

Documentary Storytelling

Making Stronger and More Dramatic Nonfiction Films

Second Edition

Sheila Curran Bernard



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Jon Else

Jon Else directs the documentary program at the University of California, Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. His films, which have earned him four Emmys, several Academy Award nominations, and a MacArthur Fellowship, include *The Day after Trinity*; *Yosemite: The Fate of Heaven*; *Sing Faster: The Stagehands' Ring Cycle*; and the PBS series *Cadillac Desert* and *Eyes on the Prize*, which is where we first met. He has served as cinematographer on hundreds of films, including *Tupac: Resurrection*. He is currently producing and directing *Wonders Are Many*, a documentary feature about nuclear weapons. We spoke in 2003 and again in 2006.

Is the common thread in documentary a need for story?

The common thread that we've overwhelmingly embraced for the last 50 years is story. We haven't figured out a way to do documentaries very successfully without stories. The adoption of the story devices of *dramatic film*—that's a relatively new thing.

Story, in the sense that I think we all bring to it from Western literature, from the theater, from a good novel and narrative films, has served us extremely well. It's kept a lot of viewers from changing channels to watch a soap opera or *Desperate Housewives*. But in a way, that's our deal with the devil, our Faustian bargain. I've spent a lot of my career trying to make real people in the real world behave like Lady Macbeth or King Lear or a character on *Homicide*. Trying to sort of force them to not be quite so messy and nonchronological in how they go about their struggles with life, and trying to make it fit a Shakespearean mold.

When I did the film *The Day after Trinity*, about J. Robert Oppenheimer and the building of the first atomic bomb, we had people on the production staff read *Hamlet*, and there was a lot of discussion around the big table as we were shooting and editing about the similarities between Oppenheimer and Hamlet. What we ended up doing, I think, was kind of bend whatever Oppenheimer's real-life character was so that it more closely approximated a tortured young Danish prince trying to figure out what to do. The same was true with Henry Ford [*A Job at Ford's*] in *The Great Depression* series. There was a great, I think, unconscious effort on my part to make Henry Ford's reversal of fortune at the hands of his workers reflect King Lear's reversal of fortune at the hands of his daughters. I'm not sure I would do it that way again.

But isn't that a valid biographic device, as long as your work is also accurate? Print biographers do it.

Both films are structurally very successful, I think. But whether they're successful history or not—time will tell. Robert Oppenheimer and Henry Ford are an awful lot more complex and their lives are messier, in terms of their forward motion, than either Hamlet or King Lear. And another problem in both of those films is that I attempted to make myself invisible, jumped through a lot of hoops to make the filmmaker vanish entirely.

Even then, shouldn't viewers realize that someone is telling the story?

But I believe very firmly that audiences take documentaries to be somehow truer than nearly everything else they see on screen. And that at the end of a film, when the lights come on or the commercial comes on, there are certain events that the audience believes actually happened in a certain order. The audience doesn't say, "Well, that's Jon Else's version of how the events in Henry Ford's life unfolded." People are going to take it to be something unnervingly close to the actual way in which actual events happened.

I try to get it right; there's nothing in either of these films that hasn't been fact checked to within an inch of its life. And that's why I feel comfortable putting out my version. There are other spins and versions that also can be fact checked. What I don't have patience with are stories that get put out there in which the filmmaker is too lazy to fact check it or the story is too good to be

fact checked. To kind of let it go and then say, "I'm not a journalist, so it doesn't matter." I don't buy that.

Part of the problem seems to be that there's no common definition of "documentary." Even filmmakers are divided: Are they artists, journalists, something else?

In a way it's not up to us. We don't have the luxury of defining ourselves as documentary makers or not. Our films say, very loudly, "I am a documentary." The whole seduction of the audience succeeds because audiences place great value on something they believe in their souls to be true. You can say, "No, I'm not a journalist, no, I'm not a historian, I'm just a storyteller"—but what you put on the screen is going to be taken by the vast majority of the audience to be factual.

