

Documentary Storytelling

Making Stronger and More Dramatic Nonfiction Films

Second Edition

Sheila Curran Bernard



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Susan Froemke

One of the nation's leading direct cinema (also known as *vérité*) filmmakers, Susan Froemke is currently completing a long-term project about addiction for HBO. Her company, Susan Froemke Productions, creates corporate and independent work.

When we spoke in 2003, Susan was chief administrator and principal filmmaker at Maysles Films in New York, a company she joined in the 1970s. Her first production with Albert Maysles and his late brother, David, was *Grey Gardens*, a now-classic portrait of Edie Beale and her mother, Edith Bouvier Beale, reclusive relatives of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. While at Maysles, Susan made more than 20 nonfiction films, including the Academy Award-nominated *Lalee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton* (HBO), a look at poverty and education in the Mississippi Delta, and the Grammy Award-winning *Recording The Producers: A Musical Romp with Mel Brooks* (PBS), about the making of the Broadway hit's cast album. We spoke about these projects in 2003, with an update in 2006.

I've heard direct cinema described as "the drama of life—without scripts, sets, interviews, or narration." Many people think this means you just go outside and start filming.

Right. But that's not at all what happens. It's one thing if we're recording an event, and the client wants us to be somewhere at a certain time and we show up with our cameras. And as you start recording that event, you see, "Wow, this could be a really interesting film; there's more than just this Rolling Stones concert that I'm filming [*Gimme Shelter*], or there's more than just these

meetings with the Gettys [*Concert of Wills: Making the Getty Center*].” Pretty soon, you have to start thinking as a filmmaker and ask yourself, What story are you telling? What direction is your subject taking you in, and is that something that’s going to make a good film?

What about films that begin as a general topic or idea, such as Lalee’s Kin?

The genesis of *Lalee’s Kin* was HBO calling me up saying, “We’d like you to take a look at poverty at the end of the millennium.” So how do you start to find a story? We researched and researched. We had to become educated about the current issues of poverty. We wanted an answer to the question, “Why is there so much poverty in this rich country?” This was 1997; the welfare reform bill had just been passed. Initially, it seemed that the obvious story line was to follow three welfare mothers and see how the changes in the welfare laws were affecting their lives. But as I researched the topic more—and it wasn’t just me, I had two smart assistants on staff here—I realized that I wanted to look more at the systemic causes of poverty.

Through talking to a lot of academics and policy makers, including Senator Paul Wellstone, we identified the systemic causes of poverty as illiteracy, illegitimacy, and racism. Larry Brown, who had written the book *Hungry in America*, told us, “If you’re doing a film about poverty, you’ve got to be in the Mississippi Delta.” He said, “There’s this one school superintendent that you’ve got to meet, Reggie Barnes.” And when I called Reggie Barnes, I got that intuitive feeling over the phone that this is my subject. Reggie said, “If you can educate the child of illiterate parents, you can stop the cycle of poverty.” And that struck home. It’s a simple statement but it’s a powerful statement; let’s investigate this. I went down to the Delta and met Reggie, who had a Herculean task ahead of him, getting an impoverished school system off academic probation. This was a real narrative, the first I’d found after searching in four different states for almost six months.

So you have the genesis of a story, what then?

At Maysles, we say that casting is everything. We choose to call it “researching,” because people think that casting means actors,

like a Hollywood film. But we do have to find our subjects, they don't just fall in your lap. Once we found Reggie, we needed to find a family whose lives were going to intersect with the school superintendent's story, so you could see how difficult it is to try to stop this cycle of poverty that's been passed down for generations. Since this is the Mississippi Delta, we couldn't find any production personnel who could help us cast, so I asked Jim O'Neill, who was affiliated with the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, to drive me around the cotton fields.

