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MAKING
DOCUMENTARY
FILMS AND
VIDEOS

SECOND EDITION

**A Practical
Guide to
Planning,
Filming,
and Editing
Documentaries**

**A HOLT PAPERBACK
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
NEW YORK**

VISUAL EVIDENCE

Communicating with an audience through an existential, visual medium is far different from communicating in a face-to-face or voice-to-voice situation. Audiences have the perverse habit of assuming that the way they think you are communicating is the way that you intended to communicate. As far as they are concerned, the message they get is the only message there is. And you have no opportunity to defend yourself—to revise, clarify, or explain what you actually meant.

Therefore, it is important to think of the images you shoot as visual evidence. It is not enough that you can argue the case for what your images mean. You'll never get the chance. The only real test is whether the images can stand on their own and argue the case themselves.

For instance, in a documentary about a protest march, there was a shot of a cold-looking police officer standing by a police barrier. Behind him was a completely empty street. The narrator said, "Twenty thousand people took to the street in protest . . ." But the visual evidence said *nobody was there*. Imagine if the voice had come from an interview rather than from the narrator. The use of this shot would have suggested to the audience that the person in the interview was not telling the truth.

This, for me, is the essential difference between visual evidence and B-roll. B-roll merely illustrates what is being said, while visual evidence works to tell your story in visual images. Silent films were great on visual evidence, because that's all they had. Go back and get a look at some of the classics, run at the proper speed. Films of the silent era were shot

and projected at sixteen frames per second. Following the silent era, they were often played back on sound film projectors at twenty-four frames per second, which caused everyone to walk funny and bounce around sort of herky-jerky. Fortunately, silent films released on DVD play at the right speed, giving you the opportunity to see how visual evidence communicates.

A perfect example of visual evidence is a beautiful short film, *89mm from Europe*, which won an International Documentary Association award some time ago. The film shows how trains arriving at the border between Poland and the former Soviet Union must have all their wheels changed to proceed because of an 89mm difference in the width of the rails. Shot like a silent film—although there is voice, natural sound, and music—it is *all* visual evidence.

There Is No Substitute for Good Footage

You have to shoot the best analog of the actual situation that you can manage and then edit the footage into a single, coherent print that will clearly communicate your intentions to the people who will see it.

Advances in film and video technology have given us the ability to record images from reality that would have been impossible just a few years ago.

Cameras attached to telescopes and cameras mounted on satellites look outward into space.

Cameras using fiber optics, cameras mounted on microscopes, and cameras and video repeaters hooked up to electron microscopes, fluoroscopes, and God knows what else, are examining inner space.

Cameras take pictures in the dark using infrared film or light-gathering lenses.

Cameras operating at high speed slow down events that occur too quickly for the eye to follow.

Time-lapse photography speeds up action that occurs over too long a time for the process of change to be noticeable.

In the area of re-creation, models and miniatures are used to abstract significant details from events that are too complex to be observed in full.

Digital computer animation systems create three-dimensional pictures as if a camera were moving around—inside or outside—

structures that do not exist, presenting images of events that never happened.

Therefore, if you can think of an image, you, or someone, can make a picture of it.

Concrete Nouns and Action Verbs

The more concretely you can describe your documentary idea in terms of visual images, the better your chance of communicating it through film or video. Similarly, the more abstract or interpretive your idea is, the more important it becomes to build up evidence for the idea through specific, concrete images.

To be filmed, an image has to be solid, tangible, existential. For instance, there's no problem in filming the image-idea:

The boy runs toward the camera.

Just turn the camera on, yell, "Action!" and shoot what happens.

But it gets trickier with the addition of adjectives. How would you film this image-idea in one shot?

The frightened boy runs toward the camera.

Probably you'd try to have the boy act frightened—his face contorted, breathing heavily, looking over his shoulder, bumping into things, and so on. You might also try to film in a situation that helps the audience infer fright from the boy's actions: At night on a dimly lit street. In a dark forest. On a battlefield.

Let's try one more. In one shot, how can you film this image-idea?

The intelligent boy runs toward the camera.

You can't.

You need two scenes in sequence. First a scene that establishes the boy's intelligence, and then the shot of the boy running.

You can't film abstractions, such as:

Economics is the dismal science.

Nor can you film the absence of something:

On Tuesday, the mail didn't come.

Yes, of course, you can film two actors talking. One says, "Happy Tuesday, did the mail come?" The other says, "No." You could also put the statement in narration. You just can't shoot a picture of it.

The best you can do, in either case, is to shoot and organize a sequence of concrete events from which you hope the audience will infer your meaning.

But getting it shot is not all there is to making a documentary—not even when you are shooting events as they actually happen in the real world. Because it is not what you see happening that counts. It's not even what you aim the camera at that matters. It is the actual scene as it's recorded on film or video that provides the visual evidence for the audience.

Miss Darling and the Scene That Wasn't There

We were working on a documentary about open education in a classroom of third and fourth graders. The teacher was a beautiful young woman, very likable, very photogenic, who got along well with the kids. My crew immediately nicknamed her "Miss Darling."

One of Miss Darling's strong points as a teacher was that she related well to the boys in her class. Fourth-grade boys can be difficult, and some teachers have trouble with this. So I wanted to show what happened in Miss Darling's classroom.

We filmed a group of boys playing with dinosaurs in a diorama they had made until we used up the film in the camera. While Jack Behr, my camera operator on that film, reloaded the camera with a fresh 400-foot magazine, I looked around for another bit of behavior to shoot. In a quiet place, away from the other children, a husky ten-year-old boy in a football jersey was sitting with Miss Darling, learning to knit.