You can't have your cake and eat it too. You can't tell a story that is too good to be true, and not let the audience in on the deception. But what I try to do with my students is point out that in making these films you don't have to stretch things like that. Having a passionate personal voice doesn't mean that you can't be journalistically ethical. You can be a journalist and an artist at the same time. It's all about letting people know what kind of truth you're telling.

You've talked about the role of documentaries in advancing public awareness of issues and events. Can you explain?

I'll limit myself to discussion of documentary as something that's important in civic dialogue, in the national conversation. One role of documentary is to provide the American public with a basis for conversation, a basic and accurate understanding of what the issues are and what the basic facts are. Documentary in fact does have a secret life among policy makers. President Clinton was famous for watching lots of documentaries in the course of briefing himself for a particular issue. There was a screening of the Yosemite film in a Senate caucus room for seven senators, even before it was released on PBS, unbeknownst to me. *Cadillac Desert* had a screening on Capitol Hill in a Senate caucus room with about 100 people in attendance from the White House, OMB, the Congress, the Senate, the Department of the Interior. The first copy of *The Day after Trinity* was purchased by the C.I.A.

If you went to the sixth grade in California in the 1990s, you had to watch *Cadillac Desert*. Now, there's no question that public television is also hugely important, simply because of its large but diminishing reach. *Cadillac Desert* was seen by about 9 million people on the night it was broadcast. The book only sold 50,000 copies. By the time the sun sets on my life, the series will probably have been seen by 30 to 50 million people around the world. Fine with me.

As a director and director of photography, how much do you plan your storytelling in advance?

In approaching a film, I always try to find at least two stories that unfold simultaneously. One of them almost always is a very simple, straight-ahead, forward motion through time. For instance, in *Sing Faster*, the forward motion is just the simple story that is told in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, in the operas. It's this crazy soap opera about the gods fighting, a giant Aristotelian drama with characters and rising conflict and resolution and all that. And then parallel to that is the much less linear story of the stagehands preparing this production for opening night.

In *Cadillac Desert*, the same was true. In setting out to tell what, on the surface, were not enormously riveting tales of how canals and irrigation were developed in the West and how dams were built, I first looked for a narrative. Just a simple, forward-moving narrative that went through time and involved people in conflict. And it turns out that there was a lot of that, [it] took place in Congress and had an enormous effect on how we live in America today.

The second thing was to find some sort of a visual chronology, something visual on a grand scale. And it turned out that was fairly straightforward. The American West was at one time very, very dry. What we did was that we slowly, in the course of each hour, showed the water being re-engineered. Helicopter photography was extremely important in *Cadillac Desert*, in getting up above these landscapes to see how much they had been changed. You really can't tell how much the plumbing system in the West has been turned on its head until you get up above and look down and see that the rivers and canals are running in the wrong direction. It's dry where it should be wet and it's wet where

it should be dry. We also did a lot with the visual concept of “unnatural” farming—at night, in the middle of the desert, etc.

Yosemite: The Fate of Heaven tells two stories as well; the story of the park today and the pressure it’s under from tourism, and the park as it was encountered by Lafayette Bunnell, on an Indian raid in 1854. Yosemite’s an interesting case because all of the footage on screen is in the present; it’s a historical film which takes place entirely in the present. All of the narration is from an 1854 diary that I discovered about halfway through the preproduction period.

Did you excerpt and use passages in the order in which they were written?

The unfolding of events in the diary, the story of what Lafayette Bunnell and the Mariposa Battalion actually did—arriving at the valley, chasing Chief Tanaya and his tribe, and finally burning Chief Tanaya’s village—those in fact are in the correct order, a nasty parable of conquest. On the other hand, Bunnell’s ruminations about Yosemite and his transcendental experience, those paragraphs are shuffled around pretty substantially. I teach in a school of journalism now and I take a much tougher, hard-ass view of all this than I did.

