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write has to pass beneath the critical eye and flashing red pen of my long-time partner in life and work, Sylvie Hampe. Whenever she announces, “This doesn’t make sense,” I’ve learned not to argue, but to rewrite. Over the years she and I have learned how to give and receive criticism and still remain best friends. Thanks, love.

MAKING ANALOGS OF REALITY

I used to think that the documentary films I was making were real. But as I looked at what I was doing, I saw I was making analogs—I was making models of the situation I was filming.

—Bob Young, documentary filmmaker, 118th SMPTE Technical Conference
MAKING DOCUMENTARY FILMS AND REALITY VIDEOS

IT TAKES MORE

Making a successful documentary film or video requires much more.

It starts with the camera. You have to have good footage—visual evidence that sets forth the statement of the documentary in visual terms. Tornado footage is good, but it is not sufficient. In their VolcanoScapes documentaries about the destruction of the lovely Hawaii coastal town of Kalapana by Kilauea Volcano, Artemis and Mick Kalber had incredible footage of homes destroyed by a slow-moving river of lava. But they focused their story on the people who had chosen to live and build their homes downhill from an active volcano.

And you have to have an idea, a concept that expresses the point of view of the documentary. Interviews may help define the point of view, but they are usually a terribly cumbersome way to get the documentary idea across. In spite of what you see nightly on PBS, interviews do not a documentary make, because they don't show the topic; they show people talking about the topic.

It takes pictures. For instance, immediately after the opening title, Ken Burns's The Civil War shows a series of dramatic photographs of war after a battle. The camera moves slowly across each photo, letting you know that in this documentary much of what you will see will come from still pictures, and you will be given time to see what is there. On the sound track we hear a violin—no speech—as the documentarian shows us that the pictures can speak for themselves.

Then you have to have a structure—an ordered progression of images and sounds that will capture the audience's interest and present the point of view of the documentary as a visual argument. For instance, The War Room, a film by Chris Hegedus and D. A. Pennebaker, about the 1992 Clinton campaign, opens with a series of scenes in New Hampshire showing the problems facing candidate Clinton. No interviews; just interactions that show what is happening in the campaign at that time. As the film develops, we see the campaign overcoming obstacles on the way to a Clinton victory.

IT LOOKS SO EASY

I once worked as house audiovisual guy for a teacher training project. When the project put on a conference, I'd take Polaroid snapshots of each day's activities and display them on the bulletin board the next morning. The teachers told me how much they liked the pictures. And, invariably, the next thing they'd say was, "What kind of camera did you use?"

As if that mattered.

It was the simplest, thirty-dollar, wide-angle-lens, no-frills camera that Polaroid made. But it wasn't the camera that made the pictures interesting. It was what the people were doing.

A persistent problem for the modern documentary has been the almost mystical belief of many would-be documentarians that the camera somehow does it all. I vividly recall one academic authority on documentary who questioned whether I was "in sympathy with the cinema verité filmmaker's desire to shoot a wealth of footage as a passive observer, in order to report as self-effacingly as possible as a journalist."

Well, no. Because that formulation reduces the documentarian to something of a media janitor in charge of an image vacuum machine. Just turn on the machine and it will suck the essence of the event through the lens and store it on videotape or film. Then all you have to do is reverse the flow and blow your documentary back in the audience's faces.

If it were only that easy!

Yes, I'm in favor of shooting a lot of footage, but always as an active, decision-making participant in a process of communication that begins with an idea and ends with an audience. Inexpensive video equipment has placed the possibility of making a documentary within the reach of anyone. But the equipment won't make your footage interesting. And digital effects and nonlinear editing systems can't turn random shots or hours of talking heads into a dramatic documentary statement.
GOOD IMAGES DON'T JUST HAPPEN

I began planning this book while working on the script for Defenders of Midway, a documentary focused on a group of veterans of the famous World War II naval battle. At the start of that project, UPS delivered to my apartment two boxes of VHS windowprint dubs covering 120 half-hour field tapes shot at Midway Atoll. The problems I found with this footage are typical of the problems to be avoided in making a documentary: lack of planning, inadequate visual evidence, poor interview technique, and obtrusive crew interference with the people in the video.

Much of the footage was shot by an award-winning commercial director who wouldn't dream of shooting a thirty-second spot without extensive preproduction planning. But who, at least from the evidence in his footage, went off to shoot an hour documentary with little or no preparation.

It is precisely when you don't know what is going to happen that preproduction planning is most important.

A group of veterans had returned to Midway fifty years after the historic battle. They had been young marines, sailors, and airmen in 1942. Now they were men in their late sixties and seventies who had come to dedicate a memorial and to reminisce with one another. I'm sure the producers believed that if the video crew just followed these veterans around and recorded whatever they did and said, they'd have a great documentary. And the notes I received from one of the producers suggest that he believed they had accomplished exactly that. Unfortunately, his optimism wasn't borne out in the footage.