I liked the look of the scene and motioned to Jack and the soundman to move in and shoot. At first, I didn't have much more in mind for the scene than a few shots of a young, would-be football player and an attractive teacher, sitting together and knitting. But as we started to shoot, began to realize that they were carrying on a conversation in low

voices. From where I was standing I couldn't hear what they were saying, but the scene was so poignant—the boy looking up with wide, trusting eyes, the teacher bent toward him with a tender look on her face, the quiet conversation—that I whispered to Jack, "I don't know what's going on, but I like it. Shoot the whole magazine."

I was convinced that we were capturing an intimate and personal moment in the relationship between a teacher and her student. It would serve as a shining example for teachers everywhere that (1) the classroom won't go to hell if you spend some quiet time with one student; and (2) boys, even rough-and-tumble boys in jock sweatshirts, can be interested in more than sports and all-male activities. Beyond that, it was such a charming scene that I was convinced it would enhance the film and please the audience. In my mind, I made space for as much as five minutes of this scene in the twenty-five-minute running length of the finished film.

Unfortunately, I neglected to tell any of this to Jack while he was shooting. He had started out concentrating on close-ups of the teacher and the boy and of their hands as they were knitting. From his point of view, through the viewfinder of the camera, he was too close to them to see what I felt was going on. As a result, the footage consisted of a set of related close-ups and two-shots that covered the process of learning to knit far more extensively than was needed, but barely hinted at the deeper, more personal sharing that I thought had been there. I spent three weeks trying to edit that footage to show what I wanted, and then gave up in defeat. No matter what had actually happened in that classroom during the eleven minutes we were filming, what we had on film was a rather prosaic sequence of a boy and his teacher knitting.

And that's all.

I remain convinced that the tender, almost loving, moment between Miss Darling and the boy actually occurred in the way I witnessed it, but there was no way I could use the footage we had shot to communicate to an audience what I had seen and felt. Even describing it in narration wouldn't do. The evidence simply was not in the footage.

A Great Opening Scene

Later, Jack found and photographed a scene so powerful that we used it as the opening shot to represent the theme of the documentary.

We were in the playground of a nursery school. The children had been tie-dyeing T-shirts, and one five-year-old boy was trying to hang his on a low clothesline to dry. He had the T-shirt in one hand and a clothespin in the other, with the clothesline bouncing up and down in front of him. The boy knew what he wanted to do. But he lacked the experience to hold the clothesline steady, drape the T-shirt over it, and secure it with the clothespin. He experimented with several different approaches, but always seemed to need one more hand than he had to complete the job. The more he tried, the more frustrated he became. This was such a clear example of the difference between knowing about something and having the skill and experience to do it, that we used the entire two minutes, uncut, as the opening scene of the film.

No audience has ever misunderstood that scene. At first they laugh at the child's difficulty, but after about thirty seconds, a large part of the audience is leaning forward as if to help him. The scene is so visually compelling that it serves as a defining moment that sets the audience on the right track to understand the rest of the movie.

That's visual evidence.

Seeing What Is There

Being able to see what you have actually recorded can be tough, even for an experienced professional. I wanted the footage of Miss Darling and the boy to be usable so badly that I worked at trying to edit it long past the point where I should have admitted to myself that the evidence simply wasn't there.

And for the person who is new to documentary, learning to see what is there can be especially hard. Most of our experience in looking at films and videos, from grade school on, has been in interpreting them. And I take the word *interpreting* quite literally to mean translating from visual imagery to some form of verbal response.

For example, I was working with a graduate class in the use of visual communication in education. I showed them *The Birth of Aphrodite*, a short, somewhat abstract and artistic film about the myth of Aphrodite rising from the sea. Then I asked, "What did you see?"

At first their responses were either generalities about beauty, art, mythology, and the human condition, or had to do with creative writing, the classics, and how to use film in the classroom.

"Yes," I said, "but what did you *see*? What is in the film? What happened within the frame? What was the first shot? What was the next shot?"

With a great deal of difficulty, and with everyone contributing, the students slowly were able to start re-creating and describing from memory the sequence of shots that made up the film.

As they worked on it, they got better. When they came to the last few shots, where we see the naked Aphrodite dancing in the moonlight at the edge of the sea, several people remembered that the "just-born" goddess had the white outline of a swimsuit on her otherwise beautifully tanned body.

We can only speculate as to whether the filmmakers noticed that flaw when they were putting the film together. Perhaps they did, and thought they could get away with it. They almost did. Or perhaps they didn't see it at all. It takes time, training, and experience to look at your own work and see it for what it is.

BEHAVIOR IS VISUAL EVIDENCE

Films of behavior have to be made up of visual evidence, because no one today is willing to settle for an illustrated lecture. For instance, *The War Room* shows the behavior of people working on the 1992 Clinton campaign. There are no interviews. There is no narration. *It's all visual evidence.* I love this kind of documentary. I wish there were more of them.

Reading People

Making documentaries—and to me that usually means filming the behavior of people—gets you involved in trying to capture pieces of a process on film or video. People are seen in the middle of the process, between their history and their hopes. The documentarian can choose to trap them in roles—the manager at his desk, the housewife at the supermarket—or to explore them more fully as individuals.

It's not simply a matter of getting a lot of background footage of these people in other situations. That's the solution most often proposed by film students when they sense a caricature in the footage rather than a portrait. "If I could only see her at breakfast, or playing with her children," they say, "then I'd understand her better."

