CHAPTER 1

Introduction

It's not uncommon for people, including documentary filmmakers, to differentiate the nonfiction films they enjoy (and make) from something they've stereotyped as "documentaries." Documentaries, from the reputation they seem to hold, are the films some of us had to watch during fifth-grade history or eighth-grade science. Sometimes derided as "chalk and talk," these films tended to be dry, heavily narrated, filled with facts, and painful to sit through. So ingrained is this model, it seems, that inexperienced or polemical filmmakers sometimes imitate it, creating films that are little more than illustrated lectures created to "show" or "prove" something through a steady recitation of data. Conversely, nonfiction films that *work*—that grab and hold audiences through creative, innovative storytelling—are often set apart by their makers and audiences as being somehow an exception to the form, rather than high-quality examples of it.

Like their "narrative" (fictional) counterparts, these stand-out films often emphasize character, conflict, rising stakes, a dramatic arc, and a resolution. They bring viewers on a journey, immerse them in new worlds, and explore universal themes. Done well, they compel viewers to consider and even care about topics and subjects they might previously have overlooked. And yet, unlike fictional drama, these movies are based on a single and powerful premise: they're true. The stories are based in the real, factual world.

Done well, documentary storytelling appears easy, almost inevitable. And yet the filmmakers who do it can assure you that it's hard work, a painstaking process that continues through every stage of production, from conception through editing. That process is what this book is about.

DEFINING DOCUMENTARY

Documentaries bring viewers into new worlds and experiences through the presentation of accurate, factual information about real people, places, and events, generally (but not always) portrayed through the

use of actual images and artifacts. A performing killer whale turns deadly under the conditions of captivity (*Blackfish*); children in Kolkata are given cameras and inspired to move beyond their limited circumstances (*Born into Brothels*); soldiers on the front lines in Iraq film their own stories of combat (*The War Tapes*). But factuality alone does not define documentary films; it's what the filmmaker does with those factual elements, artfully weaving them into an overall narrative that is often greater than the sum of its parts. "The documentarist has a passion for what he finds in images and sounds—which always seem to him more meaningful than anything he can invent," wrote Erik Barnouw in his 1974 book *Documentary*. "Unlike the fiction artist, he is dedicated to *not* inventing. It is in selecting and arranging his findings that he expresses himself."

Story is the device that describes this arrangement. A story may begin as an idea, hypothesis, or series of questions. It becomes more focused throughout the filmmaking process, until the finished film has a compelling beginning, an unexpected middle, and a satisfying end. Along the way, the better you understand your story, even as it's evolving, the more prepared you'll be to tell it creatively and well. You're likely to identify characters and scout locations more carefully, and the visuals you shoot will be stronger. Perhaps surprisingly, you'll be better prepared to follow the unexpected—to take advantage of the twists and turns that are an inevitable and welcome part of documentary production, and recognize those elements that will make your film even stronger.

Puja running, from *Born into Brothels*.
Photo by Gour, courtesy of Kids with Cameras.

DOCUMENTARY AS A SUBSET OF NONFICTION FILM AND VIDEO

As noted in the preface, the range of film and video categorized loosely as "documentary" is broad and varies widely in quality, in terms of both content and craft. The best documentaries demand viewers' active engagement. When the audience is caught up in a life-and-death struggle to protect Africa's oldest park (*Virunga*), embedded with the filmmakers in Cairo's Tahrir Square (*The Square*), or behind the scenes with some of music's most significant and unheralded backup singers (*20 Feet from Stardom*), there is nothing as powerful as a documentary.

Many documentaries have far-reaching impact. Jeanne Jordan and Steven Ascher learned that their Academy Award-nominated film *Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern*, about the efforts of Jordan's parents to save their Iowa farm from foreclosure, influenced farming policy in Australia. Jon Else's *Cadillac Desert*, the story of water and the transformation of nature in the American West, was screened to inform policy makers on Capitol Hill. Alex Gibney learned that *Taxi to the Dark Side*, his Academy Award-winning look at the U.S. military's treatment of detainees in Iraq and Iran, was viewed by individuals campaigning for the U.S. presidency in 2008 and by the U.S. Army in its training of the Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corps. To achieve this effectiveness, films must not only reach audiences through compelling, nuanced storytelling, but they must also earn their audiences' trust through reliable, honest content.

Although the storytelling tools explored in this book can be applied to other kinds of nonfiction media production, the examples are drawn primarily from longer-form work, including broadcast hours and series and theatrical-length features. As discussed in the preface, these films and their creators have their counterparts in the world of creative nonfiction prose, also sometimes described as literary nonfiction.

CREATIVE NONFICTION ON SCREEN

Consider this list of the "five characteristics" that make nonfiction writing creative, as described by author Philip Gerard in his book *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life*:

- First, it has an apparent subject and a deeper subject . . .
- Second, and partly because of the duality of subject, such nonfiction is released from the usual journalistic requirement of *timeliness* . . .

- Third, creative nonfiction is narrative, it always tells a good story [Gerard cites another writer, Lee Gutkind, in explaining that to do this, the nonfiction writer "takes advantage of such fictional devices as character, plot, and dialogue. . . . It is action-oriented. Most good creative nonfiction is constructed in scenes."] . . .
- Fourth, creative nonfiction contains a sense of *reflection* on the part of the author. . . . It is a *finished* thought . . .
- Fifth, such nonfiction shows serious attention to the craft of writing.

How does this evaluation apply to documentary films?

An Apparent Subject and a Deeper Subject

There may be a deceptively simple story that *organizes* the film, but the story is being told because it reveals something more. *Sound and Fury*, on the surface, is a documentary about a little girl who wants a cochlear implant, an operation that may enable her to hear. But in telling that story, the filmmakers explore the world of Deaf culture, what it means to belong to a family and a community, how language is acquired, and more. *The Donner Party*, at its most basic level, tells the story of pioneers who took an ill-fated shortcut across the Sierra Nevada, became trapped by winter snowfall, and in desperation resorted to cannibalism. But filmmaker Ric Burns chose that story not for its shock value but because he felt that it revealed something about the American character.

Released from the Journalistic Requirement of Timeliness

Even when documentaries are derived from news reports, they are not bound to tell the story while it's still "news." Instead, their creators take time to consider events and put them in more detailed and often layered context. The financial meltdown of Enron; the abuse of prisoners at Bagram, Abu Ghraib, and Guantánamo; the suicide of writer Hunter S. Thompson—all, at one time, were news stories, and all have been used as fodder for enduring, thought-provoking documentaries by director Alex Gibney.

Tells a Good Story

This means that a filmmaker uses the tools of creative writing to *identify* and *shape* a good story, one that accurately represents the truth.

It does not mean inventing or distorting characters or plots or conflicts for the purpose of enhancing a documentary's appeal.

Contains a Sense of Reflection on the Part of the Author

A documentary is not a news report. It is a thoughtful presentation of a subject that has been explored, researched, weighed, considered, and shaped by the filmmaker over a period of time, and then communicated outward in a voice and style that are unique. Who is a film's author? The conventional view is that it is the director, provided the director is principally responsible for the story that is told, from development through editing. Many films, more accurately, have multiple authors, reflecting close relationships between a producer(s), a director, a writer, and an editor, or some combination within that group. But the author is the person or group whose vision, ultimately, is reflected on screen.

Shows Serious Attention to the Craft of Film Storytelling

A filmmaker's palette is different, in many ways, from that of a novelist or playwright, but the underlying considerations remain the same. Craft is about wielding the unique tools of a chosen medium to their full and best advantage. A story told on film has the power to actively engage viewers both emotionally and intellectually by immersing them, visually and aurally, in an on-screen experience.

OBJECTIVITY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND BIAS

The power of documentary films comes from the fact that they are grounded in fact, not fiction. This is not to say that they're "objective." Like any form of communication, whether spoken, written, painted, or photographed, documentary filmmaking involves the communicator in making choices. It's therefore unavoidably subjective, no matter how balanced, neutral, fair, or accurate the presentation seeks to be. Which stories are being told, why, and by whom? What information or material is included or excluded? What choices are made concerning style, tone, point of view, and format? "To be sure, some documentarists claim to be 'objective,'" noted Barnouw, "a term that seems to renounce an interpretive role. The claim may be strategic but is surely meaningless."

Subjectivity is not the opposite of objectivity. All forms of communication are *subjective.* Someone made that film, just as someone painted that picture, took that photograph, or even aimed a surveillance camera in one direction rather than another. Sometimes the subjectivity is less apparent, as when a writer or filmmaker strives for neutrality, working to present the journalistic basics of who, what, where, and when, and in addition, working to ensure that multiple points of view are fairly presented. (This does not mean seeking out "both" sides, if doing so misrepresents the issues.) But a work can also have a point of view and remain journalistically sound, if the author's point of view is transparent and if the evidence that's assembled is fairly chosen and presented truthfully.

A work is subjective whether or not an author or filmmaker is identified. Arguably, it strengthens the integrity of work to reveal the reporters or storytellers. Consider detailed web pages that have no listed author, or a newspaper story with no byline. That writing is not necessarily any more balanced, fair, accurate, or neutral; it's just that viewers/readers have to work harder to evaluate the credibility of the information's source—and should.

Bias

"Bias" is often used to describe the perspective of a news source: people say that a certain network has a conservative bias, or a newspaper has a liberal bias, and so forth. Merriam-Webster defines bias as "a tendency to believe that some people, ideas, etc. are better than others that usually results in treating some people unfairly." A bias may be positive or negative. A professor with a positive bias toward older students might grade them more easily, whether intentionally or not. An employer with a negative bias against workers with young children might find reasons not to hire them.

Everyone has biases. A good journalist, like a good documentary filmmaker, works to overcome them and trusts that the audience, presented with sufficient evidence, is capable of reaching its own conclusions. Bias becomes *distortion, falsehood, deception,* and such when the author only cherry-picks the record, selecting information and interviews in a way that pushes the audience unfairly toward a conclusion that is false or misleading.

Bias is not the same thing as point of view. Here's an example, drawn from an exercise shared with me by Richard Panek, an award-winning nonfiction writer and educator: Suppose that a dozen students attend a lecture given by a visiting professor of history, an

American in his early thirties who's an expert on modern France. Afterward, they are divided into four groups, and each group is asked to write a brief report about the lecture. The catch is that each group is writing for a specific audience, such as: 1) a university tenure committee; 2) the visiting professor's hometown newspaper; 3) a men's fashion magazine; and 4) a documentary production company that's scouting talent for a TV special on the history of France.

Imagine that once the groups have finished the reports, they're asked to take a bit more time to remove anything in their write-ups that might be construed as bias. They do so. Will the four completed reports be identical? Of course not, because they're created for different audiences. The university tenure committee wants to know about the effectiveness and content of the lecture, for example, and not about the out-of-season Armani blazer the professor wore. The hometown newspaper will be less interested in that day's lecture than in the overall achievements of their former resident. And so on. Each of the reports will emphasize those details that serve its unique audience, and at the same time, each of the reports might still be accurate, fair, and truthful.

Within this example, a *biased* report might result if those writing for the tenure committee already had a preferred candidate, and therefore focused on the few missteps made by the professor without acknowledging that they were not representative of the talk overall or the students' positive reception of it. A rule of thumb, if you're wondering whether your work is biased, is to ask yourself whether a reasonable group of smart people, much like a jury, given not only your report or film but also the overall evidence available, would find your work to be generally accurate and fair in its representation of the known facts.

With documentary films, balance and neutrality are not prerequisites; fairness, accuracy, and transparency should be. Viewers don't need to agree with your documentary or its conclusions. But they should be able to trust that important events happened in a way that the film presents them as happening, and that evidence has not been distorted or withheld in the interest of creating a more convincing (albeit misleading) argument or a more "dramatic" storyline. Once your deception is discovered, the whole film has lost its value, except perhaps to audiences looking for affirmation of pre-existing views, even if those views are, in fact, biased.

Fairness and Balance

A filmmaker striving for journalistic balance will often work to present the story or argument in a way that seeks out and gives a *fair* hearing

to a range of viewpoints essential to a true understanding of the issue at hand. This doesn't mean setting up a false dichotomy (pro/con, he said/she said) if that would be misleading. For example, the overwhelming majority of scientists agree that the climate is changing, even if there are differences of thought about causes and solutions. It would be dishonest, therefore, to give the fringe position—climate-change deniers—an equal say to "balance out" climate-change adherents.

A film can be truthful and accurate without being balanced. Suppose you decide to tell the story of a woman's crusade against the use of animals to test cosmetics, from her point of view. You're not representing your film as a neutral look at the issue of animal testing; your film is about this crusader. The main caveat is that false statements by her (or her supporters) can't be allowed to stand uncontested; you'd need to find a way to let viewers know that while these are their views, the facts don't support them.

The other caveat with a narrow point of view is that if you *do* need multiple perspectives, you should get them. A film loses credibility when interviewees are telling us what other people, especially those in opposition, think or feel. If your subjects are talking about a "them"—as in, "they were afraid of us, we had them worried"—you should consider letting "them" speak for themselves. In fact, allowing for contradictory points of view can strengthen a film, not least because it plays to the fact that people like to weigh evidence for themselves and make up their own minds. For example, I was among the producers responsible for the multipart PBS series *Eyes on the Prize*, a history of the American civil rights movement, which covered events from the mid-1950s through the mid-1980s. We did not set out to "show" that the movement was necessary and right, although I doubt any of us felt otherwise. Instead, our task was to explore the history and let it reveal itself—especially to younger viewers, who had not experienced it firsthand—through participants' stories. We were continually reminded by the production executives that our ability to do so, effectively and well, lay in our willingness to let the evidence of history speak for itself, including giving a fair platform to individuals who'd lived through this era and opposed (at least during that time) the movement. Fairness, in this context, meant not judging or sandbagging opponents; it meant allowing them the same right to speak about their experiences as anyone else, and earning their trust that we would do so. The series, and the history it conveys, is stronger and richer because of it.

As another example, look at *Super Size Me*: When starting his 30-day diet, director Morgan Spurlock is critical but also somewhat

ambivalent about McDonald's and a lawsuit that blames fast food for the obesity of two teenaged girls. He lays out the basic construction of his experiment on camera and brings in three independent doctors to measure the results. (Some critics have argued that the artificiality of this experiment stacks the deck against McDonald's, but I don't agree. Knowing the setup, the audience can and should bring its own skepticism to the table; the experiment is obviously extreme.) Throughout the film, Spurlock also allows interviewees with whom he might be assumed to be sympathetic—doctors, lawyers, school personnel, people on the street—to paint themselves (at times) as mercenary, misinformed, or ignorant. How difficult is it to understand that 64 ounces of soda contains a lot of sugar? Or to look across a lunchroom and notice that the teens you're feeding are eating nothing but high-fat, high-salt junk food? By the film's end, Spurlock has learned and conveyed a great deal of unflattering evidence against the fast-food industry, but his call for change is directed at consumers.

Selection

Making choices about what to include or exclude in the film also does not constitute bias. (Remember the definition of documentary is *selecting* as well as arranging materials.) Whether you're creating a 30-minute film or a nine-hour series, you can't include everything; there's not enough time, and you'll confuse viewers who are trying to follow your story. Instead, you make choices that help you to focus that story, while remaining careful not to leave out characters or information that is essential to an honest understanding of that chosen story.

For example, *The Boys of Baraka* follows a group of "at risk" boys in the U.S. who are sent to an experimental boarding school in Kenya, in hopes of improving their odds at future success. The film does not offer a menu of other educational options for at-risk Baltimore youth, nor were there critics arguing against programs like the Baraka School—and these alternatives weren't necessary to this story or its honest telling. *Born into Brothels* did not spend screen time telling you how or where Zana Briski learned photography or how she'd chosen the particular cameras the children in Kolkata were using, nor did the filmmakers include voices of people who thought, for example, that Briski shouldn't be interfering in a foreign culture. Even if such concerns existed, filmmaking always involves choices, and those concerns didn't impact the story the filmmakers had chosen to tell.

DOCUMENTARY DECEPTION

Film is a medium that we *experience*, both because of the range of senses involved (we see and hear events unfolding with our own eyes and ears) and the kind of storytelling that engages us both emotionally and intellectually. It is powerful and convincing, and if we are not on guard, we may be deceived by films that deliberately (or naively) distort or mislead, perhaps in the interest of entertainment or advocacy, convincing us of the existence of mermaids, alien spaceships, or unproven conspiracy theories. This is achieved, for example, by:

- asking rhetorical and unmotivated questions that lead the viewer in a false direction;
- presenting facts out of context or in a context designed to mislead. Suppose that I'm trying to convince you that Joe had his wife murdered, and as evidence, I tell you that he paid $25,000 to the killer. That sounds bad, until someone points out that the killer happened to work in a factory that Joe owns, and he earned the money in hourly wages;
- presenting evidence out of context and/or mashed together in a way that creates a false impression;
- creating fake evidence, such as reports that sound like news reports, or documents that appear to be genuine.

It takes a certain amount of media literacy to unravel the strands of a dishonest film. Some approaches:

- Do what you can to determine not only who made the film but also who paid for it, and dig beyond organization names to learn more about their activities and what kinds of work they do or support.
- Consider how and where the film is promoted.
- Find interviews with the filmmakers and/or and go to their websites to learn more about who they are and what other sorts of films they've done. There is diversity in most filmmakers' portfolios, but if someone has made a career out of films that focus on alien abductions and conspiracies, the chances are good that the climate-change film they're producing is not going to be scientifically rigorous.
- Look very closely at what the film presents as evidence. If a newspaper looks odd, find out if it's an actual publication. If documents are presented, do they seem real?
- When statistics are presented, are they anchored by time and specifics?

- When headlines and news reports are offered, are they anchored by time and context?
- Is the film asking unmotivated and leading questions? One example involves questions that are posed to suggest the validity of a hypothesis that simply can't be proven: "Could it be that these tracks were not made by humans or animals, but by the very aliens Dr. Smith claims to have seen?" Another involves questions that are not derived from evidence presented in the film, but serve to advance the thesis the filmmaker is trying to drive home. "Why were analysts so afraid of considering the alternative?" for example, implies that it's an established fact that analysts *were* afraid of considering the alternative, whether or not that is true.

Inaccuracies can (and do) find their way into even the best-researched films, but you don't want them to be there on purpose.

WHO TELLS DOCUMENTARY STORIES?

The range and breadth of documentary filmmaking worldwide is actually quite astonishing. Some documentary filmmakers work within production houses or stations; many more work independently, with varying degrees of financial and technical support from national or local governments, commissioning stations or broadcast venues, and/or foundations and corporations. Some filmmakers work to reach regional or local audiences, including community groups; others strive for national theatrical or broadcast release and acclaim at prestigious film festivals; a growing number put their work online, reaching virtual communities.

Documentary storytelling does not refer specifically or even primarily to writing, nor is it strictly the province of someone identified as a writer. The tools described in this book are employed by almost anyone involved in documentary production, including producers, directors, editors, cinematographers, sound recordists, and researchers. Storytelling describes the conceptual process that begins at the moment an idea is raised and continues to be applied and reapplied as a project is filmed, edited, and completed. Throughout the process, filmmakers routinely address story issues: "Who are the central characters? What do they want? What are the stakes if they don't get it? Where is the tension? Where is the story going? Why does it matter?" Even if the film is structured as an essay, there should be an escalating sense of urgency, discovery, and relevance as the answers and subsequent questions are revealed. Someone is making those choices, whether or not he or she is credited as writer.

Hunter S. Thompson, in *Gonzo: The Life & Work of Hunter S. Thompson*, a Magnolia Pictures release.
Photo courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.

THE "WRITER'S" ROLE

Some have questioned how it's possible to "write" or "script" reality. The answer is straightforward: documentary filmmaking involves the selection and arrangement of reality into films and series, and the process by which that happens involves "writerly" choices about story, structure, character, style, and point of view. Even purely vérité films are constructed, before and during production and often, more significantly, in the editing room. Even if there is no one on the crew who takes a writing credit, there is someone—or more likely a few people (in the case of vérité filmmaking, it's often the editor(s) as well as the director—making these decisions of story and structure.

