

## 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	•			

Nonfiction film genres	Records, reveals, preserves	Persuades, promotes	Analyzes, interrogates	Expresses
17 Experimental (avant garde)	•			•
18 Historical	•	•	•	
19 Incentive		•		•
20 Minority voice (feminist, gay or lesbian documentary)		•	•	•
21 Mockumentary (fake documentary)	•	•		•
22 Nature		•	•	
23 Persuasive (exposé or thesis)	•	•	•	
24 Political (agitprop)	•		•	
25 Process		•		
26 Propaganda		•	•	
27 Romantic tradition		•		
28 Science				
29 Sociological	•		•	
30 Training	•			
31 Travel and exploration	•		•	
32 War (effects of)	•	•	•	

Whether or not you are familiar with all these genres, it's plain that trying to typify and categorize them is highly arguable. You could, for instance, make a case for all films belonging in the second column because all nonfiction films seek to persuade. And merely by their selecting something for our attention, you could say that all films seek to express (fourth column). To further confuse matters, most genres make use of multiple modalities according to how they fulfill their self-imposed task. With such permeable boundaries the usefulness of any method of deconstruction is limited, but in production and before it, it helps to know what modality you are currently using so you can deploy it more consciously and successfully.

Bill Nichols in his valuable *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001) divides documentary into six categories. For each I have chosen just a single well-known example. His list evolves chronologically from (as he asserts) documentary's roots in Hollywood fiction, and for each category he lists a commonly perceived deficiency:

- *Poetic documentary* (1920s). Poetically assembles fragments of the world but lacks specificity and is too abstract. Example: Joris Ivens' *Rain* (Netherlands, 1926), which evokes all the aspects of a passing shower in Amsterdam (Figure 3-1).
- *Expository documentary* (1920s). Directly addresses issues in the historical world (that is, the world we all share and experience as "real"). Once sound became established, it adopted the classic "voice of God" commentary. Expository documentary suffers from being too didactic. Example: Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak's *Why We Fight* series made for the U.S. War Department (USA, 1942-1945).

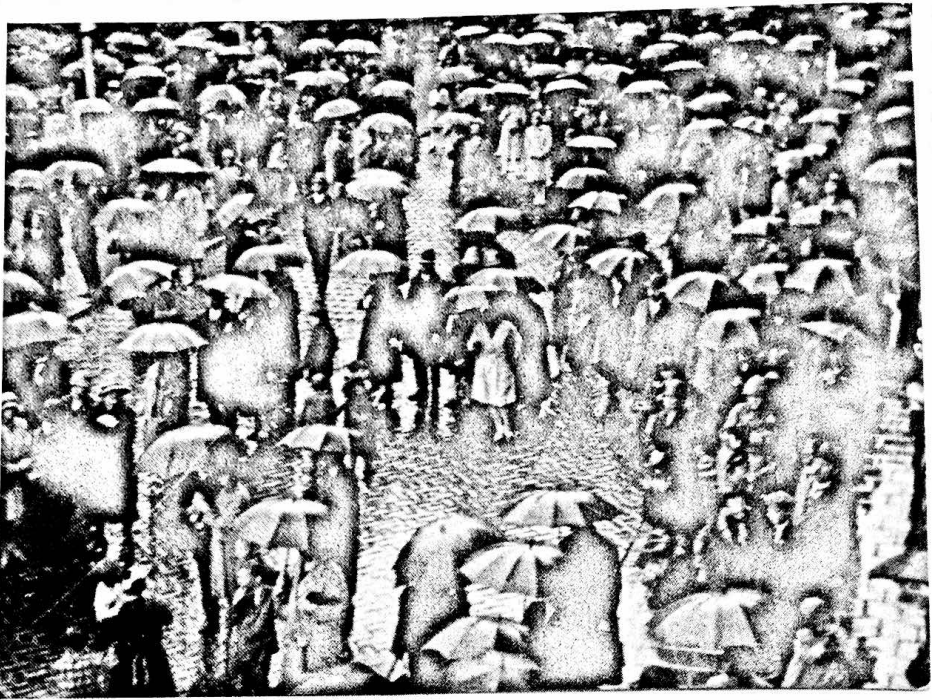


FIGURE 3-1

Amsterdam under umbrellas in Joris Ivens' *Rain*. [© European Foundation, Joris Ivens-Joris Ivens Archives]

