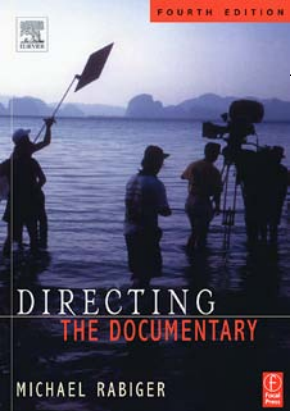


FOURTH EDITION



DIRECTING  
THE DOCUMENTARY

MICHAEL RABIGER



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**DIRECTING**  
THE  
DOCUMENTARY

**Fourth Edition**



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# **DIRECTING THE DOCUMENTARY**

**Fourth Edition**

**Michael Rabiger**



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For  
*Netta Hakak with love–*  
*Here comes the next generation!*



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# PREFACE TO THE FOURTH EDITION

If you are interested in making documentary films, everything you need technically and conceptually should be here. Using a hands-on, project-oriented approach, this book takes you through the necessary steps in using the screen as a tool of inquiry and self-expression. It can take you from absolute beginner, if that's where you are, to advanced levels of competency. If you are a professional, you should find new ways of seeing and a greater wholeness and logic in the world of your work. Because so many people (myself included) are experiential learners and temperamentally unsuited to absorbing masses of untried information, the book is designed to accommodate more than one kind of user. Your profile may be one or more of the following:

- You want conceptual preparation before undertaking production work. For you, each production-related phase includes an introduction and graduated projects to help you develop skills, judgment, and confidence.
- You learn best from doing rather than from conceptual preparation. You can jump straight into the projects and use the rest of the book as a problem-solving manual as solid issues take shape in your work.
- You want to direct fiction but wonder if documentary skills might be a useful. There is a section on how documentary work develops the confidence to improvise, experiment, and capitalize on spontaneity, and how useful documentary coverage is as a developmental tool during fiction-film rehearsals.
- You are trapped in film or TV work that has become routine, and you long to direct. This book offers paths to get there.
- You cannot afford time or money for schooling, and you want to learn making documentaries anyway. This book will help you get there.

This edition has been thoroughly updated, revised, and expanded to reflect changing technology and the veritable explosion of documentary production. Luckily, the explanations and practices that come from my filmmaking and teaching also keep developing. I especially value the stimulus from workshops, seminars, and conferences, for they confirm that the needs and practices of documentary makers

are fairly universal. They also show how much the documentary voice is needed and appreciated, especially in nations that are entering or leaving the airless embrace of authoritarianism. In a world wracked by hatred and warfare, the still small voice of humane conscience has never been more vital.

Because seeing enough documentaries remains a practical impossibility, this book cites mainly English language films, many made by American independents. *Directing the Documentary's* practices and methods must, however, work in a range of cultural settings, for it has gone into several languages since it first appeared and seems to work for its users.

Changes to the fourth Edition include new chapters:

- Evidence and Point of View in the Documentary (Chapter 4). This likens making a documentary to compiling evidence in a court case for presentation to the jury, or audience. By reviewing the rules of evidence and likening them to testimony from a camera, recorder, or witness, this chapter advances guidelines for making more persuasive documentary. The court's summing up phase represents the way that evidence is structured in a film to exert maximum dialectical effect on the audience—the jury whose judgment determines credibility and therefore truth.
- Projects: Critical Writing (Chapter 9). These introduce methods of critical writing about documentary and encourage its practice as a method to discover and clarify your inherent values.
- Missions and Permissions (Chapter 17) brings together ethics, embedded values, and practical issues concerning permissions and informed consent.
- The Preproduction Meeting (Chapter 19). Mindful that the book may be used for projects of very different complexity, this edition includes the preproduction meeting as a forum for coordinating a large production.
- Location Sound (Chapter 22). Now that camcorders have more sophisticated sound recording facilities, more people use location mixers and wireless mikes, so there is a new chapter on location sound.
- Using Music and Working with a Composer (Chapter 35). As digital editing frees documentary from the straitjacket of realism and as sophisticated synthesizers permit the making of low-cost original scores, music is being used more extensively for atmosphere and comment. This chapter summarizes how to work with a composer.

