Warning Concerning Copyright Restrictions

The Copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyright material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction not be "used for any purposes other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.
The process of editing the footage you've shot is, if anything, even more deliberate than shooting the documentary.

You start with an empty reel and fill it with images and sounds selected from the raw footage, choosing and organizing what the audience will see from what has been recorded.

In the end, there is nothing in the final version of your documentary that was not put there deliberately.

There is no substitute for good footage.

Advances in film and video technology have given us the ability to record images from reality that would have been impossible just a few years ago.

Cameras attached to telescopes and cameras mounted on satellites look outward into space.

Cameras using fiber optics, cameras mounted on microscopes, and cameras and video repeaters hooked up to electron microscopes, fluoroscopes, and God knows what else, are examining inner space.

Cameras take pictures in the dark using infrared film or light-gathering lenses.

Cameras operating at high speed slow down events that occur too quickly for the eye to follow.

Time-lapse photography speeds up action that occurs over too long a time for the process of change to be noticeable.

In the area of re-creation, models and miniatures are used to abstract significant details from events that are too complex to be observed in full.

Computer animation systems create three-dimensional pictures as if a camera were moving around—inside or outside—structures that do not exist, presenting images of events that never happened.

There is no substitute for good footage.

Advances in film and video technology have given us the ability to record images from reality that would have been impossible just a few years ago.

Cameras attached to telescopes and cameras mounted on satellites look outward into space.

Cameras using fiber optics, cameras mounted on microscopes, and cameras and video repeaters hooked up to electron microscopes, fluoroscopes, and God knows what else, are examining inner space.

Cameras take pictures in the dark using infrared film or light-gathering lenses.

Cameras operating at high speed slow down events that occur too quickly for the eye to follow.

Time-lapse photography speeds up action that occurs over too long a time for the process of change to be noticeable.

In the area of re-creation, models and miniatures are used to abstract significant details from events that are too complex to be observed in full.

Computer animation systems create three-dimensional pictures as if a camera were moving around—inside or outside—structures that do not exist, presenting images of events that never happened.
Therefore, if you can think of an image, you, or someone, can make a picture of it.

But getting it shot is not all there is to making a documentary—not even when you are shooting events as they actually happen in the real world. Because it is not what you saw happening that counts. It's not even what you aimed the camera at that matters. It is the actual scene as it's recorded on film or videotape that has to provide the visual evidence for the audience of what occurred while you were there.

MISS DARLING AND THE SCENE THAT WASN'T THERE

We were working on a documentary about open education in a classroom of third and fourth graders. The teacher was a beautiful young woman, very likable, very photogenic, who got along well with the kids. My crew immediately nicknamed her “Miss Darling.”

One of Miss Darling’s strong points as a teacher was that she related well to the boys in her class. Fourth grade boys can be difficult and some teachers have trouble with this. So I wanted to show what happened in Miss Darling’s classroom.

We filmed a group of boys playing with dinosaurs in a diorama they had made until we used up the film in the camera. While Jack Behr, my cameraman on that film, reloaded the camera with a fresh four-hundred-foot magazine, I looked around for another bit of behavior to shoot. In a quiet place, away from the other children, a husky ten-year-old boy in a football jersey was sitting with Miss Darling, learning to knit.

I liked the look of the scene and motioned to Jack and the soundman to move in and shoot. At first, I didn’t have much more in mind for the scene than a few shots of a young, would-be football player and an attractive teacher, sitting together and knitting. But as we started to shoot, I began to realize that they were carrying on a conversation in low voices. From where I was standing I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but the scene was so poignant—the boy looking up with wide, trusting eyes, the teacher bent toward him with a tender look on her face, the quiet conversation—that I whispered to Jack, “I don’t know what’s going on, but I like it. Shoot the whole magazine.”

I was convinced that we were capturing an intimate and personal moment in the relationship between a teacher and her student. It would serve as a shining example for teachers everywhere that (1) the classroom won’t go to hell if you spend some quiet time with one student, and (2) boys, even rough-and-tumble boys in jock sweatshirts, can be interested in more than sports and all-male activities. Beyond that, it was such a charming scene that I was convinced it would enhance the documentary and please the audience. In my mind, I made space for as much as five minutes of this scene in the twenty-five-minute running length of the finished film.