- *Observational documentary* (1960s). Observes things as they happen, without imposing commentary or using re-enactment. Inclined to lack context and historical background. Example: Fred Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (USA, 1967).
- *Participatory documentary* (1960s). Interviews or interacts with its participants and uses archival film to retrieve history. Its deficiencies are intrusiveness, excessive faith in witnesses, and a tendency to produce naïve history. Example: Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (France, 1960).
- *Reflexive documentary* (1980s). Questions documentary form and conventions—how it represents things, not just what it represents—as an important part of its purview, but it is inclined to become abstract and lose sight of actual issues. Example: Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (France, 1982).
- *Performative documentary* (1980s). Describes human issues not in the abstract, disembodied way of Western philosophic tradition, but gives them weight by presenting them subjectively as “concrete and embodied, based on the specifics of personal experience, in the tradition of poetry, literature, and rhetoric.” Example: Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (USA, 1989), which draws on memoir, performance, dance, and incantation to convey what it feels like to be black, gay, and angry in a racist and homophobic society. The dangers in this mode are an over-reliance on style and subjectivity, and that its films can too easily be sidelined as avant garde.



Erik Barnouw in his excellent *Documentary: A History of Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) looks differently at nonfiction forms. He assigns 13 different roles to the documentary as it evolved historically:

- Prophet
- Explorer
- Reporter
- Painter
- Advocate
- Bugler
- Prosecutor
- Poet
- Chronicler
- Promoter
- Observer
- Catalyst
- Guerilla

These are proactive roles that assign the documentary a range of active social functions. Evidently Barnouw believes that documentary exists to act on society by changing the viewer's heart and mind. If so, it does this by presenting evidence in order to engage us with particular issues in a particular world. The quality of the evidence—the subject of the next chapter—has much to do with each film's effectiveness.

fiction films as *Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier, 1999), *The Celebration* (Thomas Vinterberg, 1998), and *The Idiots* (Lars von Trier, 1999). They began by playfully setting up rules of limitation, rather as the photographers Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham, Ansel Adams, and Willard Van Dyke had done in 1932 for their Group f/64. The photographers—tired of pictorialist work in which photography tried to make itself look like painting, charcoal sketches, or etching—proclaimed that photography would only be liberated to become itself if photographers rejected everything borrowed from other pictorial forms. So they concentrated on developing photography's own attributes.

Compare this idea with the Dogme Group's manifesto, which appears in various versions and translations. I have taken minor editorial liberties to render it into vernacular English as follows:

### A VOW OF CHASTITY

- Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in, but shooting must go where that set or prop can be found.
- Sound must never be produced separately from the images or vice versa. Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is shot.
- The camera must be handheld. Any movement or immobility attainable by handholding is permitted. The action cannot be organized for the camera; instead, the camera must go to the action.
- The film must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable. If there is too little light for exposure, the scene must be cut, or a single lamp may be attached to the camera.
- Camera filters and other optical work are forbidden.
- The film must not contain any superficial action such as murders, weapons, explosions, and so on.
- No displacement is permitted in time or space: the film takes place here and now.
- Genre movies are not acceptable.
- Film format is Academy 35 mm.
- The director must not be credited. Furthermore, I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste. I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a "work," as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ (Member's Name)

The last clause is particularly interesting because it rejects a leadership hierarchy and personal taste, and strikes a mortal blow at the filmmaker's ego. Instead, it passes preeminence to the cast. Of course, in practice any number of contradictions will appear, but the group's work, and the high praise it called forth from actors, demands that one take the spirit of the vow seriously. Thomas Vinterberg, interviewed by Elif Cercel for *Director's World*, said:

