Documentary Storytelling: Creative Nonfiction on Screen

Third Edition

Sheila Curran Bernard

Praise for previous editions:

"With all the buzz over blockbuster docs, Focal Press serves up a perfectly timed winner in a much-neglected area. True to the nature of the beast, the book is more about filmmaking as a whole, and how and where storytelling weaves into the overall process."

—Canadian Screenwriter (Writers Guild of Canada)

"Bernard is keenly aware of the power of persuasive images, and her insistence on complexity and integrity is a consistent theme throughout the book."

—The Independent (Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers)

"[B]rilliant and effective."

—BackStage

Documentary Storytelling has reached filmmakers and filmgoers worldwide with its unique focus on the most important and cost-effective tool of nonfiction filmmaking: storytelling. This practical guide reveals how today’s top filmmakers bring the tools of drama to the world of nonfiction filmmaking, without sacrificing the rigor and truthfulness that give documentaries their power. Whether your project is vérité or archival history, low budget or high, this book offers practical advice for every member of the production team at every stage of production, from research through shooting and editing. This third edition has been updated and improved, with new content throughout and new interviews with Alex Gibney (Taxi to the Dark Side), James Marsh (Man on Wire), Deborah Scranton (The War Tapes), and others, in addition to previous interviews with filmmakers including Steven Ascher and Jeanne Jordan (So Much So Fast), Ric Burns (New York), Nick Fraser (BBC Storyville), and Sam Pollard (When the Levees Broke)

Sheila Curran Bernard is an Emmy and Peabody Award-winning filmmaker and writer whose credits include projects for broadcast, theatrical release, and museum and classroom use. She has taught at Princeton University, Westbrook College, and the University at Albany, SUNY.

Related Title:

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More Praise for *Documentary Storytelling*

“Bernard demonstrates to documentarians how story can be more effectively incorporated into every level of nonfiction filmmaking from conception to development and pre-production, in the field and in the editing room. Her discussions incorporate many examples from contemporary documentaries to illustrate a variety of salient points.”

—*Documentary* (International Documentary Association)

“Sheila Curran Bernard’s *Documentary Storytelling* is an essential, pragmatic, common-sense approach to making nonfiction films for the student and/or first-time filmmaker, based on the author’s deep awareness of documentary film history and theory, and her intimate knowledge of how today’s most important documentarians formulate their works.”

—Gerald Peary, film critic, *The Boston Phoenix*

“Invaluable for documentary filmmakers as well as anyone who uses information and evidence to portray real events. But the value of this book goes beyond its service to storytellers; the consumers of documentary films and all journalism can benefit by more fully understanding the narrative structures that we all use to construct order and meaning in the world.”

—Penne Bender, Media Director, Center for Media and Learning, City University of New York, The Graduate Center

“While documentaries are nonfiction, they are certainly not objective, and even the smallest choices in writing, filming, interviewing, narrating, or scoring can drastically alter the perspective of the film, and in turn, the audience. Bernard is keenly aware of the power of persuasive images, and her insistence on complexity and integrity is a consistent theme throughout the book.”

—Alyssa Worsham, *The Independent*

“If you fancy yourself as a documentary film-maker, or simply want to improve your understanding of observational storytelling, buy this book, read it, and apply the ideas contained within.”

—Quentin Budworth, *Focus Magazine*

“Documentary Storytelling. That’s what this book is about. It’s about the story, how to convey that story eloquently, effectively, and ethically. . . . This book is absolutely brilliant. . . . packed full of interviews with award-winning documentary filmmakers offering up information, advice, and wisdom you’ll find interesting and useful.”

—Krista Galyen, *AAUG Reviews*
Praise for Archival Storytelling (with Kenn Rabin)

“I am often asked how to work with archival materials. Now I have an easy answer: Get a copy of Archival Storytelling and read it. Everything’s there—how to use archival materials, acquire them, and most of all, how to think about them. Archival Storytelling is indispensable.”

