see The Treatment).
20. *Obtain permissions.* Secure a commitment (preferably in writing) of time and involvement from those you intend to film. If you intend to shoot in non-public locations, secure written permissions for them beforehand. In many cities you now must have permission from the authorities to film in the streets or on public transportation.

Once shooting becomes definite:

21. *Secure your crew.*
22. *Make a shooting schedule* and build in options to deal with foreseeable difficulties, such as inclement weather or unavailability of a major element or participant.
23. *Do any necessary trial shooting* to
 - A. “Audition” doubtful participants
 - B. Work out communications with a new crew
 - C. Set standards for work you are going to do together
 - D. Test new or unfamiliar technology

THE DOCUMENTARY PROPOSAL

Everyone dreads writing the proposal, which is so necessary when you have to communicate your intentions, and particularly when it comes to fundraising. However, its most important function is forcing you to clarify the organizational and thematic analysis you have (or have not) developed during research. Then, as the time comes to *pitch* your film (that is, to seek support through making verbal presentations of it), you will be able to draw a clear and forcefully attractive picture of your intentions.

Another useful function is that the proposal helps prepare you to *direct* the film, that is, to shoot (capture and catalyze) materials that will really add up to something. Being unprepared leads to blindly collecting stuff that you hope can be beaten into shape during editing. It nearly always cannot.

The proposal also shows how well you intend to fulfill the conditions of documentary itself. Always depending on the kind of film you are making, it should

- Tell a good story
- Make human truths, both large and small, emerge through behavioral evidence, not just verbal description
- Present a personal, critical perspective on some aspect of the human condition
- Inform and emotionally move the audience

Like a gripping piece of fiction, the successful documentary usually incorporates

- Well-placed exposition of necessary information (facts or context placed not too early or too late)
- Interesting characters that are actively trying to do or get something
- Events that emerge from the characters' needs
- Dramatic tension and conflict between opposing forces
- Suspense—not people hanging off cliffs, but situations that intrigue your spectators and make them anticipate, wonder, compare, and decide
- Confrontation between conflicting persons, factions, or elements
- A climax in the tension between opposing elements or forces
- A resolution (happy or sad, good or bad, satisfying or not)
- Development in at least one major character or situation

These criteria may seem too much in bed with traditional fiction to fit documentary, but most of these points apply to stories of all kinds, even the most experimental. Look again at your favorite documentaries and see whether they incorporate these dramatic ingredients. I bet when you look closely they do.

Keep on writing and rewriting the proposal until it is succinct, free of redundancy, and effortless to read. A good proposal demonstrates how you expect to meet the implicit expectations of documentary and that you really understand the genre. Experienced funders know that thin or muddled writing will lead to thin or muddled filmmaking. Conversely, whoever can think and write clearly is on the way to excelling in the more demanding work of making films.

DOCUMENTARY PROPOSAL ORGANIZER

The Proposal Organizer following will help you write a proposal or develop a prospectus package as you search for financial support. Think of its categories like the pigeonholes in a mail sorting office. A well-researched film will have something substantial and different to put in most, if not all. If you find you've put similar material into more than one classification, go to further drafts until material is presented *only once and in its rightful place*. This is very important.

For simplicity the proposal organizer is geared toward a short and uncomplicated film, but it works well for something longer and more complex. Everything you write should be brief, because a completed proposal should not be longer than four or five pages. Use the Proposal Organizer as the first step toward the final version.

PROPOSAL ORGANIZER

Working title _____ Format _____
 Director _____ Camera _____
 Sound _____ Editor _____
 Others (Role) _____ (Role) _____

1. **WORKING HYPOTHESIS and INTERPRETATION.** What are *your* persuasions about the world you are going to show in your film, the “statement” you want to emerge out of the film’s dialectics? Write a hypothesis statement that incorporates the following wording:
 - A. In life I believe that (your philosophy regarding the particular life-principle that your film will exemplify) _____
 - B. My film will show this in action by exploring (situation) _____
 - C. My film’s main conflict is between _____ and _____
 - D. My film’s point of view, or its POV character, will be _____
 - E. I expect my film’s structure to be determined by _____
 - F. The subject and point of view suggest a style that is _____
 - G. Ultimately I want the audience to feel _____
 - H. . . . and to understand that _____
2. **TOPIC and EXPOSITION.** Write a paragraph that includes
 - A. Your film’s *subject* (person, group, environment, social issue, and so on)
 - B. *Expository information* (factual or other background information) so that the reader can see the enclosed world into which you are going to take us
3. **ACTION SEQUENCES.** Write a brief paragraph about any sequence that will show characters, an event, or an activity. (A sequence is usually delineated by being in one location, one chunk of time, or an assembly of materials to show one topic.) For each, describe
 - A. The sequence’s expected action
 - B. What information or persuasion it contributes to the film
 - C. The agendas or conflicts you expect it to evidence
 - D. Any useful metaphors it will suggest
 - E. Any special, symbolic, or emblematic imagery it will contain
 - F. What structures the events (especially through time)
 - G. What the sequence will contribute to the film as a whole
4. **MAIN CHARACTERS.** Write briefly about each main character, including
 - A. The person’s identity—name, relationship to others in film—and his or her qualities
 - B. What he or she contributes to your film’s story
 - C. The metaphoric role you see this person occupying in relation to what else is in the film

- D. What this character wants to get or do in relation to the others or to the situation
 - E. Any direct speech quotation that freshly and directly conveys what this person is about
5. CONFLICT. What is being argued or worked out in this film? Define
- A. What conflict the characters know they are playing out
 - B. What conflict *you* see them playing out (of which they may be quite unaware)
 - C. What other principles (of opinion, view, vision, and so on) you see at issue
 - D. How, where, and when will one force confront the other in your film (the *confrontation*, which is very important)
 - E. Possible developments you see emerging from this or other confrontations
6. SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE. What will this film say about the lives it portrays, and what is the social significance of this? Why should people care to watch this film?
7. YOUR MOTIVATION FOR MAKING THE FILM. What, in your background and interests, impels you to make the film? This indicates whether you have the energy, passion, and commitment to stay the course and make an outstanding film.
8. AUDIENCE, ITS KNOWLEDGE AND PREJUDICES. A documentary should anticipate the expectations—both right ones and wrong—of its audience. Your film is in a dialogue with these prejudices and must extend, subvert, or endorse them. Complete the following:
- A. My intended audience is (don't write "Everyone!") _____
 - B. I can expect the audience to know _____ but not to know _____
 - C. I assume positive audience prejudices are _____ and negative ones are _____
 - D. Countervailing facts, ideas, and feelings that my audience needs to experience are _____
9. TO-CAMERA INTERVIEWS. Because "talking heads" have been overused they are now out of favor, but they do make good safety coverage. Also, a well-recorded track can be used as voice-over narration or interior monologue. For each intended interviewee, list
- A. Name, age, gender
 - B. Job, profession, or role
 - C. Metaphoric role in your film's dramatic structure
 - D. Main elements that your interview will seek to establish
10. STYLE. Shooting or editing style that might augment or counterpoint your film's content. Comment on
- A. Documentary genre you are using, and how this affects the film's style
 - B. Point of view and how this affects shooting and editing styles

- C. Narration (if there is to be any, and by whom)
 - D. Lighting moods
 - E. Visual and other rhythms
 - F. Any intercutting or parallel storytelling
 - G. Intended juxtaposition of like or unlike materials to create comparison, ironic tension, etc.
11. **TONE.** Describe the progression of moods of the film as you see them, and the film's prevailing tone.
 12. **STRUCTURE.** Write a brief paragraph on how you might structure your film. Consider
 - A. How you will handle the progression of time in the film
 - B. How and through whom the story will be told
 - C. What elements in the film (such as a process, journey, season, etc) that will probably structure the film
 - D. How important information will emerge
 - E. What will probably be the climactic sequence or "crisis" in your story, and where in the structure this might go
 - F. What other sequences will become the falling action after the "crisis"
 13. **RESOLUTION.** Your film's ending is your last word. It exerts a strong influence on the film's final impact. Write a brief paragraph about how you imagine your film ending and what meaning you foresee it establishing for the audience. If the events could go in more than one direction, it is entirely realistic to hypothesize different endings.

THE PROPOSAL

The final proposal will probably be presented to a fund, foundation, or television channel—that's if they fund at the conceptual stage, which is rare today unless you have a stellar track record. You may be canvassing individual investors. Note that a good title for your film is an extremely important part of signaling your wares and attracting support.

Use the information you collected in the Proposal Organizer under the different headings, putting selected information in the order that will work best for the foundation, fund, or channel to which you are applying. Write compactly, informatively, and poetically so that the reader can "see" all the essentials of the film in the writing. This means summoning up the essence with maximum brevity. Expect to go through 10 to 20 drafts before you have something worthy of you.

Typically a proposal will include the following:

- Cover sheet (1 page)
- Program description (3 pages)
 - Synopsis of the project, maybe in 25 words or less
 - Treatment explaining background information, structure, theme, style, format (16mm film, DVCAM, Digital BetaCam, HDTV, etc.), voice, and point of view

- Target communities for the program and why this audience is presently unserved by television (television is usually trying to fill gaps)
- How you are known to (and trusted by) the community in which you propose filming.
- Why public television (for instance) is the right place for this program
- Current status of the project
- Production personnel (2 to 3 pages)
 - Applicants' full resumé
 - Key production personnel names, positions, short biographies
- Previous and present work samples
 - Previously completed sample work (either demo reel or completed film—see fund guidelines)
 - Work-in-progress (WIP) of perhaps 5 minutes minimum length
 - Written descriptions of prior work, applicants' creative contribution to it, its relevance to WIP, and what the WIP represents (rough cut, trailer, selects, or a clip)

Funding organizations that routinely solicit applications streamline their process to ensure that juries compare consistent documentation. They usually issue their own proposal forms, expect you to write in very specific ways, and want a specified number of copies with everything labeled in very specific ways. If you seriously expect support, you must fulfill what they expect, so check and re-check everything before you close up the package. A weary committee member sifting through a great pile of competing applications sees departures from the norm not as charming originality but indifference to the jury's task. You cannot afford to lose support at the outset through inattention to details.

The Independent Television Service (ITVS) Web site is a mine of information on how to apply and what independent films have recently been funded (see www.itvs.org and go to "For Producers"). The site gives valuable hints on writing a better application. Passion and innovation are high on the list of desirable attributes.

For information on the PBS series *POV* go to www.pbs.org/pov/utills/aboutpov_faq.html and to their call for entries Web site www.pbs.org/pov/utills/callforentries.html#callforentriesk. The guidelines of these program portals, through which many important American independent documentaries get made, are inundated with applications. Most documentaries must now be initiated by their makers rather than funded at the proposal stage. ITVS and POV ask producers to apply with a substantial amount of the footage or a long edited version.

Web sites that offer open access are normally a mine of information on all aspects of making documentaries for television. Read carefully, because everything you see is meant to parry the commonest mistakes and misunderstandings. Most documentary applications are abysmal. An ITVS regional jury on which I once sat for 3 days ended up unanimously considering only 6 out of 140 applications to be at all promising. Two of those we chose (which ITVS in the end failed to support) went on by other means to become quite famous independent films.

Note that when you propose a film to television, they expect you to be geared to their audience and to have plans for your film to function educationally in designated communities afterward. Documentaries are expected to have long and useful lives after their single showing on TV, and it's your job to figure out who will use your film afterward and in what way.

THE TREATMENT

The treatment, like the proposal, is more armament in the battle to get a film made and exists to convince a sponsor, fund, or broadcasting organization that you are uniquely prepared to make a film of impact and significance. Whereas the proposal presents its argument rationally via categorized information, the treatment evokes how an audience would experience the film on the screen. A treatment is therefore a short story narrative that excludes any philosophical or directorial intentions. To make one,

- Restructure the information you worked up in the proposal into a chronological presentation, allotting one paragraph per sequence.
- Write an active-voice, present-tense summary of *what an audience watching the film you expect to make will see and hear from the screen*.
- Write colorfully so that the reader visualizes what you see in your mind's eye.
- Convey information and evoke your characters wherever possible by using their own words in brief, pithy quotations.
- Never write anything that the reader will think you cannot produce.
- Keep within the specified page count.

