

Documentary Storytelling

Making Stronger and More Dramatic Nonfiction Films

Second Edition

Sheila Curran Bernard



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Per Saari

Los Angeles-based filmmaker Per Saari is head of development for Nicole Kidman's production company, Blossom Films, and previously worked at Robert Redford's Wildwood Enterprises. On his own, he makes documentaries. His most recent film is *The Magic Knot*, a 30-minute film about the Khumbu Climbing School, which was established to teach technical and safety skills to Sherpa climbers. I spoke with him primarily about an earlier film, *Why He Skied*, a 45-minute documentary he began shooting in 2002, a year after his older brother, Hans, died in a skiing accident near Chamonix, France. This interview was conducted in 2006.

People handle grief in so many ways. Some write poetry or essays; some compose or perform music. Why documentary?

When you go through such a personally momentous thing, you have to come up with a way to organize it in your head, just so you can rationalize it and deal with it. And for me there's nothing more analytical and ruthlessly self-critical than a documentary film, and especially a documentary film that is all about yourself. So for me it was actually a pretty logical approach to handling something as personal and intimate as grief.

How did you think of the film when you first started out?

Initially it began as a way to tell his story. My sister said she was afraid that people would forget who my brother was, and I started thinking about that and wanted to make a film about him. But I wanted to do it in a way that was helpful to me, and helpful

to the people who knew him. I approached it from the personal angle of “How is this affecting me?” and then from the angle of “What’s an approach that might make people interested in finding out about it?”

The film has an interesting structure. It begins with text on screen, describing the tragedy that occurred in Chamonix, where your brother fell. It cuts to you in Chamonix, about to climb the same mountain, to retrace his last steps. But then it cuts back to six weeks earlier, when you first set out in a car with two friends to retrace Hans’s larger journey, from the West Coast home he lived in as an infant to the East Coast where he went to college, and then on to Europe.

I read in a documentary filmmaking book that you can never go wrong with a road trip. No matter what, the physical journey always keeps people interested. And so I took that idea and put it together with a fairly convenient map of my brother’s life, which literally went from west to east across the United States and then to Europe. We followed a chronological road trip from A to Z. But I stole the idea from somebody’s book.

Along the way, you meet with people who knew Hans and ask questions not only about who he was and what he did, but also about why he did it—and whether or not he’d considered the potential cost to others.

Before I started, I asked all the people that I knew—not necessarily the people who are in the film, but people who knew my brother—questions that they had. And I pooled the questions and came up with a master list of things that I wanted to ask people. Actually, I wanted to get more into the stories of the people we were visiting, to find out what they were doing and their adventures. But that stuff wasn’t needed in the end, it was fat, and it just sort of fell away.

Leaving the questions that you ask, and also the questions the film asks.

There are two mysteries. One is, why did he ski? Why did he go that day, why did he make the decisions that he did, why did he do in general what he did? But there’s also a more formal mystery: You’re trying to piece the film together as you’re watching it, and there are different story lines going on so the audience is forced to question what they’re seeing and where they’re going, and where

their preconceptions are taking them. So that's a more sort of structural mystery. It was a way to keep people engaged in a story, just on a formal level. To try to keep this a mystery was really important, because I'm dealing with a subject that's so personal.

The film unfolds with two forward-moving stories. One is the road trip from west to east. The other is your presence at Chamonix, which is intercut with the road trip. You're there to follow your brother's last journey up a mountainside, but there's a question of whether or not you'll succeed.

That was designed initially as sort of a gimmick, because of course you're going to climb the mountain. But in the end, we were tricked; we almost didn't climb the mountain because of weather and all the things that we saw unfold in the film. So it actually was true drama unfolding.

How much did the film change as you were editing it?

I would say the film didn't change as much when we were cutting as it did when we were shooting. I didn't have the structure in my head, other than the road trip. But in the six weeks that we were shooting the film, I started imagining how I wanted to put it together: If I wanted to tell it linearly from the beginning of the road trip to the end and cut in my brother's story along the way, or if I wanted to start with the mountain climbing and go backward, as we ended up doing. That was all stuff that I had plenty of time to think about along the journey itself.