—David Grubin, Filmmaker, LBJ, FDR, Napoleon, and The Jewish Americans

“This is it, the book that will save you thousands of dollars and untold hours of frustration. It will be the single best purchase your production company will make. Archival Storytelling clearly explains the entire process of researching, acquiring and licensing archival footage and music. Included are time-tested tips and techniques for efficiently managing the work flow and negotiating rights.”

—Ann Petrone, Archival Supervisor, The Fog of War

“One of the best—and most needed—texts I have seen in a while. The challenge is to keep what is a fairly technical aspect of filmmaking interesting without compromising the quality and depth of information. The authors have done an exceptional job in this regard by the careful interweaving of interviews with researchers, filmmakers and legal experts through the factual material. There is the strong sense of being in the presence of experienced filmmakers and researchers who accept that while there are standard practices, archival use and intellectual property laws, etc. are contingent fields in which each case must be assessed and dealt with on its merits.”

—Bruce Sheridan, Chair, Film & Video Department, Columbia College

“I’ve been making historical documentaries for many years, yet I learned new things from this book. This is the definitive guide for archival research for documentary filmmakers. An invaluable resource.”

—Mark Jonathan Harris, Distinguished Professor, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, and writer/director, The Long Way Home and Into the Arms of Strangers
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Documentary Storytelling

Third Edition
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In memory of Henry Hampton
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Preface to the Third Edition

The phrase *documentary storytelling* has become commonplace since this book was first published in 2003; it describes the powerful merging of visual and literary narrative devices to enable media makers to reach and engage audiences with nonfiction content. But the need for “storytelling” is also sometimes used to justify nonfiction work that is overly sentimental or sensational, poorly researched, and poorly crafted. That’s not what this book is about, and it’s not what the filmmakers featured in these pages do.

Instead, it’s about an organic and often time-consuming process in which a filmmaker approaches a subject, finds (as opposed to imposes) a story within that subject, and then uses a wealth of narrative devices—structure, character, questions, point of view, tone, stakes, and more—to tell that story truthfully and artfully, so as to attract and actively engage an audience. In this way, the documentary filmmaker joins the ranks of other master storytellers, whether they work in fiction or nonfiction. The astonishing work of directors like Alex Gibney, Ari Folman, James Marsh, Deborah Scranton, and many others continues to set a high bar for those seeking to work in nonfiction media. *Documentary Storytelling*, in this and previous editions, puts the tools used by these filmmakers into the hands of anyone seeking to tell nonfiction stories, whether for broadcast or theatrical release or use in educational and community settings.

With this new edition, I hope to challenge the use of the term “documentary” to describe any and all forms of nonfiction audiovisual programming. For an analogy, consider the nonfiction section of a bookstore or library. There are books with advice on cooking and gardening and pet care; graphic novels and how-to manuals and celebrity tell-alls; histories that are scrupulously researched and histories that appeal primarily through images and sentiment; rigorous science alongside pseudoscience. Go a step farther, and include in this list the glossy brochure that advertises your dentist’s practice, the report published by a particular charity to attract supporters, or the incendiary flier put out on behalf of a controversial cause.

We would never lump all of this nonfiction material—as different as it is in quality, purpose, audience, format, and form—together as one thing (*docubooks*, perhaps). Instead, we’ve learned, as readers, to recognize these differences. Similarly, we need to learn, as viewers,
to better recognize the range of media presented as nonfiction. And so for this edition, I’ve chosen a subtitle that sets documentary films alongside a particular form of nonfiction prose, “creative nonfiction.” The intent is to start with the best in documentary and explore it as the model for any kind of production, even those that more accurately would be billed as the audiovisual equivalent of tabloid, magazine, or vanity pieces, and perhaps advocacy, public relations, and even advertising.

This new edition has been restructured and contains more than 20 percent new material, including an examination of new films, new conversations with award-winning filmmakers (Brett Culp, Alex Gibney, Susan Kim, James Marsh, and Deborah Scranton), and a closer look at the use of story as a tool for analysis (not prescription) at every step of production, from research through editing. Unfortunately, this meant that some material from the previous edition had to be dropped, including the interview with archivist, filmmaker, and writer Kenn Rabin, with whom I worked in 2007 and 2008 to jointly author Archival Storytelling: A Filmmakers Guide to Finding, Using, and Licensing Third-Party Visuals and Music (Focal Press, 2008).