When we drove through Lalee's neighborhood, I saw her family pulling down a house, an old wooden structure next to an old trailer she was living in. We stopped and watched, and Lalee soon invited me inside. We sat down at the kitchen table, and she just talked. And I thought, "This is the dream subject." Because I could say one or two words, and she would start to pontificate. Also the fact that she was giving me access to her house, the first time I met her, is exactly what you need when you're doing vérité. It's all about access and getting the trust of your subject. I think Lalee started trusting us very early on in the shoot. And she'd never seen a documentary in her life, so it's not like I could say to her, "Just let us film your life, and if you don't like something that we're filming, you can always tell me."

We also loved Lalee's children; they just charmed us. That was another reason why Lalee was cast. Main and Redman were the first two kids that we met. Redman was so curious and adorable, and Main, although somewhat withdrawn, really opened up around us. And it was after the second time we filmed that we met Granny [another child]. Right away I thought that Granny was a fascinating character and had a lot of potential as a main or secondary story line.

You filmed Lalee's Kin over a period of time, traveling from New York City to Mississippi periodically to shoot. What would motivate a trip?

We went down to film Lalee soon after I met her because she was getting a new trailer [from the government]. And it's really a metaphor for poverty. Lalee's so excited that this new house is going to arrive, she's full of hope and expectations, and when she finally gets it she realizes it's this rat-infested dump. It was a year before she could get a stove, a refrigerator that worked,

and electricity. I mean these are gargantuan efforts for a family to overcome. And you see her crushed, which is what we experienced filming this very poor population. They couldn't have hope for long. But they had this resilient spirit; they would say at the end, "Well, I thank the Lord for whatever I've gotten."

The story kept changing every time we went down there. It was really hard to track. We would go down for events, like the arrival of the new trailer or the beginning of a school year. We went down on Granny's birthday, which also happened to coincide with the school announcing that it was going off probation. We would always check in with Lalee and Reggie, especially with Lalee, and get a lot of textural things. And oddly enough, a lot of things would happen on birthdays or Mother's Day, I guess because a lot of people would come into the household. On Mother's Day, she found out that Eddie Reed, her son, was in jail.

We would often go down thinking we were going to film one thing and something totally different would happen; a whole new chapter would unfold. And I just would not worry about it. Your subjects, in many ways, are directing the film. You follow the directions their lives take; it's always much more interesting. Even the minutia of daily life fascinates me, like when Lalee is teaching Granny how to cook. It tells so much, that there's no meat in the house, and what Lalee ends up cooking with is bologna.

As a direct cinema filmmaker, a style that's observational or "fly on the wall," how do you approach issues of storytelling?

We're trying to make scenes, because we're trying to make nonfiction films. I never think that we're making a documentary. I think that we're making a film, just like a feature film director makes a film. I've got to get cutaways, I've got to get an end point of the scene, and I've got to get into the scene some way. Usually you're going to miss the beginning of the scene, unless it's total serendipity and something unfolded while you were filming. Often you're sitting waiting and something happens and you just miss that first line. You've got to get it some way. For instance, the scene at the end of the film where Lalee breaks down. We went into the trailer and Lalee was incredibly upset. She's talking to her daughter. And so Al [Maysles] and I just started filming because we could see that something had happened, something very emotional was

going on. As I started to understand—a neighbor had come to tell her that Eddie Reed had been taken back to jail—I knew that I didn't have a beginning to the scene. I had to get a beginning, but I didn't want to just ask Lalee, "What's going on?" I don't like to do that, to cut to an interview to explain what's going on in this beautiful emotional scene, and we're not going to be using narration, so I have to figure out how to nudge Lalee to give me an opening line.

That's, to me, a real skill that you develop after you've shot a lot of vérité and you know what you need to bring back to the editing room for the editor to be able to craft a scene together to tell a story. Lalee didn't know what Eddie Reed had been taken to jail for. So what I did is, I asked Jeanette, Lalee's daughter, "Why don't you call the police, to find out?" As soon as I said that, Lalee said to Jeanette, "Why don't you call the police?" That allowed Jeanette to talk with them and then tell Lalee [as we were filming] what had happened. So that we did have a beginning to the story.

So you're working on several levels—as the technician recording sound, the producer worrying about Lalee, and the storyteller watching for a scene's beginning, middle, and end.

