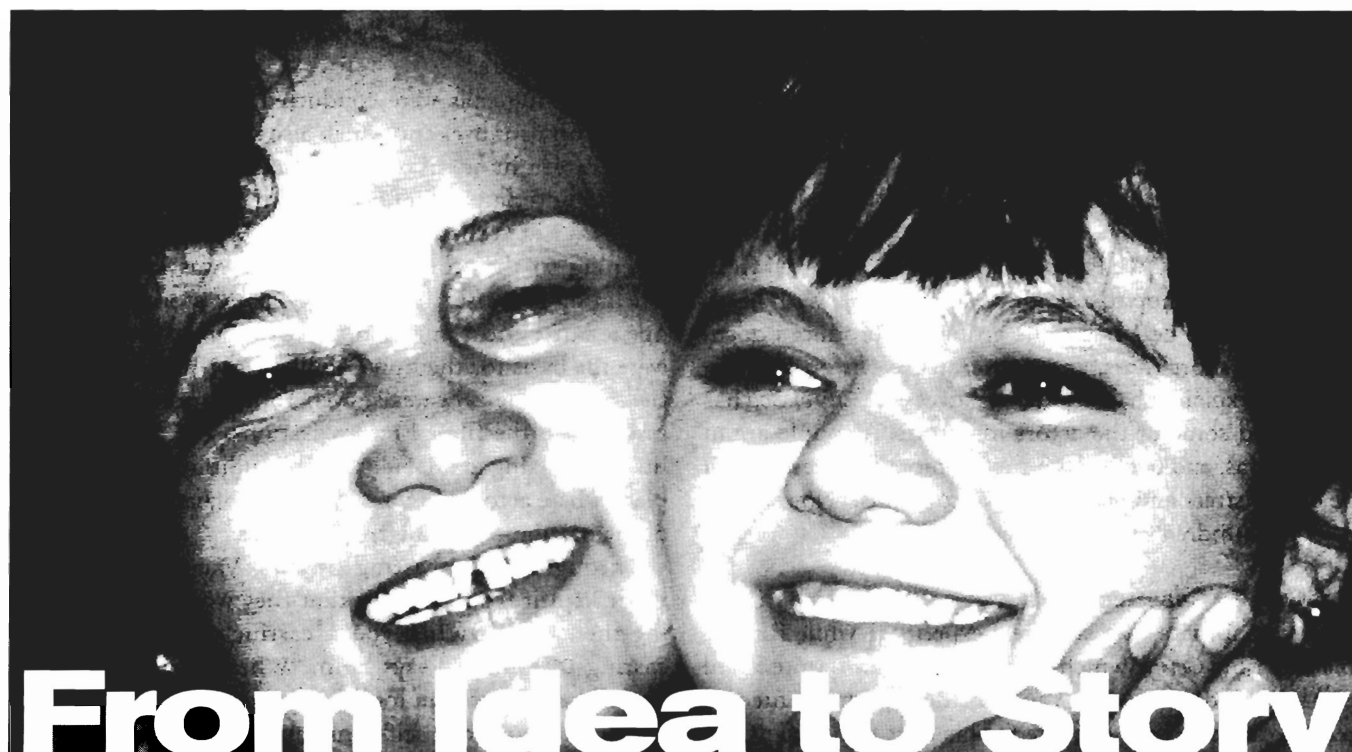

From Idea to Story

DISCOVERING A DOCUMENTARY NARRATIVE

By Sheila Curran Bernard

Suppose that you're thinking of doing a documentary film about Elvis Presley, or a diner in your home town, or images of Islam in American popular culture. Something about the topic has caught your interest, and you think you want to take it to the next level.

First, ask yourself what it is about the idea that grabs you. As the initial audience for your film, your gut reaction to the subject is important. Chances are it wasn't a sweeping notion of Elvis Presley that caught your attention, but an account, perhaps, of his time in the military. It's not the fact that there's a diner in your home town, but that rising taxes and a dwindling customer base have left the owners open to offers from developers looking to build a mall despite local opposition. You hadn't thought much about images of Islam in America until you watched a couple of newly-arrived students from Iraq and the Sudan trying to make their way through a pep rally at your son's school, and you found yourself seeing American culture—high school culture—through their eyes. By narrowing the focus, you're on the road to finding the story within a subject.