Could be. And I'm not opposed to fleshing out a portrait with anything you can get that works—if you've got the time and space in your film. But a cardboard background of a cardboard person will simply lend cardboard detail to the caricature.

When the visual evidence is well realized, however, you can get a sense of the situation in a flash. The fact is that we are all skilled at reading people. We attend not only to what is said but to the way it is said and the nonverbal behavior occurring in the situation.

Even though a documentary is not the same as face-to-face interaction, it is similar when we show a person talking with an interviewer or speaking directly to the audience. The difference is that there is no feedback channel for the audience to test their impressions of the person. They can't say, "You frowned when you said that. Are you angry about it?" What they see is all they've got. And that makes it all the more important for us, as documentarians, to record and show as accurately as we can the visual evidence in the scene.

Remember to shoot people doing what they do, even if you're mainly interested in what they have to say. Plan the location so that it becomes a part of the evidence of the scene. If you're filming an expert on juvenile delinquency who is proposing alternatives to putting adolescents in adult prisons, film her at the prison rather than in her office. You'll have the visual evidence that says this woman is talking about concrete reality, not just some theory she's concocted.

Words and Actions

Remembering that what is said and what is done should both be considered behavior, what happens when people's actions seem to contradict the words they are saying?

Here's a situation from a video of a counselor working with a husband and wife whose marriage was in trouble: If you simply had a transcript or an audio recording of the words being spoken, you could easily come away with the feeling that while all was not right with the marriage, at least the couple was trying. But if you looked carefully at the body posture and behavior of the husband and wife—with or without sound—you couldn't escape a quite different conclusion. The wife was eager to please the marriage counselor, trying to put a good face on things, quick to cooperate. The husband said little and did nothing.

At one point the counselor asked them to turn their chairs to face each other and talk to one another about their problems instead of talking to him. The wife immediately moved her chair. The husband didn't budge. He sat slumped down, hands in pockets, present—but not there. It was clear from the visual evidence of their behavior that she was living on hope, desperately clinging to the marriage, while he was already gone.

FILMING VISUAL EVIDENCE TAKES PREPARATION

Making a documentary with visual evidence requires the filmmaker to go out and find something happening in front of the camera that tells the story to the audience far better than any interview with an expert. And that depends on the filmmaker being prepared to find the visual evidence, or to recognize it when it happens. You have to plan for filming in situations and at locations likely to provide useful visual evidence, and you must also be prepared to recognize visual evidence when it occurs, even when it doesn't show up in the way you might have expected.

A critical part of the preparation for any documentary project should be to ask yourself what you can show your audience that will help them to understand the subject. What can you show that will catch their attention? What can you show that will make them want to know more?

I regularly receive e-mails from people who want to make a documentary on some subject, but are having a hard time figuring out what to film as visual evidence and wonder if I can help. The e-mail is almost always accompanied with some statement about the people the filmmaker has lined up to give interviews. Which to me means the person is thinking about the project, which is good, but hasn't distinguished between basic research and principal photography.

One of the things you should do is to ask your interview subjects, "What can I film that will show an audience what we are talking about?" They know. They'll tell you.

Another would be to imagine you have to shoot with a silent camera. What could you film that would show the story of the documentary to your audience? What would make them say, "Wow!"?

I'll give you a hint: It isn't an interview with an academic expert.

In Sol Worth's documentary film class, when we would talk about our film ideas—and these were often pretty strange, esoteric, not very visual ideas; we were graduate students, after all—Sol would ask, “OK, how are you going to show that?” And we would kind of flail around until we finally thought up some sequence of images that we thought might convey the idea we were talking about.

Sol would listen, and if we had come up with anything that someone might conceivably record on film and edit into a communicative sequence, he'd say, “Good. That's good.”

And just as we were going, “Phew, got away with that OK,” Sol would ask, “How else could you show it?”

It was a way of tuning us to look for images to tell the story. And it was also a way of reminding us that even if we didn't get the perfect picture—the one in our imagination—we should be on the lookout to find something else that might work.

Quite often, the images we found were far better than the ones we had thought up.

Visual Evidence Is Not the Same as B-roll

Some filmmakers might argue that what I call “visual evidence” is the same as what they call “B-roll,” but most of the time it's not. For instance, suppose they were filming my documentary idea about short WALK lights and cars that turn on red without stopping so pedestrians can't cross even when the WALK light is on. If they've shot some good visual evidence, they won't say, “I've got great B-roll of cars turning right on red without stopping.” They'll say, “I've got some great *shots* of cars that don't stop before turning right on red. One almost hit a pregnant woman.” Because they really think of B-roll as cover footage, just as I do, and they know their “great shot” is visual evidence.

Much more about B-roll in the next chapter.

Gathering Evidence

It's not enough to know what you want to shoot. It's not even enough to know what really is happening in the situation you shot. You have to have the evidence on film or video.

This has two important implications for the documentarian: First, during shooting, it's important to keep firmly in mind that the documentary is

going to be edited in order to organize it to communicate with an audience. And second, during editing, it's necessary to forget, for a while, what you intended to shoot and look at what you've actually recorded.

EDITING VISUAL EVIDENCE

Obviously, you can't show everything you've shot. In editing, you abstract visual evidence that will serve as an accurate analog of the events that were filmed. And you organize it into a statement that will communicate to your audience—honestly, directly, and forcefully—what you know about the event.

Clearly, you have to be careful, in editing, not to distort the evidence. And that can be hard. You were there when the footage was shot. You know everything that happened. It takes only a little bit of the footage to spark your memory of the entire event. But your audience wasn't there. So the footage you choose for the scene has to stand as an accurate analog for everything you remember.