A major change in the fourth Edition is that the Aesthetics and Authorship section is now rewritten and repositioned ahead of that on preproduction because film teachers needed a more linear textbook. I have tried to make the material more concise, more proactive in its advice, and more directly relevant to beginners whose sights may be fixed more on production than on premeditation.

The fourth Edition also includes

- A history section updated with many recent films. Being fair and representative is impossible, so I have cited the best films I have seen. Because this book is used beyond the Anglophone world, I have included international

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films of stature in the hope that readers may see them too. This combination of chance and choice in my method undoubtedly results in a view neither adventurous nor balanced, but it's plainly impossible to satisfy all constituencies, and it is better to reflect what I know. So be it.

- Expanded research chapters (Chapter 15 and 16).
- Updated equipment references and updated film references throughout the book.
- How making documentaries can prepare you to direct fiction and how the Iranian cinema shows the way for a fusion of documentary realism and poetic, allegorical storytelling.
- Outcomes Assessment forms for most projects gathered together in Appendix 1. For teachers' convenience they will also be posted in Microsoft Word format under the book's title on the Focal Press Web site ([www.elsevier.com/inca/publications/store/6/7/5/9/6/6/index.htm](http://www.elsevier.com/inca/publications/store/6/7/5/9/6/6/index.htm)). Assessing work by its outcomes facilitates
  - Teachers assessing students' work more objectively
  - Students assessing and discussing each other's work
  - Greater awareness of multiple layers in film work
  - Constructing similar criteria for your own work—existing and projected
- Greater emphasis on going beyond using film as simple denotation to use it connotatively and poetically to liberate ideas and feelings.
- Initial Research and the Draft Proposal (Chapter 15) now expanded to include defining point of view and style. It contains discussion of “raising the stakes”—deciding what, for participants and audience alike, is at risk for the central character(s) and what the director might legitimately do to intensify this.
- Interviewing (Chapter 24) reformatted to make it clearer and more prescriptive.
- Sound theory and camera handling theory (Chapter 14).
- The three-act structure made more prominent, with encouragement to use dramatic form in all stages of directing.
- Beats and dramatic units explained and made germane to directing. Recognizing dramatic units as they spontaneously unfold in life helps the director know when a documentary situation is going somewhere and when, conversely, it will remain stuck without directorial attention.
- A questionnaire on embedded values at the end of the research phase, positioned as the last consideration before shooting (embedded values are the unquestioned assumptions that permit us to accept things as “just the way they are” when we should, in fact, be critical of them).
- More overview guidance for those who use the book as a field guide, including bullet points at the start of each part and each chapter. There is also a Production Projects overview as an introduction in Chapter 28.

There are new exercises in

- Pitching ideas (Chapter 10)
- The family drama (Chapter 10)
- Critical writing (Chapter 9)
- Sound theory and recording (Chapter 14)

Most projects and exercises in this book come with individual assessment criteria and suggested topics of discussion. Teachers in an educational climate that demands objective proof that students are learning will find outcomes assessment extremely useful for several reasons. Their students, having multiple criteria by which a piece of work will be judged, know what is expected and can plan for it. When work is finished, the assessments serve as prompts for teachers and learners to see more deeply into each piece of work and to evolve shared values. Film teaching seems to be moving away from the traditional model of students apprenticed to a master in favor of using more rational, open practices related to theories and practices in the rest of the arts. In general, this book should reduce the burden of instruction so that teachers and their students can concentrate on the truly fascinating relationships that develop over their work.

Worldwide, the documentary is growing in quantity, stature, and accomplishments. With fresh approaches and new causes to champion, the independent documentary is stirring ever greater public interest. Digital, high-definition video equipment and desktop computer postproduction have revolutionized screen production and displaced film from its elite and excluding position as the medium of choice. Drama can greatly profit from non-professional actors, neo-realistic use of settings, and imaginative stories arising from local cultures. The future has never looked more exciting for cinema independents.