A story is the narrative, or telling, of an event or series of events, crafted in a way to interest the audience. At its most basic, a story has a beginning, middle, and end. It has compelling characters, rising tension, and conflict that reaches some sort of resolution. It engages the audience on an emotional and intellectual level, motivating viewers to want to know what happens next. Most successful documentaries, whether essays (*Bowling for Columbine*), mysteries (*The Thin Blue Line*), family dramas (*Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern*), or histories (*New York: A Documentary Film*) follow a compelling narrative throughline that serves as a framework for factual, and often complex, material.

The exact story you'll tell on screen, or how you'll tell it, might take months or even years to determine. But by evaluating a potential subject with storytelling in mind, you begin the creative process of turning an idea into a film early on, ensuring that you start out with at least a baseline framework for a film that will work.

"Finding" the Story During Production

With experienced filmmakers, this tends to mean not that a filmmaker has simply shot material without any story in mind, but that he or she alters the story's focus or, more likely, its structure, during production and postproduction. Even verité projects, which are significantly crafted in the editing

This page: Heidi Bub and her mother, Mai Thi Kim, from *Daughter from Danang*. Facing page: family photograph of filmmaker Jeanne Jordan (left) and family, from *Troublesome Creek*.

PHOTOS: THIS PAGE, COURTESY OF GAIL DOLGIN AND VICENTE FRANCO; FACING PAGE, JEANNE JORDAN

room, are generally begun with a sense of the story and its potential development. You can't know where real life will take you, but you can certainly anticipate a range of outcomes and determine whether or not the story's narrative holds sufficient promise.

Sometimes an opportunity comes along that precludes extensive planning. Filmmakers Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco had just days to decide whether or not to travel to Vietnam after they learned about an upcoming reunion between Heidi Bub and the birthmother who'd given her up during "Operation Babylift" in 1975.

At minimum, Dolgin and Franco had a basic, straightforward narrative of an adoptee returning to her homeland, although whether or not that could be turned into a documentary remained to be seen. In Vietnam, the filmmakers found themselves immersed in the complex story that would become their documentary *Daughter from Danang*.

It's also not unusual for filmmakers to begin one project, only to be drawn by the characters and situations they encounter that are both different and stronger than they anticipated. In publicity material for the film *Sound and Fury*, director Josh Aronson says that he initially intended to film five deaf individuals whose experiences covered a range of viewpoints on deafness. But in his research, he discovered the Artinians, a family in which two brothers—one hearing, one not—each had a deaf child. This created an opportunity to explore conflict within an extended family over how to raise deaf children. In another example, filmmaker Andrew Jarecki was making a film about birthday party clowns when he discovered, through one of his characters, the story that he eventually told in his documentary *Capturing the Friedmans* of a family caught up in a devastating child abuse case.

Knowing that this may happen, or is even *likely* to happen, doesn't mean that you shouldn't approach a general idea by looking first for the best story you can given the subject as you then understand it. Each approximation of your story has value, and each helps to ensure that you're working efficiently and effectively toward production.

Evaluating the Story

Beyond the conviction that a subject you're developing has an underlying narrative that will work well on film, there are some practical considerations that may be helpful to consider in deciding on a film subject or determining your approach to it. An initial topic may seem beyond the scope of your schedule and budget, for example, but there may be a smaller component within that topic that would allow you to explore many of the elements that first captured your interest.

1. Access and Feasibility

Does your film provide entree into new or interesting worlds, and can you obtain access to those worlds? Aside from exclusive or extraordinary access, any film, even one shot in your grandmother's kitchen, depends on some kind of access being granted, whether it be personal (your grandmother), location (permission to bring your equipment into her home), or archival (access to her photo album or those poems she's been writing all these years). In some cases, *lack* of access may become part of the story, as with Michael Moore's pursuit of General Motors chairman Roger Smith, in *Roger & Me*. In others, extraordinary access leads to unique films, as evidenced by news producer Alexandra Pelosi's proximity to George W. Bush as he campaigned for the presidency in *Journeys with George*, or director James Cameron's filmed journeys deep into the wrecks of the Bismarck and Titanic.

As you develop your idea, you need to determine if what you need for production is really possible. Can you get inside a cyclotron to film? Will you be allowed to follow a third-grade student during that spelling bee? Gaining access usually means establishing a relationship and building trust with the people who can grant it. It's important to respect that trust, so be truthful about yourself and your project from the start. You can generally get people to talk to you even if they know that you don't agree with their position, as long as you make it very clear that they will be given a fair hearing and that you value their point of view. (Again, there are exceptions: filmmakers such as Nick Broomfield (*Kurt & Courtney*) and Michael Moore may push the boundaries of access as a matter of style; they may show up with the cameras rolling to deliberately put their subjects on edge.)