BUDGET PLANNING FORM

Your final budget, or a budget summary sheet, should wherever possible be done using a budget software program. Here is an all-purpose form to prompt what you will need to cover by way of costs (Figure 15–1). Note that in this early stage, you may find it useful to compile for your own use both high and low figures as optimistic and pessimistic approaches, respectively. This should keep you from underestimation. A contingency percentage is always added at the end of a film budget to cover the unforeseen, such as bad-weather delays, reshoots, additions, or substitutions. Note that unusually low budgets are seen as a sign of dangerous inexperience and seldom attract support.

THE PROSPECTUS

This presentation package or portfolio communicates your project and its purposes to non-filmmaking funders, who may be quite task oriented. The League of Left-Handed Taxidermists wants to know how *Stuffing Badgers* will be useful to them, how much it costs, and why. A prospectus should be thoroughly professional and contain:

Brief Particulars for Project

Working Title:		Length ___ m ___ secs	
Crew Member	Address	Home phone	Work phone
(Director)			
(Camera)			
(Sound)			
(Editor)			
Format (circle all that apply):	DV/Betacam/Digital Betacam/HD Other _____	Film: B&W/color 16 mm/35 mm	
Schedule	Preproduction	Production	Postproduction
From (date)			
To (date)			
Brief description of subject:			
Film's Working Hypothesis is:			

Preproduction

<i>Item</i>	<i>Low Estimate</i>	<i>High Estimate</i>
Director/researcher @ ___ per day for ___/___ days		
Travel		
Phone		
Photocopying		
Food		
Accommodation		
Tests		
Research (library, etc.)		
1: Preproduction SUBTOTAL		

FIGURE 15-1

Short budget estimate form. Note high and low estimate figures. A contingency percentage of the below-the-line costs is often added to the total to allow for the unforeseeable.

Production

Role	Daily Rate	Min Days	Max Days	Low Estimate	High Estimate
Director					
Camera Operator					
Sound Operator					
Gaffer					
Other					
2a: Production personnel SUBTOTAL					
Equipment					
Camera (film)					
Camcorder					
Magazines (film)					
Changing bag (film)					
Clapper board (film)					
Lenses					
Filter kit					
Exposure meter					
Color tem. meter					
Tripod					
Baby legs					
H-hat					
Tilt head					
Spreader					
Video monitor					
Nagra package (film)					
Headphones					
Mike boom					
Extra mikes					
Mixer					

FIGURE 15-1 *continued*

Role	Daily Rate	Min Days	Max Days	Low Estimate	High Estimate	
Batteries						
Sun gun						
Lighting package						
Tie in cables						
Extension cords						
Other _____						
Other _____						
2b: Production equipment SUBTOTAL						
Materials	Type	Cost per Unit	Min Days	Max Days	Low Estimate	High Estimate
Camera raw stock						
Nagra tape						
Develop negative						
Make workprint						
Sound transfer						
Sound stock						
Videocassettes						
Other _____						
Other _____						
Miscellaneous	Type	Per Day	Min	Max		
Insurance						
Transport						
Food						
Accommodation						
Location or other fees						
Other _____						
2c: Production miscellaneous SUBTOTAL						

FIGURE 15-1 *continued*

Postproduction

Role	Cost per Day	Min Days	Max Days	Low Estimate	High Estimate
Editor					
Assistant editor					
Narrator					
3a: Postproduction personnel SUBTOTAL					
Materials	Type	Amount	Min	Max	
Archive footage					
Time coding					
Window dub					
Offline editing equipment					
Music					
Titling					
Online (video)					
Sound mix					
Transfer mag master to optical (film)					
Conforming (film)					
First answer print (film)					
First release print (film)					
3b: Postproduction materials and processes SUBTOTAL					
Production office					
Legal					
Insurance					
Phone/fax, assistance, and other production office expenses					
Production manager					
Other _____					
Other _____					
4: Production office SUBTOTAL					

FIGURE 15-1 *continued*

Budget Summary

Phase	Category	Subtotal		Minimum Estimate	Maximum Estimate
Preproduction	1: Personnel and materials TOTAL				
Production	2a: Personnel				
	2b: Equipment/materials				
	2c: Miscellaneous				
	TOTAL				
Postproduction	3a: Personnel				
	3b: Materials/processes				
	TOTAL				
	4: Production office				
	FINAL SUBTOTAL				
	Contingency (add 12% of final subtotal)				
PRODUCTION GRAND TOTAL					

FIGURE 15-1 *continued*

1. *Cover letter*: This succinctly communicates the nature of the film, its budget, the capital you want to raise, and what you want from the addressee. If you are targeting many small investors, this may have to be a general letter, but wherever possible fashion a specific letter to a specific individual.
2. *Title page*: Finding a good title usually takes inordinate effort but does more than anything at this stage to arouse respect and interest. Evocative photos or other professional-looking artwork in the prospectus can do much to make your presentation persuasive.
3. *One liner*: A simple, compact declaration of the project. For example,
 - A theater director goes to live as one of the homeless so that she can knowledgeably direct a play about homeless people
 - Marriage as seen in the ideas and play of 7-year-olds from across the social spectrum
 - Three people, of different ages and from different countries, relive their near-death experiences and explain how profoundly their lives changed afterward
4. *Synopsis*: Brief recounting of the documentary's intended story that captures its flavor and style.
5. *History and background*: How and why the project evolved and why you feel compelled to make it. This is where you establish your commitment to

- the people and story. This is very important because nobody finishes a complex project unless he or she has an emotional investment in it.
6. *Research*: Outline what research you've done and what it has shown you. Here you establish the factual foundation to the film, its characters, and its context. If special cooperation, rights, or permissions are involved, here is where you prove that you can secure them.
 7. *Reel*: A 3- to 5-minute, specially edited trailer on VHS or DVD that proves the characters, landscape, style, and other attractions to which you lay claim. It may be a single sequence of great power or a montage of material. This is your chance to let the screen make your argument. Be aware that when there are 400 applications, reels must be of distinguished material that makes its point extremely rapidly. Include an overview list to help make viewing an alluring prospect.
 8. *Budget*: Summary of expected expenditures. Don't understate or underestimate—it makes you look amateurish and may leave you asking for too little.
 9. *Schedule*: Approximate shooting period (or periods, if shooting is broken up) and preferred starting dates.
 10. *Resumés of creative personnel*: In brief paragraphs, name the director, producer, camera operator, sound operator, and editor, with summaries of their qualifications. Append a one-page resumé for each. Your aim is to present the team as professional, exciting, and specially suited.
 11. *Audience and market*: Say whom the film is intended for and outline a distribution plan to show convincingly that the film has a waiting audience. Copies of letters of interest from television stations, channels, film distributors, or other interested parties are very helpful here.
 12. *Financial statement*: If you have legally formed with others into a company or group, make an estimate of income based on the distribution plan and say if you are a bona fide not-for-profit company or working through one, because this may offer investors tax advantages they can claim against their contributions.
 13. *Means of transferring funds*: Supply a letter for the investor to use as a model that makes committing funds to your production account easy.

Every grant application is potentially the beginning of a lengthy relationship, so your prospectus and proposals should convey the essence of your project and its purpose in a clear, colorful, individual, and impeccable way. Each prospectus you send out should be tailored to the particular addressee, but don't promise different things to different people because that could spell big trouble later.

At this stage you are what you write, so use all the facilities you can muster to give your work truly professional-looking graphics and typesetting. This is a tricky moment because you may have been unable to do more than basic research and must minimize your uncertainties. Once the project is deemed feasible and funds have been secured, then research and development can begin in earnest.

CHAPTER 16

RESEARCH LEADING UP TO THE SHOOT

This chapter deals with

- Research alone or with a partner
- A research “case history” to illustrate typical research strategies, deciding the action, casting the players, and the value of assigning metaphors and metaphorical roles
- How people alter in front of the camera and whether it matters
- Developing the film’s thematic structure and double-checking your findings
- Developing your film’s dialectics and a working hypothesis
- Pulling it all together into a dramatic plan with the three acts defined
- The dramatic components of successful scenes (beats, dramatic units)

Your proposal has received the green light, and now you are ready to embark on the next phase of research. This is the period of concentrated investigation and decision making that culminates in readiness to shoot. We are going to look at this period using an imaginary case history, one that contains just about everything typical.

RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

An ideal way to research is in partnership with a second person, perhaps a key member of the crew. Film’s strength lies in its collaborative nature, and you will appreciate how much richer your perceptions and ideas can become when you exchange them with a like-minded partner. Another benefit is having moral support when penetrating new places and confronting prejudicial attitudes. Together both partners can be relaxed, and the reassuring naturalness between

you carries over into your participants' attitude to the camera, as you can see in the Maysles Brothers' *Grey Gardens* (1975).

A further benefit of partnership is being able to compare intuitions, particularly those of foreboding. There is much you detect only on the edge of consciousness, and it is all too easy to overlook an important early warning. Your peripheral vision may also pick up clues and hints that lead to greater things. Here, too, a partner can provide the vital endorsement.

A SAMPLE SUBJECT FOR DISCUSSION

Let us assume that you want to make a film about a local school band that you've been following for a while and that you find fascinating for particular reasons. You want to go further than merely showing how the band rehearses or how it absorbs new members, because that would merely illustrate what common sense alone would expect. Your purpose is to try and lay bare the fanaticism and quasi-military discipline underlying the band's success.

Before shooting anything, find out whether such an idea is feasible. This is one of the prime purposes of research. By the way, if you work for television and must produce a film in a given time, it is a good idea to pursue the fundamentals of *several* possible ideas from the outset. Projects have a nasty habit of folding up. Permission to shoot might be a stumbling block, but sometimes during research you lose all conviction that any really meaningful film is possible. Recognizing this in time is somehow always easier when you have standby alternatives.

We are going to pursue the possibilities of this school band through the various stages of preproduction. Researching means initially surveying the general area to see if it is promising and beginning by making a "shopping list" of possible sequences. To do this you must start visiting for informal chats.

RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS

Be purposely tentative when you tell people during research about the project you have in mind. Keeping to generalities lets you feel your way, indicates that you are open to suggestions, and allows participants a stake in determining the film.

To get to the bandmaster in our hypothetical school, you would start with the school principal. You might say that you live nearby and have been thinking about making a film on the school's marching band. If he asks for a full description of the project or a script to show to his board, this is a bad sign. It signifies fear, a bad precedent, excessive caution, a lack of authority, or all of the above. In all probability, he will be delighted and will tell the bandmaster to expect you. When you arrive, approval of your project is already implied because the signal has come from the top. In dealing with any kind of institutional structure, it is usually best to work from the top downward.

When you first make a research visit, take a notebook and nothing else. Explain who you are and what you have done previously. Present yourself in a friendly, respectful way and try to reassure those you meet about your motives. You are there to learn from experts; that is your role, and that is what you should

project. It is a truthful presentation of your purpose (though not the whole truth perhaps), and it is a learning role to which most people respond appreciatively.

At this point you really do not know what your future film might contain, nor do you have more than a vague notion of what it will really be about. It is therefore both prudent and truthful to keep your options open and to parry questions with a request for *their* ideas. Often people ask to see a script. Explain that in modern documentary filmmaking, one films events that are real and spontaneous, so documentarians cannot make scripts.

Your role as an observer should be one of extremely wakeful passivity—watching, listening, and correlating what you perceive. Even the relatively suspicious come to respect a truly committed interest and gradually lower their barriers as they come to know you. This takes an investment of time on your part, but keep in mind that *documentaries are only as good as the relationships that permit them to be made*. Few relationships of trust are achieved quickly, so expect to proceed at your subject's own speed. This may mean you spend days, weeks, or even months getting to know your subjects and letting them come to trust you. People do not choose to be distrustful; they have learned to be that way, and unlearning it requires time and exposure.