Over the years many people have contributed help and ideas to this book. My sincere thanks go therefore to Peter Attipetty, Camilla Calamandrei, Dr. Judd Chesler, Michael Ciesla, Dan Dinello, Dennis Keeling, Tod Lending, Cezar Pawlowski, Barb Roos, and her students at Grand Valley State University. Thanks to Bill Yancey for help with the text, Dirk Matthews and Milos Stehlik for pictures and pictorial sources, and Paul Ruddock for freely sharing his experience from using the previous edition. My grateful thanks to Dean Mary Schmidt Campbell, Ken Dancyger, and the film faculty and students at the Tisch School of NYU for giving me the rare privilege of working with them. As a friend, supporter, and doyen of the documentary, George Stoney, also of NYU, has alerted me to significant omissions. Most of the information for the chapter on working with a composer came from Paul Rabiger, a composer for film and television. Joanna Rabiger, a documentary film editor and researcher, saved me from falling too far in arrears with documentary development. Penelope Rabiger, a teacher whose master's degree was in learning styles, has greatly helped me understand my early difficulties with traditional education and why I took alternative paths. I must thank Doe Mayer, Jed Dannenbaum, and Carroll Hodge for the inspiring exchanges, formal and informal, preceding the publication of their work *Creative Filmmaking from the Inside Out* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003). I thank them for permission to summarize some of its ideas on the dangers of embedded values.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to Columbia College, which allowed me to implement so many of my ideas. Through the support and vision of Bert Gall and Caroline Latta, the Film/Video Department was radically rethought, expanded, and rehoused during my tenure as chair. Over the years, the college and the Film/Video Department, now under the able leadership of Bruce Sheridan, have shown great affection and trust. To my students, at Columbia and elsewhere around the world, I have this to say: Dear friends, both past and present, you are too many to name, but you showed me the way to writing and rewriting this book. Thank you.

The excellent Focal Press staff have consistently been a pleasure to work with and to know, and I must particularly thank Elinor Actipis, Acquisitions Editor, for her outstanding encouragement, practical support, and professionalism at every stage. Given Focal's mammoth book list, I count myself more than lucky.

Lastly, heartfelt thanks to my wife, Nancy Mattei, for her endurance, sharp proofreading, and unfailingly kind, constructive, and astute critical suggestions. With the quantity and quality of help given me, any mistakes are mine alone. Maybe I should add that I have no relationship of personal gain with any of the manufacturers, services, or institutions named in this book.

*Michael Rabiger*  
*Chicago, 2004*



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## PART 1

# INTRODUCTION, HISTORY, AND FUTURE

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Part 1 looks at

- Becoming a documentary director
- What makes a nonfiction film a documentary
- Objectivity and subjectivity in documentary
- Showing evidence and complexity to your audience
- The documentary's influence in society and the responsibilities that go with it
- How you relate as a documentary maker to your audience
- How film language evolved and how the documentary was born
- Interventional and non-interventional approaches to participants and their worlds



- The role of technology and its effect on handling documentary subject matter
- Where changes in technology and audience expectations may be taking us

This book is for practical people who like making things that are useful. Documentaries are stories, and stories have always been vital to human life. Making them from the actual—real people living their real lives—becomes special whenever a work taps into meanings that run deep, such as those also expressed in myth, legend, and religion. The presence of **ancient values** such as these in the documentary shows that human life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century still takes place under similar and mysterious laws of the universe.

A documentary might be about the seasonal bird movements across whole continents, as in Jacques Perrin's *Winged Migration* (2001), or about the desperate work of an Italian doctor and English nurse who must amputate a young soldier's leg on a kitchen table, as in Fabrizio Lazzaretti and Alberto Vendemmiati's *Jung (War) in the Land of the Mujaheddin* (2000). These two works alone plunge you into the mystery of being. One, taking you inside a V of geese flying high over Canadian mountains, is made by an extremely professional team with a vast budget; the other confronts us with the madness and suffering of humans in armed conflict, and is made with minimal resources by two young and brave Italian documentary makers fresh from film school.

Everyone who sets out to practice an art form begins from the inspiration and achievements of others. Part 1 of this book examines briefly who documentary makers are, how the genre originated, what work it has elected to do, and what it may become—given that its identity remains entirely open to new influences and change. To give context and some flavor of its evolution, I have compressed documentary history into a single chapter of subjectively selected highlights. Here are some of the uses, developments, and outstanding personalities in documentary's first eight decades.