Unfortunately, I neglected to tell any of this to Jack while he was shooting. He had started out concentrating on close-ups of the teacher and the boy and of their hands as they were knitting. From his point of view, through the viewfinder of the camera, he was too close to them to see what I felt was going on. As a result, the footage consisted of a set of related close-ups and two-shots that covered the process of learning to knit far more extensively than was needed, but barely hinted at the deeper, more personal sharing that I thought had been there. I spent three weeks trying to edit that footage to show what I wanted, and then gave up in defeat. No matter what had actually happened in that classroom during the eleven minutes we were filming, what we had on film was a rather prosaic sequence of a boy and his teacher knitting.

And that’s all.

Although I remain convinced that the tender, almost loving, moment between Miss Darling and the boy actually occurred in the way I witnessed it, there was no way I could use the footage we had shot to communicate to an audience what I had seen and felt. Even describing it in narration wouldn’t do. The evidence simply was not in the footage.
A Great Opening Scene

But, later, Jack found and photographed a scene that was so powerful that we used it as the opening shot to represent the theme of the documentary.

We were in the playground of a nursery school. The children had been tie-dyeing T-shirts, and one five-year-old boy was trying to hang his on a low clothesline to dry. He had the T-shirt in one hand and a clothespin in the other, with the clothesline bouncing up and down in front of him. The boy knew what he wanted to do. But he lacked the experience to hold the clothesline steady, drape the T-shirt over it, and secure it with the clothespin. He experimented with several different approaches, but always seemed to need one more hand than he had to complete the job. The more he tried, the more frustrated he became. This was such a clear example of the difference between knowing about something and having the skill and experience to do it, that we used the entire two minutes, uncut, as the opening scene of the film.

No audience has ever misunderstood that scene. At first they laugh at the child’s difficulty, but after about thirty seconds, a large part of the audience is leaning forward as if to help him. Moreover, the scene is so powerful, visually, that it serves as a metaphor to help the audience understand the rest of the movie.

KEEP IT VISUAL

A documentary is existential. It has to stand on its own. You can’t go along with the print and explain to the audience what you meant to show or shoot, or what a particular scene is supposed to mean. You simply have to shoot the best analog of the actual situation that you can manage and then edit the footage into a single, coherent print that will clearly communicate your intentions to the people who will see it.

Sound—narration, dialogue, interviews, and music—may help the audience to interpret the documentary. But it won’t take the place of solid evidence in the form of concrete visual images.

Documentary Ground Rules

Here are some simple ground rules that I find helpful. They may seem obvious, but having them in mind can keep you out of trouble when you’re on location in a hot shooting situation.

- A documentary is made to communicate to an audience.
- A documentary communicates through strong visual images organized in sequence to make a statement.
- Visual images can only be described with concrete nouns and action verbs.
- Editing is the heart of the process of communicating in a documentary.
- It’s the documentary you show, not the footage you shot, that counts.

All filming, and especially documentary filming, is tentative because you can’t know which footage will be used, or how the footage will be edited, until you see how the finished documentary goes together.

Even in a fully scripted motion picture, where each scene is carefully blueprinted well in advance, changes are frequently made in the cutting room to improve it. In documentary, where the script for a half-hour presentation may not be much more than a one- or two-page outline of possible shooting situations, the editing process is a critical step.

WHEN IS A FILM NOT A FILM?

If a film—or a video—isn’t composed primarily of visual evidence, then even though you recorded it with a camera and show it on a screen, it really isn’t a film. Try this sometime: Play back a video with the monitor blanked out or turned off. If you can follow what’s going on, then too much of the information is coming in the audio channel and not enough through visual evidence. Or try watching TV news with the sound turned off. Usually you can only
make a wild guess at what's happening. News people call their visuals "B-roll" and the reporter talking "A-roll." Guess which they consider more important?

I cringe whenever I hear documentary producers, directors, or writers talk about their documentaries in terms of recording interviews. Getting people to talk about the subject of the documentary is important, but mainly for research purposes. Yes, you always hope for a great sound bite that will drive home a point. But if all you have is people telling about the topic, you lack the visual evidence to make a documentary.

Recognize that some ideas just aren't visual ideas. They belong in an article, or a pamphlet, or a speech, or a recording, or a wall poster. And there's nothing wrong with that. Unless you try to force them to become a documentary.

Concrete Nouns and Action Verbs

The more concretely you can describe your documentary idea in terms of visual images, the better your chance of communicating through film or video. Similarly, the more abstract or interpretive your idea is, the more important it becomes to build up evidence for the idea through specific, concrete images.