TWO RESEARCH STRATEGIES

Two ways to elicit opinions without committing yourself to any particular point of view are to play the “student-of-life” role and that of devil's advocate. Instead of saying to the bandmaster, “I think you are tough and inflexible toward those kids,” you probe in a more general and depersonalized way, no matter what your convictions may be, by saying, “Some of the people I've spoken to say you are pretty definite about what you want. Do you find there's opposition to this?” And perhaps later, you might hazard something like, “Your experience seems to have shown you that kids need a strong sense of direction.” Without committing yourself to agreement, you have shown that you appreciate the bandmaster's convictions.

Many people assume that because you can accurately describe their convictions, you share them. While this is sometimes true, it is more likely a convenient misunderstanding, one it would be unproductive to correct.

Why does the student-of-life approach find such ready acceptance? Initially you will probably feel yourself trying to fake a confident, relaxed interest that you are too anxious to really feel. Do not worry; this is researcher's stage fright and always seems to accompany the initial stages of a new project, even for old hands. Yet you will be amazed at how readily your presence, and your right to ask all sorts of questions, is usually accepted. And then you will be eagerly passed on from person to person. Coming with a friend or colleague's recommendation always raises your trustworthiness several notches.

Have you stumbled upon exceptionally cooperative people? Probably not. Rather, you have uncovered a useful facet of human nature. Most of us seem privately to consider we live in undeserved obscurity, and that nobody properly recognizes our achievements or true worth. When someone comes along wielding the tools of publicity—the pen, microphone, or camera—it offers the fulfillment of a deep-seated yearning. Also, more people than you would imagine have

a philanthropic desire to tell the world a few truths it should know. This, I think, helps explain why people may receive you with surprising enthusiasm and respond so gratefully to the recognition your attention confers.

With this comes an obligation on your part to act responsibly and to treat respectfully the lives you enter. More often than not, you will leave the scene of a documentary feeling that your participants have not only given you dinner but have shared something profoundly personal with you and your camera. You carry a strong sense of obligation not just to “the truth,” which is an abstract thing, but to good people who gave you something of themselves.

This gets tricky when you feel similarly obligated to those whom you neither like nor approve. Making documentaries poses many awkward questions of moral obligation. One cardinal rule during the research period: *Never even hint you will film any particular scene or any particular person unless you are absolutely certain that you are going to.* Most people are longing to be interviewed or filmed working, no matter how cool they are on the outside. If you don’t commit yourself, you will avoid disappointing people and making them feel you have rejected them. As long as possible, stress the tentative and uncertain aspects of your research. You may yet have to shoot certain scenes or interviews, just to keep someone happy. Diplomacy of this kind costs time and money and is to be avoided.

Another cardinal rule: *Never say you will show footage to participants, either cut or uncut, if you think there is the remotest possibility that pressure will be brought on you to make undesirable changes.* Participants in a film, whether documentary or fiction, are generally appalled by their own appearance and mannerisms. They are the worst people to help you make judgments about balance and content. If people argue over this, tell them that a reporter does not have to show her notebook to anyone before the article comes out in the newspaper and that documentarians are no different. You must avoid anything leading to loss of editorial control. This is ultimately in your participants’ interest as well as your own, because their initial shock and embarrassment usually change later to pleasure and self-acceptance when an assembly of people is approving.

DECIDING THE ACTION AND CASTING THE PLAYERS

Earlier I suggested that you should start compiling a list of possible sequences. In the band project you have begun researching, you would spend time at the school getting to know the band’s personalities and routine. You would start listing the possible action sequences.

- Auditioning for players
- Individuals practicing
- Group practice
- Marching
- Special performances
- Social activities between members either before or after sessions
- Social activities between members in times of waiting

As if for a fiction movie, you have been finding locations and pieces of action. Now you need to set about “casting players.” You should begin making private, confidential notes on outstanding individuals. What kind of people are they? What does each represent in the whole? One may be the clown, another might be the diplomat, and another the uncertain kid who dislikes the band’s militarism but likes being a member too much to leave. There may be senior kids who act as “policemen” and enforcers of the band’s discipline. There may be a few eccentrics whose presence is tolerated because their playing outweighs their oddities.

THE VALUE OF ASSIGNING METAPHORICAL ROLES

It is extremely helpful to go beyond functional descriptions for your characters and give each a *metaphorical* characterization. All this, of course, is for your private use and not divulged to your subjects, as they might think you were mocking them. By producing a metaphorical vision of the group and their situation, you are compelling yourself to define each person’s underlying and unacknowledged role. Fred Wiseman’s *Hospital* (1969)—about all the human problems that find their way into a New York hospital emergency room—makes us think of purgatory, where souls are rescued or sent onward. Before our eyes the doctors, nurses, policemen, and patients become players in a renewed version of mythology. Echoes of mythology and archetypes underpin every successful documentary just as they do every arresting narrative.

Your obligation, as documentarian and artist, is therefore to more than just reflecting reality. A mirror does that, reflecting what it sees in a value-neutral and uninflected way that would be utterly banal in an artwork. You want your story to contain the characters, passions, atmospheres, and struggle proper to any human tale, but your film must reveal something more or different about your subject than people expect. The key lies in going beyond a sociological rendering. You must adopt the vision of the poet or dramatist who sees how the constants of myth and legend are regenerated in everyday life, and who looks for poetic meanings.

Giving a name to each of the metaphorical roles you see being enacted by the participants (for example, king, queen, jester, prophet of doom, diplomatic troubleshooter, sentry, earth mother) helps you do this. It gets you to recognize how, as in most established groups, your people have unconsciously set up a microcosmic society with its own roles, rules, values, and sanctions. With this golden key in hand, your film can go about compactly portraying this complete world in miniature.

Let us imagine that the band begins to look like a militaristic, patriotic, and authoritarian microcosm. It seems to say a lot about the ideology and background common to the teachers and students. Perhaps you now want to supplement with interviews the band activities, which suggest the contradictory values of both collaboration and dictatorship, because you see no other way to make these things accessible. Interviews, you hope, will give your audience access to the way the students and their teachers think. From chatting with people and absorbing many different points of view, you realize which individuals best represent the conflicting ideals you want to make visible. Certainly the bandmaster is a

charismatic figure, and his power is accepted by most as a beneficial imposition. Talk to key instrumentalists and to other teachers, and casually cross check your own impressions by asking each for a view of the others.

THE PREINTERVIEW AND HOW PEOPLE ALTER IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA

During research you investigate the ramifications of your subject, but you also test the behavior of potential interviewees as they go on record. Someone with an unsuppressed yearning to “be famous” (which is what people associate with film and television cameras) may come across as a show-off or instead clam up from sheer nervousness. This could derail your shooting and you can’t risk that.

So now it’s time to take along a camcorder to do some preliminary interviews. I ask permission before turning on my machine and give some explanation of why I am doing an initial recording. When they begin, most interviewees are self-conscious and constrained. Soon they begin to speak more freely and with feeling, though some do not. Some instead become monosyllabic or show an accentuated tendency to digress or to qualify everything they begin to say.

Take your recordings and immerse yourself in them, letting thoughts and associations come to you on their own. Make scribbled notes of these. You are learning who will give you the most, who remains undistorted by character hang-ups, and who, on the other hand, cannot or will not deliver when he goes on record. Sometimes an interesting and likable person simply does not record well. His voice may be flat or uncongenial, or he does not construct verbal pictures in a logical, communicative way. Others prove to be monotonous or expressionless, and their affect negates whatever they say or do on screen. Even the voice quality itself matters greatly. Henry Kissinger’s harsh voice, for example, may have been a major factor in his unpopularity.

For some reason, none of this is easy to see until you are out of the person’s presence and can watch a tape, free of a sense of obligation. Recognizing now what does or does not work will save time, money, and heartache later. Often, of course, a recording confirms to the point of finality what you already suspected: Person A is a delight to watch and hear, and you are sure you want to use her. Person B, however, seems constrained and evasive by comparison, and you become sure that he cannot be in the film.

Your priorities are emerging, and the key participants—each representing different and probably opposing aspects in your underlying framework—have become a natural choice. These preinterviews can be used later as voice-over if you took care to record well, in a quiet place, and without letting voices overlap. You now have the unpleasant task of telling Person B that you won’t need his services. Maybe there’s something he can do for you on camera so that he doesn’t feel completely rejected.

DEVELOPING THE FILM’S THEMATIC STRUCTURE

You have become convinced that the band, with its charismatic father figure at the helm, is a viable analog for a disturbing aspect of your country’s political structure. This analogy is by no means farfetched. Peter Davis’ *Hearts and Minds* (1974) repeatedly uses scenes of American sports and the team spirit atmosphere

to serve as an explanation and an analogy for the values expressed by supporters of the war in Vietnam. The film implies that the sports mentality conditions young Americans to enter an ideological conflict under the tragically simplistic notion of “our team” and “their team.” Only in the field as they saw friends and foes die did the young GIs begin to question what “playing for the team” actually meant. By such conditioning and metaphors in peacetime, the film suggests, do we prepare our young people to suffer and die in the prosecution of grand abstractions like “America,” “freedom,” and “my leaders, right or wrong.” By finding the embodiment of such paradigms, the documentarian draws attention to the shadowy substructures of a whole society.

The documentarian’s job is to point out the superficial and reveal deeper truths. Suppose, in between the band practicing, the band members watch George W. Bush in the nightly news exhorting the country to go to war again in the cause of freedom and democracy. This, intercut with the bandmaster practicing tough love as he conducts, might create a telling argument by analogy. It might prove to be a cheap shot, but you won’t know until you try it.

DOUBLE-CHECKING YOUR FINDINGS

During research, collect as many relevant viewpoints as you can. Your initial judgments are often based on brief and persuasive exposure that later proves partisan, so testing your assumptions against the impressions of people whose lives make them expert helps you sift out as much reliable information as possible. It also helps you find the personalities and forces that are quietly ranged against each other.

It is fascinating to discover how everyone, especially the visible and powerful, is perceived differently according to whom you question. Biases and prejudiced viewpoints are inevitable, and you need to develop ideas about what they spring from. Cross checking different impressions of your major “characters” enables you to avoid superficial judgments and lets you build into your film the diversity of affinities and tensions that make any group of people vital and fascinating.

You have become almost oppressively knowledgeable about the people and practices that surround the school’s marching band. You need to withdraw and decide your priorities, because if you were to shoot now you would lack clear direction.

FINDING THE DIALECTICS AND DEVELOPING A WORKING HYPOTHESIS

Whatever your initial motives were for looking into the marching band, they must now be reviewed in the light of your greater knowledge. Earlier I said that a film qualifies as a documentary when it implies a critical attitude toward some aspect of society. Here we face some problems inherent in film, because as Richardson says in *Literature and Film*, “literature has the problem of making the significant somehow visible, while film often finds itself trying to make the visible significant.” Film generally, and documentary in particular, has an over-supply of the real. An unstoppable torrent of surface trivia often obscures deeper

meanings. It may not be enough to merely *show* something; we must also indicate where its significance lies. How is this achieved?

What we find significant—in issues as well as in individuals—exists because conflict is at work. It may be internal conflict in an individual who is torn between allegiances to class, generation, or a system of belief. It may be between individuals of different opinions, different convictions, or different ambitions. Or it may, like Nanook's, be between the individual and his environment as he struggles to adjust to harsh changes and to survive. A large proportion of people on the planet live, and have always lived, in dire insecurity—balanced between tenuous survival and annihilation by hunger, disease, or ideological enemies.

No human being, however free of threat from the outside, is without the internal conflicts that arise from conflicting needs, desires, or ambitions. Popularized versions of Freudian analysis suggest that every motive and every ill has its explanation in a few major principles, but Jean-Luc Godard was right to say that in drama as in life, we can never properly enter another's thoughts and feelings through psychological keys. Everything we learn about another person is suggestive, fragmentary, and pieced together from observing that person's behavior—particularly that which seems contradictory. Nor surprisingly, Godard's approach to revealing characters is simply to concentrate on their contradictions, because these invariably signal what is active and unresolved in their lives.