Cutting the Part Where Nothing Happens

Suppose the marriage-counseling sequence had been edited into a scene in a documentary, ending with the marriage counselor giving a summary of the case. And suppose, as so often happens, it had been edited to keep what was being said flowing smoothly. The long pauses where the husband said nothing might be cut out because the editor found them uninteresting. And the scene in which the husband didn't move his chair might be eliminated because nothing's happening. The visual evidence would have been altered so that it seemed to support the verbal statements that everything was going to be OK.

Then it would unquestionably come as a shock to the audience for the marriage counselor to state—as he actually did to me—that there was very little chance of this marriage lasting, and that a divorce might be the best solution for both parties.

Good Mother—Bad Mother

Here's a problem that came up in one of my documentaries. I had separate sequences of two mothers and their two-year-old children working and playing together. Let's call one the Bad Mother. Her own behavior

was pretty neurotic, and she tended to see only her little boy's faults, never his good points. She often couldn't understand what he was doing or make sense out of what he said.

The other was clearly a Good Mother. She talked freely with her daughter, paid attention to her, and encouraged her to do things on her own. She was also a person who liked everything clean and neat. I filmed her daughter helping her mix the batter for a cake.

In editing the film, I put the two mother and child sequences back to back, the Bad Mother first. Each sequence ran about four and a half minutes, cut down from nearly two hours of original footage.

In the sequence with the Bad Mother, I had focused on the little boy. It was his behavior I was interested in. I had sidestepped and cut around the mother's neurotic outbursts as much as possible, because I wanted the audience to watch the behavior of the boy and not waste time psychoanalyzing his mother.

In the Good Mother sequence I was especially interested in one point, where the daughter is handing eggs to her mother to crack and put into the mixing bowl. Then the daughter tries to crack an egg herself. The mother exclaims, "No! Please, dear! Let me do that." But the little girl persists, and finally does crack one egg. I had been concentrating on the talk between the two, leaving in as much as possible.

When I ran the two sequences, I realized I had made a big mistake. I had included almost all of the footage in which the Good Mother clucked about the mess, worried about neatness, and said "Don't . . ." to her daughter—a total of about a minute out of the forty-five minutes of original footage.

As a result, while I had neutralized the Bad Mother, I had inadvertently ended up making the Good Mother look pretty bad. Enough that, by the time the daughter tries to break an egg on her own, an audience was quite likely to miss the point that the mother could have stopped her, but didn't. I was afraid they might see it instead as just one more case of a fussy mother worrying about the mess. So I re-edited.

In the final version, the concern of the Good Mother for neatness is shown, but it doesn't overpower the important behavior of the child. And it doesn't turn a really good mother into a villain. The visual evidence of the sequence is in balance with what actually happened.

When Pictures Contradict What Is Said

When I talk about visual evidence, I'm concerned primarily with the images that are an integral part of your documentary. Every documentarian knows he's got something going if he has evidence on film or video that contradicts what the speaker says. Suppose you're doing a documentary on industrial waste. The president of a chemical company says in an interview on camera that his company is not polluting the river. But you've got footage that shows raw chemicals being discharged from his plant directly into the river. You're going to use that footage, along with the company president's statement, to show that either he is lying or he doesn't know what he is talking about. That's an obvious situation and needs no comment.

CONTRADICTION IN NARRATION

But what happens when the images and the narration are in conflict, as in the protest march film showing an empty street while the narration talked about a huge crowd? These elements are under the control of the documentarian, and the effect is to put image and sound in contradiction. Visual evidence shows what the film is about. When the images show an empty street, then that's what the film is about no matter what the narration says.

LYING BY EXCEPTION

Or let's take this situation from a public relations film made to recruit students for a famous university. Many of the strong points of the school are brought out in the film. But two scenes stick in my memory. The university is located in a cold northern city with a long, bitter winter. But there are no shots of cold, snow, and wind in the film. None. There is, however, a rather idyllic sequence of students sunbathing and swimming at a lake which almost certainly was shot during summer school, not during the regular academic year. The narration explains that the students enjoy their outings at the lake, and adds, almost as an afterthought, "Of course, it's not always like this. It can get pretty cold in winter."

In a sequence on the life of a student, the filmmakers chose to shoot an attractive female graduate student living with two other young

women in an expensive townhouse close to the campus. Again the disclaimer in narration, "Of course, not all students live like this," followed by a reference to the availability of student dormitories for most undergraduates—although these are never shown.

Such disclaimers in narration mean next to nothing. The visual evidence is that if you go to that university, you'll live in an expensive townhouse and enjoy sunny afternoons at the lake.

Because that is what is shown.

Misrepresentation

A documentarian was doing a social documentary on teenagers. He had done a highly successful film about the college protest movement and wanted to look at younger people of high school age to see if he could find the roots of protest in a suburb that sent most of its children to college.

The opening scene of the film shows a lot of sixteen-year-olds, dressed up, looking very somber. The boys look sad; the girls seem on the verge of tears. I think this was used without comment as the title background. Although nothing is said, certainly the visual evidence of the footage is that being a teenager at this place at this time is a pretty serious thing.

After the film was shown on TV, the charge was made by residents of the town that this scene had been filmed at the funeral of a classmate. I don't know whether that's true or not. My point is, if a documentarian takes a scene like this out of context and uses it as evidence to give a false impression, that's lying on film.

Sure it's real; it really happened. But it's not the truth in the visual argument of the documentary.