With only a few exceptions, works discussed in this edition are easily bought or rented through major vendors. Some films that are aired on television series, such as BBC’s Storyville and PBS’s Frontline and American Experience, may also be available for online viewing.
Acknowledgments

My thanks to Focal Press for shepherding not only three editions of this book into print but also overseeing its publication in Portuguese (2008) and Chinese (2010). Elinor Actipis, Michele Cronin, Dawnmarie Simpson, Laura Aberle, and their colleagues are the kind of publishing team any author would want. My thanks also to Cathy Gleason and Deborah Schneider for their ongoing counsel; to proposal reviewers for this edition; and to transcribers Amanda Burr and (especially) Johanna Kovitz for amazingly fast and accurate turnaround. Thank you to friends and colleagues at Princeton University, the University at Albany, and Goddard College, and to a community of nonfiction filmmakers worldwide for work that challenges, inspires, and informs.

I owe a special thanks to the many filmmakers interviewed for this and previous editions; a list can be found in Part IV. For everything else, as always, I thank my parents, David and Kathleen Bernard; my friends and family; and, of course, Joel and Lucky.

Sheila Curran Bernard
September 2010
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About the Author

Sheila Curran Bernard is an Emmy and Peabody Award–winning media maker and consultant whose credits include projects for prime-time national broadcast, theatrical release, and community and classroom use. She has taught at Princeton University, Westbrook College, and the University at Albany (SUNY), and lectured on documentary storytelling at the Niemann Conference on Narrative Journalism, Christopher Newport University, the Pennsylvania College of Technology, and elsewhere. With Kenn Rabin, Bernard is also the author of Archival Storytelling: A Filmmaker’s Guide to Finding, Using, and Licensing Third-Party Visuals and Music (Focal Press, 2008).

A surprisingly large number of people, including documentary filmmakers, will strive to differentiate the nonfiction films they enjoy (and make) from something they’ve stereotyped as “documentaries.” Documentaries, from the reputation they seem to hold, are the films some of us had to watch during fifth grade history or eighth grade science. Sometimes derided as “chalk and talk,” they tended to be dry, heavily narrated, filled with facts, and painful to sit through. So ingrained is this model, it seems, that inexperienced or polemical filmmakers still imitate it, creating films that are little more than illustrated research papers created to “show” or “prove” something through a steady recitation of data. And so nonfiction films that work—that grab and hold audiences through creative, innovative methods—are set apart by their makers and audiences as being somehow more than documentaries: they’re movies. Like Hollywood fiction, these films may emphasize character, conflict, rising stakes, a dramatic arc, resolution. They bring viewers on a journey, immerse them in new worlds, explore universal themes. They compel viewers to consider and even care about topics and subjects they might previously have overlooked. And yet, unlike Hollywood fiction, they are based on a single and powerful premise: These stories, and the elements with which they are told, are true.

In other words, they’re documentaries—and this book shows you how they’re made.

**DEFINING DOCUMENTARY**

Documentaries bring viewers into new worlds and experiences through the presentation of factual information about real people, places, and events, generally—but not always—portrayed through the use of actual images and artifacts. A presidential candidate in Colombia is kidnapped (*The Kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt*); children...
in Calcutta are given cameras and inspired to move beyond their limited circumstances (Born into Brothels); executives and traders at Enron play fast and loose with ethics and the law (Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room). But factuality alone does not define documentary films; it’s what the filmmaker does with those factual elements, weaving them into an overall narrative that strives to be as compelling as it is truthful and is often greater than the sum of its parts. “The documentarist has a passion for what he finds in images and sounds—which always seem to him more meaningful than anything he can invent,” wrote Erik Barnouw in his 1974 book, Documentary. “Unlike the fiction artist, he is dedicated to not inventing. It is in selecting and arranging his findings that he expresses himself.”