To show the pressing truths in human life, documentary must uncover the ambiguities and contradictions in its characters' "unfinished business" and focus on those most in flux. Poetry, says Billy Collins, "is a camping grounds for ambiguity and paradox." Documentary joins poetry whenever it plumbs the human psyche, for it finds contrary impulses and contradictory beliefs.

In your research, you now suspect that the band exemplifies how the country talks eternally about democracy yet hungers for "strong leadership" to sort out the misfits for their own good. But now you hit a snag. Although the bandmaster is an authoritarian of the worst kind, bands do need leaders, and a lot of the kids rather like him. Even more confounding is that, in spite of disagreeing with all his ideas, *you* find yourself liking him too.

What to do? Give up? Surely you have stumbled on a truly interesting subject, all the more so because you yourself have contradictory, ambivalent feelings toward benevolent dictatorship and toward the situation that he has projected around him. For your own clarity, you must now define the focus, the underlying and implicit concept of your film. This, which should not be shared with anyone outside your crew, is vital to determining the shooting to come. A helpful example comes to mind from a feature film. You may have seen *The Orchestra Rehearsal* (1979), a ribald Fellini movie shot for television about a fictitious orchestra in an opera house that rebels against its conductor and descends into anarchy. A comedy on the surface, it makes serious use of the orchestra as a metaphor for our complex, interdependent, and, of necessity, highly disciplined society. The conductor is the leader but can only fulfill his role if players cooperate by accepting his authority. Once they begin to assert autonomy, the music first becomes flawed, then discordant, and then completely chaotic. Eventually the opera house, under attack by unseen enemies, begins to fall down and out of sheer discomfort the orchestra reforms itself and returns to fulfilling its best potential.

An allegorical movie like this helps show how a band and its bandmaster might be a rather potent metaphor for the leader of a political unit such as a tribe or a nation. In fact, by dealing with charisma and authority, your movie could quite easily become a parable about power, nation, and the ideology that drives it.

Some in the social sciences will feel uneasy here and say, “But that’s manipulation!” I would answer, yes it is. Film being a subjectively generated medium, the documentary can never be an ideal tool of social science. It cannot credibly postulate, as one can in print, the existence of such and such a phenomenon and reinforce its arguments with objectively gathered evidence. Rather, its purpose is artistic, to relay a way of seeing and feeling. At its best the documentary can take something apparently banal and unmeaningful, and give us a heightened, subtly argued vision that is charged with significance for our own lives.

So what meaning, what thematic structure, can we find in the band situation? You have discovered what you never believed existed: a benevolent despot who is valued and valuable, even though all his “subjects” see themselves as rugged individualists. It’s a wonderful allegory for a “free” society that consents to march in lockstep in order to achieve supremacy, one that enthusiastically submits to a form of leadership that is the very antithesis of its democratic and individualist ideals. This is the kernel of your idea—this paradox below the surface that you “see.”

Now all your sequences—the activities, interviews, and discussions you ask the kids to have between themselves for the camera—must create the contradictory parts. It is a complex vision and ultimately a nonjudgmental one that reflects little that you first expected to find. Instead it shows what was there, existing in the face of all logic and belief.

Though I invented this example, I experienced a similar conversion myself while making a film many years ago on an aristocratic estate in rural England. My film (*A Remnant of a Feudal Society*) reflected my inability to reconcile the contradictory nature of the estate, which operated in quite a feudal way until modern times. Some of the survivors remembered the estate community with nostalgia as a place of security and order—plenty of hard work but a great spirit of belonging. Others felt the regime was to some degree imprisoning, demeaning, and overdemanding. Not one person had clear, simple feelings because all had differing experiences and most had only arrived at tentative, qualified conclusions. The only predictable element was that those in the upper echelon recalled the old days with more nostalgia than those lower down, although everyone valued the place’s safety and continuity.

Because of the rather monolithic view of history I’d absorbed in school, I had expected those who had served a feudal master to unite in condemnation. The reality was more human, complex, and interesting and showed me why my school history books had seemed dull next to real life.

THE WORKING HYPOTHESIS AS A NECESSITY

One never starts a journey without some direction and purpose. In documentary any hypothesis, even a frankly admitted prejudice, provides a more fruitful starting point than vacuity masquerading as scientific method. Had I not begun the

feudal estate film from my own anti-authoritarianism, I probably would have developed no deeper vision of the place. The film would have been a tedious exercise in nostalgia, with colorful rustics and their masters remembering the good old days. Doing this is not directing but handing control over to your participants, who duly hand back whatever they think is expected. You see this all the time in the work of those who mistake critical tension for hostility. Critical vision is essential to being fully alive. Revel in it.

From the moment you are first attracted to an idea, write out *the minimum your film must express*. This, modified during research, will ensure a “bottom line”—something concrete that you intend to realize through the film. With thorough and focused preparation, the basic film is sure, barring accidents. You are freed during shooting from the terrifying gremlin that whispers in your ear, “Do you really have a film here?” From this solid base you will be able to see further and supplement or modify your original vision. Even within the pressures of shooting, you can easily keep the hypothesis in mind as the measure of everything you film.

Almost always, the working hypothesis is extended and enriched during the shooting into something far beyond the minimum you pegged out for an interesting film.

One gruesome fact about authorship must be stated emphatically: if you don't decide what your film's hypothesis will be, you will *not* find it during shooting. The demands of shooting preclude contemplation, so we might say that *a documentary only becomes a true inquiry when it starts from having something to say*. Go out with a crew expecting to naturally find “something to say,” and all your energies will get burnt up keeping the crew busy and trying to fool them into thinking you know what you're doing. Back in the editing room, you'll find that the material has no focus and no vision.

Research is useless unless you turn your findings into specific, practical, concrete resolutions.

REFINING RESEARCH INTO A PLAN

THE NEED FOR DEVELOPMENT, CONFLICT, AND CONFRONTATION

Essential to any story is growth or change in the main character or situation. Here many documentaries fail by spending their time developing what turns out to be a static situation. This is a particular hazard during a short shooting time, because most human processes are rather long. You can avoid this, if logistics permit, by filming intermittently over a longer period so that change is inbuilt. A film that capitalizes magnificently on the passage of time is Michael Apted's *28 Up* (1986), which revisits a group of children at 7-year intervals from the ages of 7 through 28. Because so many eerily fulfill their earliest ideas about education, career, and marriage, this *longitudinal study* is haunting and raises important questions about how, and even whether, people make the choices that so deeply affect personal destiny. By now there is a *35 Up* and a *42 Up*, but I prefer the scope of their predecessor. Other longitudinal studies, inspired by the *Up* series, have been started in several countries.

Many documentaries shot in a restricted period leave the viewer disgruntled because nothing of importance changes. You can ensure development in your film by searching out where change is happening. This may be *physical movement* (e.g., new house, new job, journey) or *movement in time* (change of season for farmer, woman starts challenging new job, painter experiences first retrospective of his work), or it may be *psychological development* (ex-prisoner adjusts to freedom, teenager gets first paying job, adult illiterate learns to read).

Another way to ensure development is to make a film dealing with a short-term conflict that you can follow through enough stages to build up a sense of movement. This conflict might be within one character (a mother takes her child for his first day at school), between two characters (two social scientists with conflicting theories of criminality attend a key court case), between a character and the environment (an African farmer survives a drought from day to day), or thousands of other combinations.

Being able to show change comes from developing a sensitivity to people's issues and therefore anticipating how and where they face a crisis. You can help yourself by answering these questions: *What is this person trying to get or do? What does he want?* The question is valuable because it demands that you define a person in terms of movement and will. Volition cannot exist without opposition, you arrive quickly at the next important question: *What or who is keeping this person from getting what he wants?*

The elements of struggle, contest, and will are at the heart of dramatic tension in every narrative medium, documentary not excepted. A documentary without a struggle for movement is just a catalogue of expository episodes. You and I have yawned through a hundred such films.

While shooting your marching band film you can anticipate several kinds of development. One might be in a young contender auditioning to enter the band. Another might happen during a big competitive event that puts everyone under stress. Yet another might be after graduation, when the big man at school faces being a nobody searching for a job. With these processes covered, you have metaphorically encompassed a cycle of birth, life, and death in the band's ongoing existence.

You can define a conflict in your head, but it remains invisible and abstract unless you show it in action on the screen. Be sure, therefore, that you build the conflict's sides stage by stage, and be sure to arrange, if necessary, a *confrontation* between the opposing elements in your movie. If an instrumentalist has to pass a stringent test, be sure to shoot its key elements. If a young man must find a job, be sure to shoot him interviewing for one. It is always better to show struggle than to talk about it.

You may have to ensure that "the confrontation" happens; you might, for instance, arrange for two players with opposing views of the band to slug it out verbally or musically in front of the camera. If, in a film about a homeless shelter the key issue is whether strict rules are necessary, be sure to film clashes between inmates and those in charge. It may be necessary to ask either staff or inmates to initiate a typical episode or re-enact one if none happens spontaneously. This is the catalyst function that participatory cinema directors use and observational cinema exponents abhor. The poet and novelist Thomas Hardy said that "Art is the secret of how to produce by a false thing the effect of a true."

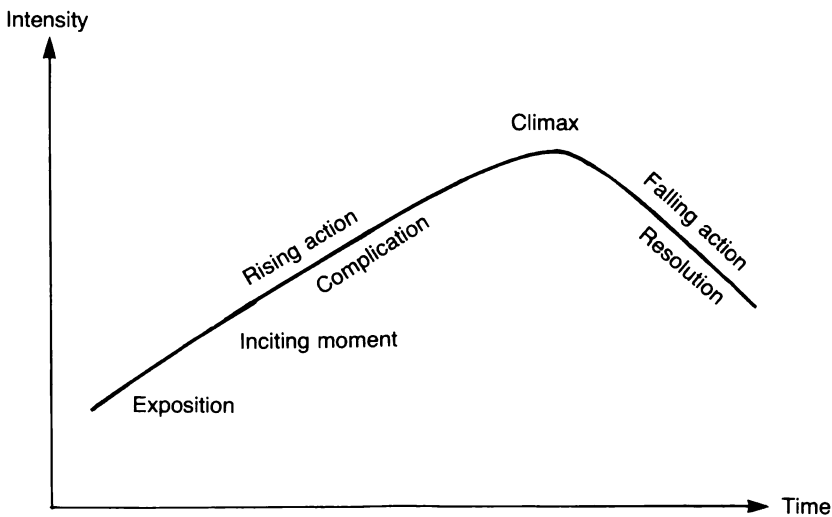


FIGURE 16-1

Dramatic curve. Variations of this apply to most narrative art, including documentary films. The same principle also is useful in analyzing a single scene.

THE DRAMATIC CURVE

It is never easy to forecast how documentary shooting will turn out in relation to your hopes. Applying the traditional dramatic curve (Figure 16-1) to your ideas, however, is useful during research and outstandingly useful as an analytical tool during editing, which is really the second chance to direct.

The concept of the dramatic curve is derived from Greek drama and represents how most stories first state their problem, develop tension through scenes of increasing complication and intensity, then arrive at an apex or “crisis.” After this comes change and resolution—though not, let me say quickly, necessarily a happy or peaceful one. In Broomfield’s and Churchill’s *Soldier Girls* (1981), the crisis is probably the point at which Private Johnson, after a series of increasingly stressful conflicts with authority, leaves the army dishonorably but in a spirit of relieved gaiety. The film’s resolution, once this major character quits the stage, is to examine more closely what soldiers need during training to survive battle conditions.

In the Maysles Brothers’ *Salesman* (1969), most people think the story’s apex is the moment when Paul Brennan, the salesman who has been falling steadily behind the pack like a wounded animal, unwittingly sabotages a colleague’s sale. In the film’s coda, his partners distance themselves as if deserting a dying man. The resolution is to leave Paul staring offscreen into a void.