The process of writing the film takes place over time. As historical filmmaker Ric Burns explains:

> You create your first description of what the film is. Sometimes it's in the form of a letter to a colleague, sometimes it's in the form of

> a two-page proposal to get seed money. But every iteration in some sense is a version of the film, and you try to give that iteration as powerful and intense an articulation as you can. And then, when you move to the next articulation—longer, more detailed, more structured, more intense, hopefully more involving—you don't abandon the previous iteration. You use it as the point of departure.

Ideas become outlines, and outlines may become shooting treatments: flexible enough to allow for inevitable surprises, but detailed enough to enable cost-effective production choices. Even if no writing is involved, something about a situation suggests to a filmmaker that there is content to be captured and shaped into a film. The writing decisions continue throughout editing—sometimes on paper, sometimes not. The film continues to be written, in its broadest sense, throughout postproduction, and a final written script or transcript, if one is produced, reflects this evolution.

Writers and Writing Credit

In the world of Hollywood theatrical dramas, there is a market for "spec" scripts—full screenplays written in advance of production. As noted above, documentary scripts are rarely compiled in this way; the main exception tends to be giant screen films or the portions of films that involve re-enactment. Some filmmakers write much more detailed shooting treatments than others, and as noted, the script evolves over the course of production. A credited film *writer*, whether that person is acting solely as writer or is also a producer or the director, will often be involved in shaping the film's content, story, and structure from idea through editing. (If there is narration, that might be part of the writing, but a writer's role, unless specified, is not limited to scripting narration.)

In recognition of the importance of writing to documentary, the Writers Guild of America, West and the Writers Guild of America, East in 2005 began to offer an annual Documentary Screenplay Award. The script must be for a film that's at least 40 minutes in length, and the film as exhibited "must have had an on-screen writing credit (i.e., a 'written by,' 'story by,' 'screenplay by,' 'documentary script by,' or 'narration written by' credit, as appropriate) related to the writing of the film." Winners to date include *Stories We Tell* (Sarah Polley), *Searching for Sugarman* (Malik Bendjelloul), *Super Size Me* (Morgan Spurlock), *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (Alex Gibney), *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman), and *The Cove* (Mark Monroe). Of these winners, Monroe is the only writer who did not also direct the nominated film; notably, only some of these films are narrated.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The idea for this book emerged from my experiences as a documentary filmmaker, writer, and consultant on a range of projects, large and small, and from my study of storytelling across genres, including documentary and dramatic films, stage plays, and works in print. It became clear to me that underlying, universal issues of story and structure can generally be applied regardless of a project's style or length. It also became clear that despite the growing popularity of documentary films and filmmaking, discussion of the form was still too often clouded by misinformation and misconceptions. In particular, this book is written to counter two prevailing and false notions: one, that it's better and more "real" to shoot a documentary first and find the story later, and, two, that the need for "story" permits a filmmaker to impose a shallow and external framework on a subject.

INTENDED READERSHIP

Documentary Storytelling is intended for those who have an interest in understanding how story and structure work, and in particular, why some nonfiction films seem to have so much more power than others and whether that power is built on credible content. It's my hope that by understanding the storytelling choices filmmakers make, viewers and filmmakers will become better and more critical consumers of nonfiction programming in general. They'll have a clearer understanding of why something does or does not "ring true," why some films seem to carry greater emotional or intellectual weight, why some programs leave them feeling manipulated or bored, and how shifts in point of view or tone can change the nature of the presentation. In today's media-saturated world, such media literacy is more important than ever.

The stages of filmmaking generally described in this book are research and development, preproduction, production, and editing (assembly, rough cut, fine cut, lock). In most cases, there is not a clear division between steps: Filmmakers may continue fundraising well into editing, for example, and the editing room may be opened while shooting is still under way. Discussions of story and structure, likewise, will continue throughout this process. It's very common for a team in the editing room to revise a preliminary outline (on paper), and even a pitch, to be sure that they can articulate the story as it's evolved during research and production. Surrounded by hours of material—still and motion images, audio interviews, music, archival

materials—filmmakers often find that stripping a project back to its bare bones, its narrative structure, is the best and most effective way to begin a project's final and strongest construction.

Examples in this book that are drawn from actual films are identified as such. Otherwise, the examples were created by me for illustration purposes, and any resemblance to actual films, whether produced or proposed, is purely coincidental. At the back of the book, I've included some information on films cited, many of which are now available for purchase, rental, or streaming through legitimate online vendors.

ANALYSIS, NOT FORMULA

Documentary storytelling describes an *organic* editorial approach to making choices about a film's structure, point of view, balance, style, casting, and more, at every stage of a film's creation. Although the book uses language familiar to anyone who has worked on a creative endeavor, the strategies described are in some ways most akin to dramatic screen storytelling. The difference is that documentarians are not free to invent plot points or character arcs and instead must find them in the raw material of real life. Our stories depend not on creative invention but on creative arrangement, and our storytelling must be done without sacrificing journalistic integrity. It's a tall order, which is why this book—the first to comprehensively examine the role of story and structure in nonfiction filmmaking—was written. The information in this book is not prescriptive, but analytical, describing some underlying qualities that many successful documentaries share. Understanding what story is and how it works to your advantage is a step toward finding your own creative and ethical voice as a nonfiction filmmaker.

OBSERVATIONS

In preparing all editions of this book, I screened a wide variety of films and spoke with a range of filmmakers, many of whom raised the same basic points:

- It's not about the technology. Too often, filmmakers (and filmmaking courses) get caught up in the *tools* of storytelling. The best equipment in the world, even the best *shots* in the world, won't save a film from a lack of focus.
- Time is an increasingly rare commodity for filmmakers, especially during preproduction and editing. Yet time is often what

enables a film to have depth, in terms of research, themes, and layers of storytelling; it can enhance creativity. As a group, we need to resist the pressure to turn out documentary products, rather than documentary films.

- Story does not have to mean three-act drama, and it definitely does not mean artificial tension that is imposed from without. Story comes organically from within the material and the ways in which you, the filmmaker, structure it.
- Documentary filmmakers, increasingly, offer a powerful addition to or contradiction of information presented by mainstream media. It is critical that this work be ethical and honest, even as it is also creative and innovative.
- Share the humor. No matter how grim the situation or subject, audiences cannot take a program that is unrelieved misery. Watch any of the top documentaries of the past few years, and notice not only how often you're on the verge of tears, but also, even within the same film, how often you're laughing.
- Think easier. Some of the best documentaries made recently are built on a narrative train that is very basic; that's often what allows for overall complexity.

SOURCES AND NOTES

Recent coverage of the Australian use of *Troublesome Creek* can be found in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (June 7, 2015, written by Paul Byrnes), www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/return-to-troublesome-creek-and-a-sydney-film-festival-pick-that-helped-farmers-20150602-gheglt.html. Definition of documentary, in Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). Information about creative nonfiction from Philip Gerard's *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1996). For more information about Richard Panek, visit www.lastwordonnothing.com/about-us/richard-panek/. An example of the discussion re writing credits: Tom Rostin's article, "You Say True Life, I Say Scripted/The Rise of Writing Credits in Documentary," *The New York Times*, August 24, 2012 (www.nytimes.com/2012/08/26/movies/the-rise-of-writing-credits-in-documentaries.html?_r=0). Information about the WGA documentary screenwriting awards can be found at www.wga.org/wga-awards/rules-documentary-screenplay.aspx.

PART I

Understanding Story

CHAPTER 2

Story Basics

A story is the narrative, or telling, of an event or series of events, crafted in a way to interest the audience members, whether they are readers, listeners, or viewers. At its most basic, a story has a beginning, middle, and end. It has compelling characters (or questions), 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.

Don't be confused by the fact that festivals and film schools commonly use the term *narrative* to describe only works of dramatic fiction. Most documentaries are also narrative, which simply means that they tell stories (whether or not those stories are also narrated is an entirely different issue). How they tell those stories, and which stories they tell, are part of what separates these films into subcategories of genre or style, from cinéma vérité to film noir.

Efforts to articulate the basics of good storytelling are not new. The Greek philosopher Aristotle first set out guidelines for what his analysis revealed as a "well-constructed plot" in 350 BCE, and these have been applied to storytelling—onstage, on the page, and on screen—ever since. Expectations about how storytelling works seem hardwired in audiences, and meeting, confounding, and challenging those expectations is no less important to the documentarian than it is to the dramatist.

SOME STORYTELLING TERMS

Exposition

Exposition is the information that grounds you in a story: who, what, where, when, and why. It gives audience members the tools they need to follow the story that's unfolding and, more importantly, it allows them inside the story. But exposition should not be thought of as something to "get out of the way." Too often, programs are front-loaded with information that audiences don't yet need to know,

including backstory. The problem is that when audiences do need this information, they won't remember it, and in the meantime, the film seems dull and didactic.

Films may start with a bit of establishing information, conveyed through narration, interviews, or text on screen (look at the openings of *Control Room* and *Jonestown*, for example). But this information should offer the minimum necessary—just enough to get the story under way. After that, the trick is to reveal exposition when it best serves that story, whether by raising the stakes, advancing our understanding of character, or anticipating and addressing potential confusion.

Good exposition is a way to build suspense and motivate audiences to stay with you. Noted filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock once explained suspense in this way: Suppose audiences are watching a scene in which people are seated at a table, with a clock nearby, talking casually. Suddenly a bomb beneath the table explodes. The viewers are shocked, of course. But suppose that audiences had previously seen a character put a bomb into a briefcase, set it to go off at a specific time, and then place the briefcase under the table. The people sitting and chatting are unaware of the danger, but the audience is tense as it watches the clock, knowing what's coming. In the first scenario, Hitchcock noted, there are several seconds of shock. In the second, there are several minutes of suspense.

Watch films that you enjoy and pay attention not only to what you know, but as importantly, *when* you learn it. This is true of present-day details and of backstory; if the backstory matters, you want to present it when it when the audience is *motivated* to hear it. Also pay attention to the many ways in which filmmakers convey information. Sometimes it's revealed when the people you're filming argue: "Yeah? Well, we wouldn't even be in this mess if you hadn't decided to take your paycheck to Vegas!" Sometimes it's revealed through headlines or other printed material. Good narration can deftly weave exposition into a story, filling in gaps as needed; voice-over material drawn from interviews can sometimes do the same thing. Exposition can also be handled through visuals: an establishing shot of a place or sign; footage of a sheriff nailing an eviction notice on a door (*Roger & Me*); the opening moments of an auction (*Troublesome Creek*). Toys littered on a suburban lawn say "Children live here." Black bunting and a homemade shrine of flowers and cards outside a fire station say "Tragedy has occurred." A long shot of an elegantly-dressed woman in a large, spare office high up in a modern building says "This woman is powerful." A man on a subway car reading an issue of *The Boston Globe* tells

us where we are, as would a highway sign or a famous landmark—the Eiffel Tower, for example. Time-lapse photography, title cards, and animation can all be used to convey exposition, sometimes with the added element of humor or surprise—think of the cartoons in *Super Size Me*.

Offered at the right time, exposition enriches our understanding of characters and raises the stakes in their stories. Watch *Daughter from Danang* and pay attention to when we learn that Heidi Bub's birth father was an American soldier, for example; that her birth mother's husband was fighting for the Viet Cong; and that Heidi's adoptive mother has stopped communicating with her. These details add to our understanding of who these characters are and why they do what they do, and the information is effective because of the careful way it's seeded throughout the film.

Theme

In literary terms, theme is the general underlying subject of a specific story, a recurring idea that often illuminates an aspect of the human condition. *Eyes on the Prize*, in 14 hours, tells an overarching story of America's civil rights struggle. The underlying themes include race, poverty, and the power of ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary change. Themes in *The Day after Trinity*, the story of J. Robert Oppenheimer's development of the atomic bomb, include scientific ambition, the quest for power, and efforts to ensure peace and disarmament when it may be too late.

"Theme is the most basic lifeblood of a film," says filmmaker Ric Burns. "Theme tells you the tenor of your story. This is what this thing is about." Burns chose to tell the story of the ill-fated Donner Party and their attempt to take a shortcut to California in 1846 not because the cannibalism they resorted to would appeal to prurient viewers, but because their story illuminated themes and vulnerabilities in the American character. These themes are foreshadowed in the film's opening quote from Alexis de Tocqueville, a French author who toured the United States in 1831. He wrote of the "feverish ardor" with which Americans pursue prosperity, the "shadowy suspicion that they may not have chosen the shortest route to get it," and the way in which they "cleave to the things of this world," even though death steps in, in the end. These words presage the fate of the Donner Party, whose ambitious pursuit of a new life in California will have tragic consequences.

Themes may emerge from the questions that initially drove the filmmaking. On one level, *My Architect* is about a middle-aged filmmaker's quest to know the father he lost at the age of 11, some 30 years before. But among the film's themes are impermanence and legacy. Kahn says in bonus material on the film's DVD:

> You sort of wonder, "After we're gone, what's left?" How much would I really find of my father out there? . . . I know there are buildings. But how much emotion, how much is really left? And I think what really kind of shocked me is how many people are still actively engaged in a relationship with him. They talk to him as if he's still here. They think of him every day. In a way I find that very heartening.

Understanding your theme(s) can help you determine both what and how you shoot. Renowned cinematographer Jon Else explains his thinking as he planned to shoot workers building a trail at Yosemite National Park for his film *Yosemite: The Fate of Heaven.*

> What is this shot or sequence telling us within the developing narrative of this film, and what is this shot or sequence telling us about the world? . . . Are we there with the trail crew and the dynamite because it's dangerous? Are we there because all the dynamite in the world is not going to make a bit of difference in this giant range of mountains, where people are really insignificant? Are we there because these people are underpaid and they're trying to unionize?

Else offers examples of how different answers might change the shooting:

> If the scene was about the camaraderie between the members of the trail crew, all of whom had lived in these mountains together, in camp, for many months by that time, you try to do a lot of shots in which the physical relationship between people shows.
>
> . . . They weren't trying to unionize, but if, in fact, we had been doing a sequence about the labor conditions for trail workers in Yosemite, we probably would have made it a point to shoot over the course of a long day, to show how long the day was, show them eating three meals on the trail, walking home really bone-tired in the dark. Basically, the more you're aware of what you want these images to convey, the richer the images are going to be.

Filmmaker Sam Pollard (*August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand*), a professor at New York University, says that for student filmmakers:

> The biggest pitfall is understanding what their film's about right from the beginning. Before they sit down to write a page of the narration or script, what's the theme? And then on the theme, what's the story that they're going to convey to get across the theme?

Arc

The arc refers to the way or ways in which the events of the story transform your characters. An overworked executive learns that his family should come first; a mousy secretary stands up for himself and takes over the company; a rag-tag group of unlikely kids wins the national chess tournament. In pursuing a goal, protagonists learn something about themselves and their place in the world, and those lessons change them—and may, in fact, change their desire for the goal.

In documentary films, story arcs can be hard to find. Never, simply in the interest of a good story, presume to know what a character is thinking or feeling, or present a transformation that hasn't occurred. If there is change, you will discover it through solid research and multiple strands of verifiable evidence. For example, in *The Day after Trinity*, physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, a left-leaning intellectual, successfully develops the world's first nuclear weapons and is then horrified by the destructive powers he's helped to unleash. He spends the rest of his life trying to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and in the process falls victim to the Cold War he helped to launch; once hailed as an American hero, he is accused of being a Soviet spy.

In *The Thin Blue Line*, we hear and see multiple versions of a story that begins when Randall Adams's car breaks down on a Saturday night and a teenager named David Harris offers him a ride. Later that night, a police officer is shot and killed by someone driving Harris's car, and Adams is charged with the murder. The deeper we become immersed in the case, the more clearly we see that Adams's imprisonment and subsequent conviction are about politics, not justice. He is transformed from a free man to a convicted felon, and that transformation challenges the viewer's assumptions about justice and the basic notion that individuals are innocent until proven guilty.

In *Murderball*, a documentary about quadriplegic athletes who compete internationally in wheelchair rugby, a few characters undergo transformations that together complement the overall film. There's Joe Soares, a hard-driving American champion now coaching for Canada, whose relationship with his son changes noticeably after he suffers a

heart attack. Player Mark Zupan comes to terms with the friend who was at the wheel during the accident in which he was injured. And Keith Cavill, recently injured, adjusts to his new life and even explores wheelchair rugby. All of these transformations occurred over the course of filming, and the filmmakers made sure they had the visual material they needed to show them in a way that felt organic and unforced.

Plot and Character

Films are often described as either plot- or character-driven. A character-driven film is one in which the action of the film emerges from the wants and needs of the characters. In a plot-driven film, the characters are secondary to the events that make up the plot. (Many thrillers and action movies are plot-driven.) In documentary, both types of films exist, and there is a lot of gray area between them. Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* imitates a plot-driven noir thriller in its exploration of the casual encounter that leaves Randall Adams facing the death penalty. Circumstances act upon Adams; he doesn't set the plot in motion except inadvertently, when his car breaks down and he accepts a ride from David Harris. In fact, part of the film's power comes from Adams's inability to alter events, even as it becomes apparent that Harris, not Adams, is likely to be the killer.

Some films are clearly character-driven. *Daughter from Danang*, for example, is driven by the wants of its main character, Heidi Bub, who

From *Waltz with Bashir*.
Photo courtesy Bridget Folman Film Gang.

was born in Vietnam and given up for adoption. Raised in Tennessee and taught to deny her Asian heritage, Bub is now estranged from her adoptive mother. She sets the events of the film in motion when she decides to reunite with her birth mother. Similarly, in *Waltz with Bashir*, Israeli filmmaker Ari Folman sets events in motion when he decides to look back at a past he cannot remember.

As mentioned, the difference between plot- and character-driven films can be subtle, and one often has strong elements of the other. The characters in *The Thin Blue Line* are distinct and memorable; the plot in both *Daughter from Danang* and *Waltz with Bashir* is strong and takes unexpected turns. It's also true that plenty of memorable documentaries are not "driven" at all in the Hollywood sense. *When the Levees Broke*, a four-hour documentary about New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, generally follows the chronology of events that devastated a city and its people. As described by Sam Pollard, the film's supervising editor and co-producer, there is a narrative arc to each hour and to the series. But the complexity of the four-hour film and its interweaving of dozens of individual stories, rather than a select few, differentiate it from a more traditional form of narrative.

Some shorter films present a "slice of life" portrait of people or places. With longer films, however, there generally needs to be some overarching structure. Frederick Wiseman's documentaries are elegantly structured but not "plotted" in the sense that each sequence makes the next one inevitable, but there is usually an organizing principle behind his work, such as a "year in the life" of an institution. Still other films are driven not by characters or plot but by questions, following an essay-like structure; examples include Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Daniel Anker's *Imaginary Witness: Hollywood and the Holocaust*, discussed by Susan Kim in Chapter 16. Many films merge styles: *Super Size Me* is built around the filmmaker's 30-day McDonald's diet, but to a large extent the film is actually driven by a series of questions, making it an essay. This combination of journey and essay can also be found in Nathaniel Kahn's *My Architect. Virunga* combines several types of filmmaking, as discussed by Orlando von Einsiedel in Chapter 22.

Point of View

Point of view describes the perspective, or position, from which a story is told. This can be interpreted in a range of ways. For example, point of view may describe the character through whom you're telling

a story. Imagine telling the story of Goldilocks and the three bears from the point of view of Goldilocks, and then retelling it from the point of view of Papa Bear. Goldilocks might tell you the story of a perfectly innocent child who was wandering through the woods when she became hungry, ventured into an apparently abandoned house, and found herself under attack by bears. In contrast, Papa Bear might tell you the story of an unwanted intruder.

By offering an unexpected point of view, filmmakers can sometimes force viewers to take a new look at a familiar subject. For example, Jon Else's *Sing Faster: The Stagehands' Ring Cycle* documents a performance by the San Francisco Opera of Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle from the point of view of the union stagehands behind the scenes.