Completely. I feel like that's something I learned very much from being able to watch David Maysles work. When David and Al were shooting *Grey Gardens*, there was no one in the house but the two of them. But I worked on the editing, and so I saw how David talked to the subjects, and I'd seen it on other projects, too, where David would get certain information out of a subject. And so I know you have to do that. You're like a psychiatrist, you say things like, "How did that make you feel?" When Lalee was telling about the death of her son George, that was a situation where she was so emotional, it was very hard not to intervene and comfort her. But being sympathetic and hardly saying anything keeps the scene going to where you feel like you have an ending. And to me the ending was where she said, "You want to love your children but don't love them too hard," which is a really amazing line.

What other storytelling issues do you face?

I'm always trying to figure out how to tell the backstory. Often over the course of shooting I'll just throw out a question: "What about your mother?" or "What about Redman?" Especially if there's

someone else around and some comment about the past goes into a discussion about the present. You throw out a thought and let the subjects bounce that around and see where it goes. That's how the "school or jail" scene started, with me just chitchatting. Lalee talks about how she started caring for Redman, and then she says, to Redman, "You know, you're gonna have to go to school or you've got to go to jail." And Redman says, "I want to go jail." And so the scene offers a way to explore one of the film's themes; that these little boys are being programmed to jail.

I don't think it pays off to try to manipulate in *vérité*; it doesn't ring true. We would never ask anyone to do anything other than, for instance, I noticed that Lalee didn't have any water. She was always pouring water out of a Clorox bottle to wash her dishes and things like that. She'd go to the jail and get it out of a hose that was attached to the building. And so one trip when we were down there, not much was going on, I said, "Well, are you going to go get water today?" Because I knew I wanted to get that scene of them hauling water. But that's something Lalee's family does all the time anyway.

How much footage did you end up shooting?

I think the ratio was 70:1 [70 hours for each hour of the final edited film]. But that's 16mm. I think *Grey Gardens* was about the same. *Grey Gardens* was shot over six intensive weeks and I think it was about 36 to 40 shoot days. *Lalee's Kin* was about 42 shoot days.

It's funny, because when we were at Sundance with *Lalee's Kin* [Al Maysles won the 2001 Excellence in Cinematography Award for the film], there were other filmmakers who would tell me they had 400 hours or 300 hours or something. You should be making choices. That's what filmmaking is all about, making choices in the field. What a handicap going into the editing room with that much material. Because to me you really have to explore your footage.

Tell me about editing Lalee's Kin.

We started editing about a year and a half into the shooting. Our approach to editing is that you screen everything and then you make selects. These films are not easy to structure. We screen all the footage, and then we talk about what we think is strong. The content dictates the form, the way we approach it. What

you originally think might be the story, you realize you might have a much stronger story but it's going to be harder to craft. And so there's a lot of experimentation and restructuring and recutting.

Do you use an act structure?

We often call it Act One, Act Two, Act Three. We'll say, when we're screening, "This is Act One information"—it's setting up the situation. We don't yet know where it's going to appear in Act One, but we put it in that section. And then Act Two and Act Three.

Act Two is always the hardest in vérité, it's the hardest part of the film not to sag. You've got to get a few of your feisty scenes into Act Two. Reggie with the pep rally, where you see Reggie's passion, really held up the middle of the film and kept the story going, which is so important. In vérité you don't often have a lot of scenes that tell the story, you have to be very careful how you place them.

Were you still shooting when you started editing?

Ideally, it's better to start editing once you have shot. We usually try to cut the end of the film, the climax, so we know what we're building to. We want to have some kind of a dramatic arc, whether it's a story line arc or an emotional arc of some sort. Some realization that the character has, or some understanding about life, something like that. But with *Lalee's Kin* we hadn't finished shooting, so we just started cutting scenes. Let's say that there are 10 moments, or maybe 20, that we think really could make great scenes, so we cut those together. And then we do a very rough assembly, like four hours long. And you see how the scenes play against each other.