Once you understand the idea of the apex or crisis, the rest of the dramatic convention arranges itself naturally in stages before and after the peak of the curve to make the classic three-act structure. Three categories precede the climax, and one follows. Let’s examine the idea in more detail so that you can apply it to your research:

Act I

1. The *introduction or exposition* establishes the *setup* by laying out main characters and their situation and giving enough necessary factual information about time, place, period, and so on to get started. Modern drama often lacks a captive audience, so it cannot afford to delay the major committing action. The main conflict, or struggle between opposing forces, will probably be established early in the documentarian's "contract" with the audience. Signaling the scope and focus of the film to come, it aims to secure their interest for the duration.
2. The *inciting moment* is whatever sets in motion the opposition of interests. In the military, basic training sets in motion a battle between the homogenizing goals of the army and the self-protecting individualism of the recruit. The army aims to break down individual identity and replaces it with a psyche trained to unthinkingly obey. In *Soldier Girls* the inciting moment is when Sergeant Abing sees Private Johnson smirking after he has rebuked her. This signals the onset of a long and unequal struggle between them. Because a white male is imposing his will on a black female, the situation is replete with disquieting overtones of slavery and colonialism.

Act II

3. *Rising action or complication* usually shows the basic conflicts being played out as variations having surprise, suspense, and escalating intensity. In *Soldier Girls*, the army's expression of will and the misfits' expression of cowed resistance are repeatedly raised a notch to more serious and offensive levels. Seeing protagonists and antagonists engaged in such a revealing struggle, we come to understand the motivations, goals, and background of each, and during this period we choose sides. Our sympathies vacillate in the face of ambiguity.
4. In the final *confrontation* comes the *climax* or *apex* of the curve, a point of irreversible change.

Act III

5. The *resolution or falling action* is what the piece establishes as the consequence. This includes not only what happens to the characters but also what interpretation for the whole is suggested by the last scene or scenes. How you let the audience last see the characters in a documentary, as in other story forms, can alter the impact of an entire film.

Few documentaries fall neatly into this shape, but some memorable ones do. The formula is used with awful fervor in Hollywood, and some screenwriting manuals even prescribe a page count per act, with particular page numbers for "plot points" where the story lurches off at an interesting tangent. Documentary, thank goodness, is too wayward a form to attract such control fever, but it still needs to be dramatically satisfying, and this is just as true for essay, montage, or other forms of documentary, not just those of the narrative variety. Indeed, this escalation of pressure, crisis, then lowering to resolution is also found in songs, symphonies, dance, mime, and traditional tales, because it is as basic to human life as breathing or sex.

THE BEST SCENES ARE DRAMAS IN MINIATURE

What is fascinating is that a successful documentary scene is a drama in miniature; it follows the same curve of pressures building to a climax before releasing into a new situation. During the shoot, the documentary director often sees a scene develop, spin its wheels, and refuse to go anywhere. Then, perhaps with some *side coaching* (verbal inquiry or prompts by the director from off-camera) the characters lock onto an issue and struggle over it until something significant changes. This fulcrum point of change, called in the theater a *beat*, is the basic unit of any scene containing dramatic interchange. Even compilation montage films that lack foreground characters, such as Pare Lorentz's *The River* (1937), follow the same dramatic curve.

LOOK FOR BEATS AND DRAMATIC UNITS

When you see someone go through a moment of irreversible change of consciousness, such as realizing his love is recognized or that he is faced with incontrovertible evidence that he lied, you are seeing a *beat*. Other characters in the scene may not notice anything, but that character (and the informed onlooker) sees that moment of change and knows that he must now take a different course of action.

A dramatic unit includes

- The initiation of a new issue
- Complications that escalate the pressures
- Apex of the confrontation
- The beat—a change of consciousness in one character that initiates a new issue and the onset of a new dramatic unit

A scene may have one dramatic unit or several. As you learn to recognize dramatic units taking place in daily life and you see them unfold for you to shoot, you know when to turn the camera on and later what portions of the documented scene to use. Being able to recognize this dramatic breathing action as it takes place is the preeminent skill for actors and directors, in fiction or in documentary.

A successful progression of beats contributes *dramatic tension*. It sets up questions, anticipations, even fears in your audience. Never be afraid to make them wait and guess. As Wilkie Collins, the father of the mystery novel, said, “Make them laugh, make them cry, but make them wait.” The need for dramatic tension applies fully to the documentary.

EXPOSITION, FACTS, AND NARRATION

Before shooting, you should know what factual material you must gather so that the audience can understand each situation. Nobody wants to use a narrator if it can be avoided, so develop an ongoing list of facts that will be vital to an

audience's understanding of the material. These will include names, places, ages, dates, times, the sequence of main events, relationships, and so on. This factual information, or *exposition*, must emerge one way or another if the film is to make sense to a first-time audience. An important part of your role as director is to draw this material out of the participants and *in more than one version*. If you cover all your bases, you can probably avoid writing and recording narration. Images and characters may supply all vital information as it is needed.

CHAPTER 17

MISSIONS AND PERMISSIONS

This chapter addresses the following issues:

- Explaining your purposes and developing a foundation of trust
- Developing loyalties to those in your films and your obligations to “truth”
- When to warn participants of the consequences of being filmed
- Getting evidence that is convincing
- Truth claims in transparent and reflexive documentaries
- Your documentary as a catalyst of change in your participants’ lives
- Accepting your incapacity for any ultimate truth or final word
- Authorship as looking both inward and outward at the world
- Being changed by your work
- Letting your last work prepare you for your next
- Location scouting, logistics, and scheduling
- Securing location and personal releases

Directing even the briefest documentary soon shows how loyalties and obligations develop between yourself and your participants and how authorship is inseparable from ethical dilemmas related to this. A single example: You are making a film about the victims of a housing scam who you get to know and like. You then gain the confidence of the perpetrators, who offer you hospitality. Because refusing might expose your judgment of them, you go out with them, eat an expensive dinner, and laugh at their jokes. When you next visit their victims, you feel thoroughly compromised, even a traitor.

Anyone working as a documentarian begins from a sense of values and mission. At first even the smallest decisions compel you to scared self-

examination, but after a few years, particularly if you work in a news organization alongside older and cynical pros, you become more comfortable and risk becoming professional in the worst sense. That is, you are in danger of turning into a skeptical bystander or of using people to illustrate foregone conclusions. Belonging to a powerful corporation makes it seductively easy to overvalue your own importance and to undervalue those who let you into their lives. Following are some general guidelines for various common situations.

APPROACHING PARTICIPANTS

When you confirm that you want someone to participate in a project, you seldom have more than the sketchiest idea of who or what will be used in the film, what it will say, or how this individual, whom you don't know very well, will finally appear to the world. Given such shadowy outcomes, documentaries can only be made on a basis of trust. Indeed, you usually "cast" particular people *because* they are cooperative and show good will. Unfortunately, documentarians have been known to abuse this trust. When I worked at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), a woman factory worker spoke candidly and trustingly in an interview about sexual morals among her female co-workers. Outraged when the film was transmitted, they beat her up the next day. The (male) director apparently knew this was a risk and gambled with her safety for the sake of a more sensational film.

For most participants, nothing comparable is at risk. To read them a standardized list of possible consequences would scare the hell out of them, and for no good reason. The case is different in investigative filmmaking; the very existence of an investigation should be fair warning.

In seeking permission, outright subterfuge is sometimes justified. When someone has just butchered 200 defenseless people, you can jettison all fine moral scruples. Such clarity is rare; usually you are not faced with black and white issues, but shades of pale gray. Such decisions take not less moral courage but more.

HOW THE SHOOTING PROCESS CHANGES THINGS

Altering reality: The fears many new directors express about "altering reality" surely come from believing that they cannot match the objectivity affected by so much on television. Leaving aside the invasiveness of cameras and equipment, it remains true that *every* set of relationships is changed according to whom is present and observing. A family picnic is altered according to who arrives; a 10-year-old child will make a different impact and result in less change to the atmosphere than a man in sunglasses who is silently taking photographs but whom nobody knows. If, however, the photographer first convinces the group that his interests are sympathetic and genuine, or if a trusted member of the group mediates his arrival, the newcomer will be welcomed. Your presence, with or without crew and camera, cannot help altering an event, but the changes can be large or small according to whom you film and how you handle the preparation.

Casting: Choose participants with care. Mistaken casting can mean waking up to find you have committed yourself to someone who resists, distorts, or even manipulates the process. To guard against this, defer decisions about who is to participate until the latest possible moment. The longer you give yourself to see people in action, the less likely you are to miscalculate. To lower the anxiety that distorts how people present themselves, be sure to tell participants that you shoot far more film than you use, so mistakes are unimportant, and avoid all comment about what is likely to survive into the final film.

When you get something other than you expect: Some mishaps and twists of fortune present both ethical and practical difficulties. Suppose the evidence you are getting does not support your hypothesis. Should you make a different film or stop shooting? Suppose somebody's basic situation changes? Suppose your lonely widow suddenly acquires a boyfriend. Do you collect materials to reconstruct the situation as it (interestingly) was, or do you alter your film to reflect the (less interesting) situation as it is now? The answers depend on what you have promised, what code of conduct you have set yourself, and what good story remains possible.

Temptations when interviewing: Interviewing poses ethical responsibilities. For instance, the thrill of the righteous chase can delude one into unfairly demolishing a person's defenses. Although there is a second chance in the cutting room to recognize and prevent this situation from becoming public, the damage to your relationship with your subject (and your co-workers) may remain. Especially if you don't have complete editorial control, you may be forced by your superiors to use something you regret shooting. Some documentarians even say, "If you shoot it, you'll use it."

Here is another interviewing dilemma. You take a participant up to an important, perhaps unperceived, threshold in his life. In a revealing moment, the interviewee crosses into territory never before penetrated. We see what Rouch calls a "privileged moment," where all notion of film as an artificial environment ceases for participant and audience alike. It is a wonderful moment, but it hinges on the revelation of some fact that should not become public. Can you now lean on the person to permit its inclusion in the film? Perhaps the participant is so trusting that you alone can make the decision whether or not it will damage him. Here wise and responsible co-workers can help you carry the burden of decision. But if it is best to suppress the revelation, can you carry on with the film as though nothing new had taken place? Again, only you, making use of your own values and knowledge of the circumstances, can finally decide.

Causing changes: The documentary often alters its subjects' lives merely by exposing them to scrutiny—their own and others. At first, participants will often maintain an "on the record" and an "off the record" relationship with you. Then the line becomes blurred as a participant develops a deepening trust and emotional dependency on you. One day you wake up to realize that you are not just directing a film but are responsible for directing a life as well. Once in a class of mine, there were several projects where this was happening. One was about a man who, as a teenager, narrowly missed being the victim of a multiple sex murderer; another was about a middle-aged gang member who was dying of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and wanted the film about him to become a posthumous message to his beloved daughter; another was about a young male prostitute whose activities existed through contempt for his own body; yet another con-

cerned a *ménage à trois*. All the directors expressed anxieties about their responsibilities, and this needed considerable class discussion time. Invariably they needed support for their decisions more than they needed any radical advice.

PARTICIPANTS MUST LIVE WITH THE FILM'S CONSEQUENCES

Assessing risks: Most films change the lives they record, and it is our responsibility to help make the chemistry a positive one. For documentary participants, there is deserved and undeserved risk. Conceivably you may be told something that, were it to fall into the wrong hands, could lead to someone's injury or even death. This may be the time to stop the camera or to destroy footage. If you intend to broadcast revelations by someone in danger, make absolutely certain that the individual knows the risks and is ready to take them. Under some political regimes, something said confidentially and in passing to a camera crew can, once broadcast, lead to imprisonment or death. If you even suspect that someone will run such a risk in your film, discuss the possibilities with him or her or with the guardian if the subject is underage. Take particular care when the person is unused to being in the public eye.

