Documentary Storytelling

Making Stronger and More Dramatic Nonfiction Films

Second Edition

Sheila Curran Bernard

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Kenn Rabin

An archivist, filmmaker, and writer, Kenn Rabin is one of the nation's leading authorities on audiovisual research and the use of stock footage and sound. His credits include the series *Vietnam: A Television History*, which involved more than 90 archives from a dozen countries; *Eyes on the Prize*, for which he received an Emmy nomination; *500 Nations*, by Kevin Costner; and Barry Levinson's *Yesterday's Tomorrows*, on which he served as writer and associate producer. More recently, he served as the archival scene researcher for the dramatic features *Good Night, and Good Luck* and *The Good German*. We spoke in 2003 and 2006.

As someone who's a storyteller and an archival film expert, what do you see as the strengths of using archival material to tell documentary stories?

I think that we've become more and more a visual society, and our storytelling relies so much on wanting to see what people are talking about. If we see it, we believe it's true, which is a tricky trap to get into, especially in this digital world. But we're raised on visual images, so we tend to think that that's the only way that stories can be told, and it's funny how you start crying out for those moving images if you don't have them.

What people don't realize is that moving images contain embedded in them certain types of information that is different than information in printed material. It's not a strength or a weakness, it's just different. To give you an example, I know of an archivist who's got a local news collection, and she's adamant about not throwing away stories on local fires, that kind of thing,

because it shows what a fire truck looked like in 1950, how the firemen dressed. And she's got a point, that there's all this social information that's encoded in those visual images.

If you're telling a story with archival material, at what point should you start finding that material?

There's an interesting chicken or egg thing that the producer faces when dealing with the kind of crosstalk that you get between archival footage and the interview process. Very often the interview subjects will suggest where to look for archival material or what to look for. Examples: "I was there with my friend and he had a movie camera", or, "I remember NBC News was there." And what you find in the archival footage will sometimes suggest, "Oh, here's a lot of coverage of a particular event, let's expand on that." Or you'll see someone in archival footage and say, "I wonder if we can find that guy, is he still around, can we interview him?" That's the kind of crosstalk you get when you really do your homework. You've got some of your team going after the archival and part of your team doing preinterviews and shooting interviews. That kind of ideal way of doing it often implies the need for a higher budget and particularly more lead time in preproduction and more time in the edit room. There's no time to do that when you're doing one of these short-form, assembly-line things that has to be done in six or eight weeks for a miniscule budget.

With schedules and budgets that tight nowadays, are producers taking shortcuts with archival research?

Generally speaking, most filmmakers I am contacted by don't understand that the way you make a stock footage documentary is that you go to the original creators of the archival footage (the networks, newsreel houses, collectors, filmmakers) and hunt around for it, see what they shot, look through cards, look through computer printouts, screen material, order it up, and bring it all into the edit room. Their understanding of the process of making a compilation documentary is that your research consists of finding all the other documentaries that have been made on the subject, getting copies of them on tape, screening them, identifying the shots that you want, and then lifting them, or at best trying to get the producers of those films to tell you where they got the shots. Or contacting someone like me to try to find those shots, somehow,

by just looking at them and intuiting where they originally came from—usually about a week before the show has to be delivered.

There also seems to be a change in how archival material is used, especially in lower-budget films.

Because of the quickness and cheapness with which documentaries are now being produced, people use what's called "wallpaper," which is generic images that stand in for narrative points that are being made. So when you say, "the city of Saigon," you can show an image that may be the city of Saigon, but it may not be the time period you're talking about, or it may be a city that looks like Saigon that you kind of get away with. It's really just an image that you're putting up on the screen to occupy the viewer's eyes for the three or four or five seconds during which the narrator is finishing their sentence. Sometimes people wallpaper with the correct image, and sometimes they wallpaper with the wrong image. It's not very good storytelling however you do it, because it's not organic. It's "pegs and holes" filmmaking; in other words, it's trying to fit a peg into a hole, rather than letting the process unfold organically in the editing room.

What about either slowing down or speeding up archival material?