Isn’t there a logic that these are his thoughts, which were likely ongoing?

Yes, I think that’s true. But we’ll never know, will we? When the lights go on, we are responsible for what the audience believes to be true. And that includes not only what happened and what things looked like, but the order in which they happened, which is crucial to cause and effect.

Do you ever storyboard your work? For example, the scene of the workers at Yosemite National Park, in Yosemite.

Never. What I do is I plan very carefully and work extremely hard to figure out, what is the concept behind this particular sequence that we’re shooting? Why are we watching these people blowing up a boulder on a particular trail in Yosemite? What is this shot or sequence telling us within the developing narrative of this film, and what is this shot or sequence telling us about the world? Are we there with the trail crew and the dynamite because it’s dangerous? Are we there because all the dynamite in the world is not going

to make a bit of difference in this giant range of mountains, where people are really insignificant? Are we there because these people are underpaid and they're trying to unionize? You've really got to figure out what the concept of the sequence is and what it is not, otherwise you just fire hose everything.

How would answering those questions change how you shoot the scene?

If the sequence is about man against nature and the futility of trying to tinker with these billions of tons of granite, it may be important to show that the boulder is huge compared to the people. And you can choose to do that by how you place human beings in relation to the boulder, and in fact we did that with that particular boulder. The thing I remember about that particular scene is that it was to some extent about danger, that people were using dynamite to clear a trail so that hikers could enjoy their Sunday afternoon going up to the lake to catch some trout. I remember having a lot of communication with John Haptas, the sound guy, to make sure he was getting this grating and to me very scary sound of a pocketknife cutting through a stick of dynamite, because of the danger involved.

If that scene was also to some extent about the camaraderie between the members of the trail crew, all of whom had lived in these mountains together, in camp, for many months by that time, you try to do a lot of shots in which the physical relationship between people shows. You show people touching each other, looking at each other. They weren't trying to unionize, but if in fact we had been doing a sequence about the labor conditions for trail workers in Yosemite, we probably would have made it a point to shoot over the course of a long day, to show how long the day was, show them eating three meals on the trail, walking home really bone-tired in the dark. Basically, the more you're aware of what you want these images to convey, the richer the images are going to be.

The danger is that we always have to be prepared that the scene may be conveying something different from what we expected it to convey. It may be that you shoot a sequence and somewhere along the line you unearth some material in front of your camera or some research or a new angle that means that this stuff suddenly has a new meaning. That can be good or bad.

It can be bad when the producers insist on bending it into the old meaning. I do a lot of camera work for other people, and I see an awful lot of sequences that I've shot end up on screen being pumped up to mean something which has really nothing to do with what they were at the time.

Why do you think this happens?

There's a lot of misunderstanding that tape is cheap and that it's a good idea with miniDV to shoot everything in sight and figure out later what it's about. That's one problem. The other problem is going out with an inflexible preconception, shooting a scene which doesn't match the preconception, and then coming back into the editing room and trying to force it with narration, tricky cutting, steroid music, or by shooting bogus footage to add to it. We've gotten to the point where producers need to have things be dramatic and unambiguous often gets the better of them. I take a very firm view about documentary ethics in general, and I think that there's an alarming erosion. The great thing about low-cost video production is that it democratizes documentary. But one of the downsides is that there's no oversight. And there's a danger that people's enthusiasm or rage or advocacy or ratings lust is going to get the better of them.

Do you write outlines and treatments before you shoot?

I do. Well—I do two kinds of films. I do films about things that have already happened, which are historical films. And films about things that are actually happening as we film. And you have to treat them differently.

The reason historical films are so popular with funders is that they know what they're going to get; they know what happened, no surprises. And the same is true for planning the film. It's your job as a maker of historical films to spend whatever it takes, six months or a year, to figure out a way to write an engaging treatment that draws on every bit of research, to turn over every stone, find out who are the interesting characters, find out who are the good witnesses. I write very, very detailed treatments for historical films. Most of my historical films take place in the present, by the way, there's a huge present component to them.