Story is the device that describes this arrangement. A story may begin as an idea, hypothesis, or series of questions. It becomes more focused throughout the filmmaking process, until the finished film has a compelling beginning, an unexpected middle, and a satisfying end. Along the way, the better you understand your story, even as it’s evolving, the more prepared you’ll be to tell it creatively and well. You’re likely to identify characters and scout locations more carefully, and the visuals you shoot will be stronger. Perhaps surprisingly, you’ll be better prepared to follow the unexpected—to take advantage of the twists and turns that are an inevitable part of documentary production, and recognize those elements that will make your film even stronger.

Puja running, from Born into Brothels. Photo by Gour, courtesy of Kids with Cameras.
DOCUMENTARY AS A SUBSET OF NONFICTION FILM AND VIDEO

As discussed in the preface, the range of film and video categorized loosely as “documentary” is extremely broad and varies widely in quality, in terms of both content and craft. At their best, documentaries should do more than help viewers pass the time; they should demand their active engagement, challenging them to think about what they know, how they know it, and what more they might want to learn. When the audience is caught up in a life-and-death struggle for a union (Harlan County, U.S.A.), in Mick Jagger’s futile efforts to calm the crowd at a free Rolling Stones concert (Gimme Shelter), or in the story of a family’s rift over whether or not a deaf child should be given a chance to hear (Sound and Fury), there is nothing as powerful as a documentary.

Some documentaries have surprising impact. Jeanne Jordan and Steven Ascher learned that their Academy Award–nominated film, Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern, about the efforts of Jordan’s parents to save their Iowa farm from foreclosure, had influenced farming policy in Australia; Jon Else’s Cadillac Desert, the story of water and the transformation of nature in the American West, was screened to inform policy makers on Capitol Hill. Alex Gibney learned that Taxi to the Dark Side, his Academy Award–winning look at the U.S. military’s treatment of detainees in Iraq and Iran, was viewed by individuals campaigning for the U.S. presidency in 2008 and by the U.S. Army in its training of the Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corps. To achieve this level of impact, films must not only reach audiences through compelling, nuanced storytelling, but they must also earn their audiences’ trust through reliable, honest content.

Although the storytelling tools explored in this book can be applied to any kind of nonfiction media production, with projects of any length and subject, the examples are drawn primarily from longer-form work, including broadcast hours and theatrical-length features. As discussed in the preface, these films and their creators have their counterparts in the world of creative nonfiction prose, where authors use the the tools of the novelist and dramatist to present factual, journalistic content.

CREATIVE NONFICTION ON SCREEN

Consider this list of the “five characteristics” that make nonfiction writing creative, as described by author Philip Gerard in his book, Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life:
• “First, it has an apparent subject and a deeper subject.
• Second, and partly because of the duality of subject, such nonfiction is released from the usual journalistic requirement of timeliness.
• Third, creative nonfiction is narrative, it always tells a good story [Gerard cites another writer, Lee Gutkind, in explaining that to do this, the nonfiction writer “takes advantage of such fictional devices as character, plot, and dialogue.... It is action-oriented. Most good creative nonfiction is constructed in scenes.”].
• Fourth, creative nonfiction contains a sense of reflection on the part of the author... It is a finished thought.
• Fifth, such nonfiction shows serious attention to the craft of writing.”

How does this evaluation apply to documentary films?

**An Apparent Subject and a Deeper Subject**

There may be a deceptively simple story that organizes the film, but the story is being told because it reveals something more. *Sound and Fury*, on the surface, is a documentary about a little girl who wants a cochlear implant, an operation that may enable her to hear. But in telling that story, the filmmakers explore the world of Deaf culture, what it means to belong to a family and a community, how language is acquired, and more. *The Donner Party*, at its most basic level, tells the story of pioneers who took an ill-fated shortcut across the Sierra Nevada, became trapped by winter snowfall, and in desperation resorted to cannibalism. But filmmaker Ric Burns chose that story not for its shock value, but because it revealed something about the American character.