Lack of preproduction planning left the project without a unifying concept. And without that, there was no apparent strategy for gathering visual evidence related to the theme.

The Interview Problem

Half of the tapes were interviews with veterans. Now, a major problem with interviews is that they're about people talking when your goal should be to show things happening. Still, this was a historical documentary, and each of these men had a story to tell. Unfortunately they were asked to tell their stories in a static interview conducted by a historian who specialized in oral histories.

Two problems there: First, a static interview is visually boring. Nothing happens. It's a talking head. Second, an oral history gathers the facts of a story to be listened to on tape or to be published. That makes it the exact opposite of a documentary interview. In an oral history, the interviewer usually has a checklist of items to cover and often will use leading questions, since a yes or no answer still provides the facts. But showing someone listening to an interviewer read a question and then answering yes or no—or possibly just shaking their head—does not make dramatic documentary footage.

The way you get good stuff in a documentary interview is by encouraging people to tell you stories, not by interrogating them. You avoid leading questions because you want the person being interviewed to tell the story in his or her own words. And while you always have a checklist of questions to refer to, the most important thing is to follow up on whatever the person is most interested in talking about.

The Midway interviewer, unfortunately, asked many leading questions, which elicited information in a form that was useless for the documentary. Even worse, when any of the veterans got excited and started to tell a story about something not on the checklist, the interviewer would often say, "We'll come back to that, but first I want to ask you about ..." And he'd go on with his prepared list of questions, often forgetting to follow up on the topic which had excited the veteran.

He didn't understand that the reason you can go with whatever the subject is excited about is precisely because you have your checklist questions written down. You can always get back to them.

Many of the interviews seemed so dull—and these were guys talking about their experiences in combat at the start of World War II—that the camera operator got bored and began being cre-
For instance, he'd take the camera off the subject to point at the wall, and then slowly pan back to the subject's face. Murphy's Law suggests that the camera would be pointing at a blank wall just when the subject said something we'd like to use, and, of course, that's what happened.

Shooting static interviews can be the toughest job in the world for a camera operator. The camera must remain steady and must show the person being interviewed. You change composition only during questions—never during answers—so that you will have an image of the speaker available whenever you want to use.

In other footage, the veterans went on a boat trip to visit Eastern Island, where several of them had been stationed. And the camera crew went along—with the camera operator asking questions, giving directions, and generally talking all over the soundtrack. This would have been an excellent opportunity to do some good on-site interviews as the veterans reminisced about their service on the island, but that opportunity was lost.

In spite of the problems in the footage, Defenders of Midway ended up a good documentary, and I'm proud of my part in making it. But if the producers and the crew that shot the footage had known more at the beginning about making a documentary, it could have been far better.

And that's how this book got started.

A NEW INTEREST IN DOCUMENTARIES

Today, people who don't know anything about video or film technology, and whose only knowledge of how to create a finished program has come from watching television, have begun making documentary films and reality videos. And, frankly, they need help.

You may be one of them.

Last year I wrote an hour documentary for a twenty-five-year-old producer who had absolutely no production experience. He had taken his savings and hired a crew to shoot ten hours of videotape about infantry recruit basic training. Only after the tape was shot and his funds were running out did he realize he didn't know how to turn what he had into a finished program.

Three trends have come together to create this new interest in nonfiction video and film production.

The first is the growing belief that, today, many people can't—or won't or don't have time to—read. The popular wisdom is that they can be reached by video.

The second is the growth of reality programming on television. This started with silly home videos, expanded to include videos made by eyewitnesses to disasters and unique events, and now has grown to include tabloid news programs.

The third is the accessibility and apparent ease of use of video technology. Writers and editors accustomed to working in print are being asked to create videos instead of brochures. Corporate communicators are being asked by their managements to document their institutions' activities on video. Artists, writers, and other creative people are finding new outlets for their creativity in the current video explosion.

But even those who have knowledge and experience with video and film technology—for example from producing sales or training videos or TV commercials—can find themselves lost when they turn to documentary. Unfortunately, many people think that because they are making a film about actual events, the truth will jump inside their cameras and will automatically reveal itself on the screen to their audience.

This never happens.

DOCUMENTARY GENRES

Documentaries can range from those shot in a hot situation, happening right now with the outcome in doubt, to fully scripted reenactments or re-creations shot with the same preparation and attention to detail as a feature film or television program. And these two different approaches to the nonfiction film have existed from the earliest days of documentary.
History and Biography

Documentaries have always looked at historical events and the biographies of important or interesting people. Today, television and the education market make these prime areas for documentarians. History and biography are after-the-fact reports on past events. The problem for the documentarian always is to find a way to make such documentaries visually interesting. For people and events of the twentieth century, there may be stock footage or photographs. Before that, there may be a few paintings or drawings, but hardly the wealth of visual material needed to fill a half-hour or hour documentary.