We did the "Vow of Chastity" in half an hour and we had great fun. Yet, at the same time, we felt that in order to avoid the mediocrity of filmmaking not only in the whole community, but in our own filmmaking as well, we had to do something different. We wanted to undress film, turn it back to where it came from and remove the layers of make-up between the audience and the actors. We felt it was a good idea to concentrate on the moment, on the actors and of course, on the story that they were acting, which are the only aspects left when everything else is stripped away. Also, artistically it has created a very good place for us to be as artists or filmmakers because having obstacles like these means you have something to play against. It encourages you to actually focus on other approaches instead. (see <http://stage.directorsworld.com>)

Interestingly, these strictures belong with the improvisational spirit of documentary. Following this good-humored yet puritanical vow put Danish film for a while in the forefront of international cinema and induced the Danish government to increase state funding by 70% over the following 4 years. The moral? All undertakings profit from creatively inspired limitations. Some are inbuilt, some encountered, and the best are those you choose that will squeeze your own inventiveness. The Dogme Group's rules dethroned the mighty god Film Technique in favor of acting and were able to hand their excellent actors a rich slice of creative control. The actors responded handsomely.

So, what creative limitations will you set yourself?

## MIGRATING FROM DOCUMENTARY TO FICTION

Taking the relatively small British cinema as an example, it's instructive to see who first worked in documentary before moving to fiction: Lindsay Anderson, Michael Apted, John Boorman, Ken Loach, Karel Reisz, Sally Potter, Tony Richardson, and John Schlesinger. Is this such a stellar list by chance? Now add those coming from painting, theater, and music, or who espouse improvisational methods, and more distinguished names appear, such as Maureen Blackwood, Mike Figgis, Peter Greenaway, Mike Leigh, Sharon Maguire, and Anthony Minghella. These are not all household names, but to me they indicate that eclecticism, improvisation, and a documentary sensibility are important to directing wherever fiction cinema is vibrant.

Recently, when chairing a panel discussion at an international film schools' conference on the utility of a documentary training for fiction directors, I made the following notes.

If you are an aspiring fiction director, experience in making documentary can

- Offer a rapid and voluminous training in finding stories and telling them on the screen
- Develop confidence in your abilities
- Show the rewards of spontaneity and adapting to the actual
- Demand intuitive judgments
- Develop your eye for a focused and truthful human presence

- Offer a workout in the language of film and demand that you find a means of narrative compression
- Offer the opportunity for fast shooting but slow editing, and time to contemplate the results (fiction, conversely, is slow to shoot but faster to edit)
- Require much inventiveness and adaptability in the area of sound shooting. Sound design can be quite intensive in documentary, and location sound inequities teach the preeminent importance of good mike choice and positioning.
- Show you real characters in real action. Character is allied with will or volition, and each is best revealed when the subject has to struggle with some obstacle. You will also see how individual identity is somehow developed in interactions between people and is not a fixed and formed commodity that functions the same in all circumstances.
- Face you with the need to capture evidence of a character making decisions. Gripping observational documentary usually deals with the behavior of people trying to accomplish things. Documentaries expose the elements of good dramatic writing by revealing these principles at work in life.
- Allow you to see how in active characters, issues flow from decisions, and decisions create new issues
- Demonstrate how character-driven documentaries are no different from character-driven fiction. Well-conceived documentary is thus a laboratory for character-driven drama.
- Show how editing must impose brevity, compression, and rhythm. In fiction this has to be injected at the writing stage. Thus, documentary teaches why the elements of good writing involve brevity, compression, and action.
- License a director and camera crew to improvise and spontaneously create
- Give directors advance experience of participants simply being, a crucial benchmark for knowing when actors have reached that state during the search for spontaneity
- Teach the director to catalyze truth from participants, so a fiction director can learn to do the same with actors
- Pose the same narrative problems as fiction, thus giving what is really writing experience
- Help the whole crew to see all human action as dramatic evidence
- Be shot in real time, when drama must be plucked from life. This accustoms directors to thinking on their feet.
- Establish that the risk/confrontation/chemistry of the moment are the stock in trade of both documentary and improvisational fiction