Whether or not you have yet made your first documentary, you hold the keys to the innovations and changes of the future. My job is to convey, as best I can, whatever you need to make a flying start. Some of this will be unavoidably technical, but the most important work will be in freeing up your mind to operate radically. There is a direct, human analogy for making a documentary: research is anticipation and inquiry; shooting is experiencing and memorizing; viewing the dailies is recall; and the edited film is memory reorganized and articulated so that you can share a vital experience with others. Whatever you do, read Chapters 39 (Education) and 40 (Getting Work) soon. They stress how vital it is to form long-term educational and career plans, beginning now. Otherwise what matters is that you remain close to what is human, to what your life has taught you to believe, and that you develop your own ideas and authorial voice. This book uses many analogies to free you from intimidation by the medium.

For further information on issues arising in Part 1, use the Index or go to the Bibliography.

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## CHAPTER 1

# THE DIRECTOR'S ROLE

This chapter considers

- The attraction of documentary, what it is, and what it may become
- Aspects of factual film that make it documentary
- Objectivity, fairness, clarification, and simplification
- Documentary as a subjective construct and mislabeling
- The contract with your audience
- Corporations and editorial freedom
- What medium to shoot in
- Why bearing witness matters so much

Becoming a documentary director is like taking over any new job: suddenly you must try to look competent in a new capacity and a new world. Discomfort and occasionally terror go with the experience, as with all truly worthwhile new experiences. This chapter looks at the assumptions, expectations, and myths that you can expect to encounter.

### WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

If you go to a documentary festival or conference where the filmmakers are present, you will be struck by the convivial, cooperative atmosphere and the modest way that documentary makers take on the issues of their time. It's like being at a convention of Davids, each engaged in passionate struggle with their chosen Goliath. You will see that documentary is that rare medium in which the common person takes on large, important issues and shakes up society. Directing documentaries involves handling a modicum of power, and this brings ethical issues and moral responsibilities. Those you will hear debated too.

Get two documentarians together, and the chances are high that they will argue about what documentary is. Even though documentary has evolved continuously from its inception, its purview and methods remain ambiguous, and its parameters keep enlarging. Uncontested, however, is what remains central to documentary's spirit—the notion that documentaries explore the mysteries of actual people in actual situations. The disagreements arise over allied issues:

- What any given actuality really is
- How to record it without compromise and without injecting alien values
- How to honestly and truthfully convey something that, being more spirit than materiality, can only be discerned subjectively

Such crucial ambiguities are not a fault in the medium; rather, they reflect what besets us whenever we face issues that accompany fully awakened consciousness. To make documentary is to practice living your life existentially, as though each day were your last. People who make documentaries put a high value on the joy, pain, compromise, and learning that come from being completely *alive*. No wonder they make great company.

*Documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality”*: Documentary's founding father, John Grierson—to whom we shall return—defined it as the “creative treatment of actuality.” The idea that you bring your own inventive sensibility to the real is conveniently imprecise, for it embraces all nonfiction forms, such as nature, science, travelogue, industrial, educational, and even certain promotional films. But, as we shall see, films under these categories may not really be documentary in the full sense.

*Documentary and time*: Usually documentaries are set in the present or the past, but the genre never stays long inside any set boundaries. Peter Watkins' *The War Game* (1965) showed that documentary could project itself into the future. His film takes the awful facts of World War II bombings of Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki and uses them to hypothesize a major nuclear attack on London. Until someone invents a time machine, documentaries about the past or the future have to use actors. This means that fictional characters and scripts are not automatically excluded from documentary.

*Documentary is socially critical*: Documentary always seems concerned with uncovering further dimensions to actuality and at the same time implying social criticism. The better ones do not go in for hand-wringing nor do they promote a product or service. They may not even be concerned with objectively measurable facts. For instance, a factual film about the way workers manufacture razor blades would be an industrial film, but a film that shows the effect on workers of repetitive precision manufacturing, and that *invites the spectator to draw socially critical conclusions*, can only be called a documentary—however well it might also relay the physical process of manufacturing.