Point of view can also be used to describe the perspective of the camera, including who's operating it and from what vantage point. Much of Deborah Scranton's *The War Tapes*, for example, was filmed by the soldiers themselves, rather than by camera crews following the soldiers. Point of view can also refer to the perspective of time and the lens through which an event is viewed. As one example, *The War Tapes* looks at the aftermath of a car bombing outside Al Taji through footage of the event as it unfolds (from the camera operated by Sgt. Steve Pink, who was there); an interview with Pink conducted within 24 hours of the event by Spc. Mike Moriarty; audio from an interview Scranton conducted with Pink in the months after he returned to the United States; and Pink in voice-over, reading (after he had returned home) from a journal he kept while he was in Iraq. "So it's all layered in there, this multi-faceted perception of that event," Scranton explains in Chapter 20.

There is also, of course, "point of view" of the filmmaker and/or filmmaking team.

Detail

Detail encompasses a range of things that all have to do with specificity. First, there is what's known as the "telling detail." A full ashtray next to a bedridden man would indicate that either the man or a caregiver is a heavy smoker. The choice of what to smoke, what to drink, when to drink it (whisky for breakfast?), what to wear, how to decorate a home or an office or a car, all provide clues about people. They may be misleading clues: That African artwork may have been left behind by an old boyfriend, rather than chosen by the apartment renter; the expensive suit may have been borrowed for the purpose of the interview. But as storytellers, our ears and eyes should be open

to details, the specifics that add layers of texture and meaning. We also need to focus on detail if we write narration. "The organization grew like wildfire" is clichéd and meaningless; better to provide evidence: "Within 10 years, an organization that began in Paris with 20 members had chapters in 12 nations, with more than 2,500 members worldwide."

IN HOLLYWOOD TERMS: A "GOOD STORY WELL TOLD"

In their book, *The Tools of Screenwriting*, authors David Howard and Edward Mabley stress that a story is not simply about somebody experiencing difficulty meeting a goal; it's also "the way in which the audience experiences the story." The elements of a "good story well told," they write, are:

1. This story is about *somebody* with whom we have some empathy.
2. This somebody wants *something* very badly.
3. This something is *difficult*, but possible, to do, get, or achieve.
4. The story is told for maximum *emotional* impact and *audience participation* in the proceedings.
5. The story must come to a *satisfactory ending* (which does not necessarily mean a happy ending).

Although Howard and Mabley's book is directed at dramatic screenwriters, who are free to invent not only characters but also the things that they want and the things that are getting in the way, this list is useful for documentary storytellers. Your particular film subject or situation might not fit neatly within these parameters, however, so further explanation follows.

Who (or What) the Story Is About

The *somebody* is your protagonist, your hero, the entity whose story is being told. Note that your hero can, in fact, be very "unheroic," and the audience might struggle to empathize with him or her. But the character and/or character's mission should be compelling enough that the audience cares about the outcome. In *The Execution of Wanda Jean*, for example, Liz Garbus offers a sympathetic but unsparing portrait of a woman on death row for murder. You also may have multiple protagonists, as was the case in *Spellbound*.

The central character doesn't necessarily need to be a person. In Ric Burns's *New York*, a seven-episode history, the city itself is the

protagonist, whose fortunes rise and fall and rise over the course of the series. (Throughout that series, however, individual characters and stories come to the fore.) But often, finding a central person through whom to tell your story can make an otherwise complex topic more manageable and accessible to viewers. For *I'll Make Me a World*, a six-hour history of African-American arts in the twentieth century, producer Denise Greene explored the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s by viewing it through the eyes and experience of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks, an established, middle-aged author whose life and work were transformed by her interactions with younger artists responding to the political call for Black Power.

What the Protagonist Wants

The *something* that somebody wants is also referred to as a goal or an objective. In *Blue Vinyl*, filmmaker Judith Helfand sets out, on camera, to convince her parents to remove the new siding from their home. Note that a filmmaker's on-screen presence doesn't necessarily make him or her the protagonist. In Steven Ascher and Jeanne Jordan's *Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern*, the filmmakers travel to Iowa, where Jeanne's family is working to save their farm from foreclosure. Jeanne is the film's narrator and she can be seen in the footage, but the protagonists are her parents, Russel and Mary Jane Jordan. It's their goal—to pay off their debt by auctioning off their belongings—that drives the film's story.

Active versus Passive

Storytellers speak of active versus passive goals and active versus passive heroes. In general, you want a story's goals and heroes to be active, which means that you want your story's protagonist to be in charge of his or her own life: To set a goal and then to go about doing what needs to be done to achieve it. A passive goal is something like this: A secretary wants a raise in order to pay for a trip to Europe. She is passively waiting for the raise, hoping someone will notice that her work merits reward. To be active, she would have to do something to ensure that she gets that raise, or she would have to wage a campaign to raise the extra money she needs for the trip, such as taking a second job.

An exception is when the passivity *is* the story. In *The Thin Blue Line*, for example, Randall Adams, locked up on death row, is a passive protagonist because he can't do anything to free himself, as no one believes him when he claims to be innocent. In general, though,

you want your protagonist to be active, and you want him or her to have a goal that's worthy. In the example of the secretary, will an audience really care whether or not she gets the trip? Probably not. If we had a reason to be sympathetic—she is visiting her estranged family, for example—maybe we would care, but it's not a very strong goal. Worthy does not mean a goal has to be noble—it doesn't all have to be about ending world hunger or ensuring world peace. It does have to matter enough to be worth committing significant time and resources to. If you only care a little about your protagonists and what they want, your financiers and audience are likely to care not at all.

Difficulty and Tangibility

The something that is wanted—the goal—must be *difficult* to do or achieve. If something is easy, there's no tension, and without tension, there's little incentive for an audience to keep watching. Tension is the feeling we get when issues or events are unresolved, especially when we want them to be resolved. It's what motivates us to demand, "And then what happens? And what happens after *that*?" We need to know, because it makes us uncomfortable *not* to know. Think of a movie thriller in which you're aware, but the heroine is not, that danger lurks in the cellar. As she heads toward the steps, you feel escalating tension because she is walking *toward* danger. If you didn't know that the bad guy was in the basement, she would just be a girl heading down some stairs. Without tension, a story feels flat; you don't care one way or the other about the outcome.

So where do you find the tension? Sometimes, it's inescapable, as is the case with the National Guardsmen enduring a year-long tour of duty in Iraq, in Deborah Scranton's *The War Tapes*. Sometimes, tension comes from conflict between your protagonist and an opposing force, whether another person (often referred to as the *antagonist* or *opponent*), a force of nature, society, or the individual (i.e., internal conflict). In Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, striking miners are in conflict with mine owners. In Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady's *The Boys of Baraka*, the tension comes from knowing that the odds of an education, or even a future that doesn't involve prison or death, are stacked against a group of African-American boys from inner-city Baltimore. When a small group of boys is given an opportunity to attend school in Kenya as a means of getting fast-tracked to better high schools in Baltimore, we want them to succeed and are devastated when things seem to fall apart. In *Born into Brothels*, similarly, efforts

to save a handful of children are threatened by societal pressures (including not only economic hardship but also the wishes of family members who don't share the filmmakers' commitment to removing children from their unstable homes), and by the fact that the ultimate decision makers, in a few cases, are the children themselves. The audience experiences frustration—and perhaps recognition—as some of these children make choices that in the long run are likely to have significant consequences.

Note that conflict can mean a direct argument between two sides, pro and con (or "he said, she said"). But such an argument sometimes weakens tension, especially if each side is talking past the other or if individuals in conflict have not been properly established to viewers. If we don't know who's fighting or what's at stake for the various sides, we won't care about the outcome. On the other hand, if the audience goes into an argument caring about the individuals involved, especially if they care about *all* the individuals involved, it can lead to powerful emotional storytelling. Near the end of *Daughter from Danang*, for example, the joyful reunion between the American adoptee and her Vietnamese family gives way to feelings of anger and betrayal brought on by the family's request for money. The palpable tension the audience feels stems not from taking one side or another in the argument, but from empathy for all sides.

Weather, illness, war, self-doubt, inexperience, hubris—all of these can pose obstacles as your protagonist strives to achieve his or her goal. And just as it can be useful to find an individual (or individuals) through whom to tell a complex story, it can be useful to personify the opposition. Television viewers in the 1960s, for example, at times seemed better able to understand the injustices of southern segregation when reporters focused on the actions of individuals like Birmingham (Alabama) Police Chief Bull Connor, who turned police dogs and fire hoses on young African Americans as they engaged in peaceful protest.

Worthy Opponent

Just as you want your protagonist to have a worthy goal, you want him or her to have a worthy opponent. A common problem for many filmmakers is that they portray opponents as one-dimensional; if their hero is good, the opponent must be bad. In fact, the most memorable opponent is often not the opposite of the hero, but a complement to him or her. In the film *Sound and Fury*, young Heather's parents oppose her wishes for a cochlear implant not out of malice but out of their deep love for her and their strong commitment to the Deaf

culture into which they and their daughter were born. Chicago Mayor Richard Daley was a challenging opponent for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in *Eyes on the Prize* specifically because he wasn't Bull Connor; Daley was a savvy northern politician with close ties to the national Democratic Party and a supporter of the southern-based civil rights movement. The story of his efforts to impede Dr. King's campaign for open housing in Chicago in 1966 proved effective at underscoring the significant differences between using nonviolence as a strategy against *de jure* segregation in the South and using it against *de facto* segregation in the North.

As stated earlier, it's important to understand that you should not in any way be fictionalizing characters who are real human beings. (The rules for documentary are different than those for reality television, where content and characters may be manipulated for entertainment purposes, depending on the releases signed by participants.) With documentary work, you are evaluating a real situation from the perspective of a storyteller, and working with what is actual and defensible. If there is no opponent, you can't manufacture one. Mayor Daley, historically speaking, was an effective opponent. Had he welcomed King with open arms and been little more than an inconvenience to the movement, it would have been dishonest to portray him as a significant obstacle.

Tangible Goal

Although difficult, the goal should be possible to do or achieve, which means that it's best if it's both concrete and realistic. "Fighting racism" or "curing cancer" or "saving the rainforest" may all be worthwhile, but none is specific enough to serve as a story objective. In exploring your ideas for a film, follow your interests, but then seek out a specific story to illuminate them. *The Boys of Baraka* is clearly an indictment of racism and inequality, but it is more specifically the story of a handful of boys and their enrollment in a two-year program at a tiny school in Kenya. *Born into Brothels* illuminates the difficult circumstances facing the children of impoverished sex workers in Kolkata, but the story's goals are more tangible. Initially, we learn that filmmaker Zana Briski, in Kolkata to photograph sex workers, has been drawn to their children. "They wanted to learn how to use the camera," she says in voice-over. "That's when I thought it would be really great to teach them, and to see this world through their eyes." Several minutes later, a larger but still tangible goal emerges: "They have absolutely no opportunity without education," she says. "The question is, can I find a school—a good school—that will take kids that are children of prostitutes?"

This, then, becomes the real goal of the film, one enriched by the children's photography and exposure to broader horizons.

Note also that the goal is not necessarily the most "dramatic" or obvious one. In Kate Davis's *Southern Comfort*, a film about a transgender male dying of ovarian cancer, Robert Eads's goal is not to find a cure; it's to survive long enough to attend the Southern Comfort Conference in Atlanta, a national gathering of transgender people, with his girlfriend, Lola, who is also transgender.

Emotional Impact and Audience Participation

The concept of telling a story for greatest emotional impact and audience participation is perhaps the most difficult. It's often described as "show, don't tell," which means that you want to present the evidence or information that allows viewers to experience the story for themselves, anticipating twists and turns and following the story line in a way that's active rather than passive. Too often, films tell us what we're supposed to think through the use of heavy-handed narration, loaded graphics, or a stacked deck of interviews.

Think about the experience of being completely held by a good mystery. You aren't watching characters on screen; you're right there with them, bringing the clues you've seen so far to the story as it unfolds. You lose track of time as you try to anticipate what happens next, who will do what, and what will be learned. It's human nature to try to make sense of the events we're confronted with, and it's human nature to enjoy being stumped or surprised. In *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, you think Enron's hit bottom, that all the price manipulation has finally caught up with them and they'll be buried in debt—until someone at Enron realizes that there's gold in California's power grid.

Telling a story for emotional impact means that the filmmaker is structuring the story so that the moments of conflict, climax, and resolution—moments of achievement, loss, reversal, etc.—adhere as well as possible to the internal rhythms of storytelling. Audiences expect that the tension in a story will escalate as the story moves toward its conclusion; scenes tend to get shorter, action tighter, the stakes higher. As we get to know the characters and understand their wants and needs, we care more about what happens to them; we become invested in their stories. Much of this structuring takes place in the editing room. But to some extent, it also takes place as you film, and planning for it can make a difference. Knowing that as Heidi Bub got off the airplane in Danang she'd be greeted by a birth mother she hadn't seen in 20 years, what preparations did the filmmakers need to make to

be sure they got that moment on film? What might they shoot if they wanted to build up to that moment, either before or after it actually occurred? (They shot an interview with Heidi and filmed her, a "fish out of water," as she spent a bit of time in Vietnam before meeting with her mother.) In the edited film, by the time Heidi sees her mother, we realize (before she does) how fully Americanized she's become and how foreign her family will seem. We also know that the expectations both she and her birth mother have for this meeting are very high.

Mai Thi Kim and her daughter, Heidi Bub, in *Daughter from Danang*.
Photo courtesy of the filmmakers.

You want to avoid creating unnecessary drama—turning a perfectly good story into a soap opera. There's no reason to pull in additional details, however sad or frightening, when they aren't relevant. If you're telling the story of a scientist unlocking the genetic code to a certain mental illness, for example, it's not necessarily relevant that she's also engaged in a custody battle with her former husband, even if this detail seems to spice up the drama or, you hope, make the character more "sympathetic." If the custody battle is influenced by her husband's mental illness and her concerns that the children may have inherited the disease, there is a link that could serve the film well. Otherwise, you risk adding a layer of detail that detracts, rather than adds.

False emotion—hyped-up music and sound effects and narration that warns of danger around every corner—is a common problem,

especially on television. As in the story of the boy who cried wolf, at some point it all washes over the viewer like so much noise. If the danger is real, it will have the greatest storytelling impact if it emerges organically from the material.

Raising the Stakes

Another tool of emotional storytelling is to have something at stake and to raise the stakes until the very end. Look at the beginning of *Control Room*. The film intercuts story cards (text on screen) with images of everyday life. The cards read: *March 2003 / The United States and Iraq are on the brink of war. / Al Jazeera Satellite Channel will broadcast the war . . . / to forty million Arab viewers. / The Arab world watches . . . / and waits. / CONTROL ROOM*. Clearly, these stakes are high.

In the hands of a good storyteller, even small or very personal stakes can be made large when their importance to those in the story is conveyed. For example, how many people in the United States—or beyond, for that matter—really care who wins or loses the National Spelling Bee, held each year in Washington, D.C.? But to the handful of children competing in *Spellbound*, and to their families and communities, the contest is all-important. Through skillful storytelling, the filmmakers make us care not only about these kids but about the competition, and as the field narrows, we can't turn away.

Stakes may rise because (genuine) danger is increasing or time is running out. In *Sound and Fury*, for example, the stakes rise as time passes, because for a child born deaf, a cochlear implant is most effective if implanted while language skills are being developed. How do the filmmakers convey this? We see Heather's much younger cousin get the implant and begin to acquire spoken-language skills; we also learn that Heather's mother, born deaf, might now get little benefit from the device. As Heather enrolls in a school for the deaf without getting an implant, we understand that the decision has lifelong implications.

In terms of your role as the storyteller, stakes also rise because of the way you structure and organize your film: What people know, and when they know it, what the stakes of a story mean *to your characters* and how well you convey that—all of these play a role in how invested the audience becomes in wanting or even needing to know the outcome of your film.

A Satisfactory Ending

A *satisfactory ending*, or resolution, is often one that feels both unexpected and inevitable. It must resolve the one story you set out to tell.

Say you start the film with a problem: A little girl has a life-threatening heart condition for which there is no known surgical treatment. Your film then goes into the world of experimental surgery, where you find a charismatic doctor whose efforts to solve a very different medical problem have led him to create a surgical solution that might work in the little girl's situation. To end on this surgical breakthrough, however, won't be satisfactory. Audiences were drawn into the story of the little girl, and this surgeon's work must ultimately be related to that story. Can his work make a difference in her case? You need to complete the story with which the film began. With that said, there is never just one correct ending.

Suppose, for example, that your film is due to be aired months before the approval is granted that will allow doctors to try the experimental surgery on the girl. Make that your ending, and leave the audience with the knowledge that everyone is working to ensure that she will survive until then. Or perhaps the surgery is possible, but at the last minute the parents decide it's too risky. Or they take that risk, and the outcome is positive. Or negative. Or perhaps the doctor's breakthrough simply comes too late for this one child but may make a difference for hundreds of others. Any of these would be a satisfactory ending, provided it is factual. It would be unethical to manipulate the facts to imply a "stronger" or more emotional ending that misrepresents what you know the outcome to be. Suppose, for example, that the parents have already decided that no matter how much success the experimental work is having, they will not allow their daughter to undergo any further operations. You cannot imply that this remains an open question (e.g., with a teaser such as "Whether the operation will save the life of little Candy is yet to be seen.").

Ending a film in a way that's satisfying does not necessitate wrapping up all loose ends or resolving things in a way that's upbeat. The end of *Daughter from Danang* is powerful precisely because things remain unsettled; Heidi Bub has achieved the goal of meeting her birth mother, but even two years after her visit, she remains deeply ambivalent about continued contact. At the end of *The Thin Blue Line*, Randall Adams remains a convicted murderer on death row, even as filmmaker Errol Morris erases any lingering doubts the audience might have as to his innocence.

SOURCES AND NOTES

There are various versions of this Alfred Hitchcock story distinguishing shock and suspense, including a discussion at the American Film

Institute in 1972, http://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Alfred_Hitchcock_at_the_AFI_Seminar_roundtable(18/Aug/1972). Story elements from David Howard and Edward Mabley, *The Tools of Screenwriting* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993). As described in a follow-up film, *Sound and Fury: Six Years Later*, Heather Artinian eventually received the cochlear device. Information about her work as an advocate for the hearing impaired can be found online. *The Thin Blue Line*'s Randall Adams was released in 1989, following the film's release. Information about his case can be found online.

CHAPTER 3

Finding the Story

Armed with an understanding of story, how do you find one within a chosen *subject* for a documentary? Suppose, for example, that you're thinking of doing a film about Elvis Presley, a bakery in your home town, or something about labor in the high-tech industry. 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 topic 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 bakery 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 significant local opposition. Your interest in the high-tech industry comes from stories you've read about global labor, worker exploitation, or the industry's impact on the environment.

We're surrounded by subjects that offer potential for documentary storytelling. Current events may trigger ideas, or an afternoon spent browsing the shelves at a local library or bookstore. Some filmmakers find stories within their own families. Alan Berliner made *Nobody's Business* about his father, Oscar; Deborah Hoffman made *Confessions of a Dutiful Daughter* about her mother's battle with Alzheimer's. Even when you're very close to a subject, however, you'll need to take an impartial view as you determine whether or not it would make a film that audiences will want to see. This is also true when you adapt documentaries from printed sources. In making the series *Cadillac Desert*, drawn from Marc Reisner's book of the same name, producer Jon Else chose three of the roughly 40 stories in Reisner's book; Else and his team then conducted their own research and determined the best way to tell those stories on film.

STORY RIGHTS

In general, if you're using a range of books and magazines solely for research purposes, you don't need to obtain any of the underlying rights. When the film is indelibly linked to a book, however, as was the case with *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (directed by Alex Gibney, based on the book by Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind), *A Brief History of Time* (directed by Errol Morris, based on the book by Stephen Hawking), or *Slavery by Another Name* (directed by Sam Pollard, based on the book by Douglas A. Blackmon), you will need to come to a legal arrangement with the author or copyright holder. (Don't confuse this with companion books that are written during or after production, such as the companion book to the first season of *Eyes on the Prize*. This book was written by the Blackside publishing staff and journalist Juan Williams during postproduction, and drew on the production teams' research and interviews. In other words, companion books are based on the documentaries, rather than vice versa.)