Informed consent: To secure informed consent from participants means that you warn them that by publicly showing footage—though not necessarily by taking it—their reputation or even their life can be at risk, sometimes irreparably. Unlike the fiction filmmaker paying actors, the documentarian generally offers no financial compensation, and even if a substantial sum changes hands, there's little comfort in trying to settle moral obligations with cash. Checkbook documentary is still likely to be exploitation.

Where do your responsibilities lie? When do you owe loyalty to the individual and when to larger truths? Is there an accepted code of ethics? How much should you say to participants before they become too alarmed to permit filming? Only you and your advisers can decide. Usually your problems lie in the opposite direction, and you will expend much energy trying to convince people either that their fears are unfounded or that being in documentary will make neither you nor them rich and famous. Documentary exists entirely through the voluntary cooperation of participants, so take every care to avoid unnecessary exploitation. Consider what it will cost to do some good in the world, and decide *from your participants' vantage* as well as from your own whether a risk is worth it—a lonely calculation if ever there was one.

Pressures on the director to be ethical: Directing a documentary sometimes feels like being a doctor advising patients about the procedure, complications, and consequences of an irreversible operation. Some participants are not attentive or sophisticated enough to absorb all the implications, and although the signature on the release form discharges legal obligations, it doesn't meet those that are moral. In America during the 1970s, the Loud family consented to have their lives filmed (*An American Family*, 1973, PBS, 12 hour-long episodes). The exposure, first to the camera and then to savage criticism in the press (as though the family were performers) tore the family apart. Afterward the Louds said that the series' intentions were inadequately explained. Maybe so, but the open-ended nature of such undertakings makes comprehensive explanation virtually impossible.

Occasionally the filmmaker, using dubious practices to serve a larger purpose—as did Michael Moore in *Roger and Me* (1989)—can find his methods returning to haunt him. By simplifying and transposing some causes and effects, Moore handed ammunition to his film's many enemies. His later work, *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), which investigates the inanities of gun culture in America, is more careful and all the more effective. Because so few documentaries cross language and cultural frontiers, I was pleasantly surprised to find Moore's cheerful face advertising the film on a Madrid bus stop. It proves that satirical humor in the service of significant subject matter can get a documentary film shown all over the world.

EMBEDDED VALUES

All storytelling begins from assumptions about the way things are and about what will be familiar and acceptable to the audience. You only have to look back a few decades to see how many people, roles, and relationships in movies are represented in archaic or even insulting ways. Women are regularly secretaries, nurses, teachers, mothers, or seductresses. People of color are servants, vagrants, or objects of pity with little to say for themselves. Criminals or gangsters are ethnically branded, and so on—all this is very familiar and may seem like a problem that has passed. Not so.

These stereotypes come from what three film faculty members at the University of Southern California call *embedded values*, or values so natural to the makers of a film that they pass below the radar of awareness. Jed Dannenbaum, Carroll Hodge, and Doe Mayer of USC's School of Cinema and Television have an excellent book about making art, *Creative Filmmaking from the Inside Out: Five Keys to the Art of Making Inspired Movies and Television* (Simon & Schuster, 2003). Its examination of ethics is especially pertinent to documentary, where you can so easily make assumptions that silently guide the outcome of your film. *Creative Filmmaking* is mostly aimed at fiction filmmakers, but it poses some fascinating questions that I have adapted here. Embedded values, so easy to see in the next man's field, creep into your own work with surprising ease. The point is not learning to be politically correct, which is orthodoxy of another kind, but to avoid feeding into whatever is still considered normal and just shouldn't be.

Take a few steps back and consider how your intended documentary represents what is listed in the following and whether the world in your film will reinforce stereotypes or reflect instead the complexity and injustices of life as it is.

Participants:

- *Class:* What class or classes do they come from? How will you show differences? Will other classes be represented, and if so, how?
- *Wealth:* Do they have money? How is it regarded? How do they handle it? What is taken for granted? Are things as they should be, and if not, how will the film express this?
- *Appearances:* Are appearances reliable or misleading? How important are appearances? Do the characters have difficulty reading each other's appearances?

- *Background*: Is there any diversity of race or other background, and how will this be handled? Will other races or ethnicities have minor or major parts?
- *Belongings*: Will we see them work or know how they sustain their lifestyle? What do their belongings say about their tastes and values? Is anyone in the film critical of this?
- *Emblems*: Do they own or use important objects, and what is their significance?
- *Work*: Is their work shown? What does it convey about them?
- *Valuation*: For what do characters value other characters? Will the film question this or cast uncertainty on the intercharacter values?
- *Speech*: What do you learn from the vocabulary of each? What makes the way each thinks and talks different from the others? What does it signify?
- *Roles*: What roles do participants fall into, and will they emerge as complex enough to challenge any stereotypes?
- *Sexuality*: If sexuality is present, is there a range of expression, and will you portray it? Is it allied with affection, tenderness, love?
- *Volition*: Who is able to change their situation and who seems unable to take action? What are the patterns behind this?
- *Competence*: Who is competent and who not? What determines this?

Environment:

- *Place*: Will we know where characters come from, and what values are associated with their origins?
- *Settings*: Will they look credible and add to what we know about the characters?
- *Time*: What values are associated with the period chosen for the setting?
- *Home*: Do the characters seem at home? What do they have around them to signify any journeys or accomplishments they have made?
- *Work*: Do they seem to belong there, and how will the workplace be portrayed? What will it say about the characters?

Family Dynamics:

- *Structure*: What structure emerges? Do characters treat it as normal or abnormal? Is anyone critical of the family structure?
- *Relationships*: How are relationships between members and between generations going to be portrayed?
- *Roles*: Are roles in the family fixed or will they be shown developing? Are they healthy or unhealthy? Who in the family is critical? Who is branded as “good” or “successful” by the family, and who “bad” or “failed”?

- *Power*: Could there be another structure? Is power handled in a healthy or unhealthy way? What is the relationship of earning money to power in the family?

Authority:

- *Gender*: Which gender seems to have the most authority? Does one gender predominate, and if so, why?
- *Initiation*: Who will initiate the events in the film, and why? Who is likely to resolve them?
- *Respect*: How are figures with power going to be depicted? How will institutions and institutional power be depicted? Are they simple or complex, and does what you can show reflect your experience of the real thing?
- *Conflict*: How are conflicts negotiated? What will the film say about conflict and its resolution? Who usually wins, and why?
- *Aggression*: Who is being aggressive and who is being assertive, and why? Who are you supporting in this, and whom do you tend to censure?

In Total:

- *Criticism*: How critical is the film going to be toward what its characters do or don't do? How much will it tell us about what's wrong? Can we hope to see one of the characters coming to grips with this?
- *Approval/Disapproval*: What will the film approve of, and is there anything risky and unusual in what it defends? Is the film challenging its audience's assumptions and expectations, or is it just feeding into them?
- *World View*: If this is a microcosm, what will it say about the balance of forces in the larger world of which it is a fragment?
- *Moral Stance*: What stance will the intended film's belief system take in relation to privilege, willpower, tradition, inheritance, power, initiative, God, luck, coincidence, etc.? Is this what you want?

To make either documentary or fiction is to propose a version of reality. Films that entertain by dwelling on chain saw massacres or teenage shooting rampages gradually alter the threshold of reality for those attracted to such subjects, as a rash of international high school shootings has demonstrated. What do you want to contribute to the world? Are the elements you are using working as you desire?

These considerations are at the core of screen authorship, and *Creative Film-making from the Inside Out* has some very pertinent ideas in every area of screen creativity. Concerning embedded values, it asks that you know and take responsibility for the ethical and moral implications in your work.

GIVING AND TAKING

Any discussion of ethics makes the responsibilities of documentary sound very burdensome. But making documentary is not just taking, it is also giving. If “the unexamined life isn’t worth living” (Plato), your documentary may endear you to your participants through the self-examination it brings them. Paradoxically, for those culturally unprepared for reflection or proactively solving their problems, your involvement can transform the very lives you may have wanted to record intact. So you face a conundrum, because filming can compromise, subvert, improve, or even create the end result. The answer may be to share the compromises with the audience rather than hide them. Today’s audience is sophisticated, knows that filming is a complex artistic process, and is interested in what filming does to the situation under study.

TRUTH CLAIMS

Documentaries usually assert their validity as a truthful record in one of two ways. The traditional approach is to make a film that is honest to the spirit of your best perceptions and trust that the audience can infer the film’s honesty. Consciously or otherwise, spectators judge any film against their own instincts and knowledge of life, so “transparent” films—films that purport to show life happening as though no camera were present—can still work very effectively.

In the reflexive approach, the director deliberately builds into the film whatever doubts and perceptions would not be adequately acknowledged through showing the material on its own. Such a film explores perception as well as what is perceived, and this may include some self-portraiture by the makers. Robb Moss’ touchingly autobiographical *The Tourist* (1991) examines the two dominant and concurrent aspects of his life—his job as a documentary cameraman, often filming in third world countries where people have too many children, and his marriage to a nurse specializing in neonatal care, with whom he wishes to have children and cannot (Figure 17–1). Without falsely reconciling any of the open questions in his life, Moss chronicles the ironies that fate has dealt them. Finally, the film shows the joy of adopting a daughter.

How one sees, how one connects with others through making a film, is a Pandora’s box that cannot be half-opened. Autobiography always omits or suppresses some truths and, by such subtraction, elevates others. As such, truth is always provisional and to some extent fictionalized. Either for economy or for self-preservation, we never tell all about ourselves, and in settling for telling some truths and for others partially told, we recreate ourselves as though we were figures in fiction.

BEHALFERS: SPEAKING FOR OTHERS

Speaking on behalf of others is almost a disease among documentarians, and (as I learned through Henry Breitrose, a fine writer on the documentary) they have earned a special word: *behalfers*. Behalfers make it their work to represent those without a voice, which in the end is everyone who cannot make films themselves. This should remind us how charity is dispensed by the privileged, how it can feel



FIGURE 17-1

Robb Moss examines his own image as cameraman and husband in *The Tourist* (1991). (Photo courtesy of Robb Moss.)

to the recipients, and how self-serving it can be to imagine you are promoting someone else's interests.

Offering your participants a share in authorship may be the only way to overcome the distrust that poisons relations between the religions and races, say, or between feminists and well-meaning males. For decades indigenous peoples were filmed like small children or zoo animals unable to speak for themselves. Missionaries ran roughshod over native populations because it was unimaginable to them that Africans or Aztecs could hold valid spiritual beliefs. The do-good impulse runs deep, so you must be awfully clear about its basis whenever you want to act on it. Belief is dangerous when it legitimizes superiority, and being an ethical filmmaker means treating other people, their values and their lives, with the respect and humility that you would want applied to your own.

As groups and individuals become more sophisticated about film's process and purposes and less trustful of those who elect to speak on their behalf, they become more discriminating about controlling the outcome. This represents not a loss of the filmmaker's rights but a maturing relationship that requires more depth from the filmmaker and that he or she acknowledge the right of others to control their own images.

EVIDENCE AND ETHICS

Another ethical concern should be with the standard of argument you put forward. Incontrovertible evidence is always more persuasive than opinion or

hearsay. A documentary is always more powerful if its themes and ideas arise out of an unfolding life situation rather than if you plunder actuality to selectively illustrate a thesis. Interestingly, the same principle applies to fiction films; it is the difference between “signifying” a situation versus presenting it in the act of being. Once again, drama and the documentary share fundamentals.

You may have to take special care to show that a point in your film is not contrived. In the one I made about an English country estate, *A Remnant of a Feudal Society* (1970), a head groom spontaneously held out his deformed hand to demonstrate what happened (as he thought) to horsemen from holding reins at their master’s pleasure in all kinds of weather. Because it was unclear what was wrong with the hand in the wide shot, the cameraman zoomed in close. I afterward kept the wobbly zoom. Removing it by making a cut between long shot and close shot, though more elegant onscreen, would have undermined the spontaneity of his action by making it look prearranged. A simple cut in the footage would have demoted its credibility.