Concern for the quality and justice of human life lifts the documentary out of the purely factual realm and propels it into moral and ethical dimensions. There, it scrutinizes the organization of human life and attempts to develop a humane consciousness in its audience. The best documentaries are models of disciplined passion, showing the familiar in an unfamiliar way. They invite us to

function at a keen level of awareness and even to follow this up by taking action. Sometimes documentaries literally argue a case, but more often the argument is implicit and conducted through showing us the conditions of somebody's life.

*Documentary, individuality, and point of view:* The French novelist Emile Zola said that "a work of art is a corner of Nature seen through a temperament." This is not far from Grierson's "creative treatment of actuality." Amend Zola's statement to read, "a documentary is a corner of actuality seen through a human temperament," and it's plain that a documentary examines the actual through the prism of human temperament. Memorable films present their characters and events through the lens of an identifiable, authorial persona, even though films are nearly always made collectively, not individually. In fiction and experimental film, this personal stamp is familiar from contemporary fiction or experimental film directors such as Chantal Akerman, Jane Campion, Peter Greenaway, Abbas Kiarostami, Baz Luhrmann, Penny Marshall, Sally Potter, Julie Taymor, and Lars von Trier, all of whom have their recognizable concerns and style. A clear authorial identity is also visible in the documentaries of Nicholas Broomfield, Barbara Kopple, Michael Moore, Errol Morris, Marlon Riggs, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Fred Wiseman, Nettie Wild, and many others. Each brings a fresh, special, and engrossing involvement with some aspect of the human condition. You feel it in their passionate and empathic engagement with a subject and in their commitment to presenting the roots of a reality on the screen.

To explore an issue and to use a medium to its utmost are the preconditions for becoming an artist. Artists make visible what is only at the edge of society's consciousness, and any art museum or gallery shows a great historical range of such visions. Like painters, documentarians are guided by conviction, conscience, ideology, and interest in form. They too seek to persuade.

Not all artists conform to the romantic ideal of the genius working alone. A 15<sup>th</sup>-century Italian painting attributed to Fra Angelico or Uccello was almost certainly made by a team. Each assistant handled details such as landscape background, hands, or drapery. Likewise in film, a team, not an individual, handles aspects of a film's vision. *Hoop Dreams* (1994), codirected by Steve James, Fred Marx, and Peter Gilbert, shows how superb screen authorship can arise from shared values (Figure 1-1). Given how collaborative a technological medium is, and that film is shown to a collective audience, this is hardly surprising.

*Documentary is an organized story:* Successful documentaries, like their fiction counterparts, tell a good story and have engaging characters, narrative tension, and an integrated point of view. These elements are fundamental to all stories, and are present in myth, legend, sagas, and folk tales—humankind's earliest organized narratives. The poet T.S. Eliot, considering where poetic narrative comes from, said that, "It is the function of all art to give us some perception of an order in life, by imposing an order on it." Documentary often points to an underlying organization by demonstrating causes and effects. By mobilizing a range of strong feelings it urges us to action. Michael Roemer in *Telling Stories*<sup>1</sup> shows how plot (that is, the situation and pressuring circumstances in a story) is really the rules of the universe, and vital characters are those who contest—often

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Roemer, *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).



**FIGURE 1-1**

Superb screen authorship arising from shared values in *Hoop Dreams* (1994), codirected by Steve James, Fred Marx, and Peter Gilbert. (*Hoop Dreams* Copyright 1994, Fine Line Features. All rights reserved. Photo appears courtesy of New Line Productions, Inc.)

heroically but unsuccessfully—the way things are. A character may take on the rules of the universe out of ignorance, obstinacy, or a host of other reasons, but the struggle becomes his or her (and our) education.

All successful stories seem to center on some aspect of human development, no matter how minimal and symbolic, and they do this in order to leave us with some degree of hope. Watching actual people struggling with actual circumstances produces strong and moving documentaries, especially if you also see someone learn something as a result.