To be filmed, an image has to be solid, tangible, existential. For instance, there's no problem in filming the image-idea:

*The boy runs toward the camera.*

Just turn the camera on, yell "Action!" and shoot what happens. But it gets trickier with the addition of adjectives. How would you film this image-idea in one shot?

*The frightened boy runs toward the camera.*

Probably you'd try to have the boy act frightened—his face contorted, breathing heavily, looking over his shoulder, bumping into things, and so on. You might also try to film in a situation that helps the audience infer fright from the boy's actions. At night on a dimly lit street. In a dark forest. On a battlefield.

Let's try one more. In one shot, how can you film this image-idea?

*The intelligent boy runs toward the camera.*

You can't.

You need two scenes in sequence. First a scene that establishes the boy's intelligence, and then the shot of the boy running.

You can't film abstractions, such as:

*Economics is the dismal science.*

Nor can you film the absence of something:

*On Tuesday, the mail didn't come.*

Yes, of course, you can film two actors talking. One says, "Happy Tuesday, did the mail come?" The other says, "No." You could also put the statement in narration. You just can't shoot a picture of it.

The best you can do, in either case, is to shoot and organize a sequence of concrete events from which you hope the audience will infer your meaning.

GATHERING EVIDENCE

The point to all this is that it's not enough to know what you want to shoot. It's not even enough to know what really is happening in the situation you shot. You have to have the evidence on film or video.

This has two important implications for the documentarian. First, during shooting, it's important to keep firmly in mind the fact that the documentary is going to be edited in order to organize it to communicate with an audience. And second, during editing,
it's necessary to forget, for a while, what you intended to shoot and look at what you've actually recorded.

Seeing What Is There

Being able to see what you have actually recorded can be tough, even for an experienced professional. For instance, I wanted the footage of Miss Darling and the boy to be usable so badly that I worked at trying to edit it long past the point where I should have admitted to myself that the evidence simply wasn't there.

And for the person who is new to documentary, learning to see what is there can be especially hard. Most of our experience in looking at films and videos, from grade school on, has been in interpreting them. And I take the word interpreting quite literally to mean translating from visual imagery to some form of verbal response.

For example, I was working with a graduate class in the use of visual communication in education. I showed them The Birth of Aphrodite, a short, somewhat abstract and artistic film about the myth of Aphrodite rising from the sea. Then I asked, “What did you see?”

At first their responses were either generalities about beauty, art, mythology, and the human condition, or had to do with creative writing, the classics, and how to use film in the classroom.

“Yes,” I said, “but what did you see? What is in the film? What happened within the frame? What was the first shot? What was the next shot?”

With a great deal of difficulty, and with everyone contributing, the students slowly were able to start re-creating and describing from memory the sequence of shots that made up the film.

As they worked on it, they got better. When they came to the last few shots, where we see the naked Aphrodite dancing in the moonlight at the edge of the sea, several people remembered that the “just-born” goddess had the white outline of a swimsuit on her otherwise beautifully tanned body.

We can only speculate as to whether the filmmakers noticed that flaw when they were putting the film together. Perhaps they did, and thought they could get away with it. They almost did. Or perhaps they didn’t see it at all. It takes time, training, and experience to look at your own work and see for what it is.

Communication with an audience through an existential, visual medium is far different from communication in a face-to-face or voice-to-voice situation. Audiences have the perverse habit of assuming that the way they think you are communicating is the way that you intended to communicate. As far as they are concerned, the message they get is the only message there is. And you have no opportunity to defend yourself—to revise, clarify, or explain what you actually meant.

BEHAVIOR AS VISUAL EVIDENCE

Making documentaries—and to me that means filming the behavior of people—gets you involved in trying to capture pieces of a process on film or videotape. People are seen in the middle of the process, between their history and their hopes. The documentarian can choose to trap them in roles—the manager at his desk, the housewife at the supermarket—or to explore them more fully as individuals.

It's not simply a matter of getting a lot of background footage of these people in other situations. That’s the solution most often proposed by film students when they sense a caricature in the footage rather than a portrait. “If I could only see her at breakfast, or playing with her children,” they say, “then I'd understand her better.”

Could be. And I'm not opposed to fleshing out a portrait with anything you can get that works—if you’ve got the time and space in your documentary. But a cardboard background of a cardboard person will simply lend cardboard detail to the caricature.