To show the origin and authenticity of evidence and to acknowledge ambiguity, where it exists, are both ethical and practical considerations. They help you maintain a good-faith relationship with your audience.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

The two alternatives outlined earlier—transparency and reflexivity—can be described a little differently as either using the camera to look outward at the world (transparency) or using the world as a mirror in which to examine aspects of self evoked by that world. This difference is supposed to distinguish the classicist temperament from the romantic, but either can be valid and fascinating as long as you recognize at the outset your real purpose and priorities. Do you know what you believe? How will your beliefs guide and inform the way you see the world in your film?

Finally, of course, neither dimension is separable; there is no world without perception nor any perception without an object. Self and world are inextricably related, as I have argued all along. The decision about which route to take should arise from the subject and what you want to say about it. Often finding the right approach is a question of emphasis and of how, temperamentally, you function best as a storyteller.

How will you accommodate your human subjects when they make some adaptations for your camera? Do you trust your audience to make their own assessment of your relationship to truthfulness? Will you need to assist them, and if so, how?

The process of recording and interpreting needs to be justified to your participants. You need to be respected and trusted as you make your recordings. If the complexities of this relationship affect important truths, will you acknowledge this, either implicitly or explicitly? The recording process may be too intrusive to document some intimate occasions, or will seem so to the audience. Can you draw a line, and if so, where?

These are all very theoretical questions until they find application in the real world. Luckily, it is the real that helps us decide—not only what to do, but what we believe and who we are as we do it.

DOCUMENTARY AS EXPOSURE TO LIFE

Unlike some other arts, documentary is hard to make in retreat from life. Unless you make premeditated essay films, documentary is created by moving courageously into some area of life and by living with the consequences. Until you turn on the camera, many issues and aspects of personality (your own and those of your participants) will remain dormant and unresolved. Once you start, you may have to argue passionately for your rights as chronicler and critic. You will certainly be attacked for daring, as one person, to make an interpretive criticism of another. Are you ready to stand by your judgments?

Aesthetic and ethical decisions are seldom made from a position of cool intellectual neutrality; more often they are forged in discomfort and anxiety over conflicting moral obligations—to actual people who know and trust you, on the one hand, or to truths whose importance may transcend any individual's passing discomfort, on the other. One thought to keep in mind when making a documentary, one I find both comforting and liberating, is that my best efforts to make a film are still only what the French call *une tentative*—an attempt, bid, or endeavor that is no more than one little person's view at one little moment in time. In the end, it is delusional to take on responsibility for definitive truth. It is as irrational, as common, and as humanly foolish as wanting your children to be perfect.

MISSION AND IDENTITY

Luckily we already carry certain knowledge and certain convictions. To recognize this imprint is really to say, "This is what I believe and this is what I can pass on to others." If you feel the need to communicate it, you have the drive for authorship and to make art. To some, the maker of a "transparent" documentary negates his or her impact because this kind of film aims to present life on the screen with scarcely a trace of authorship. But it is still likely to be displaced autobiography, because rather than implying, "I have been the victim of a violent society, and look like what has happened to *me*," the filmmaker searches out others whose diversity and experience give universality to what the filmmaker has already discovered in his or her own limited but deeply felt experience.

Making documentaries is a way to put your convictions under test—by finding other people and other situations that somehow convey what you want to say. As such, it is how you see the world that you share with the audience, not yourself as subject. Your task is to identify the counterparts of your own experience floating unattached on life's stream and to catch and tether them in a structured statement that will mirror the truths that life has taught you.

A lot of what happens as you do this takes place at an unconscious level. Looking at someone else and trying to see through his or her eyes places useful restraints on indulging displays of ego. Seeking your most enduring preoccupations outside yourself, and in others, helps to create a product with overtones of universality. The discipline of such a process has its own rewards. With growing maturity you can identify the surrogates to your own values and temperament and allow them to achieve a life of their own in a film. Your work even alters the way you see the fundamentals of your own life—the very source from which your documentary process sprang. In this way, each project is midwife to the next.

ANTICIPATING THE SHOOT

SCOUTING THE LOCATIONS

During preproduction, the director of photography (DP), sound recordist, and director should check out locations for problems whenever possible.

Camera: The DP will want to know what problems the location may represent. If it is an exterior, the DP will want to see when available light is at its best. On overcast days, it is wise to carry a compass with you, so you can calculate the angle of the sun on a cloudless day. Is there enough electricity available for lighting, and where will lighting stands go so there's maximum freedom without getting them in shot?

Sound: The first thing a sound specialist does in a new location is to clap her hands, once and loudly. She then listens to what follows the *attack* of the hand-clap. Ideally it is an equally rapid *decay*. If the room is *live* (reverberant) there will be an appreciable comet's tail of sound reflected and thrown around the room. This will concern her greatly, and she may argue persuasively for an alternative venue.

Take such advice seriously, because the composition of surfaces in a location can make the difference between sound that is usefully *dry* or non-reverberant, and one unworkably live and reverberant (see Sound Theory in Chapter 14). Reverberation is multiplication of the original or *source* by sound ricocheting off hard, sound-reflective surfaces. A resonant room is one that has a "note" within the range of speech to which the room resonates. You'll know this phenomenon from singing in your shower and finding one or more note (or frequency) at which the room joins in, augmenting your song with a resonance of its own. Resonances are bad news to sound recordists.

When in doubt, audition dubious sound locations by shooting tests. Record some sample dialogue from representative microphone positions, then edit the results together. In no time at all, you have the measure of your problem. The sound recordist will be concerned with

- Reflectivity of ceiling, walls, and floor (drapes and carpet greatly reduce this)
- Whether there is, or can be, soft furniture or irregular surfaces legitimately introduced to break up the unwanted movement of sound within the space
- Alignment of surfaces likely to cause standing waves (sound bouncing to and fro between opposing surfaces, augmenting and cross modulating the source sound)
- Whether the room has intrusive resonances (this happens mainly in rooms with a lot of concrete or tile surfaces)
- Whether participants can walk and cameras be handheld in a quiet scene without the floor letting out tortured squeaks
- Ambient sound and sound penetrating from the outside

Typical intermittent sound intrusions from the surroundings come from being near to

- An airport flight path
- An expressway, railroad, or subway
- Refrigeration, air conditioning, or other noise-generating equipment that runs intermittently and will cause problems unless you can turn it off while shooting
- Construction sites. You scouted the location at a weekend, not realizing that come Monday morning, a pile driver and four jackhammers compete to greet the dawn. You have no hope of stopping them.
- A school. Schools have a large amount of hue and cry at certain times of day.

Interior dialogue shooting usually must be done with all doors and windows closed. In summer this can be trying, but part of checking a location is to ensure that you can get electric power cables in under the doors or through windows when they are completely closed during takes.

LOGISTICS AND THE SCHEDULE

Estimating how long each scene will take to shoot only comes with experience. In general, careful work takes much longer than you imagine possible. You probably should schedule only two or, at the most, three sequences in a day's work unless you are using available light and have good reason to anticipate that what you want is straightforward. Even a simple interview, lasting 20 minutes on tape, may take 3 hours to accomplish. You should also allow plenty of time for transport between locations, because tearing down equipment in the old location and setting it up anew is time consuming. A new film unit is usually a lot slower than it is 10 days later.

A 30-minute documentary can take between 3 and 8 working days to shoot, depending on (a) amount of travel, (b) amount and size of lighting setups, (c) the complexity of the necessary sound setup, and (d) the amount of randomness inherent in the subject matter. If, for instance, you are shooting in a school yard and want to film a spontaneous scuffle between boys during break, you may have to hang around in a state of exhausting readiness for days. On the other hand, if you simply want to film the postman delivering a particular letter, you can organize things to get it all done in 10 minutes.

Avoid the tendency to schedule optimistically by making best-case and worst-case estimates, and allotting something in between. One luxury peculiar to the independent filmmaker (and there are few) is that, like the nature photographer, he or she can shoot over a long period. As we have said, many documentaries show no real development because the economics of filmmaking make it prohibitive to reassemble a crew at, say, 6-month intervals for a period of 2 years. Yet only such extended observation is likely to capture real changes in people's lives. Independents tend to work as a group and on more than one project at a time, so they do not have to reconstitute a crew the way a commercial project does.

Whether you are shooting in a drawn-out or a compact way, make up a model schedule and solicit comment from all concerned. Well in advance of each day's shooting, *make sure everyone has a printed schedule*. Time spent planning and informing people is time, money, and morale saved later. A poorly informed crew waits passively for instructions and gives up taking initiative.

In the schedule include a phone contact number for each location. Whenever several people are meant to converge in an arranged place at an arranged time, count on someone getting lost or having car trouble. It is maddening to be incapacitated for lack of information, and unless everyone has a mobile phone, this is a constant threat on location. A low-tech solution is to have a *prearranged contact number* (one of the crew who has a mobile phone, your sister who works all day in an office, or a message service). Any number of people spinning in orbit can now make arrangements through the third party.

A schedule should also list special equipment or special personnel required in particular locations and give clear navigational instructions so everything and everyone gets there. Photocopies of a map marked up with locations and phone numbers can save hours of precious time. Not for nothing is filmmaking compared with special forces invasion.

THE PERSONAL RELEASE FORM

The personal release form is a document in which the signatory releases to you the right to make public use of the material you have shot (Figure 17-2). Some documentarians secure a record of agreement by asking participants to say they are willing to be filmed and that their name and address is such-and-such. They certainly can't subsequently claim they didn't know they were being filmed. A

<i>Personal Release Form</i>	
For the \$_____ consideration received, I give _____	
Productions, its successors and assigns, my unrestricted permission to distribute and sell all still photographs, motion-picture film, video recordings and sound recordings taken of me for the screen production tentatively titled ____.	

Signed	_____
Name (please print)	_____
Address	_____

Date	_____
Signature of parent or guardian	_____
Witnessed by	_____
Date	_____

FIGURE 17-2

Typical personal release form.

signed document is better because people sometimes decide to pull out later, and a whole project can disappear down the toilet with a whoosh. Normally you won't have legal problems unless you allow people to nurture the (not unknown) fantasy that you are going to make a lot of money selling their footage. No one ever got rich making documentaries, so lose no time correcting any other notions.

Have personal release forms ready for participants to sign immediately after their filming is complete. No signature is valid without the \$1 minimum legal payment, which you solemnly hand over as symbolic payment.

Because it is clearly impractical to get releases from, say, all the people in a street shot, one usually gets signed releases from speaking participants only. Naturally, use your judgment; securing the release is to prevent participants filmed under a verbal agreement deciding at the eleventh hour that they do not want to appear in your film. Forestall such problems by always obtaining the signed release immediately after shooting. Minors cannot sign legal forms themselves and will need the clearance of a parent or legal guardian.

PERMISSION TO FILM AT LOCATION FACILITIES

Conditions vary from country to country, but in general personal releases are signed immediately *after* the performance has been given, whereas location permission must be secured in writing *before* you start shooting. I was once held up for a year after getting permission to film an exhibition in a synagogue. Although I got permission for the building, the traveling exhibition's owner denied he had given verbal permission to film—and did this after hugely enjoying himself presenting exhibition items to the camera.

Anything unrestrictedly open to public view (such as the street, markets, public meetings) may be filmed without asking anyone's permission. All events on private property (which may include a city transportation system) must be cleared by whomever is responsible unless you care to risk being taken to court for invasion of privacy. This happens if you or your company seems worth suing or if someone wants a pretext for a court injunction to block a showing of your film. This is a great hazard to investigative journalism.

Most cities have restrictions on filming in the street. In practice this means you are supposed to get police permission and perhaps pay for a cop to wave away troublesome bystanders or to control traffic. Technically if you abandon a handheld technique and put up the tripod, you have crossed over from news gathering to the big time, but there may be nobody around who cares, unless of course you tie up traffic. Some big cities such as Chicago are film friendly, whereas in others such as Paris and New York the honeymoon is long over. Conditions are increasingly restrictive and usually to film at any urban location you must work through a special division of the mayor's office or state film commission to get permission to film. Tied in with this is a requirement to carry liability insurance to cover the many occasions when filming implies some risk to the public.