Note that when you are negotiating for the rights to a story, you will want to retain creative control over your film. The author may be an expert on the subject, but you are an expert on translating it on film to a general audience. You don't need a degree in science to make an extraordinary science documentary or a degree in social work to create a compelling portrait of runaway teens. What you need are intelligence, curiosity, an ability to learn fast, and a readiness to consult with people who *are* experts in those fields. Ideally, there is a positive collaboration between expert and filmmaker that serves to enrich the film.

"FINDING" THE STORY DURING PRODUCTION

One of the biggest misconceptions about documentary filmmaking is that it happens spontaneously. In fact, it's fairly common to hear filmmakers talk about the story revealing itself over the course of the production or even in the editing room. With experienced filmmakers, however, this tends *not* to mean that a filmmaker has simply shot material without any story in mind, but instead that he or she adjusts the story's focus or, more likely, its *structure* during production and postproduction. Even vérité projects, which are significantly crafted in the editing room, are generally not shot until filmmakers have some confidence that a story will unfold over the course of filming. You can't know where real life will take you, but you can anticipate a range of outcomes and determine whether or not a subject 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 birth mother who'd given her up years earlier, during "Operation Babylift" in 1975. Dolgin says:

> We all really believed that we were going into a happy reunion, and we had no idea whether we would come back with anything more than that. It just grabbed us with the possibilities of raw emotion and passion, and those are great elements for a documentary. And we're also drawn to films where we don't know what's going to happen—we have a concept and we go with it.

At a minimum, the filmmakers 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. Dolgin says:

> Maybe there would be a film that would explore what happens when you lose your birthplace identity. Heidi grew up in southern Tennessee, and we imagined going back with her and having her rediscover her roots in some way. But we had no idea, truly. We just went. And of course as soon as we got there it became clear that what we had anticipated was going to go in a different direction.

In Vietnam, the filmmakers found themselves immersed in the complex story they told in *Daughter from Danang*. Similarly, New York-based filmmaker Kazuhiro Soda was surprised to learn that a college friend was running to fill a vacant political seat, and hurried to Japan to start shooting the film that became *Campaign*, as he describes in Chapter 21.

Frederick Wiseman, renowned for his exploration of American institutions (*Hospital, Basic Training, Welfare, Public Housing, Domestic Violence*), has told interviewers that once he is given permission to film, he moves quickly, spending weeks shooting and then finding his themes and point of view over the course of several months of editing. But note that there is an inherent structure to Wiseman's work—the rhythms of daily life and of the individual stories he picks up over the course of filming—and a distinctive style that he brings to his films. For an interview (published in *The Boston Phoenix*) about the film *Public Housing*, writer and filmmaker Gerald Peary asked Wiseman if he looked for "drama" while shooting. "The first thought: I'm trying to make a movie," Wiseman responded. "A movie has to have dramatic

sequences and structure. . . . So yes, I am looking for drama, though I'm not necessarily looking for people beating each other up, shooting each other. There's a lot of drama in ordinary experiences." It's also worth noting that Wiseman's style of shooting almost invariably necessitates a high shooting ratio (footage filmed versus footage that ends up on screen) and a lengthy editing period.

Kazuhiko "Yama-san" Yamauchi, in *Campaign*.
Photo courtesy of the filmmaker.

SERENDIPITY

It's not unusual for filmmakers to begin one project, only to be drawn by the characters and situations they encounter toward a film that is 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 experience 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. More recently, British filmmaker Orlando von Einsiedel went to Virunga National Park in Congo to tell a "positive story about the rebirth of the region," he says, in Chapter 22, only to be confronted by a much more complex narrative, which he and his team wove together as *Virunga*.

Knowing that the story may change, or is even *likely* to change, 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. Knowing at least your baseline story helps you to anticipate, at minimum, what you'll need to make the film, including characters and location setups. When he worked with emerging documentary filmmakers at the University of California, Berkeley, Jon Else said he would require that they head out "with some bomb-proof fallback plan," so that even if everything on the shoot went wrong, they would still come back with something.

EVALUATING STORY IDEAS

Beyond the conviction that a story you're developing will work well as a film, the following important practical considerations may be helpful to consider.

Access and Feasibility

Does your film provide an entrée into new or interesting worlds, and can you obtain access to those worlds? Over the years, documentary filmmakers have taken audiences behind the scenes with Cuban immigrants as they arrive and settle in the United States (*Balseros*); with high school basketball stars as they follow their dreams of professional sports careers amid hardship in Chicago (*Hoop Dreams*); with a billionaire couple whose dream of constructing the largest privately-owned home in the United States is interrupted by economic crisis (*The Queen of Versailles*); with workers engaged in hazardous labor—as coal miners, sulfur carriers, welders, and more—in Ukraine, Indonesia, China, Pakistan, and Norway (*Workingman's Death*).

Aside from exclusive or extraordinary access, any film, even one shot in your grandparents' home, depends on some kind of access being granted, whether it be personal (your grandparents), location (permission to bring your equipment into their home), or archival (access to family photo albums, personal letters and such). Sometimes, *lack* of access may be part of the story, as with Michael Moore's pursuit of General Motors chairman Roger Smith, in *Roger & Me*.

As you develop your idea, you need to determine whether the elements needed for production are really available to you. Can you get inside a cyclotron to film? Will that Pulitzer Prize-winning author grant you an interview? Will you be allowed to follow a third-grade student during that spelling bee? Several years ago, I worked on a science

documentary for which we wanted to film cyclists in the Tour de France to illustrate the conservation of mass and energy. The success of a good portion of that film depended on access to the Tour and to exclusive CBS Sports coverage of it. Had we not been able to arrange these, we would have had to find a different illustration.

As an additional note, gaining access usually means establishing a relationship and building trust with the people who can grant it. This is a professional relationship, although filmmakers often grow very close to their subjects. 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. (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 deliberately to put their subjects on edge.)

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 into your hands, getting your film shot, edited, and technically ready for broadcast or theatrical release will still be very expensive. Even celebrated filmmakers have trouble raising money these days. Have you set your sights too high? Don't think small, just realistically. Know that some types of documentaries are costlier to produce than others, and that "extras," such as the rights to use a clip of archival film from a private collection or a short piece of music from your favorite album, can set you back thousands of dollars.

Passion and Curiosity

Do you care deeply about the subject? 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 a 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.

Passion is also an ingredient that commissioning editors and funders want to see when filmmakers approach them for support.

Filmmaker Hans Otto Nicolaysen used to review proposals for short and documentary films on behalf of Filmkontakt Nord (FkN) in Norway, which he helped to found. His first criteria for making a grant? "Passion," he says. "I always start with the question, 'Why are you telling me this story now?'" Nicolaysen says a proposal should convey not only the filmmaker's skill but also his or her connection to the material.

Passion must come with curiosity, or you risk creating a one-sided diatribe. Few people like being lectured at or told what to think, which is what may happen if you start a project with the conclusion, such as: "I want to show that animal testing is bad." Furthermore, if you already know what you think, why devote months or even years of your life to the film? As you think about issues that you feel strongly about, can you find questions that you'd like to explore? For example, you may think that you can't imagine a single scenario in which animal testing is justified. Are you willing to test that conviction by seeking out, and genuinely listening to, a range of people (scientists, patients, animal rights advocates, and others) who may share your point of view, strongly disagree with it, or more likely fall somewhere in between? If you find the debate of interest, or you come across stories in your research that merit digging deeper, your passion might lead to a viable project. You don't necessarily need to include all or even most of the research you've done on screen. You just need to do your homework, so that whatever story you end up telling contains the complexity it demands and draws viewers in, allowing them to reach their own conclusions based on honestly presented evidence.

Audience

Who is your intended audience? Many documentaries, whether produced independently or in-house, are created with an audience in mind. Even though you may end up reaching a different audience than expected—maybe the project you thought would only play regionally winds up being a national success—it can help to start with some idea of whom you're targeting: age, geographic area, educational level and so on. Are you creating science programming for grade schoolers, or an older audience? Are you hoping your political documentary catches the attention of HBO, or the executives at the PBS series *Frontline*, or audiences at independent art houses? Is your film intended not for broadcast but for use by community or educational groups? Do you hope to release your film theatrically? These questions are worth thinking about early on, because they may affect not only how you research and craft the film but also how and from where you might fund it.

It's also true that some filmmakers begin to work before worrying too much about these questions—the topic is too urgent or the opportunity too fleeting. This was the case with *The Kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt*, produced and directed by Victoria Bruce and Karin Hayes. In January 2002, they were finalizing plans to film Colombian senator Ingrid Betancourt while she campaigned for the presidency, when they saw on CNN that she'd been kidnapped by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). "When she was kidnapped, we just went into Plan B," remembers Bruce, who headed to Colombia almost immediately. That first shoot lasted 16 days, and two months later, a second shoot lasted 10 days.

"In between that time, we thought, okay, March/April, we're going to cut a trailer together, and we're going to get funding, we're going to get grants," Hayes says—but that didn't happen. Bruce's former boyfriend lent them $15,000, and the pair paid for the rest with their own savings and with credit cards. They taught themselves to edit, still without funding or any guarantee of an audience. But, Hayes notes, "From the very beginning, when I was imagining where did I want my film to be, and what style did it need to be, I was thinking HBO." That fall, their hopes were realized. At an industry gathering featuring commissioning editors, including one from HBO, Bruce pitched the film, motivating the HBO editor to follow up, attend a screening at Slamdance, and acquire the film [then called *Missing Peace*], with a caveat: It still wasn't ready for HBO.

"They wanted to do some re-editing, and we worked on it for another two months with their editor, Geof Bartz," explains Bruce. "The most important thing they changed was that they wanted you to know that Ingrid was kidnapped up front. We had a slow build of getting to know this woman. And Sheila Nevins [President of HBO Documentaries] said that you will care so much more about her time with her kids in the home video if you know she's going to be gone soon. It's brilliant."

There is no single road from idea to audience. Sometimes events and opportunities necessitate working quickly, before too much is known. Sometimes the subject may seem too obscure or too personal to seek sponsorship early on. In some cases, filmmakers nearly complete their films before submitting them to "open calls" for program slots or festival competition, and in that way they gradually find an audience and possibly funds for completion. But as all of these examples illustrate, at some point in the process, you need to identify whom you're trying to reach, and may want to adjust the storytelling accordingly.

Juan Carlos Lecompte and cardboard figure of his wife, from *The Kidnapping of Ingrid Betancourt.*
Photo by Ana Maria Garcia Rojas, courtesy of the filmmakers.

Relevance

Will anybody care about your film, or can you make them care? 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 find a compelling story that will be worth others not only funding but watching? It's possible to make people care about all sorts of things, but it usually takes the right approach. For more on this, see Chapter 6.

Timeliness

One aspect of relevance, though not always the most important one, is timeliness, which is not to be confused with the timeline of news reporting. In this context, it means that television executives, for example, may hope to plan documentary programming to coincide with an

event, such as a historical anniversary or a high-profile motion-picture release on a related topic. The fact that a subject is or may become topical, however, is not by itself a reason to pursue it, because by the time you finish the film, 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 elephant 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 American presidential campaign of 2016 may not be.

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—but you'll still need to find a narrative thread, if that's the style of film you're choosing to make.

Hook

Another question to ask as you evaluate the story is, does it have a 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 a 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, aren't sure they want her to have the operation. It's the part of the story that makes people want to know more.

Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple, does not hook audiences with the horror of a mass suicide/murder that took place in 1978, even though the film opens with text on screen announcing the event. Instead, the film's hook is that it promises viewers an insider's look at what it means to join a community, only to be drawn inexorably into a terrifying, downward spiral. As discussed especially in

Chapter 7, the hook is often the last piece of the film to come together, as the themes, characters, and story come more clearly into focus and are distilled into the promise you make to the viewers: *This* is what this movie is; *this* is why it's worth your time; *this* is why this story needs to be told and demands your attention.

Existing Projects

What other films or series have been done on the topic, and when? This is useful to know, in part because it 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; look at the range of projects on the American civil rights movement, the threat of nuclear war, or dinosaurs. But knowing as much as you can about your subject also means knowing how else it's been treated on film, not only for the sake of the film but also to bolster your ability to defend the idea to potential funders and distributors.

Is This a Film You'd Want to See?

Given an assignment to research, write, or even make a short documentary on a subject of their choosing, students often seem to go first to "important" topics and the kinds of films that mimic the stereotype of what documentaries are. The initial pitches tend to be for films that are dutiful, critical of the injustice in the world, and in all likelihood nothing like the films they would seek out for entertainment.

Why not think backward? First, it's important to consider what's possible on a fixed schedule and budget (including a time budget); this will likely mean a simpler approach even to a relatively complex issue. But thinking backward also means putting yourself in the position of both filmmaker and audience, and thinking in terms of choice and enjoyment: What sort of film would you enjoy making and, perhaps more importantly, watching? Which filmmakers, films, and subjects are you most drawn to?

DEVELOPING THE STORY

Once you've decided that your idea is worth pursuing, you'll need to start refining the story and planning how you'll tell it. There's no single way to do this, and furthermore, it's a process that tends to continue from the moment an idea strikes you until the final days of postproduction. In general, though, depending on the needs of the project,

the budget, and the schedule, you are likely to at least write some form of outline or treatment, so that you know—before you spend a lot of time and money shooting—that you have a story that works, and can plan not only what you need to shoot but also why.

IF YOU ALREADY KNOW THE STORY, HOW CAN THE FILM NOT BE BIASED OR DIDACTIC?

Knowing your story (or at least the germ of it) at the start of a project is not the same thing as knowing exactly what you want to say and how. It simply means having an idea of the narrative spine on which you could hang your subject and having at least some idea of themes you want to explore. From there, you need to research, develop, and shoot your story with questions and an open mind. Building on an earlier example, as sympathetic to the bakery owners as you may feel at the start of your project, you might come to find yourself sympathizing with developers, or discovering that a third solution, while meaning the end of the bakery, is best for the town.

Every film is different. With a historical film, you know the event itself, and finding the story means figuring out which part of the event you want to explore and what the parameters of that story are—in other words, where you enter and where you exit, which is determined to a large degree by what *story* you're choosing to tell. "You have to draw limits on when the story begins and ends," filmmaker Stanley Nelson explains (Chapter 19). "Sometimes it happens on paper before we start. Sometimes it happens in the edit room, and those are sometimes the hardest decisions to make."

For example, imagine a commission to make a film about Prince Charles and Lady Diana. Well, what about them, what piece of their lives together (or apart) are you choosing to tell? Is it a story of their courtship, marriage, and divorce? Is it a critique of the economics of twentieth-century monarchy? Is it about Diana's activism on behalf of HIV/AIDS, and how that may or may not have affected her standing at home? As noted, your story may shift over the course of making the film, but think about how different your production will be if your narrative spine is their wedding rather than a story of Diana's activism.

As noted, even films that end up advocating a position or idea—that these chemicals shouldn't have been dumped, that law enforcement used too much force, that laws are being broken—will be stronger if those creating them remain open to new and even conflicting

information. The more effectively and truthfully you can present your case and trust your audience's intelligence, the more likely it is that the resulting film will stand up to scrutiny.

TELLING AN ACTIVE STORY

A significant percentage of the documentaries on television these days are about events that are over and done with. You still generally want to craft a narrative that unfolds over the course of the film, so that the outcome appears to be uncertain. One way of doing this is to keep the storytelling (and interviews) in the moment. This means, for example, that witnesses who are interviewed don't say: "I found out later he was fine, but at this point I got a call from somebody, Andy I think it was, he later became mayor, and Andy told me that my boy Jimmy was down the well." Instead, ask your storytellers to stick to what is known at this point in your narrative, moment to moment, such as, "I got a call that Jimmy was in the well. I ran screaming for help."

Telling an active story allows the viewer to come with you through an experience. It builds tension and leaves the ending a surprise. (This works even when the outcome is already known. A good storyteller can get an audience to suspend disbelief and somehow hope with their hearts for an outcome that their heads know is not possible.) If you or an interviewee begin a story by telling us the outcome, you've let all of the suspense out of your story. Surprisingly, this is a common mistake, not only in interviews but in scripted narration. People will write, "Although he wasn't badly hurt, Jimmy had fallen down a deep well."

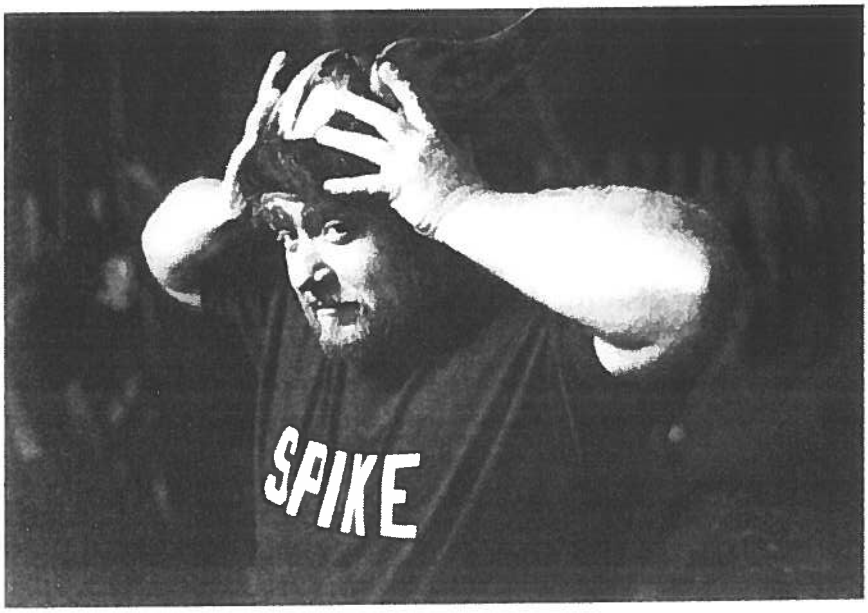
Does staying in the moment mean that you can't offer interpretations of the past? No. For example, an expert witness might be interviewed saying, "People complain about over-regulation, that there's too much of it. But there are laws that should have made the contractors responsible for sealing that well up. Instead, they left it open, and a little boy fell in." The expert hasn't yet said when or how the boy got out, but he has put this accident into a broader context.

Sometimes, it will seem that a film's subject just doesn't lend itself to a forward-moving story. For example, suppose that members of the local historical society want you to make a film about their town's founding in 1727, and they want to fold in some material about the origins of some of the wonderful old architecture that still survives. They're excited by the fact that many of the local families are descended from early residents, so they have access to a decent collection of old oil portraits as well as photographs and even some letters. What does

it add up to? Not much that will interest anyone who's not a direct relative of the folks on camera, because there's no story being told on screen—yet. When Ken Burns, Ric Burns, and Geoffrey Ward used artifacts and images from the nineteenth century in *The Civil War*, they used them in the service of a powerful story—the North against the South. What's the *story* of this town's history?

In the search for narrative, some filmmakers find a "guide" to the past, such as the town's mayor, who might say, "Let's set out to see where this great city came from," and off he or she goes. But there are often more creative devices, and it can be useful to find a present-day story that would motivate a look back. For example, what if students from the local middle school are researching the town's history in order to write a play that they will perform later that year? That's a possible framework. What if a local builder is trying to restore the town's oldest house, which has been renovated repeatedly over the years? In order to do so he's got to peel back the layers one by one, offering a reason to explore the town's architectural history while also giving us a chance to follow the kind of home building renovation that audiences enjoy. These aren't earth-shattering ideas, but they demonstrate ways to consider a subject that might not seem, at first glance, to have much potential as a film.

"When approaching a film, I always try to find at least two stories that unfold simultaneously," says filmmaker Jon Else. "One of them almost always is a very simple, straight-ahead, forward motion through



Ken "Spike" Kirkland, in *Sing Faster: The Stagehands' Ring Cycle.*
Photo courtesy of Jon Else.

time. For instance, in *Sing Faster*, the forward motion is just the simple story that is told in Wagner's *Ring* cycle, in the operas. It's this crazy soap opera about the gods fighting, a giant Aristotelian drama with characters and rising conflict and resolution and all that. And then parallel to that is the much less linear story of the stagehands preparing this production for opening night."