When the visual evidence is well realized, however, you can get a sense of the situation in a flash. The fact is that we are all skilled at reading people. We attend not only to what is said but to the way it is said and the nonverbal behavior occurring in the situation.

While a documentary is not the same as face-to-face interac-
tion, it is similar when we show a person talking with an interviewer or speaking directly to the audience. The difference is that there is no feedback channel for the audience to test their impressions of the person. They can't say, "You frowned when you said that. Are you angry about it?" What they see is all they've got. And that makes it all the more important for us, as documentarians, to record and show as accurately as we can the visual evidence in the scene.

**RECORDING VISUAL EVIDENCE**

It is important to think of the images that you shoot as visual evidence. The question is not whether you can argue the case for what your images mean. You'll never get the chance. The only real test is whether the images can stand on their own and argue the case themselves.

For instance, in a documentary about a protest march, there was a shot of a cold-looking police officer standing by a police barrier. Behind him was a completely empty street. The narrator said, "Twenty thousand people took to the street in protest . . ." but the visual evidence said nobody was there. Imagine if the voice had come from an interview rather than from the narrator. The use of this shot would have suggested to the audience that the person in the interview was not telling the truth.

Silent films were great on visual evidence, because that's all they had. Don't turn up your nose at them if you've seen movies from the silent era only on children's TV shows. Go back and get a look at some of the classics from the silent era. And be sure they are run at the proper speed. The main reason we laugh at silent films today is that they were shot at sixteen frames per second, and we play them back at twenty-four frames per second. Which is why everyone seems to bounce around and walk funny.

If you want to see good visual evidence, find a rerun of "Mission Impossible" and look at the opening montage. It foreshadows the entire show in a series of quick shots that show you interesting things about to happen—with just a musical background, no voice.

**A recent winner in the International Documentary Association Awards is a beautiful short film, 89 mm from Europe, which shows how trains arriving at the border between Poland and the former Soviet Union must have all their wheels changed to proceed because of an 89mm difference in the width of the rails. Shot like a silent film—although there is voice, natural sound, and music—it is all visual evidence.**

**The Interview Problem**

Try not to rely on interviews to make your case. Even in court, where the interview—questions by an attorney, answers by a witness—is the way virtually all information is elicited, there are complex rules governing what information can and cannot be used. This is because the courts know that what people say is terribly unreliable. And yet many, many documentaries being made today are virtually created from interviews.

I was watching a documentary called *Natasha and the Wolf* on "Frontline" on PBS. Not only is all the information in this documentary carried in interviews, but the interviews are conducted in Russian with simultaneous translation into English, and what is shown visually often bears little relationship to what is talked about. I saw no convincing visual evidence. And without the ability to hear the way the person talks, because the voices were covered over by simultaneous translation, there was no way to use behavioral clues to evaluate the information. I turned it off.

**Behavior Is Visual Evidence**

Films of behavior have to be made up of visual evidence, because no one today is willing to settle for an illustrated lecture. For instance, *The War Room* shows the behavior of people working on the 1992 Clinton campaign. There are no interviews. There is no narration. It's all visual evidence.

On the other hand, *Baseball: A Film by Ken Burns* stops dead at regular intervals while people with only a tangential relationship to
the sport are shot in an absolutely static situation, talking about 
what baseball, or some event in the history of baseball, meant to 
them. No visual evidence.

Shoot people doing what they do, even if you're mainly inter-
ested in what they have to say. Plan the location so that it becomes 
a part of the evidence of the scene. If you're filming an expert on 
juvenile delinquency who is proposing alternatives to putting ado-
lescents in adult prisons, film her at the prison rather than in her 
office. You'll have the visual evidence that says this woman is talk-
ing about concrete reality, not just some theory she's concocted.

Words and Actions

Remembering that what is said and what is done should both be 
considered behavior, what happens when people's actions seem to 
contradict the words they are saying?

Here's a situation from a videotape of a counselor working with 
a husband and wife whose marriage was in trouble: If you simply 
had a transcript or an audio recording of the words being spoken, 
you could easily come away with the feeling that while all was not 
right with the marriage, at least the couple was trying. But if you 
looked carefully at the body posture and behavior of the husband 
and wife—with or without sound—you couldn't escape a quite 
different conclusion. The wife was eager to please the marriage 
counselor, trying to put a good face on things, quick to cooperate. 
The husband said little and did nothing.