*Documentary's range of forms:* Imposing an order by demonstrating cause and effect can be accomplished any number of ways. A documentary can be controlled and premeditated, spontaneous and unpredictable, lyrical and impressionistic, or starkly observational. It can have commentary or no speech at all, interrogate its subjects, catalyze change, or even ambush its subjects. It can impose an order by using words, images, music, or human behavior. It can use literary, theatrical, or oral traditions and partake of music, painting, song, essay, or choreography. Deciding which of these to use in your film need never be a lonely matter because examples are always available in songs, plays, short stories, history, and literature.

*Fidelity to the actual versus realism:* There are no limits to the documentary's possibilities, but it always reflects a profound fascination with, and respect for, actuality. But what *is* actuality? To the materially minded it is something objective that we can all see, measure, and agree on. The wealthy TV network or

funding agency, wary of lawsuits, wants a documentary to contain only what the documentary theorist Bill Nichols calls *historical reality*—that which can be seen, proved, and defended in court if need be. Not surprisingly, these organizations are much readier to produce informational films or controlled corporate journalism than they are true documentary, which is guided by conscience and results in a more individual and critical view of the world.

True documentary reflects the richness and ambiguity of life, and goes beyond the guise of objective observation to include impressions, perceptions, and feelings. Human reality under pressure becomes surreal and hallucinatory, as you see so memorably in Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). Modern documentarians must be ready to represent not just the outward, visible reality of those they film but also their inner lives, because thoughts, memories, dreams, and nightmares are the inside dimension of their lives. Writers have always been able to shift levels between their characters' inner and outer dimensions, and have sometimes included the storyteller's perceptions as part of the rich resulting narrative. Film is finding out how to claim these freedoms for itself.

*Documentary as unfolding evidence:* The modern documentary differs from its earlier, more scripted forms because mobile technology allows us to record events and authorial consciousness *as they unfold*. This produces the sensation of spontaneous, living adaptation familiar from the heightened moments in our own lives. Take, for example, Nicholas Broomfield and Joan Churchill's fine *Soldier Girls* (1981). Ostensibly it shows how the U.S. Army trains its women soldiers, but it also reveals a great range of formal and informal moments, including sadistic training and humiliations that are all the more disquieting because they are imposed by authoritarian white men on minority women. The film delays confronting a central paradox until late: because warfare is brutal and unfair, a caring instructor cannot train soldiers to survive kindly, no matter what their gender. But this argument wears thin after what we have seen and leaves us disturbed by larger questions about soldierly traditions and military mentality—just as the film's makers surely intended. We share what moved or disturbed Broomfield and Churchill, but the film never tells us what to feel or think. Instead, *by exposing us to evidence that is contradictory and provocative* it jolts us into realization and inner debate.

Whenever a film exposes us to good though contradictory evidence, we become jury members arbitrating truth. A documentary of this type is thus a construct of evidences that are weak or strong, as you will see in Chapter 4 (Evidence and Point of View in the Documentary).

*Documentary as a social art:* As we have said, films are usually made collaboratively. This means that an authorial attitude arises and is collectively mediated by the individuals who shoot and edit the film. Another collective—the audience—then considers the resulting work. All film, and the documentary in particular, is a truly social art form in every stage of its evolution.

## OBJECTIVITY AND FAIRNESS

*Objectivity:* People frequently assume documentaries are objective because factual television likes to balance out opposing points of view. This is supposed

to ensure a fair, unbiased view of the events and personalities in question. Such balance is a tactic inherited from journalism, which sometimes must preserve the identity of sources that gave information on condition of anonymity. Political balance lowers the dangers to, and responsibilities of, the newspaper. Papers fear accusations of political bias or of being proved wrong, because this brings discredit and lawsuits. So part of a journalist's professionalism has always been to keep things looking objective. A newspaper will further this appearance by prescribing a uniform and faceless "house" writing style, and by camouflaging staff attitudes as the opinion or the conflicts of others.

In the 1930s this fixation with equipoise led reputable British newspapers to depict the trouble brewing in Germany as a petty squabble between Communists and Blackshirts whipped up by Red troublemakers. We see in hindsight that no responsible commentator could sit on the fence and report in this hands-off way. It was neither fair nor responsible when the Nazis had already begun acting on their genocidal intentions.