WORK BACKWARD, EMBRACE LIMITS

This one piece of advice touches on everything else in this chapter, but goes a step farther. First, understand that limitations can be enormously helpful in sparking creativity, while too much freedom can have the opposite effect. Second, be honest about what your limitations are, in terms of experience, access to equipment or personnel, and the level of resources available to you (including not only money but also time). Without substantial resources, you cannot create a comprehensive film history of World War II. Instead, play to your strengths. Find one local World War II veteran, or a group of them who meet weekly to play darts, that sort of thing.

Think about what your end product is going to be and what it will take to get there in terms of your schedule and budget. Be sure to factor in all the costs of finishing the film, especially if you'll need to produce masters and clear rights. Especially, consider your time frame. If you don't have a lot of time to edit, you don't want to go overboard in shooting—you want to shoot less and shoot smarter. And if the overall length of the finished film is limited—in other words, you don't have a lot of *screen time*—that also presents limits, and working backward to incorporate that limit can be useful. Here's an example of this, from Boston-based filmmaker Tracy Heather Strain, whose credits include commissioned films for the PBS series *American Masters* and *Race: The Power of an Illusion*. Earlier in her career, she was talking to a series producer about everything she wanted to include in an hour-long film she was making and where she wanted the story to go. The series producer reminded her that with credits, her film would only run about 55 minutes. Strain says:

> It hit me to think about it. All the things I want to say are not going to fit in a 55-minute film. And so one of the first things I do now is look at how long I have [on screen] and I sketch out a little three-act, minute breakdown.

With classic three-act structure (Chapter 4), for example, the first and third acts are roughly a quarter of the film, with the second act roughly

half. A 20-minute film, therefore, needs to get a story going within five or six minutes, with the tension ratcheting up through the second and third acts—a total of maybe 10 to 12 minutes—before reaching a quick resolution. The more focused the story, the better the chances of accomplishing this.

SUMMARY

Going into production with the story in mind, even knowing that the focus is likely to shift, is generally far more effective than just heading out to cover a vaguely defined subject. Jon Else says:

> Films don't go over budget because you paid a sound guy too much and put the crew in a hotel for an extra day. They go over budget because people waste two months of editorial time figuring out what the story is. If you're talking about doing inexpensive work, that's the single most important thing, finding a story that comes with a ready-made through line. It's much more cost-efficient to figure out the story beforehand.

The downside, Else notes, is that "it's very, very tough to do any kind of cinema vérité film—which involves really discovering the story—inexpensively." Even when filmmakers carefully select a subject for the strength of its characters and the potential of a strong narrative line, the films, such as *Salesman* or *Control Room*, are built on an observational approach that takes considerable time to shape in an editing room.

SOURCES AND NOTES

Transcripts and additional information about *Daughter from Danang* can be found at the *American Experience* website, www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/daughter/filmmore/pt.html; also see the film website, www.daughterfromdanang.com. Gerald Peary's interview with Frederick Wiseman (*Boston Phoenix*, March 1998) can be found at www.geraldpeary.com/interviews/wxyz/wiseman.html. Additional information on Frederick Wiseman and his films can be found at his website, www.zipporah.com. Information on *Sound and Fury* available at www.nextwavefilms.com/sf/joshnotes.html.

CHAPTER 4

Story Structure

A good way to gauge the status of a film in progress is to ask the filmmaker to tell you the story of the film in a brief, one- or two-paragraph pitch. If he or she immediately launches into a lengthy description of the opening shot or an amazing scene, the film might be in trouble. Visuals *serve* a story; they are not the story. Along the same lines, if the filmmaker starts to talk about the subject in broad terms—the film is about a soccer team, or World War II, or a famous author—there may also be a problem. To really get to the heart of the story, you need to have a sharper focus: What *about* World War II or that author or team? Given that subject, what story are you telling and how are you telling it?

This is where structure comes in. Think about the times when you've tried and failed to effectively tell a joke. A good joke needs structure: a setup, followed by complications/escalation, followed by a completely unexpected—but in hindsight, inevitable—punchline. If the joke teller gives the punchline away, or interrupts the joke with too many unnecessary details or asides, the joke loses its power.

Narrative structure tends to work in the same way. If your pitch sounds like a grab bag of ideas and explanations, chances are you're missing the structure, whether the project is still at the treatment stage or you think you're nearly finished editing. Lack of structure is evident when a film is strung together with a series of "and then this happened, and then this, and then this," or when it's a jumble of ideas and scenes that feels disorganized and repetitive, with no variation in rhythm and no real build of ideas or argument.

Structure is the foundation of narrative storytelling; it's what gives it a beginning, middle, and end. It puts the filmmaker(s) in the author's seat, driving the film forward in a way that compels the viewer to want to come along to find out what happens next. Perhaps counterintuitively, *simplicity* of structure is what allows for complexity in the overall film. If you have a strong narrative spine, you can hang a tremendous amount of content onto it and audiences will stay with you. This strategy is a big part of what distinguishes and defines the best of creative nonfiction film.

THE NARRATIVE SPINE, OR TRAIN

Films move forward in time, taking audiences with them. You want the storytelling to move forward, too, and to motivate viewers to be curious about the information you're giving them. The train is the single thread—either an action or a question/argument, generally—that drives your film forward, from beginning to end. The narrative spine, the base-line story, is what you pitch in order to encapsulate what your film is and allow others to imagine it as a story on screen, rather than a subject. It is your narrative framework, and the way it's stated suggests a possible outcome.

- The train for *Super Size Me* might be stated as: *To test whether or not fast food is really as bad for your health as people claim it is, a filmmaker sets out to eat only what is offered at McDonald's for 30 days, measuring his health with the aid of doctors.* Possible outcomes: Either the McDiet will harm the filmmaker or it won't.
- The train for *Daughter from Danang* might be stated as: *A young Amerasian woman returns to Vietnam to meet the birth mother who gave her up for adoption 22 years earlier, in 1975, as Saigon was evacuated.* Possible outcomes: Either the reunion will go well or it won't.

Get a good train going, and you can make detours as needed for exposition, complex theory, additional characters, backstory—whatever you need. Because this is a foundational device, the train does not need to be present at every moment in your film; in fact, in many films the actual screen time devoted to the train is quite small. But you must return to the train periodically throughout, and the train that began the film needs to be resolved as you end the film. All along the way, even as you detour, you must remember to ask yourself, *what does this detour mean for my train, how does it advance or complicate it*? These detours aren't there just as distractions; they add depth and tension to the forward moving narrative.

Identifying the Train

Identifying and articulating a film's train, whether the film is still at the idea stage or has already been produced, can be difficult. One of the key strategies is to think simpler. In the classroom, student filmmakers often struggle with the train because they get caught up in details of the plot rather than thinking in basic terms about something on which to hang that plot. Try to strip the film's structure to its core question

or action. Michael Moore's *Roger & Me* follows a lot of issues and characters, but at its core is a very simple device: Moore sets himself up as the protagonist, trying to get a meeting with Roger Smith, CEO of General Motors. That device enables Moore to string together otherwise difficult-to-connect material. As complex as *Sound and Fury* is, the spine is built on one question: Will Heather Artinian be given a cochlear implant?

Look at Maysles Films' *Gimme Shelter*, the 1970 film that follows the Rolling Stones through the end of a 1969 tour, focusing heavily on their efforts to organize and then perform at a free concert at the Altamont Speedway in northern California, where events spiral dangerously out of control. The film's narrative device is not the concert or the stabbing death that occurred there; it's the Stones *watching* the concert on a flatbed editing machine (Steenbeck), in part to see the stabbing that had not been apparent to them from the stage. "This gives us the freedom, all you guys watching this," filmmaker David Maysles explains to the Stones as they sit around the Steenbeck. (The film is directed by David Maysles, who's seen recording sound; his brother Albert, unseen, who's shooting; and editor Charlotte Zwerin, who's operating the Steenbeck.) "We may only be on you for a minute," he continues, "and then we can go to almost anything."

The device allows the Maysles to set up the mysteries of the film—what happened, what was the involvement of the Hell's Angels, did the Stones have any idea what was happening?—and launches the film. By periodically cutting to Mick Jagger and Charlie Watts watching and reacting to the footage that we (the film audience) are watching, the filmmakers are more free to cut between scenes and sequences that are otherwise somewhat disconnected: Footage from concerts that preceded the one at Altamont; scenes showing the complication and risk of trying to organize the free concert and find a venue for it; scenes of chaos in the hours before and during the concert, scenes of performances by Grace Slick, Tina Turner, and others. And at the end of the film, they return again to the editing room, as the Stones ask them to rewind and replay the images captured by one of the cameras, freezing on a gun in the hands of the man who was stabbed. With their responses, the film is essentially over.

The Train Conveys One Story

The train of the film is its core story, its foundation. You will likely be able to identify the train within the opening sequence (whether it runs

two minutes or ten; it depends on the film), and if you're right, you would expect to see the film return to the train periodically throughout and then conclusively at the end. This doesn't mean it should be an easy journey to get to that ending, nor should the ending be entirely predictable. It just has to connect to the story you promised when the film opened. If, during production, the film takes a detour and ends up with a powerful end to a different story, it's probable that you and your team will need to rethink how the film opens and what the actual spine of the film is.

Each Film's Train Is Unique

The narrative spine is part of what differentiates your film from someone else's. For example, the website for Firelight Media offers a three-paragraph description of *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, directed by Stanley Nelson. The third paragraph suggests the structure of the film: "On November 18, 1978, over 900 members of Peoples Temple died in the largest mass suicide/murder in history. Using never-before-seen archival footage and survivor interviews, *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* tells the story of the people who followed Jim Jones from Indiana to California and finally to the remote jungles of Guyana, South America in a misbegotten quest to build an ideal society." The journey is implied in the title and this description.

In contrast, another filmmaker drawing on the same history might make a film called *Massacre at Jonestown*, which might have as its train the final days in Guyana. Someone else might make *Jonestown Survivor*, which might tell the story of an individual's journey from that fateful day to a new life. Nelson's film, bookended by the massacre, follows the temple and its members on a harrowing journey that seemed to begin with free choice and ends with entrapment, brutality, and death.

Sometimes, you can confirm your hunch about a train by looking at the DVD box: *Waltz with Bashir*, for example, "chronicles one man's descent into his own half-forgotten past." (If you are pitching it as a train, you'll likely want to add specifics: an *Israeli* man's descent; half-forgotten past *as a soldier in Lebanon*.) *Man on Wire* shows how Philippe Petit "overcame seemingly insurmountable challenges to achieve the artistic crime of the century." Alex Gibney's *Taxi to the Dark Side* "investigates the torture and killing of an innocent Afghani taxi driver in this gripping probe into reckless abuses of government power." As Gibney discusses in Chapter 15, the story of the young taxi

driver's murder provided a narrative framework for a subject he'd been struggling with: "I was approached to do a film about torture, and initially reluctant because it was a very difficult subject and I wasn't sure the subject would be a film. And so I looked for a story . . ."

Remember, though, that the train may not be neatly articulated on the box, and that in fact there may not be a clear-cut train. Eugene Jarecki's *Why We Fight* is a well-structured and complex film, but the description on the box ("an unflinching look at the anatomy of American war-making") doesn't describe the train; instead, it talks generally about the film. *Why We Fight* is an interesting example, however, because the film uses the arc of a grieving father, retired police officer Wilton Sekzer, as a narrative *framing device*. Having lost his son in the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, Sekzer wants revenge and believes the U.S. government's argument that the target should be Iraq. By the end of the film, his views have changed. Sekzer is not an active protagonist, and his story is not the train, because he does not have a goal that propels the film forward. But his presence and arc helps to give the film's overall essay a coherent and satisfying shape.

A Train Is Both Universal and Specific

Films generally appeal to our emotions before they appeal to our heads. In fact, the reason to tell a story for maximum (genuine) emotional impact is so that you *can* appeal to people's heads. Think about the documentaries and even the fictional dramas that appeal to you. At their most basic level, the questions they raise are: Will the guy get the girl? Will the outbreak be stopped? Will the town/puppy/hostage be saved? Will the team/first grader/unemployed father win the competition?

The train is the device that gets to the heart of your film, whether it's a story of competition or a question that demands an answer. Here's an example. I am not naturally drawn to space exploration. I understand that it's complex and important, but when people start going into details about lunar modules and orbits and heat shields, my eyes glaze over. There are, of course, people who will buy any book or video that comes out about the space program, people who know everything there is to know about Sputnik and Goddard and the Sea of Tranquility. So the question is, how do you make a film that will appeal to both groups? You don't want to make it so superficial that you bore the aficionados, or so dry that you will never attract audiences like me. (Note that I did not say "so technical," because if you get a good train going, you can be surprisingly technical and people will

want to follow you.) A student of mine came up with a solution that I thought worked well.

The assignment was to write a treatment for a historical documentary on any U.S. subject. He chose the tragic Apollo 1 mission. (In 1967, a month before they were to become the first men to land on the moon, three U.S. astronauts died in a fire during a routine test.) One possible train that he considered was the government investigation that followed the fire, but it quickly became apparent that this would mire the film in bureaucracy—committees and reports and testimony—and lose anyone not interested in the details. Instead, he used the day of the fire as his train, moving the events forward in a way that motivated a look into the history and politics of space research and the lives of the astronauts involved. Since he presented the story from the point of view of those with something at stake in its outcome, he was able to bring the "initially disinterested" audience members along, giving us a reason to care and want to learn more.

Thinking about the "initially disinterested" is a good strategy in general. It's very easy for your own knowledge of or passion for a subject to get in the way of good storytelling. Assume that a big portion of the people you hope to reach don't know (or perhaps don't care) about something that you know every detail of. As you think about the story you want to tell about these topics, what are the key points that most fascinate you? How might you pitch the film at a family event, or in an elevator should you bump into a commissioning executive? What are the three to five "bullet points" you might fold into a pitch that will not only get people to pay attention, but might prompt them to ask you for details?

BUILDING ON THE NARRATIVE FRAME

The train, or spine, summarizes the film's structure at its most basic. Now you need to build a film that will hold an audience's attention, whether it's for 20 minutes or two hours or more. We've all sat through documentaries that seemed pointless and meandering. Maybe they had great beginnings, but then they seemed to start again, and again, and again. The film seemed to be about one thing, but the rousing conclusion was about something altogether different. The story started in the present, and then quickly plunged into background and never resurfaced. Or the situation and characters were so weakly developed that we found ourselves caring little about the outcome. These are often problems of structure.

Structure works in response to the audience's built-in expectations. It's human nature to try to make sense of patterns and arrangements, to work at filling in the blanks and guessing what happens next. Filmmakers can heighten or confound those expectations, thereby increasing the viewer's involvement in a story and investment in its outcome. There's no such thing as a lack of structure; even in an experimental film, something is stringing those images together. That something, for better or worse, is structure.

The building blocks of a film's structure are shots, scenes, sequences, and, in some but not all cases, acts. Because these are commonly used words that at times have conflicting meanings, the following definitions clarify how they're being used here.

Shot

A shot is a single "take" on an image. There may be camera movement during the shot, or it may be static. It may be a close-up, a wide shot, a pan, or a tilt. But it begins and ends with the action of the cinematographer turning on and off the camera; later, the editor will further refine the shot by selecting from within it, giving it a new beginning and end point. Individual shots can convey a great deal of storytelling information: point of view, time of day, mood, emotion, character, rhythm, theme. A single shot may also include a "reversal," which is a twist in the plot, sometimes described as a change in values from one state to another. An example of a shot that contains a reversal can be found in *Yosemite: The Fate of Heaven*. We follow a cascading waterfall down through what appears to be pristine wilderness—until we land in a crowded tram full of noisy tourists. The reversal is from isolation to crowds, nature to humankind, pristine to polluted.

Scene

A scene is a consecutive group of shots within a single location. You might have a "scene at the courthouse" or a "scene on the boat." A scene is usually more than simply a snapshot of a location, however; it's a subset of the overall action. A scene is made up of a series of *beats*. In *Born into Brothels*, the scene "The children ride a bus to the beach" might be broken down like this:

- A few shots (interior, then exterior) show the children's excitement that a bus has arrived and is waiting.
- From inside the bus, we see a child ask if she can sit by a window, because she wants to take pictures. Everyone's on board; another

quick shot, and then filmmaker Zana Briski makes sure the children all have their cameras.

- With a honk, we see the driver's point of view (POV) as the trip gets under way. From inside and outside the bus, we see a range of shots: children looking, taking pictures, their point of view as they look out; the bus moving forward.
- Inside the bus, the children eat and begin to sing (various shots).
- One child is sick.
- The music shifts as the bus gets into a more rural area (seen from various points of view).
- Inside the bus, several of the children have fallen asleep (various shots), intercut with more traveling shots, as the landscape becomes more rural.
- The bus has stopped; the children gather their things and look out at the ocean.

In other words, the scene started with the excited shout, "Hurry up, the bus is here," and ended with "Look at the water!" Like shots, sequences, and acts, scenes like this contain a beginning, middle, and end, and often, they culminate in a reversal, called a turning point, that motivates a shift in action of the overall story. Here, the reversal ties in with some of the film's themes. Boarding a bus in a congested, dirty city, the children arrive at the bright, open seaside. This reversal motivates the next scene—enjoying and photographing the beach.

To be satisfying, a scene should feel complete, which means that those filming the scene need to remain aware that events being witnessed will need to be condensed in the editing room, and shot accordingly. Filmmaker Steven Ascher (*Troublesome Creek*) explains, "Filming real life is a constant struggle to distill reality into a meaningful subset of itself . . . the telling moments, the telling gestures, the lines of dialogue that will suggest the rest of the scene without actually having to see the rest of the scene."

Sequence

A sequence is a collection of shots and scenes that together tell a more or less continuous story of an event that's a piece of your bigger story. Like a book's chapter, a sequence has a beginning, middle, and end. And, like a book's chapter, your sequences should be different from each other; each should have a unique job to do in the overall storytelling, while also moving the film's train—its underlying

plot, or narrative—forward. It can be helpful to think of titles for your sequences, whether or not they end up on screen (they probably won't). A title will help you differentiate the "Frankie goes to the prom" sequence, to use an example from an imaginary vérité film, from a sequence in which "Frankie retakes her college admissions test" (SAT).

The sequence in which Frankie goes to the prom might begin with Frankie rushing home from her job at the mall and continue with her emerging from her bedroom in a long white gown, dancing with her boyfriend, crying in the ladies' room because she's been dumped, and then arriving home, where she collapses into her mother's arms. The sequence you're thinking of as *Frankie retakes her SATs* might begin with Frankie hiring a private tutor and continue with a montage of her studying late at night and on Saturdays, getting ready to take the test, and entering the test room; it might end with her nervously taking the envelope, with her results, out of the mailbox.

But you're not yet done with how you think about these as sequences. What's the overall story of this film, and how do the sequences serve the story? If the film is about a high-school student's struggle to earn a college scholarship, and that's your spine, your sequences need to link to that spine. That means that you need to think about the spine either as you're planning the shoot or as you're editing the film. What is the minimum score she needs to get on her SAT to qualify for the scholarship she is pursuing? How does attending the prom affect the story, if at all? You never want to force it, so if you can't find (not impose, find) a connection, you may end up dropping a sequence.

For example, if the point of your film is actually to look at the obstacles that stand between a student and college, the scholarship may be one focus, but your bigger spine would be *affording college*. In that case, you'd want to find out, through your research, what steps this student is taking to afford college, and decide what is *necessary* to honestly tell the story. If she's had a part time job all the way through high school, that's probably necessary. The prom sequence may not be relevant to the story about "getting a scholarship," but the cost of going could be part of a story about "affording college."

Each sequence, like each chapter in a book, should feel unique. As filmmaker Ric Burns explained, describing the creation of *The Center of the World*, a two-hour history of the World Trade Center and the final episode of his acclaimed series *New York: A Documentary Film*, "Every step along the way you ask, 'What's absolutely crucial

to telling the story? What advances the story?'" Burns describes applying a:

> basic narrative yardstick, which is: try not to tell any story [in this case, meaning sequences within the overall story] more than once. So there's only one riot. There's only one fire. There's only one burst of skyscrapers. There's only one war. In other words, always find that moment where the nature of the particular story you're telling is caught at its highest arc.