At one point the counselor asked them to turn their chairs to 
face each other and talk to one another about their problems in-
stead of talking to him. The wife immediately moved her chair. 
The husband didn't budge. He sat slumped down, hands in pock-
ets, present—but not there. It was clear from the visual evidence of 
their behavior that she was living on hope, desperately clinging to 
the marriage, while he was already gone.

EDITING VISUAL EVIDENCE

Obviously, you can't show everything you've shot. In editing, you 
abstract visual evidence that will serve as an accurate analog of the 
events that were filmed. And you organize it into a statement that 
will communicate to your audience—honestly, directly, and force-
fully—what you know about the event.

Clearly, you have to be careful, in editing, not to distort the 
evidence. And that can be hard. You were there when the footage 
was shot. You know everything that happened. It takes only a little 
bit of the footage to spark your memory of the entire event. But 
your audience wasn't there. So the footage you choose for the 
scene has to stand as an accurate analog for everything you re-
member.

Cutting the Part Where Nothing Happens

Suppose the marriage-counseling sequence had been edited into a 
scene in a documentary, ending with the marriage counselor giving 
a summary of the case. And suppose, as so often happens, it had 
been edited to keep what was being said flowing smoothly. The 
long pauses where the husband said nothing might be cut out 
because the editor found them uninteresting. And the scene in 
which the husband didn't move his chair might be eliminated be-
cause nothing's happening. The visual evidence would have been 
editorial so that it seemed to support the verbal statements that 
everything was going to be okay.

Then it would unquestionably come as a shock to the audience 
for the marriage counselor to state—as he actually did to me—that 
there was very little chance of this marriage lasting, and that a 
divorce might be the best solution for both parties.

Good Mother—Bad Mother

Here's a problem that came up in one of my documentaries. I had 
separate sequences of two mothers and their two-year-old children,
working and playing together. Let's call one the Bad Mother. Her own behavior was pretty neurotic, and she tended to see only her little boy's faults, never his good points. She couldn't understand what he was doing or make sense out of what he said.

The other was clearly a Good Mother. She talked freely with her daughter, paid attention to her, and encouraged her to do things on her own. She was a Scandinavian, and she liked everything clean and neat. I filmed her daughter helping her mix the batter for a cake.

In editing the documentary, I put the two mother-and-child sequences back to back, the Bad Mother first. Each sequence ran about four and a half minutes, cut down from nearly two hours of original footage.

In the sequence with the Bad Mother, I had focused on the little boy. It was his behavior I was interested in. I had sidestepped and cut around the mother's neurotic outbursts as much as possible, because I wanted the audience to watch the behavior of the boy and not waste time psychoanalyzing his mother.

In the Good Mother sequence I was especially interested in one point, where the daughter is handing eggs to her mother to crack and put into the mixing bowl. Then the daughter tries to crack an egg herself. The mother exclaims, "No! Please, dear! Let me do that." But the little girl persists, and finally does crack one egg. I had been concentrating on the talk between the two, leaving in as much as possible.

When I ran the two sequences, I realized I had made a big mistake. I had included almost all of the footage in which the Good Mother clucked about the mess, worried about neatness, and said "Don't . . . " to her daughter—a total of about a minute out of the forty-five minutes of original footage.

As a result, while I had neutralized the Bad Mother, I had inadvertently ended up making the Good Mother look pretty bad. Enough that, by the time the daughter tries to break an egg on her own, an audience was quite likely to miss the point that the mother could have stopped her, but didn't. I was afraid they might see it instead as just one more case of a fussy mother worrying about the mess. So I re-edited.

In the final version, the concern of the Good Mother for neatness is shown, but it doesn't overpower the important behavior of the child. And it doesn't turn a really good mother into a villain. The visual evidence of the sequence is in balance with what actually happened.

INTERVIEWS AS VISUAL EVIDENCE

You're shooting a documentary about a subject that has become controversial. One side makes charges. The other side denies them and makes countercharges. You shoot interviews with spokespersons for both sides. What evidence do you have?

The fact is that while an interview is prima facie evidence that the person shown said the words that were spoken, it carries no evidence whatsoever about the truth value of the statement the person makes. But an audience, like a jury, is not above using other cues to decide whether or not to believe a speaker. His or her dress and manner, as well as the logic of the statement, can have a powerful effect on them.