Similarly, taking statements made by one person, but at two different times and two different locations for two different purposes, and putting them together as if they were one statement made at one time for one purpose is at least misrepresentation and probably lying. More on this in chapter 14.

UNREAL IMAGES

The modern documentarian has available a number of tools that simply did not exist a few years ago. Or even if they did exist, they were too expensive to use in a documentary. But today, when it's an easy thing to

rearrange the location of the pyramids by computer, digital effects and computer animation make it possible to create images of *anything*.

I think this is wonderful, and the documentarian has every right to make use of these images, as long as they are used honestly. That means labeling made-up images as simulations. It means not using digitally enhanced images as if they had been recorded in an actual situation.

Fiction Footage

I've already mentioned documentarians using footage from fiction films to illustrate historical documentaries. I have no problem with this as long as the audience knows what they're looking at. But if scenes are taken from fiction and used as if they were actuality footage, so that the audience is led to believe that what they are witnessing really happened, then the documentarian has left the truth behind in order to serve some other purpose, such as keeping the story interesting. Unfortunately, that's what docudrama does, and why it is fiction based on fact and not documentary.

Reenactment

Reenactment has been a technique of documentary from its earliest days. It can be an extremely effective way of showing an event for which no footage exists. In reenactment as with any other footage not documenting real events, the documentarian must be honest and accurate. It might make a great dramatic scene to show Thomas Jefferson having a lover's quarrel with Sally Hemings, but it wouldn't be honest.*

If you are going to dress people up in costumes and give them the tools and weapons from an earlier time, be sure what you show is correct for the period.

*As I write this the Jefferson-Hemings issue still has not been completely resolved by historians and may never be.

B-ROLL AS ILLUSTRATION, METAPHOR, AND VISUAL WALLPAPER

The concept of B-roll comes from the film days in TV news. Two rolls of film would be loaded on film projectors feeding into TV cameras. One was called the A-roll, which showed the reporter on camera talking or interviewing someone who was talking. The other was the B-roll, which carried the “visuals” that illustrated the story the reporter was talking about.

B-roll is cover footage, pictures that run while someone is talking. It's like the children dressed up as shepherds or wise men in a Christmas pageant—there to provide something for the audience to look at while they listen to the words. It's not evidence, just illustration.

For example, in the first hour of the miniseries *FDR on American Experience*, the story is told entirely through narration and sound bites from interviews. At the very opening of the film, we see newsreel footage of the train carrying President Roosevelt's body to Washington and the people lining the tracks to pay their respects. After that, what we see consists of camera moves on still pictures, a few atmosphere shots from the Roosevelt estate at Hyde Park, a few newsreel shots of political events in the last ten minutes or so, and, of course, the talking heads of interviewees. Watched with the sound turned off, the images tell no story, although one can occasionally infer key points in the life of young Franklin Roosevelt.

The B-roll Mentality

What troubles me about the whole concept of B-roll is what I might call the B-roll mentality:

- Planning a documentary around a series of interviews. (More on that in chapter 12.)
- Thinking that the verbal statement (the A-roll) is the more important thing.
- Thinking of all noninterview footage as “B-roll” and all non-interview filming as “getting some B-roll.”
- Which leads to believing that as far as the images are concerned, close enough is good enough.
- And, perhaps the biggest problem of all, accepting what people tell you, rather than going out with a camera and seeing for yourself.
- Because, if you consider the message of the documentary to be in the interviews and narration, why take the time and trouble to locate and record strong visual evidence, when all that's needed is to cover twenty seconds of talk so the screen won't be blank?

Any time you see action in a documentary in slow motion for no reason, it's B-roll. But if the shot is in slow motion so you can better see what actually happened, it's visual evidence.

Any time a shot in a documentary could be taken out of the film and replaced with something completely different, it's B-roll. If it has to be there, it's visual evidence.

When you see the same shot used over and over again, it's B-roll.

The B-roll mentality is what allowed the filmmakers making a documentary about a historical figure in the American Revolution to shoot a steel-hulled sailing ship for a scene set in the early eighteenth century, and put that shot in the film. I mean a close-up of the hull—bow wave curling back as the ship goes through the water—so that you can see it's made of steel. Wrong century.

Before making my documentaries on kids and schools, I screened all the films I could find on early learning in children. Many of these films had obviously had the narration written before the film was shot, so that the script followed the child development theories of whatever expert was the consultant to the film. Then shots of children illustrated the narration. But quite often the behavior shown was not the behavior described. The narration might say that at a certain age young boys join together in inseparable gangs. Which was accepted child development dogma at the time. What we actually saw on the screen, however, was

several boys on a playground, but each boy was playing by himself. The film offered absolutely no visual evidence to support the gang thesis. It was all B-roll, as if the filmmaker, or the expert, or both, had decided that everyone knows that at a certain age young boys gang together, so it would be enough to show a bunch of boys—no matter what they were doing—for everyone to get the point.

B-roll and TV

Try watching TV news with the sound (and closed captioning) turned off. Usually you can make only a wild guess at what's happening. B-roll illustrates talk. If you can't hear the talk, it makes little or no sense.

In some circles—and even some university documentary courses—it is conventional to plan principal photography for a documentary in terms of how many interviews need to be shot, and how much B-roll will be needed. That's exactly how you make a TV show and stay within budget and on deadline, but it is not, in my opinion, how to make a documentary.

I'm a big fan of the competitions on the Food Network, where several master chefs compete in producing phenomenal cakes, pastries, and sugar structures. These are not documentaries, of course. They are reality TV game shows. But when these programs started a few years ago, we viewers got a good chance to see all of the hard work that went into the chefs' creations.