In the sister volume to this book, *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. ([Boston: Focal Press, 2003], 67–69), I advocate covering rehearsals for fiction film as if they were documentary material and suggest this is particularly useful for



- Discovering best camera positions
- Practicing camera framing and movements as something subservient to actors' movements
- Revealing performance inequities on the screen
- Demystifying the relationship between live performance and its results on the screen
- Seeing the need for rewrites based on the screen results
- Giving experience of working with non-actors or actors who are marginally experienced
- Helping to spot clichés, bad acting habits, and areas that are forced or false
- Helping prepare actors for the presence of the camera—thus lowering the regression that follows the introduction of camera when shooting begins
- Posing problems of adapting to a here-and-now actuality

Not so long ago, documentary was considered a lower form of filmmaking, a sideline for those not up to anything better. Now it is perceived quite differently—as a vibrant way to experience what the veteran Hollywood cinematographer Haskell Wexler calls “real filmmaking.” Through experience in handling non-actors in an improvisatory genre and through using the full range of cinema skills to tell a story, a documentary director gets a supreme preparation for the greater artistic and industrial demands of fiction. These include writing, directing actors, leading a large crew, and spending a fortune each working day. Not everyone wants to give up documentary freedoms to become a latter day Napoleon, but make no mistake—the option to do so is now distinctly present.



Right now you need to establish what matters to you most, so you can do your best work. Actually, the key to this is already inside you and close at hand. It will reveal itself if—candidly and in private—you make the provisional self-profiles in the projects that follow. Some people will find confirmation of what they expected; others will be surprised (as I was) to discover that for years they have been overlooking the obvious.

## FIND YOUR LIFE ISSUES

Finding your central issues begins with discarding everything outside a few strong emotional and psychological concerns. Whatever unfailingly arouses you to these strongly partisan feelings comes from a mark you've absorbed. The marks you carry, and the issues they bring, will be few and personal. Exploring them sincerely and intelligently through your films will deeply touch your audience and keep you busy for life. Unfortunately, filmmakers often seem willing to settle for a superficial understanding of these matters—far more so than writers or painters, for instance. Here are a few projects to help you begin the process of introspection.

## PROJECTS

### PROJECT 10-1: THE SELF-INVENTORY

To discover your issues and themes, and thus what you can give to others, start with a non-judgmental inventory of your most moving experiences. This should be straightforward, because the human memory retains only what it finds significant. If you already have a good handle on your underlying issues, take the inventory anyway—you may be surprised. Honestly undertaken, this project reveals life events that are key in your formation. Acknowledging them will urge you to work at exploring the underlying issues.

Here's what to do:

1. Go somewhere private and write rapid, short notations just as they come to mind of major experiences in which you were deeply moved (to joy, to rage, to panic, to fear, to disgust, to anguish, to love, etc.). Keep going until you have ten or a dozen.
2. Stand back and organize them into two or three groups. Name each group and define any relationship or hierarchy you can see between them. Some moving experiences will be positive (with feelings of joy, relief, discovery, laughter), but most will still have disturbing emotions attached to them, such as embarrassment, shame, or anger. Make no distinction, for there is no such thing as a negative or positive truth. To discriminate is to censor, which is just another way to prolong the endless and wasteful search for acceptability. Truth is *truth*—period!
3. Examine what you've written as though looking objectively at a fictional character's backstory. By seeing your formation a little objectively, you should find trends, even a certain vision of the world, attaching naturally to these experiences. Be bold and freely imaginative in developing this character's world

view, just as if you were developing a fictional character. Your object is not to psychoanalyze yourself or to find ultimate truth (those would be impossible): it is to fashion a temporary authorial role that you can play with all your heart. Because it's a role, not a straitjacket, you can change it, evolve it, and improve it as you go.

Now write notes that, without disclosing anything too private, will enable you to describe objectively and aloud to a group or class:

- A. The *main marks your life has left on you* during formative experiences. Keep your description of the experiences to a minimum and concentrate on their effects, not their causes.