At this point, a scene could go in many different directions. Sometimes you have two or three points in a scene; often you try to assign a value to the scene. For example, "This scene is going to tell Lalee's backstory, her family upbringing." Or, "This scene is going to explain what Reggie's dilemma is." Or, "This scene, you're going to understand Granny's despair." One scene may stand for something for a two-month period, and then you completely reedit it to stand for something else.

That's why we give our editors director's credit, because they work very closely with us in structuring the film and giving the film a beginning, middle, and end. We do the selects and then the scenes, and once we cut the scenes, we start to put them in an assembly. Right away you start to see which story lines are working and which ones are weak. And you keep editing down, you keep sculpting, down and down. The hardest part for us has always been the opening. Trying to set the scene and introduce a lot of characters.

In general, direct cinema expects viewers to work a bit to follow a story, to figure out the players and themes.

Charlotte Zwerin—a phenomenal filmmaker to have learned from—said to me early on, “I don't see what's wrong with making people work a few minutes in the beginning of a film.” And I think we all feel that way. I think it's different when you're cutting just for television. In a theater, no one's going to get up and leave; they've committed two hours or 90 minutes, part of their day, to going through this experience and they're ready to sink into a story. Television's a lot different; you'd better grab them right away. It's a different way that you start to edit.

How do you keep track of the material as you're editing?

I think most filmmakers use three-by-five cards. You write the topic of the scene and one or two points of what the scene's going to accomplish, and you have a bulletin board and keep rearranging these cards. About 10 years ago, [editor] Deborah Dickson and I started taking notes and putting them into the computer. It's much easier to look at your structure on paper and quickly see, for example, I've got a lot of Lalee, good Reggie, now I've got to weave in the kids. You can see what you're missing.

What kind of editing schedule do you follow?

We edited *Lalee's Kin* in a little less than two years. *Grey Gardens* took two and a half years; it took a whole year just to figure out what you had in the footage and what story line you were going to go for. Nothing happens in that house in *Grey Gardens*. So how do you structure a film about it? It took a long time to figure out that there was a balance of power between Little and Big Edie.

Vérité is a time-consuming process.

I think you get a much richer, more layered, more complex film in the end. You have to see where your subject is taking you. You've got a kernel of an idea and an intuitive feeling that this is going to lead you somewhere really interesting, but you have to have nerves of steel while you're making it. A lot of stuff doesn't happen the way you thought it was going to happen or in a timely manner. This is where the faith and the experience of making these films comes in, where you just know that life is going to reward you in some way. Sometimes you can get really lucky with a subject, like *Gimme Shelter*. The Maysles got an assignment to film a Rolling Stones concert at Madison Square Garden, one concert. And then they asked the Stones if they could, on their—the Maysles'—own money, follow them on tour, and then the Altamont concert happened.

In *Lalee's Kin*, when the school district got off probation, Reggie's story, you could have stopped the film there. But Lalee's story . . . We thought one of the most revealing moments was when Lalee said, "I don't know much about love." It's really an amazing thing to hear a woman say; she's never really experienced romantic love. But you realize that she does love her children very much. She doesn't show it so much, but deep down she loves these children, and she especially loves her son. You see her devastation when her son is going to go to the penitentiary, probably for life. And that's when Lalee breaks down. But then she raises up again and it's her "keep on keeping on." When Al and I walked out of the trailer after we'd filmed that, we looked at each other and said, "We have an ending." And Deborah Dickson felt the same way.

Let's move on to Recording The Producers, which you filmed as Broadway stars Nathan Lane, Matthew Broderick, and, of course, Mel Brooks made the cast album for The Producers. How was that film to make?

That was all about gaining the trust of these celebrities. They have to do this very difficult recording of a cast album in one day, because of the union rules, and here's this film crew that I think everybody thought, "This is going to really prevent us from getting it done." Mel Brooks was very skeptical at first. He even said to me, "I hate cinéma vérité."