**Released from the Journalistic Requirement of Timeliness**

Even when documentaries are derived from news reports, they are not bound to tell the story while it’s still “news.” Instead, they take the time to consider events and put them in more detailed and often layered context. The financial meltdown of Enron; the abuse of prisoners at Bagram, Abu Ghraib, and Guantánamo; the suicide of writer Hunter S. Thompson—all, at one time, were news stories, for example, and all have been used as fodder for enduring, thought-provoking documentaries by director Alex Gibney.
Tells a Good Story

This means that a filmmaker uses the tools of creative writing to identify and shape a good story, one that accurately represents the truth. It does not mean inventing or distorting characters or plots or conflicts for the purpose of enhancing a documentary’s appeal.

Contains a Sense of Reflection on the Part of the Author

A documentary is not a news report. It is a thoughtful presentation of a subject that has been explored, researched, weighed, considered, and shaped by the filmmaker over a period of time, and then communicated outward in a voice and style that are unique. Who is a film’s author? The conventional view is that it is the director, provided the director is principally responsible for the story that is told, from outlining it prior to shooting to overseeing how it’s shaped and reshaped in the editing room. Many films, more accurately, have multiple authors, reflecting close relationships between a producer(s), a director, a writer, and an editor, or some combination within that group. But the author is the one whose vision, ultimately, is reflected on screen.

Shows Serious Attention to the Craft of Film Storytelling

A filmmaker’s palette is different, in many ways, from that of a novelist or playwright, but the underlying considerations remain the same. Craft is about wielding the unique tools of a chosen medium to the full and best advantage, without going too far. Told well, a story will feel seamless and inevitable, fully and actively engaging the viewer.

SUBJECTIVITY

The power of documentary films comes from the fact that they are grounded in fact, not fiction. This is not to say that they’re “objective.” Like any form of communication, whether spoken, written, painted, or photographed, documentary filmmaking involves the communicator in making choices. It’s therefore unavoidably subjective, no matter how balanced or neutral the presentation seeks to be. Which stories are being told, why, and by whom? What information or material is included or excluded? What choices are made concerning style, tone, point of view, and format? “To be sure, some documentarists
claim to be ‘objective,’” noted Barnouw, “a term that seems to renounce an interpretive role. The claim may be strategic but is surely meaningless.”

Within that subjectivity, however, there are some basic ethical guidelines for documentary filmmaking. Audiences trust documentaries, and that trust is key to the form’s power and relevance. Betray that trust by implying that important events happened in a way that they did not, selecting only those facts that support your argument, or bending the facts in service of a more “dramatic” story, and you’ve undermined the form and your film. This doesn’t mean that you can’t have and present a very strong and overt point of view, or, for that matter, that you can’t create work that is determinedly neutral. It does mean that your argument or neutrality needs to be grounded in accuracy. How to do this is discussed at length throughout this book.

**HOW IMPORTANT IS STORY?**

In today’s documentary marketplace, story is what commissioning editors are looking for and training in storytelling is deemed necessary for filmmakers. A small sampling:

- From the website of the Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program: “The program encourages the exploration of innovative nonfiction storytelling, and promotes the exhibition of documentary films to a broader audience.” The week-long, invitation-only Documentary Edit and Story Lab provides filmmakers “the opportunity to focus on story, character development and dramatic structure while working intensively with accomplished editors and directors on selected scenes from their work-in-progress.” (www.Sundance.org)

- At the BBC, *Storyville* remains the preeminent strand for one-off, international documentary films. “The strand looks for ambitious, narrative, contemporary films from all over the world to commission in co-production with other funders. . . .” (www.bbc.co.uk/commissioning/tv/network/genres/docs_strands.shtml#storyville)

- The Australian Broadcasting Corporation “commissions its documentaries from Australia’s highly competitive independent documentary industry,” according to its website (www.abc.net.au/tv/documentaries/about/). “We seek a broad slate of quality documentaries which will tell strong stories, which are well researched, which are well made, and which will entertain and
inform our audience. They can be single subject series or one off specials.”