How long did it take to edit?

The editing went on forever, mainly because there was so much emotional baggage and it was really hard to get my head into the project every night. The editing took two years, if you can believe it, as opposed to the Sherpa film, which took six weeks. I think when you're dealing with something so personal, and you're really formulating and modifying a thesis statement over and over and over—and it's a really difficult thesis statement to conclude—you just keep at it.

It was also hard because the crew hadn't done this before. My best friends were the two people who went with me, and technically it was a little tricky to get stuff to fit together. There

was more footage than we needed and technically it was not where it should have been. So it took a lot to cull the footage and then to piece it together, more than if you'd had a very clear plan and an [experienced] crew.

How much did you shoot?

We shot 65 tapes, which is approximately 45 hours. Which isn't too bad, but I'll tell you, there are tapes that we just didn't even use, and there are interviews that didn't even get looked at because there's so much material. Unfortunately, we went into the project with a vacuum cleaner approach, which is never ideal. On the Sherpa film [produced later], we shot a fifth as much material and ended up using a lot of it. So I learned a lot.

What did you shoot with?

We were using a Sony PD150 digital camera. We also had a small video camera that we took with us as a way to document the documentation, because we knew it would be a pretty self-referential film. Someone actually gave me a little advice before I left: They said even if it's a \$200 camera, just take something with you that someone can always just turn on—you don't have to get it all geared up, you don't have to have sound that's great. And that little camera saved us; a lot of the really terrific stuff that we have in the film came from that camera, some of the best stuff. And I never would have guessed that that would be the case.

Can you give an example?

One thing are my reactions, that we wouldn't have had otherwise. There's a moment in the film when these wacky cousins of mine are talking about their own adventurous lifestyle, their parrot farm. But what they're saying is very interesting and, to me, the core of the film. They say, if you really look beneath the surface at what's going on in your brother's life, you'll come away with a whole new meaning—and not just a meaning about Hans's life, but a meaning about your life. And we were lucky to have footage of me reacting to what they're saying.

Also, there were spontaneous little moments along the way that we were able to catch, the texture of the trip. And I think when you're doing a road trip, a lot of it is spontaneous and you don't

have time to open the trunk and get out the camera. So the small camera was actually very helpful. In fact, the mountain climb was shot almost all with the little camera. People get so worked up about shooting on high-quality film and video that they forget that the story isn't really dependent on how grainy the image is. As long as the subject is there, that's really important. And that was something that I took away from the whole process.

I'm curious about how you cast the film, the people you chose to interview.

There were two factors for me in deciding who we wanted to include in the film. Because we were making a road trip, we were at the mercy of the map. So one was, who is geographically convenient, and who was going to be at the right place at the right time? The second factor was what people had to say. I wanted to make sure that we found people who were going to be honest and who had interesting things to say about my brother, even if they were critical. And I think we did a pretty good job of balancing those things and finding people who had honest and not always easy things to say, not only about my brother but also my parents' approach to life. That was probably the most important thing for me, was making sure that we had brutally honest people to interview.

The one person clearly missing, who appears in photographs, is Hans's girlfriend.

I spoke with her before the film to ask if she wanted to do it. And for her it was so close; it was over a year after the accident but for her it was just absolutely too difficult to go into. And in fact my parents said the same thing, but were able to compose themselves more than she would have been able to. So she was a big supporter of the film and obviously her family was, but she just decided that she didn't want to be in it.

And her grandmother speaks so eloquently for her, and for your brother.

And again there's someone who is honest and eloquent and beautiful. . . . That was probably the most difficult part to shoot, of anything, because of the personal intensity of it.

The film uses text on screen to identify places and certain other information, such as "expedition." Otherwise, the only narration is a voice-over recorded by you. When did you write and record it?