I once did an interview with two employees of a mental institution. Both of them were leaders of the committee to keep the institution from being closed down. One was a lay therapist who dressed in hippy chic, tilted his head at a crazy angle when he talked, and spoke in a mixture of street slang and social science jargon. He made several good points in favor of keeping the institution open. But in the course of an eleven-minute interview, he also made two or three really outlandish statements.

The other man was the union shop steward and a member of the janitorial crew. He had a full beard, neatly trimmed, and was wearing his working clothes. What he said wasn't elegant, but he spoke in an even voice and stated the facts as he knew them. Most important, his attitude and behavior indicated that he believed what he was saying.

This was a sponsored documentary, and the sponsor was trying to remain neutral but actually leaned toward closing the institution. So it would have been an easy thing to use the interview with the weird lay therapist. Most audiences would find him unlikable.
and difficult to believe, not so much because of what he said but because of the way he said it. Fortunately, the sponsor agreed with me that doing that would be stacking the deck. We chose to keep the visual evidence neutral and use the statement by the shop steward instead.

**WHEN PICTURES CONTRADICT WHAT IS SAID**

When I talk about visual evidence, I'm concerned primarily with the images that are an integral part of your documentary. Every documentarian knows he's got something going if he has evidence on film or video that contradicts what the speaker says. Suppose you're doing a documentary on industrial waste. The president of a chemical company says in an interview on camera that his company is not polluting the river. But you've got footage that shows raw chemicals being discharged from his plant directly into the river. You're going to use that footage, along with the company president's statement, to show that either he is lying or he doesn't know what he is talking about. That's an obvious situation, and needs no comment.

**Contradiction in Narration**

But what happens when the images and the narration are in conflict? These elements are both under the control of the documentarian. I mentioned the protest march film showing an empty street while the narration talked about a huge crowd. That was bad editing. The filmmaker had footage of the crowd. He just didn't use it to open the sequence.

But what if the documentarian has actually recorded images that don't belong? Before making my documentaries on kids and schools, I screened all the films I could find on early learning in children. Many of these films had obviously had the narration written before the film was shot, following the child development theories of whatever expert was the consultant to the film. Images of children had then been shot to illustrate the narration.

**VISUAL EVIDENCE**

Quite often, unfortunately, the behavior shown was not the behavior described. The narration might say that at a certain age young boys join together in inseparable gangs. But what we actually saw on the screen was several boys on a playground—each playing by himself. They were playing beside each other, not playing together. There was no visual evidence to support the gang thesis. It was as if the filmmaker or the expert or both had decided that everyone knows that young boys gang together at a certain age, so it should be enough to show a bunch of boys—no matter what they were doing—for the audience to get the point.

**Lying by Exception**

Or let’s take this situation from a public relations film made to recruit students for a famous university. Many of the strong points of the school are brought out in the film. But two scenes stick in my memory. The university is located in a cold, northern city with a long, bitter winter. But there are no shots of cold, snow, and wind in the film. None. There is, however, a rather idyllic sequence of students sunbathing and swimming at a lake which almost certainly was shot during summer school, not during the regular academic year. The narration explains that the students enjoy their outings at the lake, and adds, almost as an afterthought, “Of course it’s not always like this. It can get pretty cold in winter.”

In a sequence on the life of a student, the filmmakers chose to shoot an attractive female graduate student living with two other young women in an expensive townhouse close to the campus. Again the disclaimer in narration, “Of course not all students live like this,” followed by a reference to the availability of student dormitories for most undergraduates—although these are never shown.

Such disclaimers in narration mean next to nothing. The visual evidence is that if you go to that university, you'll live in an expensive townhouse and enjoy sunny afternoons at the lake.

Because that is what is shown.
Misrepresentation

A documentarian was doing a social documentary on teenagers. He had done a highly successful documentary about the college protest movement and wanted to look at younger people of high school age to see if he could find the roots of protest in a suburb that sent most of its children to college.

The opening scene of the film, as I recall, showed a lot of sixteen-year-olds, dressed up, looking very somber. The boys looked sad, the girls seemed on the verge of tears. I think this was used without comment as the title background. Although nothing was said, certainly the visual evidence of the footage was that being a teenager at this place at this time was a pretty serious thing.