This is something that's routinely done today. Changing the speed of archival footage, particularly slowing it down, will subtly or not so subtly change the emotional flavor of a piece of archival footage. It will make something seem more heroic, more sorrowful, more gruesome, depending obviously on what the content is. And that's something that people don't think much about when they think about whether they're using archival footage honestly. They don't think it's a cheat.

Is your bottom line that you just don't manipulate archival material, period?

Well, that used to be my bottom line. I would say something a little different now, a little more complicated than that. My bottom line now is, there are a lot of different kinds of nonfiction projects you can do. If you are doing the standard historical documentary and you are setting up that type of storytelling vocabulary, and that's the expectation you want your audience to have of you, then yes,

you follow these journalistic rules and you use your footage with complete integrity. If you're doing another type of documentary, then you create it in a way where you are setting those rules up for your audience, and your audience understands that you're going to be playing a little different game.

I'm excited by the idea that filmmakers are finding new and different ways of using archival that set new rules that break the old rules. I like the fact that some people are using archival to make very personal documentaries; other people are using it to make what once upon a time was called video art. The only rule is that you've got to tell your audience what your rules are. I really like Jay Rosenblatt's work; you watch one of his films and you know he's trying to do something that's emotional and visceral and is not some representation of historical accuracy. It's something else; it's an art piece.

We often see early film footage—Charlie Chaplin, the Keystone Cops—played very quickly. Why is that?

Turn-of-the-century footage was, at the dawn of the technology, mostly shot at about 14 frames per second, approximately. If you screen *The Birth of a Nation* [D. W. Griffith, 1915] correctly, you're screening it at about 14 or 15 frames per second. And then as you go through about 1916 to 1918, it starts to standardize on 18 frames per second, which really is what the standard was for silent film through the 1920s, and then you get to sound film, which is 24 frames per second. Of course things varied; before there were electric motors, the cameramen were hand cranking the cameras. Even as they filmed one shot, their hand motions might change slightly. So it's an inexact science, but if you present early motion picture that was filmed 1917–18 through 1928–29 at 18 frames per second, then the motion will look normal to you, and it will look like what it looked like to the people who watched it at that time.

I worked with the original copyright frames of Griffith's film *Intolerance*, when I did some work for the American Film Institute. These were the frames of the film that were submitted for copyrighting in 1916. One frame of each shot of the film was stapled to a card and submitted to the Library of Congress, and we could see how the shots were tinted and toned. [The film-makers] had people hand painting each frame of the film; for

the Babylon sequence they would have someone paint the king's throne with gilt. These things were stunningly beautiful. They're not the scratchy, dark, black-and-white, running-too-fast things we usually see; they're tremendous works of art.

Have the visual archives for the 20th century been kind of picked over, or are there still surprises to be found?

The archives have been picked over fairly well for the subjects that everyone has done, that's true. But having said that, there's still the rest of each shot, and there's still, how do you use the shots and how do you put them together and how do you put together all the different elements that you have, and why do you pick the subject that you pick? I mean you have to go back a step and say, "Why do you want to make another documentary about the Kennedys? Do you have something new to say? Does the world need another documentary about that?" People should ask themselves, "Why am I picking the subject I'm picking?" But the other thing is, they've not only been picked over, they've been conglomerated and overly computer-cataloged, because they've been retrieved so often. The same keywords pull up the same footage again and again. Creativity is being taken out of the search process.

An example of that: When we were doing *Vietnam: A Television History*, we got down to the last episode, about the fall of Saigon. I was at Sherman Grinberg, which held the ABC News footage at the time, and I was looking for all the footage I could find on the evacuation of the American embassy. I pulled everything I could find in the computer, and then I started putting in some other words like *Saigon, embassy*. And then I started putting in phrases like *embassy roof*, that would not necessarily have been put in if, like today, you're no longer at the archive but telling some sales rep at the archive what you're looking for.

You can't go to the archive?

It depends on the archive, but less and less can you go to the archives. As collections get bought up by these conglomerates, they have their people who are paid little and who turn over every six months, who sit at computer terminals and do these searches for you. So you tell them what you want, and they punch in the most obvious keywords. And then they pull that stuff, they put it

on a VHS cassette, and they send it to you. And that's your film research.