- From ZDF Enterprises (a private subsidiary of ZDF): “A trademark of many years’ standing is the Sunday evening ZDF Expedition series from the History and Science department. Every documentary requires a well-structured dramatic format and a clear storyline; at the beginning the questions that will be handled during the course of the documentary should be clearly and explicitly stated. At the same time, complex issues can be conveyed in an accessible and comprehensible manner.” (www.zdf-enterprises.de/en/documentaries.672.htm)

- The Independent Television Service’s “International Call” (www.itvs.org/producers/international_guidelines.html): “Through the ITVS International Call, storytellers from other countries introduce U.S. audiences to their global neighbors, opening a window onto unfamiliar lives, experiences and perspectives.” The program is looking for “Single, story-driven documentaries with broadcast hour versions.” Note that this is not a grant, but a licensing agreement.

WHO TELLS DOCUMENTARY STORIES?
The range and breadth of documentary filmmaking worldwide is actually quite astonishing. Some documentary filmmakers work within production houses or stations; many more work independently, with varying degrees of financial and technical support from national or local governments, commissioning stations or broadcast venues, and/or foundations and corporations. Some filmmakers work to reach regional or local audiences, including community groups; others strive for national theatrical or broadcast release and acclaim at prestigious film festivals; a growing number put their work online, reaching virtual communities.

STORYTELLING, NOT WRITING
Documentary storytelling does not refer specifically or even primarily to writing, nor is it strictly the province of someone identified as a writer. The tools described in this book are employed by almost anyone involved in documentary production, including producers, directors, editors, cinematographers, sound recordists, and researchers. Storytelling describes the conceptual process that begins at the moment an idea is raised and continues to be applied and reapplied.
as a project is shot and edited, conceived and reconceived, structured and restructured. Before they shoot, while they shoot, and throughout the process of editing, filmmakers routinely address story issues: “Who are the central characters? What do they want? What are the stakes if they don’t get it? Where is the tension? Where is the story going? Why does it matter?” Even if the film is structured as an essay, there should be an escalating sense of urgency, discovery, and relevance as the answers and subsequent questions are revealed.

Only rarely is a documentary scripted prior to production (there is no counterpart to the “spec screenplay” market of Hollywood), and that is generally because it involves extensive dramatization. Otherwise, a “script” evolves organically through the entire process, and is the term used to encompass the storytelling conveyed by the finished film.

In recognition of the importance of story to documentary, the Writers Guild of America, West and the Writers Guild of America, East (writers’ labor unions) in 2005 began to offer an annual “Documentary Screenplay Award.” The script must be for a film that’s at least 40 minutes in length, and the film as exhibited “must have had an on-screen writing credit (i.e., a ‘written by,’ ‘story by,’ ‘screenplay by,’ ‘documentary script by,’ or ‘narration written by’ credit, as appropriate) related to the writing of the film.” Winners to date include *Super Size Me* (Morgan Spurlock), *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (Alex Gibney), *Deliver Us From Evil* (Amy Berg), *Taxi to the Dark Side* (Alex Gibney), *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman), and *The Cove* (Mark Monroe). Monroe is the only writer who did not also direct the nominated film; notably, only some of these films are narrated.

**ABOUT THE BOOK**

The idea for this book emerged from my experiences as a documentary filmmaker, writer, and consultant on a range of projects, large and small. I’ve worked with established as well as emerging filmmakers on productions intended not only for broadcast and theatrical release but also for museum and classroom use. It became clear to me that underlying issues of story and structure can generally be applied regardless of a project’s style or length. It also became clear that despite the growing popularity of documentary films and filmmaking, discussion of the form was still too often clouded by misinformation and misconceptions. In particular, this book is written to counter two prevailing and equally false notions: One, that it’s better and more
“real” to shoot a documentary first and find the story later, and two, that the need for “story” permits a filmmaker to impose a shallow and external framework on a subject.

INTENDED READERSHIP

Documentary Storytelling is intended for those who have an interest in understanding how story and structure work, and in particular, why some nonfiction films seem to have so much more power than others and whether that power is built on credible content. It’s my hope that by understanding the storytelling choices filmmakers make, viewers will become better and more critical consumers of nonfiction programming in general. They’ll have a clearer understanding of why something does or does not “ring true,” why some films seem to carry greater emotional or intellectual weight, why some programs leave them feeling manipulated or bored, and how shifts in point of view or tone can change the nature of the presentation. In today’s media-saturated world, such media literacy is more important than ever.