After the film was shown on TV, the charge was made by residents of the town that this scene had been filmed at the funeral of a classmate. I don't know whether that's true or not, and for my purpose it really doesn't matter. My point is, if a documentarian takes a scene like this out of context and uses it as evidence to give a false impression, that's lying on film.

Sure it's real; it really happened. But it's not the truth in the visual argument of the documentary.

UNREAL IMAGES

The modern documentarian has available a number of tools that simply didn't exist a few years ago. Of if they did exist, they were too expensive to use. But today, as mentioned in chapter three, it's a simple thing to rearrange the location of the pyramids by computer. Digital effects and computer animation make it possible to create images of anything.

I think this is wonderful, and the documentarian has every right to make use of these images, as long as they are used truthfully. That means labeling made-up images as simulations. It means not using digitally enhanced images as if they had been recorded in an actual situation.

Fiction Footage

One of the things documentarians making historical or biographical shows have started to do is to take footage from fiction films about their subject and use it to illustrate their topic. Again, I have no problem with this as long as the audience knows what they're looking at. But if scenes are taken from fiction and used as if they were actuality footage, so that the audience is led to believe that what they are witnessing really happened, then the documentarian has left the truth behind in order to serve some other purpose, such as keeping the story interesting. Unfortunately, that's what docudrama does, and why it is not nonfiction.

Reenactment

Reenactment has been a technique of documentary from its earliest days. It can be an extremely effective way of showing an event for which no documentary footage exists.

Colonial Williamsburg made and distributed an outstanding series of documentaries, which used reenactment to show life in colonial times.

In re-enactment as with any other footage not documenting real events, the documentarian must be honest with the audience.

VISUALS, EMPTY SHOTS, AND VISUAL EVIDENCE

To the best of my knowledge, the term visuals came in with television and was the direct result of transferring word people—writers and radio broadcasters—into a newly created visual medium that had no history and no traditions. These television people—and I'm talking about early practitioners in the '40s and '50s, not contemporary videomakers—used the word visuals as a reminder to themselves that without pictures, it wasn't TV. They'd say, 'I've got some good visuals to go with the doctor scene.' And that state-
ment, taken literally, suggests that the “doctor scene” is the one in the script—words on paper—and not footage that’s been shot. Whereas a documentarian, there is no doctor scene until there is footage of a doctor.

All that is ancient history. But the notion of visuals continues to pop up from time to time. And it means, quite specifically, pictures used to illustrate a verbal point. It comes from thinking that the verbal statement is the most important thing. Which leads to believing that as far as the pictures are concerned, close enough is good enough.

And that brings us to the current usage in talk-talk documentaries of empty shots—neutral images used to provide filler to cover the continuation of an interview as voice-over, or used as cutaways to cover an edit in an interview. Outside, shots of trees and sky are favored. Or any nature scene—a stream, flowers, whatever. Inside, you have the long tilt down a wall to arrive at nothing in particular, or furniture, books, whatever.

These scenes may be very pretty, even occasionally dramatic, but they are shot as filler—visual wallpaper—not as evidence to make a visual argument.

Another term for visuals or empty shots is B-roll, which stands for images that run while someone is talking.

As a documentarian, your job is to find, record, and organize visual evidence to make a powerful, dramatic statement on the screen. The minute you find yourself thinking about visuals or B-roll footage, an alarm should go off in your head to tell you that you lack the visual evidence you need and are relying on words to tell your story.

Talk is cheap.

VERISIMILITUDE IN DOCUMENTARY

If you cannot rely on the objective reality of whatever you have recorded to convince an audience of the truth of your argument, then in recording and editing the documentary, you have to present the case so an audience will believe it. One way, as we’ve seen, is to find and record convincing visual evidence.

Making a documentary requires meticulous attention to what will ultimately be shown to an audience. The verifiable truth of a documentary depends on the honesty of the documentarian in presenting an accurate analog of the situation as he or she understands it. But that alone is no guarantee that the audience will accept the documentary as true—because a documentary, every bit as much as a Hollywood movie or a Broadway play, must work within the framework of audience beliefs, conventions, and expectations. The images on the screen may be both real and true, but if they lack the appearance of truth, the documentarian sets up a credibility gap with the audience that he or she may never overcome.

An audience comes to any film or video—including a documentary—bringing with it what in the theater is called the willing suspension of disbelief. Violate that and you may lose your audience—sometimes for good. In addition to good visual evidence, structured into a compelling argument, a documentary requires the appearance of truth. The term for this is verisimilitude.