Are you allowed to suggest unusual keywords?

You can if you can think of them, although you don't know how their computer systems work. One of the things about film research is that you pull some reels, you look at some stuff, and then you think of other things you want to pull. You also put in date ranges and personalities and things like that. And so I was looking for everything on the fall of Saigon and closing down the American embassy, and because I put in some unusual keywords, I came up with this one fairly large reel of film. I put up the picture on the flatbed and started watching it, and it looked like chaos at the embassy. People trying to climb over the fence to get into the embassy, people trying to grab onto the bottom of the helicopter as it's trying to take off from the roof, and all this. And I'm watching it and all of a sudden from chaos everything stops, and everybody becomes calm and walks away and sits down at tables, and then there are random shots. And I'm thinking, what's going on here? To make a long story short, I discover that what I'm looking at is footage not of the embassy in Saigon but of Thailand, where Michael Cimino is shooting *The Deer Hunter* and recreating the fall of Saigon. And he had yelled, "Cut," so all these actors had stopped recreating the fall of Saigon and had gone back to a cup of coffee from the craft services table. It was the eeriest thing.

The previous episode of the *Vietnam* series was ending with the fall of Saigon, and we were going to pick up there at the beginning of the last episode and go on to talk about the legacies of the war. And we thought, this is amazing, we'll start the last episode with this thing, which is a recreation of this event that we'd seen the real footage of at the end of the previous episode. And I never would have found it if I'd had to phone in, you know, "Give me what you've got on the fall of Saigon."

Is it possible to make an archival film on a low budget?

It's possible, but it has to be something for which the archival materials are relatively inexpensive and accessible, and are not owned by heavily commercial third-party sources or bound by increasingly strange legal encumbrances. There are now all kinds of rules and laws regarding likenesses of famous people, which get

you into all kinds of financial trouble. I worked on a film recently that wanted to use a clip from something that normally would be in the public domain by many years. But because an actor appearing in it had their likeness trademarked, the use of that clip was going to be prohibitively expensive or not even available.

I would like to see the government step in and be heroic—issue exemptions to the copyright laws that allow nonfiction filmmakers working on primarily educational projects to be less encumbered by various restrictions—but I don't see it happening. Congress is moving in the opposite direction, favoring corporations maintaining control over their copyrights for longer and longer periods, which is not the original intention of the law.

What should storytellers know, and how should they compensate for, the various biases that are inevitable in archival or third-party material?

Producers should know about the material they're using—where it comes from, what the history of that company is—at least enough to know what the bias might have been. The more you know your subject, the more you're going to know how things might have been manipulated.

As an obvious example, if your subject is the Stalinist era in the Soviet Union, you're going to know that the materials produced out of that environment were manipulated in certain ways and showed certain sides of issues and not other sides. As a producer, you can include that as an actual subject. You can do a section on the use of propaganda in the Stalinist era; you can show photographs that have been doctored, before and after. You can show film footage that was released in the Soviet Union and then show footage of the same event as it was released in another part of the world.

It's really your responsibility to educate yourself about these kinds of things knowing, for example, the history of the newsreels. A lot of documentary filmmakers rely on newsreel footage if they're dealing with the early or mid part of the 20th century. Newsreels ran from about 1910 through the late 1960s in various countries. They were manipulated in lots of different ways, and of course narrations of the newsreels were heavily propagandized and newsreels were often restaged. One of the great newsreel moments in my research was when I was at the National Archives looking at some *March of Time* newsreels, produced by Time/Life.

I found outtakes from the story on Kristallnacht, the night when the Nazis raided all the Jewish shops. Actors dressed as SS storm troopers were sitting around a studio smoking cigarettes while prop people brought in glass plate windows with Hebrew writing on them, that were obviously meant to be windows of Jewish shops. And they were setting up to shoot a scene that was supposed to be Kristallnacht.