Then as the shows got popular and began to be produced on an assembly line, the B-roll mentality took over. Today the shows are all about the talk, with lots of fast cuts, swish zooms, and constant camera motion, so that we don't really see what is happening, as much as we get a sense of activity, while the host tells us in voice-over how the competition is progressing. The only time we get any solid visual evidence is at the end of the competition, when the chefs must move a fragile five-foot-tall sugar sculpture from their kitchen area to a display table for final judging. This is the riskiest time of all, because these creations can—and often do—shatter and crash during the move.

That, the cameras cover from every angle.

B-roll as Illustration

Well, you might ask, if B-roll is so bad, why use it at all? The short answer is that B-roll illustrates what is being said in interviews or

narration when you don't have other footage. Documentaries remembering the past face this problem constantly. There may be stock footage or photographs of the period, person, or event. But these were almost always shot for some purpose other than the one the documentarian now has in mind. So they must be used, not as evidence, but as illustrations of the time and the people being talked about.

The challenge for the filmmaker is to make illustrative B-roll more than kids in towels playing shepherds. You have to dig for images that help to advance the story, that give the viewer information as well as something to look at while someone talks.

BRINGING A WAR STORY TO LIFE

Here is an example: I was approached about writing/revising the script for a documentary called *The Borinqueneers* about an infantry unit during the Korean War. These men had attacked and taken Hill 391 several times, while sustaining heavy casualties. Each time they had been driven off the hill by devastating enemy artillery fire. Finally, some of the men refused to go up the hill again, and they were later court-martialed.

The filmmakers, Noemi Figueroa Soulet and Raquel Ortiz, had hours of interview footage with former members of the unit and with a military historian. They knew a lot about the people in the unit and the injustice that had been done to them, but probably less about what it was like to be in the Army in the 1950s or to serve as an infantryman in combat. In the rough cut they sent me, the illustrative B-roll was mostly rear-echelon footage: soldiers living in tents, going through a chow line, riding in trucks, that sort of thing. There was little combat footage.

While I did not become involved with the production, I thought it was an extremely worthwhile project and a story that should be told. And I thought it needed better footage to bring to life the events the interviews described. I wrote:

The documentary needs more of a sense of what war is about—especially the war of the infantryman. It is hell. It's hell when you're winning and hell when you lose. It is just terrible. I think we need to see this. We need to see and hear artillery and mortar shells landing. The Chinese were very accurate with mortars. And when the viewers get to Hill 391 they need to know that there was a lack of artillery

ammunition, and because of this the unit did not receive artillery support in the form of counter-battery fire, which would have suppressed some of the Chinese fire. Without it, the Chinese were free to fire on the unit at will. Viewers need a stronger sense that the unit went up Hill 391 and held it for five days against terrifying fire, and went back again and again and again, before some men decided that this was suicidal. That the refusal to go was less cowardice than a grim appraisal of reality. They need to get a stronger visual sense of war on that hill.

On the other hand, *Devil's Playground*, a documentary about the time in their late teens when Amish youngsters are free to experience the world outside the Amish community, uses lots of shots of Amish life to cover voice-over from interviews. While this functions as illustrative B-roll, it is also visual evidence of the nature of Amish life, which is a big part of the story.

B-roll as Metaphor

A visual metaphor is an image that stands for something else. In a film about New York fire fighters following 9/11, the filmmaker used a shot of three firemen's turnout coats hanging alone on a long row of coat pegs as a metaphor for dead firemen lost in the 9/11 tragedy.

Metaphor is a kind of symbolic B-roll. As the sound track talks about the strength of the nation, for instance, the filmmaker might show visuals of rugged mountains or towering redwood trees.

Metaphor is always explanation, never evidence. It is not even circumstantial evidence. If we say, "John is a tiger," we may mean many things: John is strong or brave or aggressive or ruthless or a killer. What we do *not* mean is that John is literally a tiger.

In a script I reviewed for an information video about pharmaceutical software, the writer used the visual metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle, and showed a picture of each component as a piece in the puzzle. This illustrated the idea that all of the components fit nicely together. However, a metaphor either gets the concept across quickly or not at all, and in this case, the point was made the first couple of times pieces of the puzzle graphic clicked snugly together. But the image continued over and over for the rest of the film until the puzzle was complete. While the puzzle metaphor was apt, it was hardly compelling. It was just another way of

telling the audience the same information that was being said on the sound track, rather than showing the audience evidence of the ways the components of the program actually worked together.

B-roll as metaphor can seem like truth in a different package, because the metaphoric explanation may feel like evidence, even though it isn't. When a metaphor works, it helps us to understand something, to clarify and expand our way of thinking, but it is never proof.

Of course, when a metaphor doesn't work, it often seems like nonsense.

The new-age documentary *What the #\$*! Do We (K)now!?* is full of metaphor as a way to explain concepts for which the filmmakers simply offer no evidence. So we see a lot of high-end graphic animation along with a little allegory featuring Marlee Matlin as a woman named Amanda, who has a lot of questions about her life.

Graphics are illustration, never evidence. And a made-up story about a fictional character, when coupled with statements from interviews or a narrator, is not proof of anything.

I am not opposed to visual metaphor as a form of explanation. I just don't want it confused with visual evidence.

B-roll as Visual Wallpaper

Talk-talk documentaries often use neutral images to provide filler to cover the continuation of an interview as voice-over, or as cutaways to cover an edit in an interview. Outside, shots of trees and sky are favored. Or any nature scene—a stream, flowers, whatever. Inside you have the long tilt down a wall to arrive at nothing in particular, or furniture, books, whatever. These scenes may be very pretty, even occasionally dramatic, but they are shot as filler—visual wallpaper—not as evidence to make a visual argument.