Going back to the example of *Born into Brothels*, we can see how the bus *scene* fits into a bigger *sequence*, which might be called "the day at the beach." The sequence begins with two quick exterior shots before the girl announces the bus's arrival, and continues through the bus ride and into a long scene of the children at the beach, discovering the ocean, playing in the waves, doing cartwheels, and taking pictures. And then it's night, and they're dancing on the bus as it heads back to Kolkata. It arrives, and we see the children make their way up the street, past "the line" of sex workers, and into the narrow passages to their homes. (The entire sequence runs from a fade-in at 36:48, timed from the film's first frame of action, to a fade-out at 43:53.)

This sequence achieves a number of things that serve the overall film. It shows the children interacting as a group and as independent, lively, spirited people. The pictures, especially Avijit's "Bucket," will be featured later in the film. Furthermore, the joy of the scene is immediately contrasted by the next scene, in which we see one of the children being beaten, and his mother (and possibly grandmother) screaming obscenities at him and at neighbors. In the scene after that, we see some of the children in a car and hear Briski's voice-over: "I'm not a social worker, I'm not a teacher, even. That's my fear, you know, that I really can't do anything and that even helping them to get an education's not going to do anything. But without help, they're doomed." Having seen them in a brief day's escape, we want more than ever for her to succeed. (Had there been another sequence that achieved most of the same things as this one, a choice would have been made about which was stronger, and only one of them used.)

Scenes and sequences are a big part of how you establish and vary the rhythm of a film. If it all feels the same, and there's no change of tone, mood, pace, or even content throughout, the film is going to get tedious very quickly. A scene stays in one location; a sequence conveys one important (overall) idea, theme, event. There will likely be a turning point at the end of a scene, and an even bigger one at the end

of a sequence. (Story expert Robert McKee says that ideally, each scene creates a shift or reversal that is at least minor; each sequence, a change that is moderate; and each act, a change that is major.) Even if your film does not have acts, each sequence should advance your overall argument or story. Think about the information you need and when you most need it.

The only real way to understand sequences is by discovering and analyzing them yourself, through close viewing of others' films and by trying to organize your own films into sequences. For more on this, see Chapter 7.

Act

First, not all films use act structure; many don't. "Act" is a term borrowed from dramatic storytelling (playwriting, screenwriting). An act is a series of sequences that drives to a major turning point—a climactic moment that springs directly from the story and makes necessary the next series of sequences in the act that follows. Each act plays a role in the overall storytelling, and the tension and momentum within each should be increasing.

In traditional three-act (also known as dramatic) structure, the first act covers the bulk of the story's exposition and, to paraphrase the late showman and writer George M. Cohan, gets your hero up a tree. In the second act, you throw rocks at him, forcing him higher up in the tree. In the third act, you force him to the edge of a branch that looks as if it might break at any moment . . . and then you turn the corner to your story's resolution, and let your hero climb down.

There are three important things to know about acts. The first is that there is something about dramatic structure that seems built into the way we receive and enjoy stories, and even jokes. The second is that many documentaries do not fit neatly into what might be described as formal dramatic structure, even if they employ an approximation of it. Third, there are many ways to create a compelling structural throughline—what fiction writer Madison Smartt Bell describes as "narrative design"—in a documentary without going anywhere near dramatic structure. The film still needs to have compelling characters and rising tension, each scene should move the narrative forward, and the film should satisfactorily conclude the story (or mission, essay, journey, etc.) with which it began. But it doesn't have to do it in three acts.

Before we move into some specifics of act structure, here are a few other useful terms.

Jeanne Jordan and family in 1960, from *Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern.*
Photo courtesy of the filmmakers.

Inciting Incident

The inciting incident is the event that sets into motion the action of the story (the actions that relate to the train, not the subject). It may be something that's occurred before you start filming. In *Troublesome Creek*, for example, it's the decision of the Jordan family to keep their 450-acre Iowa farm running for one final year. Filmmakers Jeannie Jordan and Steve Ascher began the film after Jeannie's father, Russ, told them of the plan. Ascher says:

> Russ called and said he thought this would be his last year of farming. To be able to do a story like this, to have that kind of access—I thought of it as both an opportunity to tell this story and also for Jeannie to be able to tell some of the wonderful stories she'd been telling around the dinner table for years about growing up in Iowa.

The plan was to spend one final year planting and harvesting, after which the Jordans would auction off their livestock, equipment, and personal belongings in order to pay off their debts and keep the land itself, 450 acres. Ascher explains:

> That gave us the possibility of a narrative spine. It would have been much harder, if not impossible, to just make a film about day-to-day life on the farm and be able to get into the kinds of issues that we did. We filmed four times over the course of about a year and a half.

The resulting film, *Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern*, was nominated for an Academy Award, among other honors.

In *Spellbound*, the inciting incident for each of the competitors we meet is that they are qualifying, or have qualified, to compete in the National Spelling Bee. In *Super Size Me*, the inciting incident, arguably, occurs when filmmaker Morgan Spurlock first learns of the lawsuit against McDonald's, and comes up with the notion of filming a 30-day McDiet. In *Waltz with Bashir*, a conversation with an old friend sparks an unexpected flashback, and sets the filmmaker on a journey to recover memories of his time on an Israeli Army mission in Lebanon.

Note: The inciting incident relates specifically to the film's train, not to the underlying history. It's the incident that sets the film's train in motion.

Point of Attack

Not to be confused with the inciting incident, the point of attack is where you, as the filmmaker, enter the film: the first frames of action. It's generally agreed that this is one of the hardest decisions to make over the course of production. In fact, it's often made and unmade many times before the right point of attack is found and you can't imagine why you ever tried anything else.

The point of attack ushers the viewer into the world of your film and its themes and characters. Discussing the opening visuals of his film *The City and the World*, episode seven of *New York*, Ric Burns says:

> It wasn't until fairly late in the editing process that we realized the beginning of the film was a moment in 1944 when Helen Leavitt borrows a 16mm movie camera and takes it up to the streets of East Harlem, and with a couple of friends, including James Agee, begins to shoot the footage that becomes her extraordinary film,

In the Streets. That scene is absolutely, in my view, the best way to start that film, and it seems so completely inevitable—but it wasn't inevitable in the sense that we knew it from the beginning.

Where you begin your film is a critical decision. The first frames may—but don't always—set the train in motion (generally, though, the train or story of your film will be under way by the end of the opening sequence). The film open also is your first chance to draw the audience into your subject and themes. As noted, your point of attack is very likely to change as you grow closer to your material; simply start with the best opening you have at that time and let it evolve from there.

Backstory

Backstory is a form of exposition, but the two terms are not always synonymous. The backstory includes the events that happened before (sometimes long before) the main story being told; it often includes material a filmmaker thinks is critical for the audiences to understand in order to "get" the story.

Backstory can be conveyed in a number of ways, including title cards (text on screen), interviews, narration, and conversation. To some extent, backstory involves the details of exposition that are revealed over the course of the film and add complexity to the story and its characters. Far along in *Grizzly Man*, for example, we learn that Timothy Treadwell very nearly won the role in the television series *Cheers* that went to actor Woody Harrelson. It is backstory—part of the complex journey that led Treadwell to live dangerously close to bears in the Alaskan wilderness. Placed where it is in the film, the detail adds a further layer of complexity to our understanding, and the filmmaker's, of the forces that led to Treadwell's death.

Often, and sometimes painfully, backstory gets dropped in the cutting room because the story itself has become so compelling and the themes so evident that the backstory is more of an interruption than a necessity. Filmmaker Stanley Nelson, for example, describes having to lose historical context of Gandhi and his struggles in India while editing *Freedom Riders* (Chapter 19). Backstory is most likely to stay in if it directly enhances and enriches the story unfolding on screen, adding depth to a character's motivation, illuminating themes and issues, or underscoring irony or historical continuity. A little goes a long way, however. If the backstory starts taking over your film, you might need to rethink which story, past or present, you really want to tell.

You may also need to look at where it's placed. In *When the Levees Broke*, a segment that presents the backstory of New Orleans's history doesn't appear until the third hour of the film. That hour "deals with the whole notion of coming back or staying—are people going to go back to New Orleans or stay where they are, are their lives better now in other places?" explains co-producer Sam Pollard. In other words, the film doesn't go into the history of New Orleans until questions and ideas in the film *motivate* a look back.

THREE-ACT DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

Three-act dramatic structure is a staple of the Hollywood system, but as noted elsewhere, it was first articulated by Aristotle, to *describe* (not prescribe) what he was seeing. Dramatic structure encompasses the basic way that many humans tell and anticipate stories: a setup, complications, resolution. "I think that's just the way we as humans are neurologically and culturally structured," says writer Susan Kim (Chapter 16), noting, for example, that the mind constructs narratives even as we sleep. "I think there is something inherent in the dramatic form that's really powerful. And I think that's why, as storytellers, as people who want to make documentary or write plays, it behooves us to understand the potential of that structure."

There are many books that describe three-act structure, but the best way to learn it is to take films apart and analyze them. Which story (or spine, or train) is *driving* the act structure? Where do the act breaks come, and how are they connected to the train? How do sequences fit into the acts, and how does each play a role in driving the overall story forward? You may not be able to really "see" the act structure until you're all the way through the film, but what you'll tend to find is that it roughly divides as follows.

Act One

The first act generally runs about one-quarter the length of the story. In this act, you introduce your characters and the problem or conflict (in other words, this act will contain some of your important exposition). Act One often contains the "inciting incident"—the event that gets everything rolling—although this event sometimes has already occurred when the story begins. There tends to be a "first turning point," which is somewhat smaller than the turning point that ends the act. By the end of Act One, the audience knows who and what your story is about and, at least initially, what's at stake. The first act

drives to an emotional peak, the highest in the film so far, necessitating the action that launches the second act.

Act Two

The second act is the longest in the film, about one-half the length of the story. The stage has been set in Act One and the conflict introduced. In the second act, the story's pace increases as complications emerge, unexpected twists and reversals take place, and the stakes continue to rise. The second act can be difficult, because there is a risk that the story will bog down or become a succession of "and then this happened, and then this." You need your second act to continue to build as new information and new stakes are woven into your story. The second act drives to an emotional peak even greater than at the end of Act One, necessitating the action that launches the third act.

Act Three

The third act is usually slightly less than one-quarter the length of the overall film. As this act unfolds, the character is approaching defeat; he or she will reach the darkest moment just as the third act comes to a close. It's a common misperception that your third act resolves the story, but it doesn't. It intensifies it; the tension at the end of the third act should be even greater than the tension at the end of Act Two. That tension then pushes you into the resolution, those last moments where you resolve the story, tie up loose ends as necessary, and let your hero out of the tree.

STRUCTURING MULTIPLE STORY LINES

Although you can tell only one primary story, it's possible to follow two or even three story lines within that story. In Hollywood terms, these are "A" stories, "B" stories, and possibly even "C" stories. The "A" story carries the primary weight and is the story around which the piece is structured, but the other stories should also have emotional peaks and valleys.

Most importantly, the stories should inform each other, meaning that at some point they should connect to form a coherent whole and advance a single overall story line. *Yosemite: The Fate of Heaven*, for example, contrasts the primeval Yosemite that survived until the nineteenth century with the national park that today accommodates several million visitors a year. The filmmakers interweave two stories,

one more clearly narrative than the other. The first is built around an 1854 diary kept by Lafayette Bunnell, who was part of a battalion that entered Yosemite on an Indian raid. The second is a more impressionistic look at the ongoing, day-to-day struggle to balance use of the park by those who love it with the needs of those who maintain it and are working to preserve it for the future.

The use of multiple story lines often enables filmmakers to create films that are more complex than would be possible with a strictly linear approach. Rather than tell everything in the order in which it occurred, they select an event and use that to focus the primary film narrative, which frees them to look back into the past or even ahead into the future as needed. This can be seen in the *Daughter from Danang*, for example, as well as *Murderball*.

WHAT THREE-ACT STRUCTURE IS NOT

Three-act structure does not mean taking a film and dividing it into three parts and calling each part an act. An act can only be considered as such if it advances the one overall story (or essay) that you set out to tell. For example, a film that looks at early settlements in the United States can't be structured, "Act One, Jamestown, Virginia; Act Two, New York, New York; Act Three, Plymouth, Massachusetts." There is no common story there; there may be common themes and this may work as an organizational construct for a film, but these aren't acts. On the other hand, you could tell three individual dramatic stories within that structure, one within each location that you then combine into a film.

Three Acts in Five or One or Two

Whether your film is described as having five acts or one, it can still follow dramatic (three-act) structure. There are many practical reasons to divide a story, including breaks for commercials (television) or audience intermission (theater). But "one-act" plays and "five-act" television specials can often still be divided into three acts. For example, even though David Auburn wrote *Proof* as a fictional, two-act stage play, the action can easily be broken into three-act dramatic structure. Auburn's "first act" contains all of his Act One and the first half of Act Two; his "second act" contains the balance of Act Two and all of Act Three. Where you break a story for reasons like commercials or intermissions is part of the structural discussion, but does not necessarily interfere with your use of dramatic storytelling.

Conversely, simply because a story is divided up for commercial breaks doesn't mean it's divided into acts. Many commercial documentaries are described as having four or five "acts," which may accommodate the points at which there is an interruption for advertising. These breaks come at dramatic moments, but that does not describe the overall structure. (For example, many commercial biographies present a fairly chronological portrayal of a person's life, driving to key moments, without being shaped by three-act structure.)

If you are working on a film that is not going to be interrupted with commercials, but your editor is insisting that your film requires four or even five acts or more, I would strongly suggest that you do a barebones outline of each of the acts. Where does it start, what does it drive to, and how does it relate to your underlying train? While it's possible to structure an interesting film in four or more parts, they may not be acts—or if they are acts, they are likely covering the same ground a few times too many.

APPLYING FILM STRUCTURE

Some documentary filmmakers think about structure over the course of production but don't focus on it until they're editing. Others play with structure from the start, sketching outlines that they return to during production and postproduction, revising them and reshaping them as needed.

In projects where an outline and/or treatment is needed prior to filming, whether to get a greenlight from commissioning editors or to get production funds from a public or private source, you may try to anticipate an act structure that you think will work. This is often the case, for example, with historical films, and can also work with films where the outcome is unknown but can generally be anticipated because of the train. In other words, by the time a filmmaker is seeking support for a film about something with an inherent arc—a competition (for example, an athletic event or a spelling bee), a time-limited event (a state fair, a school prom), a political campaign, even a day in the life—that filmmaker will also, in all likelihood, have a sense of the characters, issues, and themes that have drawn him or her to the story, and can *anticipate* an act structure, even if it ends up changing.

Finding an Act Structure in the Edit Room

In some cases, filmmakers will shoot a story that offers a basic narrative arc but wait until they're editing to specifically consider structure.

something else, and the rules of chronology and fact-checking applied to footage just as they did to interviews and narration. This meant that if you were telling the story of rioting in Detroit in 1967, you couldn't use a great scene that you knew had been shot on a Thursday if your narrative was still discussing events on Tuesday. Care was also taken with sound effects and the layering of sound onto otherwise silent film footage. "We sent all our silent archival footage to the Imperial War Museum in London, and they matched sound effects," says Kenn Rabin, describing his work as an archivist on *Vietnam*. If the footage showed a particular helicopter or a particular weapon firing, the sound effect would be of that model helicopter or that model weapon. "We were very careful not to add anything that would editorialize," Rabin adds. "For example, we never added a scream or a baby crying," unless you could see that action on screen.

When historical stills and motion picture are used, how important is it that the images represent what they're being used to portray? This is a subject of some debate among filmmakers and historians. Producers of *The Civil War* grappled with this issue in making their series because the photographic record for their story was extremely limited. At a conference in 1993 ("Telling the Story: The Media, The Public, and American History"), Ken Burns presented a clip from *The Civil War* and then said that, with two exceptions, none of the "illustrative pictures" actually depicted what the narrative implied. "There is a street scene taken in the 1850s of a small Connecticut town, which is used to illustrate Horace Greeley's 1864 lament about the bloodshed of the Civil War," Burns offered. "There are Southern quotes over pictures of Northern soldiers. None of the hospitals specifically mentioned are actually shown, particularly Chimborazo in Richmond. . . . The picture of Walt Whitman is, in fact, several years too old, as is the illustration for Dix." Burns added, "There's not one photograph of action or battle during the Civil War, and yet nearly 40 percent of the series takes place while guns are actually going off. What do you do? What are the kind of licenses that you take?"

His question is an interesting one and still not sufficiently explored by filmmakers or the public. In the skilled hands of filmmakers who have the resources and commitment to work with a stellar group of media and academic personnel, the storytelling may override the limited imagery. But too often, substitutions are made not for historical or storytelling reasons, but because schedules and budgets mandate shortcuts. Not every image needs to be specific to time and place, of course. But if you're using archival stills or motion-picture footage as visual evidence of the past, the images you select matter.

Another problem that filmmakers encounter is that the cost to use commercial archival images (and prerecorded music, especially popular music) is often extremely high. In some cases, copyrighted music and images may be added by the filmmakers and featured in the soundtrack or on screen. But at times, music is naturally present in a scene being documented—you're filming a character as he's arrested and a radio in a nearby car is blaring the latest hit, for example. These are very different uses of music, and the rights involved are also different. Some uses are covered under the "fair use" exception to U.S. copyright law (or similar exceptions that may exist elsewhere). For more information on fair use, see American University's Center for Social Media and its November 2005 report *Documentary Filmmakers' Statement of Best Practices in Fair Use*, available online.

Lastly, there are situations in which filmmakers "create" archival materials—fake footage that seems to be news footage of the civil rights movement, or home movies of the family whose story you're telling, or promotional materials for a company or college. This is done in a number of ways, such as shooting with old equipment using old film or video stock, and/or degrading imagery so that it looks old and worn. The issue here is one of transparency. If it serves the film's story without deceiving the audience in important ways, the ethical issues raised may be answerable. Problems may arise if audiences are led to believe that what they are seeing is genuine, and therefore valid as archival historical evidence.

RECREATIONS AND DOCUDRAMA

Many filmmakers use what are known as recreations (or reenactments) to visualize events, either to augment a sparse visual record or because the recreations better serve their storytelling (and at times, budgetary) needs. There are many ways to film recreations; it's a good idea to watch a range of styles to decide which works best for your film or determine an innovative new approach. You may choose to shoot partial or impressionistic reenactments—a hand here, legs marching, a wagon wheel. Human figures may be kept in the distance, as silhouettes against a skyline, or people may be filmed close up and asked to convey emotions. Entire scenes might be played out, whether by individuals who specialize in staging actual battles from the past or by actors hired to perform for the film. Some reenactments, as discussed above, are shot in a way that makes them appear to be archival (filmed with old cameras and stock, for example). Will your actors speak, and if so, will they be limited to words derived from actual documents

(such as diaries, letters, newspaper accounts, and court transcripts), or do you plan to script words—in other words, invent dialogue—for those actors? The farther the reenactment veers into invention, the closer the film moves from documentary to docudrama to fiction.

It's worth considering that if one version of an event is reenacted, the filmmakers are making a choice. A director may have actors play out a murder scene, for example, meaning that the director is portraying a single version of the event, even when other versions may be possible or the chosen version is contested. Along the same lines, whether actors are portraying Roman guards or Chinese warriors, they are standing in for the real thing, and present a compelling *visual* argument that this is how things were.