Above and beyond that, anyone using audiovisual materials should understand in general that these materials have a point of view. Things are edited. What is in the frame and what isn't in the frame, what shots are and aren't being used. Whenever you inherit audiovisual materials, you are inheriting something that's been edited in a variety of ways. That's a basic fact that anyone working in media needs to understand.

Another issue we noticed during the making of Eyes on the Prize *was that the quality of archival news coverage changed fairly dramatically between the 1960s and 1980s, and beyond.*

There are two different types of changes here, the changes in nightly news and the changes in network news documentaries. The 1960s were also the glory days of such long-form documentary series as *CBS Reports* and *NBC White Papers*. These were researched and shot over months and then presented as periodic specials, these incredibly in-depth stories where reporters followed people around for long periods of time. They're a great source of archival footage, and that kind of source doesn't exist anymore. In the 1980s and '90s, you have basically leading up to a sound bite. It's almost like the newsreels, which are often frustrating to use because you've got these short shots that you can barely edit into a sequence—one minute on each story.

I think that one of the things that begins to happen as you get good committed documentarians in the 1990s and beyond is that they start covering their own stories.

And this work, in turn, becomes an alternative to archival news material for the next generation of filmmakers.

Yes, and that footage will be wonderful, intimate footage that is not like anything the networks would have shot. People have been making their own films all along, but I think that now, more people are making their own films about contemporary subjects.

Good Night, and Good Luck is a dramatic feature, but the film includes a lot of stock footage and sound, and in addition David Strathairn, as Edward R. Murrow, recreates Murrow's actual broadcasts for CBS. How much archival material is in the film?

We bought about 21 to 22 minutes just from CBS. When you add in what we got from NBC and other sources, it would have to total more like 25 or 27 minutes. There's a lot of archival going on at the same time as a lot of nonarchival. There are scenes, for example, when Murrow is waiting to speak to William Paley and he's in Paley's outer office with his secretary. There's a little monitor near where she sits, and she's watching a 1953 soap opera. When Don Hollenback commits suicide, he's watching an episode of *The Beulah Show* from 1953, 1954. There's a lot of archival that the average viewer will barely notice; there are some prime-time shows playing on monitors in the control room, and there are even little things that are archival, like the CBS cloud logo. That was actually a major feat of clearance, all that CBS branding.

It's interesting the way documentary and dramatic forms blend in the film.

One of the most exciting things for me was that George Clooney created this film as a labor of love. It was, essentially, a documentary story from 50 years ago. It was pretty much all talk, in black and white, made for $7.5 million. And he thought, as did everybody involved, "All right, this will play for a week or two in 400 houses, and it'll do well at the film festivals, hopefully." And it played for months, and we were all happy and thought that maybe this would contradict the studios' notion that if you're going to do a film in black and white, they've got to cut your budget by two-thirds—it'll go straight to DVD and the sales will be abysmal, so they've got to underfinance the film.

And instead it was nominated for an Academy Award. Tell me about the other Section Eight film you've been working on, The Good German, *which also involves a lot of archival imagery.*

The Good German is an adaptation of a novel by Joseph Kanon. It's not a docudrama, it's not a documentary, but it is a historical piece. It's about an American journalist, played by George Clooney, who goes back to Berlin at the end of WWII, right when the Potsdam

Conference is happening. He gets involved in an intrigue having to do with a very young American soldier who's over there, played by Toby McGuire, and his own former secretary, played by Cate Blanchett. It takes place in divided Berlin, when Berlin's in four sectors: American, Soviet, French, and British.

The original plan for the film was that every shot would be digitally placed over archival footage. So that literally, the film would be "shot" in 1945 Berlin; the actors would be green-screened over archival. There was a scene in a butcher shop, for example, and I had to find every camera angle we needed in a butcher shop in 1945 Berlin. If there was a scene outdoors, a destroyed park or a zoo, I had to find those camera angles. There was interplay between the writing, directing, and archival research—what I could find that was in Paul Attanasio's script, and whatever else I found in my research that might work or that piqued Paul's interest, or [director] Steven Soderbergh's.