Example:

*"Growing up in an area at war, I had an early fear and loathing of uniforms and uniformity. When my father came home after the war, my mother became less accessible, and my father was closer to my older brother, so I came to believe I must do things alone."*

- B. Two or three *themes* that emerge from the marks you carry

Examples:

*"Separation breeds self-sufficiency."*

*"Someone taking what you value can motivate you to fight for your rights."*

*"Good work often starts out on the wrong foot."*

- C. Several *different characters for which you feel unusual empathy*. These can be people you know, types of people, or people who exist and whom you could contact.

Examples:

*A friend from an orphanage who had to overcome difficulty with intimacy*

*A friend who vents his anger through anti-globalization protests*

*An older woman who fought to regain the job that her boss gave to someone younger*

- D. Two or three *provisional film topics*. Make them different but all focused on your central concerns. Displacing concerns into other areas of life avoids autobiography and lets you explore new worlds with authority. Choose worlds that reflect the concerns to which you are already committed.

Examples:

*Anyone whose existence is complicated by having to keep their his or her secret (such as a gay person in the military)*

*Someone overcoming a situation where he or she is made to feel unacceptably different*

*Anyone forced into a lesser role and who finds ways to assert that he or she still has value*

### PROJECT 10-2: USING DREAMS TO FIND YOUR PREOCCUPATIONS

Keep a log of your dreams, because it is here the mind expresses itself unguardedly and in surreal and symbolic imagery. Unless you have a period of intense dream activity, you may have to keep a record over many months before common denominators and motifs begin showing up. Keep a notebook next to your bed, and awake gently so that you hold onto the dream long enough to write it down. When you get really interested in this work, you will automatically awake after a good dream in order to write it down. Needless to say, this will not be popular with a bedroom partner.

Dreams often project a series of forceful and disturbing images. By keeping track of the dream rather than going straight to an interpretation, you can return and reinterpret as you amass more material. Recurring images are often a key to your deepest thematic concerns.

### PROJECT 10-3: ALTER EGOS

Some people believe we each have a single true self, others that we are made of multiple personalities, each evoked by particular circumstances. True or not, the latter view is convenient for storytelling, which is what documentary really is. In this exercise you uncover those characters or situations to which you resonate and supplement what you did in the previous project with an additional and different self-characterization.

1. List six or eight *fictional characters* from literature or film with which you have a special affinity. This becomes more interesting when you respond to darker and less tangible qualities. Rank the characters by their importance to you.
2. Do the same thing for any *public figures* important to you, such as actors, politicians, sports figures, etc.
3. Make a list of influential *friends or family*, people who exerted a strong influence on you at some time. Leave out immediate family (often too complicated because they are too close).
4. Taking the top two or three in each list, write briefly about any *dilemma or predicament they have in common*, and what *mythical or archetypal qualities* you can see they represent.
5. From what you discover from points 1 to 4, *develop an ideal authorial role* that you can describe to the group or class. To direct is to play a role, always. Develop one from your own qualities, but make the role more defined, passionate, and courageous. Don't hesitate to imaginatively intensify the role. The aim is to build a provocative and active role that you can try to uphold as you direct.
6. Describe either in the group or on paper *what kind of work this person should be doing*.

### PROJECT 10-4: WHAT IS THE FAMILY DRAMA?

Prepare notes so that you can speak for around 4 minutes on

1. The *main drama in your family*. If there are several, pick the one that affected you most (examples: the impact of the family business going bankrupt, discovering that Uncle Wilfred is a cross-dresser, or the effect on your mother of her father wanting all his children to become musicians).
2. *What you learned* as a result of the way the family drama played out
3. What kind of *subjects you now feel qualified to tackle* as a result

### PROJECT 10-5: PITCHING A SUBJECT

Funding agencies and commissioning editors who put support behind some film projects rather than others are extremely influenced by a good *pitch* (oral presentation) because they know how difficult it is to have all your thinking together. Prepare your ideas so that you can make a 4-minute *pitch* of a documentary idea to the group or class. Your words should be colorful and your enthusiasm should convey a clear, almost pictorial, sense of what the film will be like and why it should be made. Rehearse in front of a mirror so that you can make an appealing presentation that includes the following:

1. Outline of the
  - A. Background to the topic
  - B. Character(s) and what makes him or her (them) special
  - C. Problem or situation that puts the main character(s) under revealing pressure
  - D. Style of the coverage and the editing
2. Description of any changes or growth you expect during the filming
3. Statement of why it's important to make this film and why you are motivated to make it

Now listen to your audience's comments, take notes, and keep completely quiet! Your film has had its chance to communicate; now study its effect so that you can reconfigure it. This is the first chance to "show" a possible film to an audience and to get a first response.