By tradition, documentary makers often shoot first and ask questions afterward, knowing if somebody takes exception, the combination of ideals and poverty will probably lead to nothing more hazardous than an irritable dismissal. This solution can be risky, particularly in non-democratic countries where cameras are often (and correctly) regarded as engines of subversion. Film or

videotape, as the Rodney King episode testifies, can provide powerful evidence of wrongdoing in court. Because of a minute or two of footage shot by the alert owner of a camcorder, the Los Angeles police department went on trial before the entire world. Years of asserting police brutality had gotten black people nowhere until the evidence was inarguable. Therefore, anyone holding a camera is potentially gathering evidence these days.

CHAPTER 27

AUTHORSHIP

This chapter touches upon the planning process, setting expectations, and making sure you have the elements of drama. It also outlines the mysterious way in which a film assembles in your mind as you make it, disassembles itself, shifts, then reassembles in its own way and according to its own needs. This is the creative process as it applies to making films about actuality. This chapter covers

- The benefits and limits of scripting
- Defining your intentions and trying to bring them into being
- Measuring your authorial progress
- Going deeper and asking for more
- Ensuring cohesion by covering your story's needs and intentions in multiple ways
- The creative process as a mysterious spiritual journey in which your film becomes a separate entity rather than your creation

SCRIPTING

A modern documentary is an improvisation fashioned from real-life materials. To write a detailed script would rob the result of spontaneity and force participants into the role of actors. However, there are a number of nonfiction genres that involve some degree of preplanned relationship between words and images, such as the

- *Compilation* film, made from archive footage and achieving its continuity and meaning through narration, voice-over, and music
- *Nature* film
- *Science or medical* film
- *Travelogue*

- *Educational* film
- *Historical or social science* film
- *Biographical* film
- *Informational* film

Inquiry and spontaneity is not usually material to some of these genres because the factual film exists to convey information rather than open-ended inquiry, uncertainty, or ambiguity. Scripting can therefore be useful and time saving for some of these categories. Especially if you are working with given archive materials, you can plan out the film using the split-page script format shown in Figure 13–2. The script form is much favored by news, scientific, corporate, industrial, and educational sponsors, who often do not understand the more organic aspects of the creative process. Certainly it gives a highly detailed, if misleadingly final, idea of what a film will be like. The weakness of scripting is that it strives for didactic goals rather than capitalizing on the material's idiosyncrasies. Any good editor will confirm that one discovers the true potential of screen materials only after experimenting with the sound and picture materials themselves. This can greatly improve what was originally envisioned in the script.

Whenever an emotional significance arises from the interplay of words and images, as in Ken Burns' and other history films that are made from contemporary diaries, reports, photographs, and often interviews, you will always need to be guided in the editing room by the actual impact from the screen and be ready to make a myriad of significant adjustments.

In live-action documentary, scripting is limited to making a proposal and planning an intended structure to contain the materials you hope to get. You may even write a treatment to whet appetites. However, the documentary usually goes no closer to scripting than making a list of intended sequences and listing the contributions the director hopes each will make.

DEFINING AND FULFILLING YOUR INTENTIONS

The toughest demand for the director while shooting is to know whether you are fulfilling your intentions and “have a film.” I want to stress that without the working hypothesis mentioned earlier to guide all aspects of your directing, you will surely be rudderless during the shoot. That carefully wrought definition of intent is *vital*.

Here is a sample of intended sequences for an imaginary film about Hans, a likable, impulsive engineer I knew who lost the battle against cancer. An overall statement would say, “These scenes must establish a German immigrant engineer's decision to sell all he has ever worked for in order to buy back his health and future.”

Hans lived above his Chicago electric-motor workshop. His machine room was of staggering size and untidiness, containing many large metalworking and electrical machines. After talking with Hans and understanding his situation, a documentary director would make up a shopping list of shots and sequences annotated with their intended meaning:

Scene	Intended Meaning
Hans at shop counter, afternoon	Last normal day of business
Hans descending stairs from apartment, morning	Morning, a new day
Hans in greasy-spoon restaurant eating breakfast	Listless, sad, unresponsive to friends
He arrives at shop, walks through	Change of routine, ominous
Stands high above his silent workshop; begins to tour the metal shop; picks up one or two items	Making his last rites
Drawer with photographs emptied	Collecting, sifting through his past
Other clearing out, ending shots	Collecting, sifting through his past
Shock cut to auction: Hans stands impassively as machine after machine is auctioned	Hans stoic, numb, betrays no feeling
Check being signed	The price of his life's work
Torn papers in waste bin	Break with the past
Subjective shot, walking into building with "Mayo Clinic" sign	Feeling what it is like to enter as a frightened, sick person
Voice-over: receptionist greeting him, telling him his room is ready, etc.	

These ideas are based on what the director can reasonably expect Hans to do and feel. The list shows not just expected shots but what feeling and information are desired from each, and what impact the various brief scenes should have on the audience, both factually and emotionally, as the story builds. The Hans film, treated as a script, looks too rigid and locked down. But it's only a safety net, something to remind the director what to look for and what to expect, and to get a decent range of material. It is a resource, not a straitjacket.

MEASURING PROGRESS

Keep your intentions clear and handy so that you can make running checks. Keep nothing in your head that can be dumped onto paper. During the shoot, you generally suffer gnawing doubts just when you are supposed to be feeling "creative." This, of course, is nothing you dare show anybody. But if you define ahead of time what story points you must make and nail down what you need from each sequence, you are directing from a plan of campaign and can breathe easier. Now, at any juncture, you can assess whether you have won or lost the individual battles. This is made hard only because you are usually *underwhelmed* by what takes place before the camera. Later, seeing the dailies, you usually find more in them than you imagined.

DIGGING BELOW THE SURFACE

When directing, it is important to delegate everything you can because if you micromanage your crew, you will be too involved in busywork to see "subtext"

in each situation—the real meaning lying below the surface and hidden from all but the dedicated observer. Often, if not always, there are hints of something else imminent, some other unacknowledged truth just under the surface. Be alert and ready to back your instincts. Just leaving the camera running after the end of something may tip the balance and make it emerge. A few words of side coaching from you might steer the scene toward the confrontation you strongly sense wants to happen.

Side coaching means that you interpolate, at a static moment in the scene, a verbal suggestion or instruction, such as “Richard, try asking her what she really means.” If your instinct is right, the real magic happens, and the genie comes out of the bottle. You can best trigger this by asking yourself the following:

- What life roles are these people playing?
- What dramatic characters do they remind me of?
- What human truth is being played out?
- What metaphor sums up what is happening here?

Metaphysical questioning makes you search for the more universal but invisible event in progress. In the Hans film, you see him selling his life’s collection of tools and getting rid of memorabilia before entering a hospital. Sad but necessary, you think. But to go no deeper is to miss the point. What he is really doing is daring and desperate: betting everything in one last convulsive gamble. He is not letting go of his past but destroying it, as if to plead with the gods, “If I let go everything I’ve ever loved, will you let me live a little longer?”

A man is bargaining with the devil that clutches at his coat tails. As soon as you realize this, you know that he is a latter-day Dr. Faustus. Now you know what mood you want to create throughout, and how you will shoot his workshop machinery to show the power that he abandons for the white temple of regeneration.

The documentary director’s enemy is the passive, uncritical habit of accepting life’s surfaces as “what is.” The person who best directs films is the person who treats life’s superficialities as a cunning deception, a mask to be peeled away in the search for deeper meanings. We do this automatically when our lives are threatened with massive change or loss. Practice by treating each new event as a scene hiding a profoundly significant meaning that you must extract. It takes great effort to wrest meaning in this way, but anyone who has ever buried a loved one knows how much in life we let pass unexamined and un-lived, and how it rears up when it’s too late to change anything.

Making films demands that you live consciously. It requires that you think in terms of juxtaposition, irony, and comparison. This means that you actively create meaning around you instead of being a passive bystander. Because you are working in a highly allusive medium, your audience is already attuned by decades of film history to expect metaphorical and metaphysical overtones, so people are waiting to see what you can do. You must work overtime with your imagination to find the poetry behind the raw material of life, most particularly because the camera itself deals with externals and surface banality.

How do you get beyond recorded realism? As in poetry, you do it by juxtaposing materials and creating a provocative antiphony. First you do it mentally, and then you do it with the camera and editing equipment. Look for the contradictions in your subject and make sure his or her dialectics are well evidenced. By dialectics I mean the opposing polarities of action, opinion, and will that set image against image, person against person, movement against movement, idea against idea, and the parts of a person against himself. These are the spars—the pressures and tensions, often insoluble and irresolvable—that stand like bridge construction in a fog of banality.

COVER IMPORTANT ASPECTS MORE THAN ONCE

Be doubtful, and during shooting cover vital points in more than a single way so that later you can choose the best. When I filmed conscientious objectors from World War I, I thought I would find one man whose story could stand as an analog for them all. But it was a leaderless movement that downplayed its own heroism. I found no single person with more than fragments of the total experience, so I ended up doing detailed interviews with some 20 men and women to profile the movement and its underground support. No individual prevailed, so on the screen I gave equal voice to all. Because I shot several accounts of many incidents, I was able to choose the best, or combine them. It was a gamble that came off because the texture of voices, faces, and photographs was simple and appropriate for a leaderless, self-effacing movement.

RAISING THE STAKES AND ENSURING THE CONFRONTATION

Make yourself look at what the main characters have at risk, what it is they are trying to accomplish, get, or do. Do you have that properly covered? Without materially altering the situation, can you raise the stakes by ensuring that your protagonist confronts what he is trying to overcome?

Suppose your main character gets fired from his job. Does he confront the manager by seeking an explanation on camera or only talk about doing it? Can you legitimately suggest he go through with this? And if you know he will have the hardest time disclosing to his father that he was fired, can you shoot that too? Can you suggest that he dare to be assertive with his father—more so than usually? Can you ask him in an interview to search his own experience for the reasons he was let go?

There are ethical dilemmas in every situation in which you ask someone to sail close to the wind. Are you trying to document what he would do, were no film being made about him, or are you filming his best efforts at struggling with the actual issues in his life? Are you intensifying what he truly faces, or beginning to create a new set of issues entirely?

THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Authorship sometimes requires not only judicious pressures to initiate what is waiting to happen but also its opposite—ceding control of the piece at certain points to an amorphous but vibrant sense of what is true. This happens most during editing. You feel a certain awe when an assembled piece begins insistently making its own demands, telling you, its creator, how it wants to be. Parents will recognize this situation. Like maturing children in relation to their parents, your films each turn out to have their own nature, idiosyncrasies, and integrity. Each will want to make its own decisions and to exist autonomously. It is a shock and a delight to see them take wing, each differently.

Some of this will happen while shooting. You will also find yourself occasionally in a state of wonderment and making a similar capitulation. A different truth than you expected is emerging about a certain character or a certain situation, and you must either ignore it or let it guide you into the unknown. For this reason, Marcel Ophuls limits research so he “will be surprised.” He wants to shoot something open and developing rather than laboriously fulfill a blueprint of prior conclusions. Thus, documentary filmmaking sometimes embraces the mystery of existence. You put authority, identity, and career in jeopardy, but if you do not respond to those emerging, elusive truths, your crew (at least) will realize it and respect you less, and may ask you why you walked away from the challenge.

Committing to this search for deeper truth makes you a sort of Everyman undergoing a spiritual journey. A challenge may always prove to be the devil in disguise, throwing a seductive temptation to trip you up, or it may be the angel of truth, challenging you to follow her footsteps to an unknown destination.

As a documentarian, you search the world for the freestanding counterparts to your own experience. Finding them, you can communicate how life really is—without any need for self-portraiture.