2. Affordability

In terms of budget and schedule, is it realistic to think that you can afford to tell the story you want to tell, in the way you want to tell it? Even if digital technology can put a relatively inexpensive camera in your hands, getting your film shot, edited, and technically ready for broadcast or theatrical release will still be expensive. Don't think small, just realistically. Know that some types of documentaries are costlier to produce, and that "extras," such as the rights to use a clip of archival film or a piece of music from your favorite album, could set you back thousands of dollars.

3. Passion and Curiosity

Passion is going to be your best weapon against discouragement, boredom, frustration, and confusion. Passion is not the unwavering conviction that you are right and the whole

world must be made to agree with you. Instead, it is the commitment to the notion that this idea is exciting, relevant, and meaningful, and perhaps more importantly, that it's something you can look forward to exploring in the months or even years to come.

4. Audience

Many documentaries, whether produced independently or in-house, are created with an audience in mind. It's always possible that the film you thought would only reach your immediate geographic region will be a break-out hit, but in general, you should have some idea who you *want* it to reach: age, geographic area, educational level, etc. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't try to also reach a wider audience, but that you're likely to approach MTV's audience differently, for example, than Lifetime's or PBS's. Is your film not intended for broadcast, but for use by community or educational groups? Do you want to try to release your film theatrically, does it have the potential to be the next *Roger & Me*? These questions are worth thinking about early on.

5. Relevance

This can be a tough one. You may be passionate about fourteenth century Chinese art or the use of mushrooms in gourmet cuisine, but can you really find a compelling story that will be worth others not only funding but also watching it? It's possible to make people care about all sorts of things, but it usually takes the right approach—and a solid story.

By rising beyond its specifics, a story often gains greater relevance for a wider audience. *Daughter from Danang* has layers of story that each add relevance: the reunion of an adopted daughter and her birth mother; the cultural dissonance felt by an American woman returning to the Vietnamese homeland she barely remembers; the change that has occurred in both countries in the years since 1975; and questions about expectation and need, both emotional and material, that are made all the more difficult by barriers of language and culture.

6. Timeliness

One aspect of relevance, though not always the most important one, is timeliness. Television executives may plan documentary programming to coincide with major events, anniversaries, or even high-profile motion picture releases—anything to capitalize on public and press interest. The fact that a subject is topical, however, is not by itself a reason to pursue it, because by the time you finish it, interest in that issue may have passed.

In fact, the quality of being "evergreen," meaning the film will have a shelf life of many years as opposed to many months, can be a positive selling point. A film on whale behavior or the American electoral process in general may be evergreen, whereas a film that specifically explores a particular environmental campaign or issues in the presidential campaign of 2004 probably will not be.

7. Visualization

Is the story visual, and if not, can you make it visual? This is an important question whether you're telling a modern-day story that involves a lot of technology or bureaucracy, or you're drawn to a historical story that predates the invention of still or motion picture photography. A film subject that doesn't have obvious visuals requires additional foresight on the part of the filmmaker; you'll need to anticipate exactly *how* you plan to tell the story on film. The opposite may also be true: a subject can be inherently visual–it takes place in a spectacular location or involves state-of-the-art microscopic photography, for example—without containing within it an obvious narrative thread.

8. Hook

In its simplest form, the hook is what got you interested in the subject in the first place. It's that bit of information that reveals the essence of the story and its characters, encapsulating the drama that's about to unfold. *Sound and Fury*, for example, is the story of the little girl who wants a Cochlear implant. The hook is not that she wants this operation, nor that the implant is a major feat of medical technology. The hook is that the little girl's parents, contrary to what many in the audience might expect, don't want her to have the operation. It's the part of the story that makes people curious; they want to know more.

9. Existing Projects

It's useful, before you get too far, to explore what other films have been made on a subject and when. In part, this may simply inform your own storytelling: What worked or didn't work about what a previous filmmaker did? How will your project be different and/or add to the subject? It's not that you can't tackle a subject that's been covered. But knowing as much as you can about your subject also means knowing how else it's been treated on film.

Every new film project is a leap of faith: you begin with the germ of an idea that seems exciting and interesting, learn as much as you can about the subject, and work to find the story within it that you want to tell. Asking practical questions when evaluating an idea is a means of refining your storytelling even further, not by limiting you but by challenging you to find creative ways to use the resources you have to effectively tell your story on screen. ◘

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