The documentarian often fills in by interviewing experts, by going to the site of the event or the home or working place of the biographical character. Today we also find documentarians borrowing footage from feature films to illustrate the period, person, or event.

Another approach is reenactment, re-creating the historical time or the people and events of the biography. Reenactment in documentary should follow the same rules as re-creation in a historical or biographical text. What is shown should be accurate and the truth as the documentarian understands it.

What about Docudrama?

There is nothing new about basing a dramatic presentation on a historical person or event. But films such as Cromwell, The Longest Day, JFK, and others are not documentaries. They may be related to actual events, but these films are not bound by the historical truth of those events. They are works of fiction derived from the lives of real people and the history of real events. Docudrama is no more documentary than a can of "real draft" beer is a draft beer. These are terms dreamed up by a marketing person to make you believe something is what it isn't.

Documentaries of Behavior

The ability to go anywhere with lightweight recording equipment made it possible to follow people around and observe on film or videotape whatever they do. In the early days of direct cinema, there were a lot of films made about ordinary people living out their ordinary lives. Films such as the Maysles' Salesman, Alan King's A Married Couple, and the PBS series An American Family. This became a kind of anthropology of ourselves.

One of my first films, and the one I remain the proudest of, A Young Child Is . . . , made in 1972, set out to observe how very young children grow and learn. Until then, those who wanted to look at the behavior of children were stuck with works such as the McGraw Hill Ages and Stages series, which took prevailing child development theory and illustrated it by having children act out whatever the experts said children did at that age. One unforgivable offshoot of this series was hanging the name "the terrible twos" on two-year-olds, when they are actually terrific, not terrible. Anyone observing without preconceived expert theory would recognize that this is the age when babies become people in their own right. And people don't always do what someone else wants them to.

The behavioral documentary is very much with us today. And much of this book will deal with recording human behavior.

Documentaries of Emotion

As the behavioral documentary pushed us in new directions, some documentarians began to explore another kind of behavior, which might be called the documentary of emotion. For example, Allie Light, in her brilliant film Dialogues with Madwomen, explores the emotional dimension of mental illness.
Reality Videos—
A New Role for Direct Cinema
With competition squeezing their production budgets, network and syndicated broadcast television producers have discovered reality videos. What started with several comedy shows based on silly home videos has resulted in a new interest in the actuality documentary. Programs such as "Cops," "LAPD," and "Real Stories of the Highway Patrol" are bringing direct cinema to the home screen nightly.

And this has reopened questions of truth versus reality, which burned so brightly in the early cinema verité era and remain a primary concern today.

ABOUT THIS BOOK
This book is written for the person who wants to make a documentary, for whatever reason, and especially for those interested in recording behavior out there in the real world, either for production of a documentary or for research of some sort.

It brings into focus what I have learned from making and watching documentaries and from trying to help others organize the documentaries they've shot. It's based on a lifetime of love for the nonfiction film in all its permutations.

My teacher and colleague at The Annenberg School of Communications, the late Sol Worth, once said he'd never seen a film he didn't like. Because Sol was a scholar first and a filmmaker second, I think he meant that he'd never seen a film he couldn't learn something from. And I'd go along with that. Some of my best documentary ideas have been sparked by films I absolutely hated.

But I have loved making documentaries from the first time I sat down at an editing table and spliced selected pieces of film into a visual statement. I have shot, directed, edited, and written scores of documentary films and videos. And in the quiet hours of the night while I cut film or edited video, I've thought a lot about what goes into a successful documentary. And by "successful" I mean a documentary that communicates to an audience exactly what you intended.

That means I'm a theory maker. I don't think of making a documentary as a technical—by which I mean equipment—problem. It is always, from initial concept to final print, a communication problem.

Generally we learn how to operate our technology long before we really have any clear idea of what we want to do with it. Put another way, you can get so caught up in the problems of shooting that you forget about showing. And it is the documentary the audience sees, not the one the documentarian shoots (or wishes he or she had shot), that counts.

Doing a documentary requires:

- planning the visual evidence that needs to be recorded,
- recognizing it when it occurs, and
- selecting and organizing what has been recorded to present a visual argument to your audience.

So a substantial portion of this book is devoted to (1) planning what you're going to do before shooting, and (2) after shooting, selecting and organizing what has been shot into the visual evidence of your documentary.

It should go without saying that the introduction of lights, microphones, a camera, and three or four technical people into any situation can have a profound effect on that situation. So a part of the book is devoted to problems and techniques involved in filming people who are not actors in actual situations on their home grounds.

Much of what I have learned about documentary filmmaking has been learned under pressure—on location with a small budget and a tight schedule, where every mistake cut deeply. So for every chapter in the book, somewhere, I've got a scar.

Shooting a documentary is a lot of fun. I'm always up when I set off for a new location to start a documentary. There's a kind of automatic status that goes along with being a documentarian.