For example, in *FDR* we see an exterior of the house at Hyde Park, at dusk, with light showing through a single window in the upstairs. The camera pushes in to a close-up of that one illuminated window as the narrator says, "While Franklin was at Harvard, his father, seventy-two years old and grown frail and weak from heart disease, died. Sara wrote in her diary, 'All is over. He merely slept away.'"

I have no idea what that shot is supposed to mean. I can conjecture that it is supposed to symbolize the room in which Franklin's father

died. But if he died in his sleep, why was the light on? Or why didn't it go off at the end of the scene? As it is, it's visual wallpaper, no better, or more informative, than a hundred other images that might have been used to cover that bit of narration.

When we've seen the same portrait of George Washington or Napoleon or Catherine the Great several times, but the documentarian keeps coming back to it whenever the person's name is mentioned, that's visual wallpaper.

If people in a documentary are traveling by ship or boat, then the first time we see a shot of the wake or the curl of the bow wave, it's illustration, possibly even a metaphor for moving on. The second time we see the same shot, it's visual wallpaper. The same with shots of the rails on which a train is traveling. Or a plane flying through the clouds.

Show the Visual Evidence

As a documentarian, your job is to find, record, and organize visual evidence to make a powerful, dramatic statement on the screen. Evidence shows the audience something both real and true which they can understand to be a portion of the documentary argument. A strong visual demonstration will almost always be the best evidence you can use.

The minute you find yourself thinking about visuals or B-roll footage, an alarm should go off in your head to tell you that you lack the visual evidence you need and are relying on words to tell your story.

Show us what happened, instead.

A SHORT SERMON ABOUT INTERVIEWS

This is a marvelous time to make documentaries. We have lightweight, inexpensive video cameras that can run for up to several hours without changing recording media and can record a broadcast-quality image in almost any light. It is equipment that allows a documentarian to go into virtually any situation and record visual evidence—activities, behavior, and events as they happen. And yet, many would-be documentarians think first of using this marvelous technology to record interviews.

Why?

Could it be because it is so much easier to ask an expert than to go out and learn about the subject on your own—with a camera?

Promiscuous Interviewing

When all documentaries were shot on film, and it cost about \$150 (equivalent to \$500 today) to shoot and process a 400-foot magazine of color film to get an eleven-minute interview, we could not afford to shoot interviews promiscuously. We needed that expensive footage for visual evidence. But the switch from film to video, and the bargain-basement cost of cameras and recording media, have made it possible to record hour upon hour of interviews for almost no direct, out-of-pocket cost. This has turned the ratio of visual evidence to interview footage upside down.

I cringe when I hear a producer or director talking about shooting lots of interviews and then having them transcribed so he or she can work from the transcript in editing the documentary. Because usually

what will result from this sort of promiscuous interviewing is something that may be more than a Q&A magazine article, perhaps even more than the sort of thing you might hear on talk radio, but it will definitely be something less than a film. It will just be people talking.

A Modest Crusade

My modest crusade is to return the documentary to filmmakers who deal in visual evidence. I don't think much of talkumentaries. Yes, the testimony of eyewitnesses is important and may be the only evidence available in some cases. But too much of the talk in modern documentaries is there, I fear, because it's so much easier to do an interview than to go out and find a compelling image.

Don't get me wrong, I believe in interviews. I've done thousands of them as a documentary filmmaker, as a scriptwriter, and as a book and magazine writer. I think they are an extremely helpful research tool. In researching a documentary, I expect to gather a lot of information about the topic prior to shooting, much of it from interviews. But I am constantly looking for the visual evidence that will permit me to tell the story with pictures.

Interviews Usually Aren't Evidence

Interviews present special problems that many documentarians seem not to be aware of. For instance, when interviews in a documentary use what is said as evidence, then the rules regarding testimony come into play, starting with the caveat that just because a person—even an important person—said something, that doesn't make it true.

TALK WITHOUT VISUAL EVIDENCE

Here's a scene from *What the #\$*! Do We (K)now!?*: A man (identified in the closing credits, but not before, as Dr. Joe Dispenza, D.C.) sits in what looks like a rustic lodge, with a huge fireplace behind him, and talks about perception, memory, and reality. He says:

Scientific experiments have shown that if we take a person and, uh, hook their brains up to certain PET scans or computer technology, and ask them to look at a certain object, and they watch certain areas of the brain light up. And then they've asked them to close their eyes

and now imagine that same object. And when they imagine that same object, it produced the same areas of the brain to light up as if they were actually visually looking at it. So it caused scientists to back up and ask this question: So who sees then? Does the brain see? Or do the eyes see? And what is reality? Is reality what we're seeing with our brain?

This dissolves to a large public area where we see "Amanda" (played by Marlee Matlin) looking at images on a computer. The man continues, voice-over:

Or is reality what we're seeing with our eyes? And the truth is, is that the brain does not know the difference between what it sees in its environment and what it remembers, because the same specific neural nets are then firing.

Dissolve to a young boy blowing a string of soap bubbles, as the man concludes, voice-over:

So then it asks the question: What is reality?

The opportunity for visual evidence—showing the "scientific experiments" the man describes—is ignored. Instead we have only his statement, which is evidence that he said the words, but not that the words are true, along with some B-roll metaphor that might loosely allude to the great mystery of the nature of reality.