Basically it was going to be done so that it looked like a 1940s Warner Brothers film, like *Casablanca* or Hitchcock's *Notorious*, where a lot of full exterior scenes were done with process projection. But because of budget constraints, because of the decision to work in black and white, we had to not do that. We ended up just doing it for some exteriors and for what traditionally you use process projection for—images out of car windows and tram windows and things like that—and in certain selected scenes and cutaways. The rest of it was created, but because I'd spent almost three years finding them millions of feet of archival footage, they used it as reference. They literally built destroyed Berlin on a back lot at Universal, based on the archival footage. And costumed all the extras, who were playing the Berliners, based on the archival footage and on stills that I got from the Imperial War Museum. A colleague of mine in the art department, Joanna Bush, created an amazing database of all the footage I'd collected. It was organized based on the geography of Berlin. So that on Steven's computer, he could click on a map of Berlin and it would find all the archival footage that I had gotten on a particular plaza or a particular street or a particular location, and pull up all that archival footage and all the stills. Steven could know where he was situated in Berlin, and the art department could recreate a particular *strasse*. We'd know the ruins and we'd know how much that area was bombed out and all that.

I got footage from various places; Germany, Moscow, London, Paris. The most useful turned out to be at the National Archives and the Library of Congress here in the U.S., because that material was vast; it had been shot by Signal Corps camera units headed up by George Stevens and William Wyler. A lot of it we got into a digital form, and then it was linked to this database.

Can you give me an international perspective on your archival work?

Hmm, how to answer that . . . I'm increasingly working internationally, but much more recently. Although I began my career doing this work on a much more international level.

Because of the Vietnam *series?*

Because of *Vietnam*, yes. At *Vietnam* we accessed something like 90 archives. I forget how many different countries, but it was a lot. Asian countries and middle European countries; we got footage from Poland and from Austria, we got footage from a lot of different places. And then after that I did some projects at WGBH [the PBS station in Boston] that involved Central and South America. In fact, we did a show on Cuba at WGBH and got some stuff out of the ICAIC [Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos] collection at Cuba. In the intervening years that's become harder and harder to do, and now there's a major push by FOCAL [the Federation of Commercial Audiovisual Libraries International]— and particularly by Lord Putnam—to rescue the ICAIC material. It's disintegrating rapidly and there's very limited access to it.

Is there communication, internationally, between archives?

There's an attempt by archives to coordinate, on an international level, more than I've ever known them to before, through organizations like FIAT, and FIAF, AMIA, and FOCAL [see the Sources and Notes section in Part V for details]. There is a sense that archives are becoming multinational corporations. So if you get on the website of Gaumont Pathé, it's now multilingual and they're prepared to handle you if you're making a request from the U.S. or France or the U.K., and that's true of a lot of, archives. It's not true of some archives from smaller countries, but certainly archives in the major countries in Europe are getting more business from other countries. It's a good thing in terms of access; it's a bad thing in

terms of the fact that more and more of these archives are behaving the way large multinational corporations are behaving. They're setting their prices high and making accessibility for the little guy a lot more difficult.

They're consolidating, too, aren't they, with the bigger archives buying up the smaller ones, even across international borders?

They're gobbling up archives like nobody's business. The BBC, as an example, now represents NHK in the U.S., they represent the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, they represent CBS, they represent Nugus Martin, which is an archive that includes a lot of presumably public domain material as well as other material from the earliest years of the 20th century through World War II. And various other collections.

On one level, these large archives can be seen as stewards, can't they? Conserving and cataloging materials. And then perhaps on another, they're exploiting it commercially, which is where many documentary filmmakers get stuck.

On one level they're stewards, they're one-stop shopping, they're digitizing the material, putting a lot of information on their website so you can search and find things easier. On some other levels, there are problems. The lowest priority is the stuff that you need for your documentary. What's getting up on the website are the sound-bitey things, the little visual things, the quick and easy clips for your corporate presentation or TV commercial. It's not anything with any context, where someone can build a sequence in a documentary.

What will it take to keep documentary filmmakers and their work in the equation?