But Nathan Lane was a big fan of D. A. Pennebaker's film, *The Company*, and so Nathan right away was very willing to wear a

mic, and then Matthew Broderick came right on board. And what surprised us—and that’s what’s great about doing this because you never know what you’re going to get, it’s always a sense of discovery that’s so exciting—is that they were very close, and big fans of each other, and they were very funny together. Nathan kind of interviewed Matthew, and Matthew played the role of Marlon Brando, and it’s just this wonderful kind of *vérité* moment that you would never have anticipated. Talk about holding up the middle! It gives you a whole new insight into who these men are and how clever and bright and fast on their feet they are, in terms of humor.

Mel didn’t want to be miked, but he was sitting next to [director/choreographer] Susan Stroman and she was miked, and so I could hear him. And as he could see that we weren’t interfering, he said, “Look at this film crew, they have so much patience.” We started at seven in the morning. I would say by two in the afternoon, he started to relax with us being there. There was a lot of chitchat going on, it was an off moment, they weren’t recording, so I just threw out, “Mel, I’m curious, was there really a Max Bialystock?” And Mel just lit up and told us this great story. I mean he’s a showman, obviously, and it was a wonderful story, and we all laughed, and then he came up to me afterwards and said, “You know, I think this is going to be okay.” And I said, “But you know Mel, we are going to need an interview.” And he said, “Oh, I don’t know.”

It wasn’t until seven at night that he agreed to be interviewed, and then he basically did a stand-up monologue. As soon as I got that I said, “I’ve got a film, and I’ve got a great film.” And afterwards, he was willing to sit and talk to us, and it was very heartfelt, and we got another layer that way. And then it was just a joy in the editing room; we edited that film quickly. It was wonderful material.

What kind of gear and crew did you need?

When you only have one day to shoot, there’s a lot of pressure on you as the director to make sure you’re getting everything. We could have used four cameras, but we only had the budget for three—two in the recording studio and one in the control room. I used the most experienced *vérité* cameramen, I think, in existence: Bob Richman, who grew out of Maysles; Don Lenzer, who’s done

years of work with us; and Tom Hurwitz. You had to go in with people who are also filmmakers in their own right, because you couldn't be everywhere at once and there was almost no way to have a communication system because it would interfere with the recording process.

How has your work been affected by the emergence of digital video?

It's been hard for me to get used to the rhythm of shooting in video. I grew up in 16 mm. I like the fact that you have to change film [magazines] every 10.5 minutes because it makes you really think about what you're shooting and what you're getting and what you need to get. A half an hour [a video cassette length] goes fast—when you're shooting it's all very intense—and then I think, why did I keep shooting?

In terms of editing, it has made a tremendous difference. With *Lalee's Kin* [which was shot on film and edited on video], we did selects and digitized selects. I don't really understand how we ever edited without the Avid, to some degree, even though I miss being able just to get on a Steenbeck and look at footage—not selects, dailies. But all the different versions you do in the [nonlinear] editing room, I mean, you can work it out so much quicker.

Still, you've got to have time to think about what's really the best story to tell with your footage. Any team in the editing room is going to tell a different story. You could have cut *Lalee* in a variety of ways. You could have cut *Grey Gardens* differently as well. You've got to think about what you're doing, and you need time to process the material. To me, that's never going to change. Telling a story is telling a story, and it's not always easy—especially in *vérité*—to see what structure is going to be best; there's a lot of working with material that's required. I've been in editing rooms where the editor gets a call from a cable station, "We're hoping you're available, we've got one month to make this hour-long film." And we're always just stunned. The truth is that *Lalee's Kin*, whether you're shooting in video or film, was going to be big budget. You needed the time in the editing room. You needed to pay a good editor. You needed to be going on many trips into the Delta to shoot. Those are expensive. And you can't run a film company on these tiny video budgets, either.

Update: Your first film at Maysles, Grey Gardens, has been adapted for the stage and is now a hit musical on Broadway. What do you think accounts for its success?

I think it's a situation of finding characters that many people can relate to. Little Edie's yearning to leave Grey Gardens and her inability to leave Grey Gardens is something a lot of people connect with. And it's a very powerful story between a mother and a daughter. I think that's why it's adapted so well—it's a great story.