

Story First: Narrative in Documentary

by Sheila Curran Bernard



Heidi & Extended Family in *Daughter from Danang*

“Film is a visual medium.” How many times have you heard this, or said it yourself? Too often in the world of documentary, people seem to think this means that filmmakers should shoot first and think about story and structure later, maybe in the editing room. Wrong. If you think about story first – characters, points of view, goals, obstacles and more – your film is likely to be stronger, your *visuals* are going to be better chosen and more effective, and you’re likely to save a significant amount of time and money. This is true no matter what style your documentary will take, from *cinéma vérité* and personal journey to archival history.

What is story? What is documentary? The late Erik Barnouw, a historian of media, described documentary as the creative *arrangement* of factual material. Factuality alone does not make something a documentary. Surveillance footage or the video record of a town meeting are not documentaries, although they *document* events and may serve an ethnographic purpose. Raw footage becomes a

documentary when someone arranges it, while adhering to underlying factuality, to create something greater than the sum of its parts. And story – narrative – is often the device that enables this arrangement.

“Narrative” is a term commonly used to describe dramatic (fictional) feature films, but it applies to any form in which an “author” relies on characters, action, theme, chronology and more to tell an involving and emotionally compelling story. Watch Ric Burns’ *The Donner Party*, as the doomed settlers are warned repeatedly to turn around, yet fail to do so. Watch *Harlan County, USA*, Barbara Kopple’s classic *cinéma vérité* portrait of a miners’ struggle. Watch Josh Aronson’s *Sound and Fury*, as two deaf parents make a decision about whether or not to grant their five-year-old’s request for a Cochlear implant. The subject matter isn’t what makes these films compelling – it’s that the filmmakers have crafted a strong narrative that *reveals* the story over the course of the film, engaging viewers in a quest to know “what happens next.”

Narrative is not the same thing as narration. The scripted voice-over of a narrator is just one way to convey story information. Shots, scenes, sequences, interviews, music, and sound effects can all play a role in advancing the story. But first, you have to know what that story is. Not the subject: the story. A story is a series of events within a subject (or topic) that has a beginning, middle, and end. For example, a biopic about the singer Cher might follow her from childhood to the present, meandering along with an “and then this happened” feel; a *story* about Cher might focus on her relationship with Sonny or a specific concert tour.

Why tell stories?

Think about watching a dull sitcom or a preachy documentary, in which information simply comes at you, washing over you. It may be mildly engaging, but your experience as a viewer is passive: you’re being talked *at*, you aren’t emotionally invested in the characters or what’s at stake, and you’re not likely to care much about the outcome. In contrast, a good mystery or gripping drama draws you in by keeping you guessing, a step ahead of the story. You feel satisfied when your hunches prove right, or

intrigued when events take an unexpected turn. You’re *actively* engaged, and the experience of viewing is more enjoyable and memorable.

With skilled storytelling, almost any subject can engage viewers in this way, from math and physics to farming and public health. There’s no single way to do this, no one structure that works for all documentaries. Some films are structured as essays, such as Judith Helfand’s *Blue Vinyl*. Others, including many of the films offered on the PBS series *Nova* and *American Experience*, are structured to the extent possible as character-driven dramas. But the goal is the same – to draw viewers in.

How do you create an active viewing experience? A few tips:

- Start with questions

The process of making a good documentary story usually begins as a hypothesis or a series of questions that are explored, refined and reshaped every step of the way from idea to screen. You generally don’t want to begin with the phrase, “I intend to set out to prove that...” or “The American public needs to be alerted to ...” If you’re making this film, you’re probably illustrating a lecture or a polemic that is likely to appeal primarily to those already familiar

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Heidi & her mother in *Daughter from Danang*



with your subject or in agreement with your point of view. One of the strengths of documentary storytelling is that it can surprise audiences into being open to new ideas and experiences, and exploring new ideas is one of the joys that make the grind of filmmaking worthwhile.

- Find a baseline narrative

Before you shoot, it's a good idea to know that you have a baseline story, with a beginning, middle and end, so that if all else fails, you have some kind of structure when you edit. Even *cinéma vérité* filmmakers – people who make “fly on the wall” observational cinema – don't usually walk out the door and start shooting. Maysles Films, for example, was commissioned by HBO to explore the subject of poverty in the United States at the end of the 20th century. Producer/director Susan Froemke and her team spent months researching the subject and exploring situations in several states before they were directed to the Mississippi Delta. There, Froemke found her subjects: Lalee Wallace, living in a government-issued trailer with a handful of grand- and great-grand-children, and Reggie Barnes, the superintendent of schools in that district, who had a clear narrative goal: To get a failing school district off academic probation by raising student test scores. By interweaving those two stories, Froemke, Deborah Dickson and Albert Maysles were able to create the Academy Award-nominated *Lalee's Kin: The*

Legacy of Cotton. The film's complexity and power were crafted in the editing room, but the producers chose their story because it had basic narrative elements, and because the characters and situation shed light on themes and issues they wanted to explore.