The voice-over was written way after, that was the last thing that I did. And I really struggled with it, because what it said not only bridges the pieces of the film together but is the thesis statement. The voice-over goes from what I postulate at the beginning to what I conclude at the end. It was really difficult to make it concise and to come up with a conclusion that made sense; I reworked and rerecorded it probably a hundred times.

Recording voice-over is very difficult; it's a difficult thing to pull off without seeming either like you're a newscaster or like you're just talking in an interview. There's a unique tone that you have to achieve, and it was a real struggle to accomplish that. I'm still not convinced that I did a good job.

There are a few places in the film where it looks as if you're alone, talking to a camera that you've set up.

Right. That was in France. After some really intense days, I just set up the camera and interviewed myself. Molly Stratton, who was the sound person on the film and is one of my dear friends, wrote a list of questions that she wanted me to answer. And so I had this little card with me that I referred to every once in a while, and I'd turn the camera on and basically interview myself. Which is an interesting process.

Did you show rough cuts to people to get reactions?

I did. I showed lots of versions of the film to different people, and it became much more personal as the cuts went on, because from the beginning people were noticing that I was shying away from showing myself on film. I was afraid that putting yourself in a movie was too self-involved. My friends and the people who looked at the film talked me out of that, and encouraged me to include more of myself and to focus less on the silliness of the story, pieces of the film that involved my friends and the texture of the road trip that in the end weren't nearly as important as my arc as a character. And so I ended up including a lot more of myself, as much as I could. But it's also very difficult to be honest on camera, to be yourself, to open up. And I'm not a very sort of

gushing person as it is. So if I had one more thing to include it'd be more of myself opening up.

How did you determine the final length?

The final length was determined just by the cut. It felt like it was done; it always hovered around 45, 47 minutes.

Did you raise money for the film?

The film was entirely self-funded. I didn't have a lot of time to pursue funding before the shooting window was upon us, so I had to break the piggy bank. The large percentage of my budget that was dedicated to purchasing equipment—including sound gear, I firmly believe that sound will make or break a project—I considered to be an investment toward future projects. As a result, my next film, *The Magic Knot*, cost almost nothing to shoot.

What was it like to screen the film with your sister and your parents?

It was really scary, actually. Because they didn't want to see the film before I was done with it and before we could see it in a public space. So our first screening was in Jackson Hole with about 1500 people. It was a very large screening and I was worried that the film wouldn't play well, or that people would be restless, or that my parents would be disappointed. And probably the most important thing that came out of that first screening was that people were re-engaging about my brother and talking about him and what he did, and what happened that day, and what someone who goes through that loss might be thinking. And for me that was the whole point of doing the movie.

Ironically, the person who introduced the film, Doug Coombs, an extreme skier, died soon after at almost exactly the same place that my brother died, falling in a very similar fashion. It was a cruel reminder that this is something that people who live in the mountains go through all the time, and it's something that I hope people think about.

What advice do you have for filmmakers who want to use documentary to tell personal, even painful stories, from their own lives?

That's a good question. My first thing to say is that I think it's a great idea, if that's your medium. But in addition to that I would

say, one, to be really honest with yourself and to open up your heart and let your story really come out. For me, that was one of the hardest things, was really letting your defenses down and exposing yourself on camera. The second thing I would say is that it's really easy to be seduced by your own story. It's important to keep a cinematic perspective on it, and to know that maybe nobody will ever see the film. Go ahead anyway, just realize that you're doing this for yourself. If it has a wider audience, that's great, but you have to realize the exhibition limitations that are down the road.

Last question. You work in the rarified world of Hollywood, with big budget fictional features and big stars. To you, what's the appeal of documentaries?

The studio mentality is so careful and so market-driven, that to me, documentaries are a breath of fresh air. For the most part, the stories are small and difficult to market; they're personal and gritty—all the things that generally a studio doesn't want in their big pictures. That's not to say that there aren't documentaries that are commercial or there aren't studio films that are intimate. But the stories that you see in documentary films are so pure, and so authentic—the good ones, that is. They're done out of heart and soul. I'm always going to have one toe in the documentary realm, because it's so passion driven.