I think that money's going to talk. At this point, and increasingly, archives are charging more and more money. And they're organizing their pricing structure on this model that, a few short years ago, only the archives that provided beauty shots used to charge. By the shot, 10-second minimum: "Okay, that's going to cost you $2500 for a minimum 10-second shot of sunrise over the Statue of Liberty." Because their clients were TV commercials. Now, more and more archives want to do it that way, which is absolutely

impossible for documentary filmmakers. Some archives will say, "Yes, if you're a documentary, if you're non-profit, we won't do it by the shot, and there'll be a 30-second minimum." But I can feel that changing. And so part of the conversation is "Well, these clients that you need to create accessibility for, build this part of your website for—and it's going to be a lot of work, because some of what they need isn't even digitized or indexed—these clients are not going to be able to pay $150 a second for licensing."

But of course, you need to have the license if you're going to get your documentary shown on television, or in theaters, or distributed for any kind of home or educational use.

More and more, the way filmmakers are handling it is to say, "Okay, I'm going to say, 'I'm going for film festivals and that's it.' When the time comes, if I get distribution, I'll buy whatever [rights] I need for that distribution. I'd like to go theatrical, I'd like to buy out a theatrical package, but there's no way I'm going to be able to afford $95 to $150 a second right out of the gate."

To be fair for a minute, the expenses that archives face, in terms of restoration and cataloging and vaulting and all that, continue to rise. They do. And you have to remember that as time goes on, what these people have to store increases. The amount of material that's being shot increases. And all of their expenses increase. And so they face huge expenses, including personnel, everything. So I can always argue that side of it. It's no cliché: Some of my best friends run these archives.

But somehow, they have to meet in the middle. I would like to think there's a way that the more expensive clients can help subsidize the documentary filmmakers. If these archives are so geared up for corporate clients, they must have a lot of them. Can that help subsidize the documentary filmmakers? And in fact, some archives will tell you that that's exactly what happens, and that otherwise they would be charging more than they even are.

I think that documentary filmmakers, especially those who create films that are used in educational settings, should be more up front about where their archival material is from. So that if or when they make substitutions, audiences would have the tools they need to decide for

themselves if the substitution is valid or misrepresents the historical record.

There are pros and cons. In a way, you're giving away your proprietary information, and I think that discourages primary research by the next filmmaker who comes along. The problem, as I mentioned, is that particularly in the last 10 or 15 years—and particularly since the era of cable documentaries—we've gotten to a point where filmmakers are not given enough budget and time to actually look through archival footage themselves, thereby stumbling on things that haven't been used a million times before. Instead what they do is this kind of second-generation audiovisual research, where they call someone like me and they say, "Now where did those shots from *Eyes on the Prize* come from? We want to use them again." Thereby perpetuating the use of the same stuff, and possibly perpetuating errors. Not so much in *Eyes*, because we were very careful, but in other films where people might have used some generic shot of a B-52 to represent some other plane on some other date flying over some other city. It's not good filmmaking and it's not good documentary scholarship. That sloppiness is made a lot easier when you start putting every source of every shot out into the public like that.

And I can make an argument *for*, which is the footnoting argument. Footnotes mean that you've done your homework, you've been accurate, you're showing that you used the accurate sources. And I suppose if someone makes a film the sloppy way, then they can't footnote it as easily, except to say, "Such and such shots taken from *Eyes on the Prize*." It won't say, "Taken from ABC News, such and such date, such and such can number."

But also, for viewers who want to develop better media literacy and understand the filmmaking choices that are made, to make the archival sources more evident might help.

I think that's a good argument. But the people who want to have that conversation will go to the website; other people, maybe the majority, won't know to even have that conversation, they'll just watch the film. How do you make people aware that they need to have the conversation to begin with? And then, what would be included in the footnotes? Is it good enough to say, "ABC News, such and such date," or do you want the can number and everything in there?

Good questions. For now, any other thoughts for filmmakers who want to use archival images and sound in their work?

I think the whole issue of fair use, and what's happening now, is really important. I'd definitely send folks to the Center for Social Media "best practices" statement [*Documentary Filmmakers' Statement of Best Practices in Fair Use*, available for download at www.centerforsocialmedia.org/fairuse].