- Identify your “train”

Film is a linear medium – the viewer experiences it frame by frame in a sequence that moves forward in time. Real life also moves forward in time, but that doesn't mean that as the storyteller, you must *present* these events in chronological order – in fact, it's often far more dramatic to shake things up a bit. As long as the important underlying chronology remains intact, you can enter and exit the story where you like. You can start in the middle, go back to the beginning, catch up with your story and then move ahead to the end. You can start at the end before moving to the beginning to ask, “How did we get here?” You can flash forward or back. You can follow two or sometimes more narrative threads (as was the case with *Lalee's Kin*), each



with its own structure.

This choice of narrative thread, or spine, is critical. Producers Ronald Blumer and Muffie Meyer of Middlemarch Films (*Benjamin Franklin, Liberty! The American Revolution*) call the narrative spine the “train.” The train is what grips that audience and demands that they hold on to see what happens next. If you get a compelling story off the ground – a good train underway – the audience will go with you on long detours as needed for exposition or explication. If you don't have a train going, those detours will seem unfocused and, more than likely, dull. Your train will be derailed.

Here's an example: You're thinking of telling a story in chronological order about this guy named Jim Jones who becomes a Pentacostal minister in Indiana and has an interracial church and it's the 1950s and – it's not very

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interesting. But if you pick up this same story much later in time, as a Congressman goes to Guyana to rescue some Americans from what relatives fear is a dangerous cult, and the Congressman is killed while members of this cult line up to drink cyanide-spiked juice, chances are the audience will stay with you as you break away from this “train” to explore the decades of social, political, cultural, and even personal change that created Jim Jones and the tragedy of Jonestown. The drama is already there; it’s a matter of finding the strongest way to tell it.

Heidi 2nd Grade in *Daughter from Danang*



• Present information when it has maximum value

In the editing room, filmmakers often try to get all of the *exposition* (the explanatory information) out of the way up front, but because it doesn’t yet mean anything to viewers, important details are lost or their significance missed. Instead, you want to introduce characters and seed information in when it’s needed.

An example of a documentary that does this well is the Academy Award-nominated *Daughter from Danang*, which was broadcast on *American Experience*. Filmmakers Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco learned that a 27-year-old Asian-American woman was about to return to Vietnam to be reunited with the birth mother who’d given her up for

adoption 20 years earlier. At minimum, they had a reunion story, which in fact became their “train.” In reality, the trip opened up a Pandora’s box of cultural confusion, hurt, and need. The resulting film, as structured by the filmmakers and editor Kim Roberts, succeeds in large part because of the way in which key background information – about Heidi’s birth father, about the war, about Heidi’s adoptive mother – is folded into the reunion story as it plays out on screen, making the real stakes of this reunion painfully clear.

• Be honest

One of the powers of documentary stories is that not only are they compelling, they’re also *true*. Audiences trust that truthfulness; it enhances their enjoyment of the film and, in many cases, is a significant part of a project’s value. Betray that trust by cherry-picking facts (selecting only those that support an argument) or by bending or distorting the facts in service of a more “dramatic” story, and the entire enterprise loses its power. There is no such thing as artistic license in documentary, because documentaries are not solely art – they are a marriage of art and journalism, with their artfulness coming from creative arrangement, not creative invention.

This is not a discussion of *objectivity* and *subjectivity*. By definition, communication in any form is subjective, because someone is making choices about what to include, what to exclude, where to begin, where to end, what story to tell. Subjectivity is inevitable – but bias (slanting the story to shine an unwarranted light, negative or positive, on a subject) is not. To invent characters and events, to omit important evidence, or to rearrange chronology to imply a false cause and effect steers a project into the realm of fiction.

Not all documentaries need to strive for balance and authority; the rules are determined by what a film sets out to do. Erroll Morris’s Academy Award-winning *The Fog of War* is driven by the thoughts and opinions of its subject, Robert McNamara, however flawed or self-serving they may be. That Morris doesn’t go beyond that framework is a significant part of the film’s power. In contrast, producers of the PBS series *Vietnam: A Television History* set out to make an authoritative and balanced series, and are therefore held to different demands.

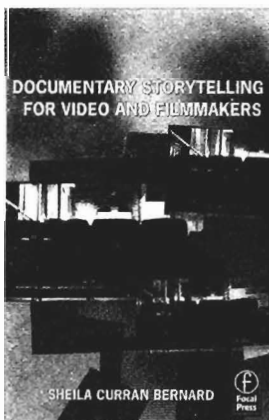
Think visually

Once you have a basic understanding of the story you want to tell, you can begin to explore visuals that best serve

that story. You could spend time and money shooting the senior prom, for example, but if your story is about the academic cost of standardized testing, how relevant would that sequence be? If your story is about a street fair, is your focus on the workers behind the scenes or the sick children visiting from a local hospital? If your baseline narrative is "a day in the life," what visuals might show the passage of time? Carefully chosen visuals can convey narrative information and reduce the need for narration and voice over.

You don't want to shoot too tightly – few documentaries end up where they began, and it's important to leave room for discovery on location and in the editing room. But starting with a story in mind can save you time and money, and better prepare you to recognize opportunity when it comes along – and shoot accordingly.

Sheila Curran Bernard is an Emmy- and Peabody Award-winning filmmaker and the author of Documentary Storytelling (Focal Press). She recently served as the Anschutz Distinguished Fellow in American Studies at Princeton University.



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