4. Several days later, pitch your film again, taking into account all the critique that you found useful.
5. Pitch it a third time and see what your audience thought of the latest version. Even if the idea hasn't improved, your delivery of it probably has. Make a habit of pitching a new idea every week to anyone who will listen and respond. You will be amazed at how many good ideas you can come up with and how much you learn from doing this. You will only be afraid of having your ideas stolen if you have too few.

### PROJECT 10-6: GOALS SUMMARY

To summarize your goals, finish the following prompts:

1. The *theme or themes* that arise from my self-studies are . . .
2. The *changes* for which I want to work are . . .
3. The *kinds of subject* for which I feel most passionately are . . .
4. *Other important goals* I have in mind are . . .



## FINDING YOUR WORK'S PATH

The self-profiles with which you have been experimenting should bring you closer to an inner self that is searching for its own artistic path. Your life has given you special understanding of certain forces and the way they work in the world, and this inner force wants you to commit yourself to showing these forces at work and to express what you feel about them.

## IF YOU LOSE YOUR WAY

Filmmaking has risks that arise from its social nature. To some degree we all depend on the approval of those we like and respect, so you can lose your own point of view in the face of the orthodoxies and criticisms coming from those around you. Because film is made and viewed collectively, you will need a strong sense of purpose if you are to hold on to the meaning of your own work. Never, ever alter more than small details of your work after criticism until you have had considerable time to reflect.

## PROGRESS AND THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

When you engage in work, the work's process will release fresh dimensions of understanding. This is the creative process, something that is cyclical and endlessly fascinating, and brings us closer to others. In documentary the learning process is lengthy and demanding. At the beginning you get clues, clues lead to discoveries, discoveries lead to movement in your work, and movement leads to new clues and a new piece of work in which to evolve them. Work—whether a piece of writing, a painting, a short story, a film script, or a documentary—is therefore both the evidence of movement and an inspiration to continue.

Our work becomes both the trail and the vehicle for our own evolution. We get help at this in mysterious ways. Goethe said, "The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred." His wake-up call to the procrastinator is delightfully pithy: "Art is long, life short; judgment difficult, opportunity transient."

Finding and acting on the self-discovery material in this chapter means taking chances and trusting that it will lead somewhere. If you work closely with other people (as I hope you do), you will need to take chances, because having people listen and react to your story is vital to discovering and accepting it yourself.

## PRIVACY AND COMPETITION ISSUES

The person who chooses to take the bull by the horns and work in the arts cannot logically remain private. In any group you'll see how the people of courage, even when they are shy by nature, go out on a limb while others who make a show of self-assurance are actually too afraid to show themselves. Telling your story to creative partners is important, for we cannot urge liberation on others unless we also work to liberate ourselves.



## HOSTILE ENVIRONMENTS

The best school and work situations are nurturing yet demanding, and in them you see people flower and evolve over time. Some, however, do not support the kind of self-exposure I have been advocating. The personal chemistry is wrong, or the environment is dominated by intensely competitive personalities—usually because perquisites, patronage, or other advantages are being held out to favorites. These distortions are a common fact of life, deplorable but something you must find ways to circumvent. You cannot await ideal circumstances before getting down to what's important. Choose your work partners very, very carefully. With a good partner you can handle just about anything.

If you feel you are not making good progress as a film author, don't despair. Do production work for other people. It will keep you in situations of change and growth. Having something to say, and being ready to say it, more often emerges from times of conflict and struggle than it does from comfort and contentment. Overcoming dilemmas and hard times is vital to one's learning and development, something that for the active mind continues from film to film, relationship to relationship, role to role, and cradle to grave.