Reporters and documentary makers, then and now, must *interpret* events. This means that for each specific issue your film must imply where the cause of justice and humanity probably lies. To guide us there, you will often have to lead us through a maze of contradictory evidence and let us make our own determinations—just as you made yours. Interestingly, this is how a court presents evidence to the ultimate authority in a democracy—a jury.

*Fairness:* In a world of ambiguities the documentarian's responsibility is to be fair. If, for example, you are telling the story of a malpractice accusation against a surgeon, it would be prudent not only to cover the allegations from both sides but to cross check everything that can be independently verified. In this you follow the same practices as the good journalist and the successful detective. Because matters are seldom as they first seem, the accused is not always guilty, and the accuser is not always innocent. Being fair to countervailing points of view also guards your own interests: your film will have its enemies no matter whose part you take, and you will probably have to defend them, possibly in court. If your enemies can demonstrate a single error of detail they will try to use it to damn the whole work. This is how opponents tried to shoot down Michael Moore's first film, *Roger and Me* (1989).

*Clarification, not simplification:* What interests the documentarian is seldom clear-cut, but there is an ever-present temptation to render it so. Nettie Wild's *A Rustling of Leaves* (1990) is a courageous and sympathetic account of the populist guerrilla movement in the Philippines, but the partisan nature of her beliefs makes one feel guiltily skeptical throughout. She makes heroes of the left-wing peasants in their struggle against right-wing thugs, and though her sympathy is clearly justified, we know that armed resistance cannot long remain honorable. Soon both sides commit atrocities and the waters become too muddy for the story to remain one of moral rectitude. To be fair means not only relaying the protagonists' declared principles but also exposing the ugly and paradoxical aspects of liberation through violence. Wild does this, for instance, by showing the trial and execution by guerrillas of a youthful informant. But one doubts if there is much of a trial when the camera is not around.

A film may be accurate and truthful, but it may fail unless it is perceived as such. Handling your audience well means anticipating the film's impact on a first-time viewer every step of the way and knowing when justifiable skepticism requires something more built into the film's argument. The more intricate the issues, the more difficult it will be to strike a balance between clarity and simplicity on the one hand and fidelity to the ambiguities of actual human life on the other.

*A documentary is a subjective construct:* The alluring notion that a camera can ever record anything objectively disintegrates when you confront a few practical considerations. What, for instance, is an "objective" camera position, when inescapably someone must place the camera somewhere? How do you "objectively" decide when to turn the camera on and off? And when viewing the resulting material, how do you spot the "objective truth" that should be used? These are all editorial decisions. They are inextricably bound up with film art's need to take what is lengthy and diffuse in life and make it into a brief and meaningful essence.

Quite simply, filmmaking is a series of highly significant choices:

- What to shoot
- How to shoot it
- What to use in the film
- How most effectively to use it

If your film is to be perceived as fair and balanced, you will need a broad factual grasp of your subject, evidence that is persuasive and self-evidently reliable, and the courage and insight to make interpretive judgments about using it. Almost every decision involves ethical choices, many of them disquieting and leading to sleepless nights. However noble your intention, the medium plays a very big part in the message. Remember that you can never show the events themselves, only a *construct* of them with its own inherent logic, dynamics, and emphases. Only by doubting its shape and balance, and by checking every aspect of its impact on other people, can you become sure that your representation aligns with your intentions.

*Documentary is often wrongly labeled:* Anything nonfiction is routinely called a documentary, even when it may be factually based advertising sponsored by a branch of the travel industry or a pet care film whose hidden agenda is to prove how necessary Contempo Cote Conditioner is to man's best friend. True documentaries are concerned with the values that determine the quality of human life, not with selling a product or service.

Then, again, the language used about documentary is often confusing. Penetrating but fair-minded exposure of a subject's issues will be called "objectivity," yet the same word will be used for the fence-sitting so favored by those who contrive the appearance of balance in order to advance a political agenda. Worse yet, the artful ways that news and documentary practitioners use to disguise their own biases suggest that documentary itself is objective. Nothing could be less true. Documentary is a branch of the expressive arts, not a science.



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