On films about events which unfold as you film, it's nearly impossible to write a treatment; that's one of the reasons they're so

hard to fund. What you can and must do is to write a document, a quasi-treatment that clearly lays out who the film is about and what the conceptual underpinning of the film is. If it's a film about a baseball team, are you there because you care about the mathematics of baseball, or do you care about the profit the owner makes? Do you care about the relationship between the players and fans? Are you there because there's a Japanese player on the team? Are you there because these players relate to the legacy of the Negro Leagues? Why are you there? Then, whatever you write needs to lay out what might likely or possibly unfold as an order of events. It has to lay out pretty clearly who the characters are likely to be, what their relationship to one another is likely to be, and what's likely to change over the course of the time that you're going to be filming. No matter how you do it, there's a little bit of folly in it. And the problem is simply the money, who's going to give you the money to go out and find out what's happening in the world? Who would fund *Salesman* [Albert Maysles, David Maysles, Charlotte Zwerin] today, except maybe Sheila Nevins [HBO]? I think vérité films get funded almost solely on the reputation of the filmmaker or on the basis of a good sample tape.

Do you shoot to the treatment?

I treat it sort of like the airplane evacuation instructions. When all hell's breaking loose and you're out on location and you're sick with malaria and half your crew has mutinied, you can glance at this treatment and figure out this fail-safe way of making the film. You hope that you'll find something vastly better, but the original treatment is a way of ensuring that you can get the film started on the screen, and most important, that you can figure out some sort of ending.

Do you work with an act structure?

I try to have the rearrangement of time, the flashbacks and flash forwards, carefully worked out within that ever-advancing present tense in the film. That almost always gets changed in the editing, but at least going into it I have something that I know, if all else fails, I can use this model and it'll be at least a passable film that won't embarrass us all. The film I'm doing now has no acts; it may be embarrassing.

At what point do you know what you want your audience to get out of the film?

It's probably a mistake to begin a film without some notion of what the audience should feel and believe and understand at the end. Those are three different things. If you've chosen a complex and deep and robust subject, there are going to be things that emerge in the process of making the film that are going to change your notion, your idea of where you want the audience to be. You know, you spend 80 percent of your effort on the first 10 percent and the last 10 percent of the film. The middle part's easy, sort of like the space shuttle.

What about casting?

For better or for worse, casting is everything. Sad sacks who mumble are just not too interesting on film. I used to describe it in much more charitable terms—we used to say, "Look for the good storyteller." In practical terms, most documentaries now require having two or three lead characters, and then sort of a second tier of the supporting players. You can look at dozens of documentaries, good ones, and that's the model that they use. It gets bent a little too often, particularly in historical films, in the direction of powerful leaders. The thing that's tough is to find the little people, but they're always there if you look hard enough. In *Cadillac Desert*, we tried to find people who worked on the dams, people who remembered the West as it was before the rivers were redirected.

In finding people to help tell a story, I'm always very direct about calling people who may have a different point of view on the story than me and encouraging them to be part of the film. Respecting what they have to say, putting it in the film. On the afternoon that we sealed up the deal on *Cadillac Desert* [based on the book by Marc Reisner], the first phone call I made was to Floyd Domeni, who is the dam builder from hell in Marc's book. He turned out to be a wonderful man who was more than happy to talk very forthrightly about what he did and why he did it. I make an attempt to either have the film be fair to everyone on all reasonable sides of an issue—and being fair doesn't necessarily mean giving everyone the same number of seconds on the screen—or to make it very clear that I'm doing a rant, if that's what I'm up to, and not try to trick the audience into thinking that I have no stake in this.