For filmmakers, this book focuses primarily on longer-form work, but the principles of documentary storytelling can and do apply in a range of forms and formats. I have applied the story and structure tools contained in this book to six-minute historical documentaries, eight-minute natural history films, and even 90-second audio presentations. Brett Culp, interviewed in Chapter 18, applies these tools as an event filmmaker, crafting stories from key moments in his clients’ lives.

FORMAT AND METHODOLOGY

The sections of this book are primarily organizational; the strategies in Part I apply to work under way in Part II, and the concepts discussed in the first two parts are explored at greater length in the interviews of Part III. Additional material from these interviews and from conversations with several other filmmakers is interspersed throughout the book.

The stages of filmmaking generally described in this book are research and development, preproduction, production, and editing (assembly, rough cut, fine cut, lock). In most cases, there is not a clear division between steps: filmmakers may be fundraising well into editing, for example. Discussions of story and structure, likewise, will continue throughout this process. It’s very common for a team in the editing room to revise a preliminary outline (on paper), and even a pitch, to be sure that they can articulate the story as it’s evolved during
research and production. Surrounded by hours of material—still and motion images, audio interviews, music, archival materials—filmmakers often find that stripping a project back to its bare bones, its narrative structure, is the best and most effective way to begin a project’s final and best construction.

Examples in this book that are drawn from actual films are identified as such. Otherwise, the examples were created by me for illustration purposes, and any resemblance to actual films, whether produced or proposed, is purely coincidental. At the back of the book, I’ve included some information on films cited, many of which are now available for purchase or rental through online vendors.

CRAFT, NOT FORMULA

Documentary storytelling describes an organic editorial approach to making choices about a film’s structure, point of view, balance, style, casting, and more, at every stage of a film’s creation. It uses language familiar to anyone who has worked on a creative endeavor, but because it uses the palette of filmmaking, it is in some ways most akin to dramatic screen storytelling. The difference is that documentarians are not free to invent plot points or character arcs and instead must find them in the raw material of real life. Our stories depend not on creative invention but on creative arrangement, and our storytelling must be done without sacrificing journalistic integrity. It’s a tall order, which is why this book—the first to comprehensively apply the rules of Hollywood screenwriting to documentary filmmaking—was written. It’s not about formula. Understanding what story is and how it works to your advantage is a step toward finding your own creative and ethical voice as a filmmaker.

OBSERVATIONS

In preparing all editions of this book, I screened a wide variety of films and spoke with a range of filmmakers, many of whom raised the same basic points:

- It’s not about the technology. Too often, filmmakers get caught up in the tools of storytelling. The best equipment in the world, even the best shots in the world, won’t save a film from a lack of focus.
• Time is an increasingly rare commodity for filmmakers, especially during preproduction and editing. Yet time is often what enables a film to have depth, in terms of research, themes, and layers of storytelling; it can enhance creativity. As a group, we need to resist the pressure to turn out documentary products, rather than documentary films.

• Story does not have to mean three-act drama, and it definitely does not mean artificial tension that is imposed from without. Story comes organically from within the material and the ways in which you, the filmmaker, structure it.

• Documentary filmmakers, increasingly, offer a powerful addition to or contradiction of information presented by mainstream media. It is critical that our work be ethical and truthful, even as it is also creative and innovative.

• Share the humor. No matter how grim the situation or subject, audiences cannot take a program that is unrelieved misery. Watch any of the top documentaries of the past few years, and notice not only how often you’re on the verge of tears, but also, even within the same film, how often you’re laughing.

• Think easier. Some of the best documentaries made recently are built on a narrative train that is very basic; that’s often what allows for their overall complexity.

There are many ways to tell a quality documentary story, many stories to be told, an increasing number of filmmakers to tell them, and more affordable tools with which to tell them. So tell an honest story and a good one. Contribute to our understanding of who we are, where we’ve been, and what we might become. Take the viewer into a new world. Be open-minded. Be rigorous. Have fun. And stand proud. Make a wonderful, truthful, brilliantly creative and exciting nonfiction movie, and then call it what it is: a documentary.
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