**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



## 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

## CHAPTER 25

# DIRECTING PARTICIPANTS

This chapter deals with the psychological processes that make documentary participants quite like actors. It also deals, of course, with some of the physical processes of directing. It covers

- Issues concerning participants
  - Self-image and self-consciousness when under scrutiny
  - Action and doing as the remedy
  - Mannerisms and habits in participants
- Camera issues
  - More axis and other filming issues, as introduced in Chapter 12: Screen Grammar
  - Scene breakdown and making notes to help you function
  - Rationale for secure or insecure camera (handheld or tripod mounted)
- Social and formal issues
  - Making use of social breaks
  - Wrapping for the day
  - How few limits there really are to documentary

## ISSUES CONCERNING PARTICIPANTS

### IN SEARCH OF NATURALNESS

People often ask documentary makers, "How do you get people to look so natural?" Of course, you are tempted to shake your head sagely and say something about many years spent learning professional secrets. Actually, naturalness is much easier to achieve than is, say, a satisfactory dramatic structure, but it still takes some directorial skill. When all the participants are uniformly unnatural,

as you sometimes see in a do-it-yourself show, it is the direction that is at fault. The key lies in the way you brief your participants, as we shall see.

Interviewing is just one way to direct a documentary. Overused, it leads to a "talking head" film. In an oral history work in which nothing but survivors are left to photograph, this may be the only film possible. Most directors, however, take great pains to show people active in their own settings, doing what they normally do. In part, this is to spare the audience from the hypnotic intensity of being talked at for long periods. We prefer to judge character and motivation not by what people say but by what they do and how they do it. Film is inherently behavioral, so actions speak louder than words. Having something familiar to do also sets participants at ease.

So you might want to shoot the subject of your film in his family life, at work instructing an employee, or in the neighborhood bar playing pool with cronies. But each situation will be stereotypical unless it contributes behavioral revelation about either the subject or his milieu. There is also another slight hitch. For most people, normality only exists when they don't feel watched. I once filmed in a glass-door factory, and one of the workers, who had spent years passing frames through a machine, completely lost her facility as soon as we turned on the camera. To her embarrassment the frames began to jam or miss the jet of rubber sealer solution. Why? Because she had begun *thinking* about her actions instead of just doing them.

When a person feels under intense scrutiny, his whole sense of himself can fragment. The implications are critical in documentary because we aim to capture people as they really are. Sudden attacks of self-consciousness wreck the process. The factory worker, feeling she must "act," lost automatic harmony with her machine, and there was nothing I could do except reassure her that this sometimes happens. So we waited until she managed a few rounds in her old rhythm. It was a striking example of the mind impeding the body's habitual function and shows that you must be able to help people stay inside their own normality.

## THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION

The Russian actor and dramatic theorist Konstantin Stanislavski has important things to say about the mind's effect on the body. He says that every interior state has an outward and visible manifestation. In everyday life we discharge our actions and relationships quite unthinkingly, and we depend on a wellspring of assumptions about who and what we are and how we affect others.

Stanislavski points out that when an actor becomes self-conscious, he loses "focus" (that is, he stops experiencing the thoughts and emotions of his character), and the very visible effect is that he loses conviction in everything he says and does. It is the ability to focus, to shut out the anxious and critical "other" self, that is behind everyone's ability to function naturally. Through investigating what made some actors convincing and others not, Stanislavski realized that actors can perform naturally and believably only when their attention is fully occupied by the thoughts and actions of their characters. To this end, director and actor together generate "work" natural to the actor's role, because any opportunity for unstructured thought will let the ever-anxious mind take over.

Insecurity, of all kinds, even fear of losing focus, leads to a loss of focus, so trained actors stay in character by remaining mentally and physically occupied.

The paradox is that only by mental and physical focus is a person relaxed enough—whether acting or leading his or her personal life—to function emotionally and authentically. At such times the person has the bodily, mental, and emotional unity that comes from pursuing goals important to him or her. As a director you can, with an effort of will, tell from a person's body language whether he or she is focused or internally divided and troubled.