But fairness is in the eye of the beholder. On *Cadillac Desert*, I thought that our story unfolded with enormous fairness, but it got a lot of people angry on both sides. Some environmentalists felt that we were too easy on the forces of development. There were a lot of big agricultural groups who thought we were way too tough on big agriculture. There were people in Los Angeles who thought we had disgraced the memory of William Mulholland. I disagree with them all. [But] it's okay if people don't like our films; it's not okay if we get it wrong, and it's factually inaccurate.

Your current film seems to break some of the narrative strategies you usually employ.

This new film, *Wonders Are Many*, is the most complicated narrative that I've ever done. It weaves together (1) the story of the making of *Doctor Atomic* [an opera composed by John Adams and directed by Peter Sellars] over a two-year period, with (2) an archival history of the arms race with (3) the life story of Robert Oppenheimer, with (4) the story of the final 48 hours before the Trinity test. But the unfolding of each separate story is nonlinear: We begin with the end of the opera and end with the beginning of the opera. The film is 92 minutes long and Hiroshima gets destroyed [the bombing that marked the culmination of Manhattan Project research] about 20 minutes in.

It's the first film I've worked on where decisions about what comes next rest on a very simple visceral sense of what works cinematically. I've got a great editor, Deborah Hoffman, who can look at a scene and say, "This next scene, even though it happened six months before, is visually and emotionally what makes sense. So let's go from that shot of wreckage at the Nevada test site to the chorus singing about plutonium, not because it makes textbook sense but because it moves the film forward in a musical, emotional, and visual sense without hurting the logic." This intuitive way of working is not for every subject. The thing that makes it possible is that the stories are incredibly rich and broad; I mean, it's an opera and an atomic bomb, so we're seldom at a loss for something jaw-dropping to put up on screen. And it takes a really brilliant and grown-up editor—Deborah has saved me on many films over the years. It's also a lot of work. It's stories braided together, and only one, the historical story of the Manhattan Project, is narrated. When we're on stage with the people

making the opera, the narrator goes away. The irony is that it's a very data-dense film; you learn a lot about nuclear weapons.

In your program at U.C. Berkeley, you try to identify the types of stories that lend themselves to lower-budget filmmaking—films in the \$100,000 range, as opposed to the \$500,000 or more that's typical for an hour carried nationally on PBS or HBO.

In the system we're trying to develop at U.C., it's a mistake to first find a story and then figure out how to make it inexpensively. You have to first figure out how much money you realistically have available, and then figure out what story fits with that. It's the polar opposite of what we've been doing all our lives.

There are some straight-ahead litmus tests that you can apply. It's almost impossible to do inexpensive films which include commercial archive material. You have to find stories that'll withstand moments of inelegant storytelling, that will not be destroyed by the loss of a particular character or location or action. You want to look for stories that can be done without travel. You want to look for stories that have a built-in narrative timeline, narrative arc.

Films don't go over budget because you paid a sound guy too much and put the crew in a hotel for an extra day. They go over budget because people waste two months of editorial time figuring out what the story is. If you're talking about doing inexpensive work, that's the single most important thing, finding a story that comes with a ready-made through-line. It's much more cost-efficient to figure out the story beforehand. The downside of that is that you're never going to be able to make *Salesman* or *Soldier Girls* [Nick Broomfield, Joan Churchill] or *Control Room* [Jehane Noujaim, Hani Salama, Rosadel Varela] if you do that. And the fact is that it's very, very tough to do any kind of cinéma vérité film—which involves really discovering the story—inexpensively.

A few other things. You want to do stories where you don't have to burn up a month getting any administrative access. You know, if you want to do a story about the history of Disneyland, that's a textbook example of something that's not going to be inexpensive no matter how you do it. If you want to do a story on the inside of a political campaign for a month with a Panasonic 100B, you probably can do that inexpensively. It's got a built-in

story arc, two leading characters, somebody's going to win, somebody's going to lose. You've got rising action, rising tension, and an ending.