In some cases, filmmakers use reenactments not only to provide visuals but also to highlight important themes and ideas. In Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*, for example, highly stylized reenactments visit and re-visit the scene of a crime in order to visually underscore the conflicting and at times self-serving testimony of purported eyewitnesses. Filmmaker Ari Folman states, in his film's official press release, that *Waltz with Bashir* was always intended to be animated. In part this was because there was limited archival footage to support the stories, but in addition, he decided that the film "could be done only in animation with fantastic drawings. War is so surreal, and memory is so tricky that I thought I'd better go all along the memory journey with the help of some very fine illustrators." In *Taxi to the Dark Side*, Alex Gibney included a highly stylized scene to depict the interrogation of Mohamed al-Qahtani, with the methods documented in a 65-page log. The scene is included in a sequence that explores the history and science of torture strategies, and forces the audience to confront the bizarre methods applied to al-Qahtani. It's shot in a way that leaves no doubt that it was created by the filmmaker for the purpose of illustration or imagination; there is no mistaking it for actual footage of the interrogation.

SOURCES AND NOTES

Information on *The Sweetest Sound* can be found at www.alanberliner.com. Information about *The Fog of War* is available at www.sonyclassics.com/fogofwar/_media/pdf/pressReleaseFOG.pdf. Discussion of *Eyes on the Prize* comes in part from my own involvement as a producer/director/writer. Ken Burns' comments on *The Civil War* in Sean B. Dolan, ed. *Telling the Story: The Media, The Public and American History* (Boston: New England Foundation for the Humanities, 1994).

Information about Maysles Films is available at www.mayslesfilms.com. Errol Morris discusses his re-enactments in "Play It Again, Sam (Re-enactments, Part One)," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2008, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/04/03/play-it-again-sam-re-enactments-part-one/. The press kit for *Waltz with Bashir* is available online, at www.sonyclassics.com/waltzwithbashir/pdf/waltzwithbashir_presskit.pdf. The extras on *Waltz with Bashir* DVD include a 12-minute film, "Surreal Soldiers: Making Waltz with Bashir," which shows the process behind the film's creation.

CHAPTER 7

Close Viewing

Audiences often respond to documentary work primarily in terms of its content or issues raised. In some ways, this is a mark of success, in the same way that people binge-watching a television drama may not take the time to notice how carefully the various subplots were constructed over an entire season, or how readers of a terrific mystery novel race through the pages to find out who did it. Done well, craft should feel inevitable, seamless, and invisible. Characters are simply alive; the flow of ideas and plot feels organic; the argument seems well-built and earned.

But people who want to write novels or episodic television or documentaries need to figure out *how* that success was achieved. This chapter offers several ways to analyze documentary films as a way of letting those films' creators—the team of people behind their production—teach you themselves.

WATCHING THE FILM

What follows are some exercises for watching the film closely. You can either watch the film all the way through without stopping and then go back and start to watch more closely from the beginning, *or* you can watch closely from the start. (You'll need to view the film on a device that allows you to pause and to keep track of running time.) The benefit of starting and stopping on the first time through is that you have no preconceived notions as you pause at various points to ask questions such as: *At this point in the film, what do I think it's about? Who or what am I concerned for? What's at stake? Where do I think the story is headed?*

If instead you watch the film first without interruptions, be sure to take a moment before starting again to ask yourself some general questions such as: *What was the film's train? How did the film begin? Did parts of this film drag or seem particularly strong? What's the film's central argument?* Then, when you watch the film again more slowly, you'll

have a sense of how your impressions align with or contradict what you're discovering about the film's story and structure.

The Opening Sequence

The opening sequence, beginning with the film's first frame, may be as short as a minute or as long as 10 minutes; each film is different. But in general, this opening sequence contains the DNA of the entire film to come. It sets out the promise between filmmaker and audience, making clear at least some of the film's rules of engagement, such as what the film is about, how the story will be told, with what elements the story will be told, and why it matters—why this film is worth an audience's time and attention.

The opening sequence is the first full sequence in the film, starting from the first frame. After you've watched this sequence, ask yourself some questions, such as:

- What do I think this film is about?
- Where do I think this film is headed?
- What would I say are the top three to five "bullet points" that the filmmaker has used to grab my attention and immerse me in the film, making me want to watch?

Looking at a range of opening sequences can be very useful: first, because there are common storytelling strategies achieved in the way a film opens; and second, because despite this, they can still be very different from each other, each uniquely creative.

Virunga

At the first frame of action, we enter with a group of men in uniform; it's revealed that they are part of a funeral procession. The scene is vérité; there is no text or voice-over to place us. At the graveside, a man speaks: "Protect us, and help us to account for each day of our lives." In voice-over, we hear another man: "Oh, Congo. Our dear Ranger Kaserka died trying to rebuild this country." As we leave the gravesite, the unaccompanied singing of the mourners gives way to recorded music and the film cuts (about 1:25) to aerial footage traveling low along a river. This image becomes black and white, giving way to carefully selected archival imagery, including footage, a map, and stills. Over these visuals, with the theme song continuing, the filmmakers add 13 blocks of text that gives the viewer historical and thematic context. These bring us from 1885 (*"Africa carved into colonies ruled by European nations"*) to 2003 (*"First democratic elections in 40 years."*)

At about 3:40, over a shot of people lined up to vote, the film dissolves back to an aerial over water, then tilts up to reveal mountains. A new series of lower thirds begins, over present-day footage:

- *2010: Oil discovery claimed in eastern Congo under Lake Edward in Virunga National Park.*
- *A home to thousands of people and the last mountain gorillas.*
- *2012: Instability returns.*

At about 4:40, another aerial follows a small plane over a field in which we see rangers patrolling. (The film title comes up, and then the opening sequence, including the music, ends.) The film moves into a new, second sequence.

To summarize: In less than five minutes, the opening of *Virunga* has set forth where we are, why we're there, what the problem is, and its deep historical precedent. We don't know everything, and that's as it should be. *Virunga*, like any good film, unfolds over time. It asks the audience to work as they watch, making connections, seeing irony, coming to realizations. We've seen a range of compelling, disturbing, and breathtaking footage.

In terms of film storytelling, it's useful to note that the film did not start "the beginning," with archival images and data about 1885—that would have been dull, because we're not motivated to care. It started with vérité footage of a funeral, a decision director Orlando von Einsiedel discusses in Chapter 22. The scene lasts about a minute and a half, and raises questions: In Congo, a man has died "trying to rebuild this country." Why does it need rebuilding? Why are people being killed for their efforts? Who are these men in their uniforms, carrying guns?

The aerial along the water breaks us out of the funeral scene and brings us into the historical montage, which as noted runs from 1885 to the elections in 2006. Another aerial breaks this up, which has the effect of drawing additional attention to a newer, current threat (which will turn out to be a focus of this film): the discovery of oil under Lake Edward. The montage continues, but it's more localized now, and we move closer to the communities at risk, and learn that instability has returned. This is the film's launching point.

Super Size Me

Like *Virunga*, Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* packs a lot of basic exposition into the film's opening sequence, but the films are, of course, very different. In this film, at the first frame of action we see a group of children singing a song that invokes the names of fast-food

restaurants, to humorous effect. For the purpose of analysis, I've broken what follows into a series of "idea" beats:

- Following a text-on-screen quote from McDonald's founder Ray Kroc, a professional-sounding narrator (who turns out to be Morgan Spurlock) tells us that "everything's bigger in America."
- In a fast-paced, fact-filled setup, he defines the problem: "Nearly 100 million Americans are today either overweight or obese. That's more than 60 percent of all U.S. adults."
- He suggests a cause: When he was growing up, his mother cooked dinner every single day. Now, he says, families eat out all the time, and pay for it with their wallets and waistlines.
- He notes a cost: "Obesity is now second only to smoking as a major cause of preventable death in America."
- About 2:00 in, Spurlock moves on to the lawsuit that inspired the film: "In 2002, a few Americans got fed up with being overweight, and did what we do best: They sued the bastards." Using a magazine cover and animation, he lays out the basics of the case, which was filed on behalf of two teenaged girls: a 14-year-old, who was 4 feet 10 inches and weighed 170 pounds, and a 19-year-old, 5 feet 6 inches, who weighed 270 pounds. Sounding astounded, Spurlock says the "unthinkable" was happening: People were suing McDonald's "for selling them food that most of us know isn't good for you to begin with."
- He then offers evidence to show that we eat it anyway, millions of us worldwide.
- Returning to the lawsuit, he highlights a statement by the judge, which he paraphrases: "If lawyers for the teens could show that McDonald's intends for people to eat its food for every meal of every day, and that doing so would be unreasonably dangerous, they may be able to state a claim."
- Spurlock seizes on this challenge but also notes a question, a theme that will inform the entire film: "Where does personal responsibility stop and corporate responsibility begin? Is fast food really that bad for you?"

At about 4:00, we see Spurlock for the first time on camera as he sets out the design of his experiment: "I mean, what would happen i I ate nothing but McDonald's for 30 days straight? Would I suddenly b on the fast track to becoming an obese American? Would it be unrea sonably dangerous? Let's find out. I'm ready. Super size me." Witl these words, the title sequence begins, with music. A minute later, a the music winds down, the film's second sequence gets under way.

To summarize: The opening of *Super Size Me* has introduced the film's train (eating only McDonald's for 30 days), although Spurlock will lay out the specific rules as the film moves forward. It's set a visual style that's fast-paced, brightly colored, a combination of animation and live action, with Spurlock on camera as participant and voice-over as narrator. It's set up the *why* of the film: an epidemic of obesity in the midst of a world increasingly filled with fast-food offerings. At the same time, it's set up a thematic question about personal versus corporate responsibility. Is McDonald's at fault for selling unhealthy food, or are people at fault for eating it? And it asks a basic consumer's question: Is it really that bad for you, after all? The filmmaker has promised to take us on a journey and has made it clear that he doesn't have all the answers: He wants to find out, and because of the skillful way he's gotten this film going, the audience wants to find out, too.

Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple

The opening sequence of Stanley Nelson's *Jonestown* lasts just under 2.5 minutes. The first frame we see is a fade up to a card, with white text appearing on a black background. All of the following appears on one card, but the phrases are added sequentially: *On November 18, 1978/in Jonestown, Guyana,/909 members of Peoples Temple died in what has been called the largest mass suicide in modern history.* The image fades, and the film dissolves to a small crowd, clustered together and smiling. A series of interviews are then intercut with archival footage. (The speakers are identified on screen later in the film, but not in the opening sequence, so I haven't identified them here.)

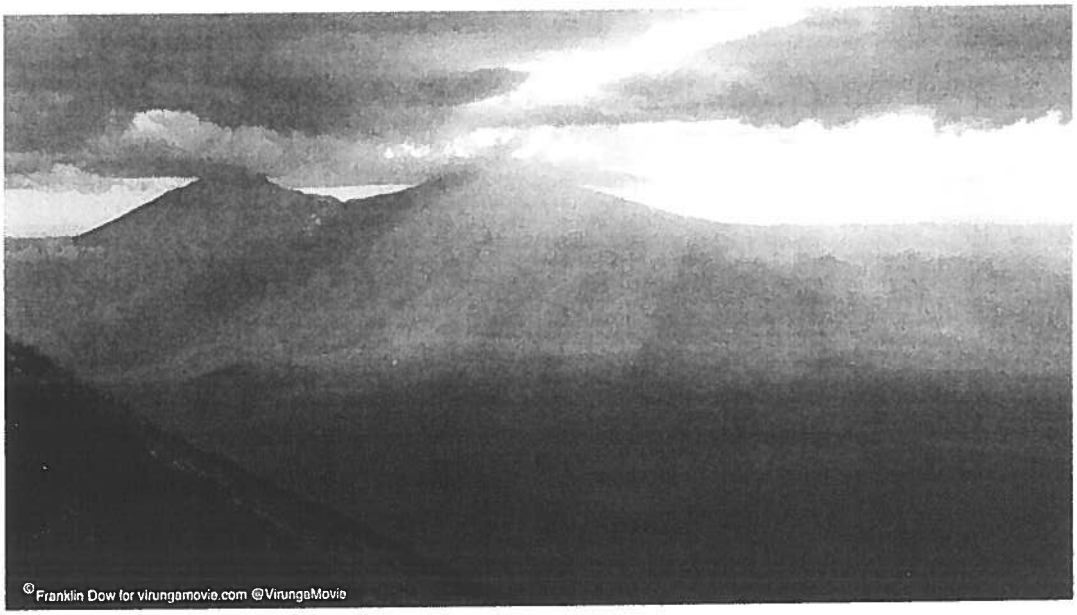
- Woman: Nobody joins a cult. Nobody joins something they think is going to hurt them. You join a religious organization, you join a political movement, and you join with people that you really like.
- Man: I think in everything that I tell you about Jim Jones, there is going to be a paradox. Having this vision to change the world, but having this whole undercurrent of dysfunction that was underneath that vision.
- Jim Jones (archival): Some people see a great deal of God in my body. They see Christ in me, a hope of glory.
- Man 2: He said, "If you see me as your friend, I'll be your friend. As you see me as your father, I'll be your father." He said, "If you see me as your God, I'll be your God."
- Woman 2: Jim Jones talked about going to the Promised Land and then, pretty soon, we were seeing film footage of Jonestown.

[Jim Jones (archival): Rice, black-eyed peas, Kool-Aid.] We all wanted to go. I wanted to go.

- Woman 3: Peoples Temple truly had the potential to be something big and powerful and great, and yet for whatever reason, Jim took the other road.
- Woman 4: On the night of the 17th, it was still a vibrant community. I would never have imagined that 24 hours later, they would all be dead.
- Jim Jones (v/o archival, also subtitled): Die with a degree of dignity! Don't lay down with tears and agony! It's nothing to death. It's just stepping over into another plane. Don't, don't be this way." The film's title comes up, and the opening sequence ends.

To summarize: This opening, like the others, sets out the promise, point of view, and style of the film to come. The opening title card is attention-grabbing, but it does something more: The film was released in 2007, which meant that for many viewers, the word "Jonestown" would immediately be a distraction as they tried to remember the details they knew about it. The text on screen helps to get that out of the way, putting a date to the event and reminding viewers of just how enormous it was. It also sets the event apart: it was the largest mass suicide in history; it's an event to be understood.

In the first interview, a woman says, "Nobody joins a cult." Other than the last speaker (an aide to Congressman Leo Ryan, who was in



Virunga National Park, from Virunga.
Photo © Franklin Dow, used by permission of the filmmakers.

Guyana to rescue church members and was killed in the violence that ensued), all of the interviewees in the film's opening sequence are former members; one is also a son of Jim Jones. Their words focus not on the mass suicide, but on the contradictions that Peoples Temple held for them, their belief in its promise and their regrets for what was lost. The opening is capped with archival audio from that last fateful day, but what lingers are questions in the audience's mind about what happened and why.

Delivering on the Promise

Now you're going to go through the entire film, slowly. The main things you're looking out for are the elements discussed throughout this book:

- What is the *central argument* being made by the filmmaker(s)?
- What *evidence* do the filmmaker(s) offer in support of the argument? Does any of it seem more or less effective?
- How is this story told? Do you see a *central narrative*—a forward moving story, or train, that makes you want to keep watching? If so, what seems to be the goal or question that's pulling you through the film, what is it you want to find out?
- Once you've identified the train, where and in what context does it return? Is it there at the film's end? Does the film satisfactorily conclude the story it promised in the opening?
- Who are the people in the film, what role does each play in the overall story? Do some people seem more or less credible than others?
- What other elements stand out in this film? For example, does something stand out in terms of lighting, editing, music, cinematography, special effects, motifs, reenactments, etc.?
- Can you identify individual sequences (akin to chapters), that have a unique focus and a clear beginning, middle, and end?
- Do you see how the ordering of these sequences also advances the overall narrative?
- Does the film's pacing feel slow to you? Does it feel dense with information? Just right?

Make some general notes, responding to the film in the way you'd respond to any movie. If it feels like it ends two or three times, note that. If it feels like it has two or three beginnings, note that. If a character feels superfluous, think about why. Do you find yourself engaged by the film, and if so, at what point(s) in particular, and why?

Identifying the Central Argument

This exercise is not unlike being asked to identify the central argument in a nonfiction article or book. This should be a sentence, rather than just a concept, and it's helpful if it's a bit specific. The central argument is akin to the theme; it's the *why* of the film. (A film may have multiple themes and argue a few points, but there will likely be one central one.)

It's possible that what you identify and articulate as the central argument may be different than what someone else sees; you just need to be able to offer specific reasons, from within the film, that you've made the choice you made. Even in the two examples below, my interpretation of the central argument may be different from that of the films' directors.

Slavery by Another Name

This is a 90-minute film that I wrote, based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Douglas A. Blackmon. Produced and directed by Sam Pollard, the film looks at various forms of forced labor (peonage, convict leasing, sharecropping) that were used in the U.S. South as a means of keeping newly freed blacks subjugated after the Civil War and the end of slavery. That's the *subject* of the film. (The train was built around the presence, absence, inaction, and action of the federal government in response to this brutality.)

The film's central argument is not sufficiently described as "racism" or even "racism is bad." Better to be a bit more specific. The central argument might be articulated as: *Legally sanctioned racial oppression and the coercion of black labor in the U.S. South in the decades after emancipation brutally curtailed black advancement while allowing white southerners to make unprecedented economic gains.*

Taxi to the Dark Side

Here is an excerpt of the film description on Jigsaw Production's website: "A documentary murder mystery that examines the death of an Afghan taxi driver at Bagram Air Base, the film exposes a worldwide policy of detention and interrogation that condones torture and the abrogation of human rights." That's what the film *does*.

But the central argument of the film, I think, moves beyond this statement. In film press materials, director Alex Gibney shares a lesson learned from his father,

> that torture is like a virulent virus . . . that infects everything in its path. It haunts the psyche of the soldier who administers it; it

corrupts the officials who look the other way; it discredits the information obtained from it; it weakens the evidence in a search for justice, and it strengthens a despotic strain that takes hold in men and women who run hot with a peculiar patriotic fever: believing that, because they are "pure of heart," they are entitled to be above the law.

Building on this, one version of this film's argument might be: *A global policy that condones torture and the abrogation of human rights, as evidenced by events at Bagram and Abu Ghraib, gives lie to and threatens the values of freedom and individual rights that the policy is alleged to defend.*

This isn't an easy exercise. It's worth trying to come up with the argument on your own, and then possibly comparing your argument with that of others who've seen the film, and then check out interviews or statements from the filmmakers, to see how your analysis lines up with theirs.

Identifying Sequences

In some ways, sequences are one of the most challenging aspects of documentary storytelling. The single best way to understand them is to try to identify them over the course of an entire film (or even better, several films). As discussed in Chapter 2, it might be useful to give the sequences you find a name that encompasses the unique *job* they do, as discrete chapters in the overall film. (Again, this is interpretive work; my description of what a sequence achieves may be different from someone else's.) Also, it's likely that the sequences will be easier to see and the breaks between them more clear-cut earlier in the film; once a story's well under way, sequences may be interwoven as part of an overall speed-up in the film's pacing.

As you look at sequences, consider also how the filmmaker transitions between them, whether it's through a transitional line of narration, a music or sound sting, a fade into and out of black, or something else.

Examples of Sequences

Immediately after the opening sequence of *Virunga*, there is a sequence that we might think of as "Meeting Rodrigue Katembo." The sequence follows him and others on what lower thirds describe as "routine ranger patrol, Virunga National Park, present day." They encounter gunfire, discover an illegal settlement, arrest a poacher, and set fire to the hut the poacher's been using. After a brief interlude—a shot of a gorilla, a shot of two hippos, a beautiful view of the park at dusk—the filmmakers talk with Katembo as he works on his rifle. (Watch how they intercut the footage of him with the archival imagery of child soldiers,

giving us a sense that he is pointing a gun at what he is seeing, and later, as he talks about his older brother, that he is haunted by what he is seeing.) In sync and in voice-over, Katembo tells us about being recruited as a child solder; about his brother's death; about his mother's insistence that he escape to save his life. "So then I escaped the army to dedicate my life to the National Park," he says. The sequence ends about eight minutes into the film; there is transitional nature footage, and then the next sequence begins, one that we might think of as "Meeting Andre Bauma and the orphaned gorillas." And so on. In this one sequence, we've learned a bit more of the history, but we've also come to understand the backstory of a central character and to see what motivates him as he takes risks on behalf of this park.