The key to directing actors, or to directing what Bill Nichols calls “social actors” (people “only playing themselves” in a documentary), is identical. Make sure that

- Any actors on camera have plenty to do so that they aren't stultified by self-consciousness
- Anything you ask them to do is organic to their life

If you ask a mother and daughter to let you film them washing the dishes at night, ask them to sustain a conversation as well. They start to discuss the next day, and now having so much familiar physical and mental activity to keep alive, they relax into obliviousness of the camera.

The least helpful thing to say is, “Just be yourself.” It seems to set people worrying: What did he really mean? How does he see me? And which me does he really want? So,

- Do ask a participant to *do* something
- Do not ask him or her to *be* anything (natural, normal, etc.)

If you are shooting a scene of two brothers making dinner, ask what they would usually be doing. If they say “Talking,” ask what they usually talk about, and pick a topic that relates well to your intended film.

One solution to keeping a participant engaged and natural during the unnatural situation of being filmed is to use the technique of reflexivity, that is, deliberately include the participant's relationship with those behind the camera as part of the movie. You might incorporate his or her questions, doubts, jokes, and even uncertainties about filming; however, this may backfire if the participant deals with his or her unease by throwing the initiative back on the film crew. A director, invited to become a character in his or her own film, will usually give only a modest and minimal response. Then a vacuum develops at the threshold that the director won't cross. In Nick Broomfield's hilarious *The Leader, The Driver, and the Driver's Wife* (1992), this threshold is justified. Broomfield uses boyish disingenuousness to draw out the South African white supremacist Eugene Terreblanche (sic) and we know full well why Broomfield holds back. But in other films of this type, it is the director's manipulation that stands uncomfortably naked, even at times in Ross McElwee's otherwise sophisticated *Sherman's March* (1989).

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When you are making a nonreflexive, "transparent" film, tell participants

- That in documentary we shoot far more than we use, so they shouldn't worry about mistakes or silences because you expect to edit
- To ignore the crew's presence and *not look at the camera*. This prevents them from falling into the trap of "playing to the audience." The crew can help by concentrating on their jobs, avoiding eye contact, and giving no facial or verbal feedback.

When you are making a reflexive film, tell participants that

- They can talk to you or to the camera as they wish
- They can do anything or go anywhere as they need to in their work or other activity that is being filmed
- Nothing is off limits, and no thought or subject of conversation is disallowed
- The object of filming is to catch things as they happen, and that filming is part of the happening

Should participants feel that you are trying to manipulate or misrepresent them, even by cheerleading as an audience, they may become uncomfortable and uncooperative, or they may relish the appreciation, which will show on the screen.

If you establish justifiable and trustworthy reasons for making the film, participants usually take part with good will, naturalness, and spontaneity. This can be very revealing when an oppressive middle-aged couple, for example, falls into a recurring argument about what food the dog should have tomorrow. Domesticity of this kind happens on the documentary screen because participants become used to working with you and enjoy giving you who they are. Not infrequently people reveal their abiding passions. I once filmed elderly miners describing the bitter days of the 1926 General Strike in England. We filmed overlooking the mine in question, and the camera went within 2 feet of the miners' faces as they relived the greatest events of their lives. They lost all awareness of being filmed because they were reliving events that embodied the deepest and most divisive issues in their community. Our camera's attention lent the moment a special gravity and meaning, so their involvement was deeply emotional and left them no attention to spare for how they might appear to us or to the world beyond our camera.

I once saw the same thing during a drama improvisation when Aiden Quinn and a partner afterward had no memory of our roving camera's presence. They had been too involved in the improv to even notice it. Life being lived in the imagination and drama can be one and the same thing—consuming. People consumed by the moment are most deeply and revealingly themselves.

### SELF-IMAGE AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

The easiest people to work with are those who are oblivious of their effect on others. Old people and small children are natural because there is no ego, no internal censor at work. With this indicator in mind, you can predict who is going