We've commissioned three documentaries to date. Lourdes Portillo did *McQueen*, a short film about Steve McQueen that premiered at the Whitney Museum. Peter Nicks did *The Wolf*, an hour-long film about his struggle with cocaine and crack that ended up being broadcast on *ABC Nightline* over two nights. And then Al Maysles set out to do one chapter in a long-term project of his, getting onto cross-country trains and following the stories of people who were riding. And it didn't quite work: Some voyages of exploration find something and some don't, and his didn't. So he's rearranged what he's doing and is involved with a short film about a dance troupe in New York. It may be that in this "cookbook" model, the open-ended exploration of cinéma vérité is problematic. If Albert can't do it, maybe nobody can.

What are some of the other challenges of making a quality film for less money?

I suspect that the most important element and in some ways the most difficult is how you break up time. How do you take the order in which real people have done real things in the real world, and how do you stretch and shrink different events to last more or less screen time? And how do you reorder them in a way that gives the greatest drama, without leading the audience to believe falsehoods, that certain things happened when they didn't? The editorial process, which can stretch to months or even years on documentary projects, that reordering of time, that's what burns up money.

It's all about, first of all, finding the point at which you enter the story. And the mysterious art is then figuring out at what points do you flash back to reveal portions of the backstory, and at what point to do flashbacks within flashbacks? In real history, Harvey Milk and the man who eventually killed him, Dan White, were both elected in the same election on the same day. But Deborah Hoffman and Rob Epstein, in structuring *The Times of Harvey Milk*, carried the audience through the first third of the film, getting Harvey Milk elected to his seat on the San Francisco board of supervisors with hardly a mention of Dan White. It's only after Harvey Milk has been elected that we then flash back to the same

election and meet Dan White, and go through Dan White's ascent to power. And those two men will eventually meet and White assassinates Milk.

Are there common structural problems that you encounter in your work with students?

The most common difficulty is finding where to enter the story. Almost all first-time filmmakers start their film at what later turns out not to have been the best place in the chronology. The second most common difficulty is a refusal to give the audience enough basic information, because students are very reluctant to use narration or text of any sort. They've grown up exposed to nothing but *bad* narration and often have trouble imagining narration that's brilliant and artful, or even useful. But words in a film can be wonderful or horrible, just like camerawork or sound or music or editing. The third most common problem is the ending, bringing the film to a soft landing, or a crash landing, or any landing. And that's the one we have the least success in solving.

When people think of documentary today, they're likely to think of the big-screen blockbusters like Super Size Me, and perhaps some of what's on public television. But for working documentary filmmakers, the bread-and-butter is likely to come from the often very low-budget documentary programming that dominates commercial television. Some of it's excellent, but there is also no shortage of material that's unimaginative, if not journalistically unsound. How do you prepare students for this world?

You have to be a realist. It's perfectly possible to do beautiful work when you're on someone else's payroll (look at Robert Flaherty). But at some point, you're going to be asked to turn out shit, and you're going to be asked to turn it out in a way that's unprofessional and doesn't do justice to your skills. When that happens, hard as it is, you have to find the line that you won't cross, especially the ethical line. We've had some experiences with recent grad students seeing stuff in the field that was just plainly, clearly unethical and struggling with that; seeing a producer posing as policemen in a drug bust, for instance.

But I'm convinced that students can fight to do good work in those settings. If a producer asks you to fake things, cook up phony stock footage, falsify your reporting, fudge the drama a little more

than you're comfortable with in order to drive the ratings, you somehow have to find it in yourself to say no in a constructive, orderly way, through the chain of command. Sometimes you're not going to get asked back, but that's okay. The more folks at all levels of documentary can blow the whistle very loudly when they see stuff that's just plain dishonest, the better. You will work again. Documentary filmmaking is about showing an audience what the actual world is, and that involves skilled ethical filmmaking. It's especially hard to speak up when you are young, but do it clearly and carefully, and have confidence that you're going to be able to work in a place that does have higher standards.