The first sequence of *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* is the opening described above. Sequence 2 is very brief (2:20–3:10), and it's just a story about Jim Jones which reveals, as the speaker says, "everything was plausible, except in retrospect, the whole thing seems absolutely bizarre." The sequence is thematic; it establishes the idea that definitions of "normal" may be fluid. The next sequence (3:10–7:08) presents the Peoples Temple in its heyday; it is a church full of song and success, offering insight into the positive community that members initially joined. From there, the music takes a somber turn, and the film moves back in time. Sequence four (7:08–13:28) is titled onscreen "Indiana, 1931–1965." The sequence moves Jim Jones from childhood to adulthood, revealing frightening character traits; it shows his discovery of the kind of religious workshop he comes to emulate; it launches a pattern of isolation, as we see his church moving to rural California to escape Indiana's opposition to integrated membership, *and* as we see Jones beginning to pull family members away from families. The next sequence begins, with the title "Ukiah, 1965–1974."

As noted, it's useful to chart sequences throughout an entire film, giving them names if possible. Keep track of how long each sequence is, and how "complete" it feels—if there is some sort of beginning, middle, and end to it. What do you learn in the sequence that you didn't previously know? What job does the sequence do? How does it change or advance your understanding of the film's overall narrative—the sequences that came before, and those to follow?

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Another exercise that's useful is a "compare and contrast" between two or more films on the same general subject. This exercise is about really

seeing how these films are constructed, as opposed to just deciding if you prefer one to the other. Does one version talk *at* you and the other engage you, and if so, why? Does one leave the audience with more parts of the puzzle to solve, and is that process satisfying? Does one feel more or less honest or manipulative, and if so, why? In thinking about the answers, consider also the experience of the filmmakers, the purpose for which the film was made, and the audience the film eventually reached.

WRITE A CLOSE ANALYSIS OF ONE ASPECT OF THE FILM

The MFA program I attended at Goddard College required us to write annotations of numerous creative works. These were short (just two to three pages, double-spaced) papers in which we were to make and support a focused argument about a specific element in whatever we were studying, such as a play or a novel. I found this exercise very useful, and now assign something similar to students of documentary. They provide a disciplined way to closely watch movies, and can be especially useful when it comes to documentary, where the temptation is often to respond to a film's subject matter. (After viewing *Blackfish*, for examples, students may want to write about SeaWorld or its trainers. But a film analysis requires that they respond to something about the craft; how the filmmakers presented this content.)

A good film analysis asks the viewer to consider *one* aspect of the craft, studying the film closely in order to make and support an argument about that one aspect, with evidence. You might want to figure out how a filmmaker did something that you found particularly effective, or you might want to figure out why something confused or annoyed you. You might look at a particular idea or thread that runs through a film, teasing it apart to see where and how it appears and with what overall effect.

You want to avoid writing a plot synopsis, film review (avoid adjectives and judgment), opinion piece, or film "report" (like a book report), that merely observes. For example, a *report* on Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* might include observations such as: "Here, the film intercuts between the two main subjects before moving on to show a reenactment of the officer being shot. After this, the film brings viewers through the journey to discover which of the two subjects did the shooting. . . . Errol Morris presents evidence including court papers, photographs, and newspapers stories. Interviewees including police officers describe the events and the suspects." That's not analysis.

Similarly, a *review* tends to use adjectives (*powerful, blistering, boring, heartbreaking*) or make judgments. The trick is to turn the judgment into a question. For example, a review might state, "One minor blunder in the film, which detracts from its value, was that individuals interviewed by Morris (*The Thin Blue Line*) were not identified on screen." An *analysis* might ask, "What was gained by the filmmaker's decision not to identify on screen the individuals being interviewed?" Or, "Morris chose not to offer on-screen identification of his characters. By what other means do we know who these people are, in terms of their identities and connection to the story?"

It's important that these analyses adhere to a single focus. Rather than spend a paragraph looking closely at the role of reenactments, and then a paragraph looking at the use of title cards, and then a paragraph about the filmmaker's choice not to identify talking heads, it's much more valuable to take one thread or idea and look closely at it as it's demonstrated in a range of craft choices.

WATCHING FOR ACT STRUCTURE

As will be clear from some of the interview chapters, many excellent filmmakers don't consciously think about three-act structure when they make films. That doesn't mean that you can't utilize dramatic structure as *one* tool for looking closely at a completed film. You may do the math, look for structure, and discover that you can't find it. Or you may find some unexpected organization behind the film that's easily overlooked when the story is complex and interwoven. The bottom line is that you're doing this to see the film more clearly. You're looking for a pattern, for ideas, for insight.

So: Make note of how long the film is. To roughly see if you can find act breaks, generally divide the overall film by four. The first act is *roughly* a quarter of the way in, which means you look at what's happening in terms of the train at *around* that point, and if you can see a definitive end to one act that might push us into the second act. You do the same at the *midpoint* of the film (which is also the midpoint of Act Two), and then again about three-fourths of the way through the film, as Act Two gives way to Act Three. The train should reach a climax very close to the film's end, and then there is generally a short resolution. Remember: The act breaks relate to the film's central spine, its narrative train.

What follows is a breakdown of *Super Size Me,* noting both act structure and the train. You'll notice that once the train is under way, surprisingly little actual screen time is spent eating at McDonald's.

Instead, the train breaks up the rhythm of the overall film and makes it possible for the filmmaker to focus on a range of issues, from childhood obesity to the fast-food industry, resulting in a film that has been used in classrooms around the world.

Super Size Me

From first frame of action to closing credits, the film is about 96 minutes long. That means that I would expect the first act to end *roughly* around 24 minutes; the film's midpoint (halfway through Act Two) is around 48 minutes; and the third act should begin around 72 minutes.

Act One

The first act begins with the opening sequence, described earlier. After the opening titles, Spurlock spends time establishing a baseline for his own physical condition. Three doctors, a nutritionist, and a physiologist confirm that his health is excellent. They aren't thrilled by the experiment, but don't expect anything too terrible to happen in just 30 days. Roughly 10.5 minutes into the show, Spurlock adds a further wrinkle: Because more than 60 percent of Americans get no form of exercise, neither will he, other than routine walking. (This prompts a sidetrack about walking in general, walking in Manhattan, and how many McDonald's there are to walk by in Manhattan.)

At 12:03, we're back to the train as we meet Spurlock's girlfriend Alex, a vegan chef. She prepares "The Last Supper," one of a handful of chapters named on screen over original artwork. A little over a minute later, the experiment gets under way, as "Day 1" is identified with text on screen. Spurlock orders an Egg McMuffin and eats. (Here, as in several places throughout the film, he breaks up blocks of narration with musical interludes. These breaks are important; they add humor and breathing room, giving the audience a chance to process information.) In a quick scene, we see Spurlock writing down what he's eaten. We need to see this record-keeping at least once, because it's part of the experiment: The log provides the data the nutritionist uses to calculate his food intake. We then see Spurlock on the street, asking people about fast food. Interspersed at various points throughout the film, these interviews also add humor and alter the rhythm of the film, while providing a range of what are presumably "typical" responses.

Around 15 minutes into the film, standing in line at McDonald's, Spurlock expands on the experiment's rules (he talks on camera to his film crew, and also in scripted voice-over). After getting this additional exposition out of the way, he bites happily into a Big Mac

(gray area—he enjoys some fast food). At 15:47, another piece of artwork, another title: "Sue the Bastards." We see Spurlock again on the street conducting interviews, this time about the lawsuit. All three of the people consulted think the lawsuit is ridiculous—which at this point in the film may also be the attitude of the audience. Spurlock interviews John F. Banzhaf, a law professor "spearheading the attacks against the food industry" and advising the suit's lawyers. Spurlock gives Banzhaf's work a bit of credibility (to counter the man-on-the-street responses) by noting that people thought Banzhaf was crazy when he was going after tobacco companies, too—"until he won." Banzhaf adds an important detail about why McDonald's is a particular target: The company markets to children.

Another man worried about the children, Spurlock says, is Samuel Hirsch, lawyer for the two girls in the lawsuit. But look at the gray area in this interview. Over a shot of Hirsch, we hear Spurlock ask, "Why are you suing the fast-food establishment?" The shot continues, unedited, as Hirsch considers, smiling. "You mean motives besides monetary re—, compensation? You mean you want to hear a noble cause? Is that it?" The lawyer seems to consider a bit longer, and then Spurlock cuts away from him, and that's the end of Hirsch's time on screen. It's funny, but perhaps more importantly, this willingness to paint various sides of the argument in less-than-flattering light is part of what makes this film engaging. Audiences have to stay on their toes and be willing not only to see complexity, but figure out for themselves what they think.

David Satcher, former U.S. Surgeon General, introduces the problem of "super sizing," which allows Spurlock (and other experts) to explore the issue of portion size. In other words, Spurlock is building an argument and letting one idea flow to the next. Finally, it's just under 21 minutes into the film and we've been away from the "train" for about five minutes, so Spurlock drives up to a McDonald's, and text on screen announces "Day 2."

Act Two

In the second act, the experiment really gets under way. Fortunately for Spurlock, he was asked on Day 2 if he wanted to super size, and by the rules he's established, he must say yes. (There might be a temptation, in a film like this, to let Day 4 stand in for Day 2, if it provided an opportunity like this. You can't. You don't need to give each day equal weight——some days are barely mentioned—and you don't need to show all meals each day. But the timeline of these meals needs to be factual, as does the timeline of Spurlock's health.) Watch how Spurlock condenses time in this scene: He starts out laughing, kissing his

double quarter-pounder, calling it "a little bit of heaven." The image fades to black, and white lettering comes up: "5 minutes later." Fade up: He's still eating. (The visual point, underscored by the card and by the screen time given to the scene, is that this is a lot of food, and for Spurlock, it's an effort to eat it.) Fade to black again: "10 minutes later." Spurlock says that a "Mcstomach ache" is kicking in. To black, then: "15 minutes later." He's leaning back in his seat. To black, then: "22 minutes later." He's *still* forcing the food down. A cut, and we see him leaning out the window and vomiting. A meal that lasted at least 45 minutes has been effectively compressed into a sequence that's 2.5 minutes long.

At about 23:18, we see a new illustrated chapter title, "The Toxic Environment." Experts and Spurlock introduce the problem of "constant access to cheap, fat-laden foods" and soda vending machines, compounded by a reliance on cars. After a brief health concern on Day 3, he cuts to Day 4 and takes a detour to further compare obesity and tobacco use, including marketing to children. This sequence is followed by another "meadow" (or musical interlude), in which we see Spurlock enjoying a McDonald's play area.

At 28:21, a new chapter, "The Impact," explores the lifelong health implications, including liver failure, of obesity in children. At 30:38, Spurlock cuts to a 16-year-old, Caitlin, cooking in a fast-food restaurant. Here again, his ambivalence seems to leave some of the work to the audience. In an interview, Caitlin talks about how hard it is for overweight teenagers like herself because they see the pictures of the "thin, pretty, popular girls" and think "aren't I supposed to look like that?" As she's talking, Spurlock fills the screen with images of thin young women, until he's covered Caitlin's face. Just before she disappears, she concludes: "It's not realistic, it's not a realistic way to live."

Is Spurlock implying that Caitlin is letting herself off the hook too easily? This may be the case, because the scene is immediately followed (32:07) by a sequence in which motivational speaker Jared Fogle, who lost 245 pounds on a Subway diet, gives a talk at what appears to be a school. An overweight eighth grader argues, like Caitlin, that weight loss isn't realistic: "I can't afford to like, go there [to Subway] every single day and buy a sandwich like two times a day, and that's what he's talking about."

As if to offer a contrast, the film then cuts to a sequence about a man who did take personal responsibility for his health: Baskin-Robbins heir John Robbins. According to headlines on screen, he walked away from a fortune because ice cream is so unhealthy.

Robbins, a health advocate, runs through a litany of health-related problems involving not only his own family but also one of the founders of Ben & Jerry's ice cream. (This sequence, like the many shots in the film of fast-food companies other than McDonald's, helps expand the argument beyond one company to look at larger issues of food choice and health.)

At 35:09, it's Day 5 of the experiment. We see Spurlock ordering food but don't see the meal; instead, we follow Spurlock into his nutritionist's office, where we learn that he's eating about 5,000 calories a day, twice what his body requires, and has already gained nine pounds. Hitting the streets again (about 37:00), he asks a range of people about fast food (they like it) and exercise (only some do it).

About a minute later, Day 6 finds him in Los Angeles, ordering chicken McNuggets. This meal motivates another look at the lawsuit and McDonald's statements about processed foods; Spurlock augments this with a cartoon about the creation of McNuggets, which he says the judge in the case called "a McFrankenstein creation."

Back to the experiment, Day 7, and Spurlock isn't feeling well. Within 30 seconds, it's Day 8, and he's disgusted by the fish sandwich he's unwrapping. Less than 30 seconds later, it's Day 9, and he's eating a double quarter-pounder with cheese and feeling "really depressed." He's begun to notice not only physical but also emotional changes. The following sequence, with an extreme "Big Mac" enthusiast, doesn't add to the argument but is quirky and entertaining.

With that, we return (at 43:00) to an idea raised earlier, the notion of advertising to children. An expert offers data on the amount of advertising aimed at kids, and how ineffective parental messages are when countered with this. Another expert points out that most children know the word "McDonald's," so Spurlock—in a scene set up for the purposes of the film—tests this out, asking a group of first graders to identify pictures of George Washington, Jesus Christ, Wendy (from the restaurant), and Ronald McDonald. He also uses a cartoon to demonstrate how much money the biggest companies spend on direct media advertising worldwide.

At 46:34, we're back to the experiment: "Day 10." But once again, we leave the experiment quickly. By 47:02, a new illustrated chapter title appears, "Nutrition." This sequence doesn't actually look at nutrition, but at how difficult it is to get nutrition information in stores. As John Banzhaf argues, how can people exercise personal responsibility if they don't have the information on which to base it? At 49:20 (roughly midway through the film), we're back to the experiment, as Spurlock gets his first blood test. He now weighs 203 pounds, 17 more than when he started.

Around 50:30, a new chapter: "It's for kids." Spurlock takes the essay even wider, with narration: "The one place where the impact of our fast-food world has become more and more evident is in our nation's schools." This is a long sequence in which he visits three schools in three different states. In Illinois, the lunch staff and a representative for Sodexo School Services (a private company that services school districts nationwide) seem willing to believe that students make smart food choices, even though Spurlock shows evidence that they don't. In West Virginia, Spurlock visits a school served by the U.S. federal school lunch program. Here, students eat reheated, reconstituted packaged foods, with a single meal sometimes exceeding 1,000 calories. Finally, Spurlock goes to a school in Wisconsin, where a company called Natural Ovens provides food for students with "truancy and behavioral problems." The food here is not fried or canned, and the school has no candy or soda machines. (It's almost a shock at this point to see fresh vegetables and fruit and realize how brightly colored they are.) The behavioral improvements in the students here, administrators tell us, are significant. And, Spurlock notes, the program "costs about the same as any other school lunch program. So my question is, why isn't everyone doing this?" (56:02).

Over footage of the Wisconsin lunch line, we hear a phone interview in which the founder of the Natural Ovens Bakery is allowed to answer Spurlock's question: "There's an awful lot of resistance from the junk-food companies that make huge profits off of schools at the present time," he says. To me, this is a misstep in an otherwise powerful sequence. Unlike several of the experts who've been interviewed, this man's ability to speak for or about "the junk-food companies" hasn't been established. (I'm not saying it doesn't exist, just that it's not set here.) The information he conveys may be fact checked and 100 percent accurate, but to me, a better way to convey it might be through facts, such as how much money per year the fast-food companies actually make in the nation's public schools. (That companies resist being removed from schools is a point made, effectively, in the following scene, when the Honorable Marlene Canter talks about the Los Angeles Unified School District's ban on soda machines.)

At about 57:08—roughly 60 percent of the way through the film—Spurlock returns to the experiment. It's Day 13, and he's in Texas, home to five of the top 15 "fattest" cities in America. Day 14 finds him in the #1 city, Houston, but he quickly goes into a new sidetrack: a visit with the Grocery Manufacturers of America, a lobbying firm based in Washington, D.C. The group's vice president says the issue is education, teaching good nutrition, and teaching physical education.

It's a bit of a thin transition, but this leads Spurlock to explore the fact that only one state, Illinois, requires physical education for grades K–12. Returning to the Illinois school, he films an exceptional program, and then for contrast, shows an elementary school in Massachusetts where physical education involves running around a gym once a week for 45 minutes. At 61:00, Spurlock suggests a reason for the issue, the "No Child Left Behind" education reforms of President George W. Bush, which an expert says explains cuts to "phys ed, nutrition, health." This, in turn, motivates Spurlock to ask students in a ninth-grade health class what a calorie is. They struggle to answer—but so do six out of six adults interviewed on the street.

At 63:02, it's Day 16, "still in Texas," but in about 20 seconds, it's Day 17 and he's back in New York. We learn that the experiment is getting to Spurlock; his girlfriend says he's exhausted and their sex life is suffering. The following day, the doctor says his blood pressure and cholesterol are up and his liver "is sick." He's advised to stop. We see him talking on the phone to his mother; they're both concerned. She's afraid the damage he's doing will be irreversible, but Spurlock reassures her that "they" think things should get back on track once it's done. Act Two ends here.

Act Three

At 69:26, Act Three (and again, as with the other films, this is my analysis, not the filmmaker's) begins with a look at the "drug effect" of food, with input from a new expert, a cartoon about McDonald's use of the terms "heavy user" and "super heavy user," and an informal phone survey. Spurlock learns that his nutritionist's company is closing, and uses this as an opportunity to explore the amount spent on diet products and weight-loss programs compared with the amount spent on health and fitness. This motivates a transition to an extreme weight-loss option, gastric bypass surgery, filmed in Houston (74:03). Note that this sequence may have been filmed anywhere during this production; its placement here in the film makes sense, because things are reaching their extremes.

The stakes for Spurlock have also continued to rise, which helps to make this third act strong. At 77:33, in New York, Spurlock wakes at 2:00 a.m.; he's having heart palpitations and difficulty breathing. "I want to finish," he says, "but don't want anything real bad to happen, either." More visits to doctors result not only in specific warnings about what symptoms should send him immediately to an emergency room, but also the realization that these results are well beyond anything the doctors anticipated. But at 81:20, Spurlock is

back at it: Day 22. In short order, he sets out to answer a new question that he's posed: "How much influence on government legislators does the food industry have?" He visits again with the Grocery Manufacturers of America, before finally (at 83:26) attempting to contact McDonald's directly.

These efforts, ultimately unsuccessful, will punctuate the rest of the film. Spurlock gets through Days 25, 26, and 27 quickly. At Day 29, he's having a hard time getting up stairs. By Day 30, his girlfriend has a detox diet all planned out. First, there's "The Last McSupper"—a party at McDonald's with many of the people we've seen throughout the film. Then it's off to a final medical weigh-in. Fifteen calls later, still no response from McDonald's.

Resolution

At 89:34, Spurlock is nearing the end of his film, and essay. He returns again to the court case. "After six months of deliberation, Judge Robert Sweet dismissed the lawsuit against McDonald's," he says. "The big reason—the two girls failed to show that eating McDonald's food was what caused their injuries." Spurlock counters by tallying up the injuries he's suffered in just 30 days. He challenges the fast-food companies: "Why not do away with your super-size options?" But he also challenges the audience to change, warning: "Over time you may find yourself getting as sick as I did. And you may wind up here [we see an emergency room] or here [a cemetery]. I guess the big question is, who do you want to see go first—you or them?"

Epilogue

Before the credits, the filmmakers do a quick wrap-up, including information about how long it took Spurlock to get back to his original weight and regain his health, and the fact that six weeks after the film screened at Sundance, McDonald's eliminated its super-size option. At 96:23, the credits roll.

SOURCES AND NOTES

There are several resources for close reading, including Francine Prose's *Reading Like a Writer* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007). Information about Goddard College's MFAW program is available at www.goddard.edu/academics/master-fine-arts-creative-writing-2/program-overview/. Information about documentary box office can be found at www.documentaryfilms.net/index.php/documentary-box-office/.