LESS THAN THE WHOLE TRUTH

One of the techniques of docuganda is to build a case for or against something by selecting only the sound bites that the filmmaker agrees with and ignoring any statements to the contrary. This is like the witness in a TV courtroom scene who is asked a loaded question and instructed to answer yes or no. When she tries to explain that a simple yes or no is insufficient, she's told to "just answer the question." Everyone knows her answer may be *true*, but it's not the whole truth.

In a documentary interview, you have to probe for the full story, not just the favorable parts. And if you leave out the stuff that hurts your case, you're really not making a documentary.

The Rules of Evidence

So, suppose you are shooting a documentary about a subject that has become controversial. One side makes charges. The other side denies them and makes countercharges. Being a modern documentarian you shoot interviews with people from both sides. What sort of evidence do you have?

The fact is that while an interview is *prima facie* evidence that the person shown said the words that were spoken, it carries no evidence whatsoever about the truthfulness of the statements the person makes. Even in court, where the interview form—questions by an attorney, answers by a witness—is the way virtually all information is elicited, there are complex rules governing what information can and cannot be used. This is because the courts know that what people say is terribly unreliable.

- They may not remember things correctly.
- They may leave out something that should be included.
- They may include or imply something that is not accurate.
- They may not tell the truth—or the whole truth.
- They may not really understand what they are talking about—even if they are credentialed experts on something or other.

HEARSAY

Under some circumstances, courts will exclude testimony about what someone else said. This is called the hearsay rule. If Alice, as a witness, says, "Tiffany told me she got home at one a.m.," the statement is inadmissible as evidence about what time Tiffany actually got home. Why? Because Alice doesn't know what time Tiffany got home. She only knows what Tiffany told her. But the statement might be acceptable as evidence that Tiffany actually said these words. For example, if Tiffany said, "I told Alice I didn't get home until four," Alice's testimony about what time she was told would be relevant.

But note that we still don't know which of them is lying. Possibly both of them are.

CROSS-EXAMINATION

Rules of evidence also require that the speaker be subject to cross-examination. He or she is not allowed to drop a verbal bombshell and

simply walk away, as happens in so many one-sided documentaries. In court, the other side gets to ask questions.

Some filmmakers use interviews with people identified as former employees of the company or agency that is the target of their investigation. Doing so suggests they have inside information about the day-to-day operations of the target. And well they may. But as opposing counsel, I would want to know why this person is a *former* employee, and whether he or she has an ax to grind.

In chapter 2 I wrote about a film on health care my partner and I reviewed. The questions we raised about the assertions that health care companies are making a 20 percent return on investment and are motivated only by greed are the kind of cross-examination completely missing in this film. A speaker may sincerely believe every word he or she is saying. It may be unquestioned common knowledge among the people the speaker hangs out with. But on cross-examination, you would want to test the validity of that knowledge. You'd want company names. You'd want to hear actual numbers. You'd want to be sure the 20 percent actually referred to return on investment, rather than, say, a 20 percent increase in profit. A company whose profits went from 5 to 6 percent has made a 20 percent increase in profit, but just a 6 percent return on investment. I don't know what the truth is about profits in commercial health care. But these statements raise questions in my mind that are not answered in the film.

A little cross-examination would help most interviews. Playing devil's advocate—asking hard questions, indeed, questions that may be counter to your purpose in making the documentary—can either help you prevent inaccuracies from being included in the film or bolster the truth value of what a speaker is saying.

Behavioral Evidence

An audience, like a jury, is not above using behavioral cues to decide whether or not to believe an interviewee. The speaker's dress and manner, as well as the logic of the statements made, can have a powerful effect on an audience.

I once did an interview with two employees of a mental institution. Both of them were leaders of the committee to keep the institution from being closed down. One was a lay therapist who dressed in hippie chic,

tilted his head at a crazy angle when he talked, and spoke in a mixture of street slang and social science jargon. He made several good points in favor of keeping the institution open. But in the course of an eleven-minute interview, he also made two or three totally outlandish statements.

The other man was the union shop steward and a member of the janitorial crew. He had a full beard, neatly trimmed, and was wearing his working clothes. What he said wasn't elegant, but he spoke in an even voice and stated the facts as he knew them. Most important, his attitude and behavior indicated that he believed what he was saying.

This was a sponsored documentary, and the sponsor was trying to remain neutral but actually leaned toward closing the institution. So it would have been an easy thing to use the interview with the weird lay therapist. Most audiences would find him unlikable and difficult to believe, not so much because of what he said but because of the way he said it. Fortunately, the sponsor agreed with me that doing that would be stacking the deck. We chose to keep the visual evidence neutral and use the statement by the shop steward instead.

SUBTITLES OR SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION?

Behavioral evidence is the reason I favor use of subtitles rather than simultaneous translation when the person being interviewed speaks in a foreign language. I also advocate subtitles when the interviewee speaks English with a heavy accent. The subtitles let us know the words that have been said, while also hearing the original statement lets us know *how* they were said.

In simultaneous translation, the voice of the speaker fades under, and we hear only the translator. For example, a program called *Natasha and the Wolf*, shown on PBS's *Frontline* some years ago, is a film constructed from interviews. Much of what is shown, visually, is reenactment, and often seems to bear little relationship to what is being talked about. Therefore there is no convincing visual evidence, just B-roll. The interviews are conducted in Russian with simultaneous translation into English. Without the ability to hear the way the speaker talks, since the voices are covered over by simultaneous translation, there is no way to use behavioral clues to evaluate the information.

Best Evidence

Occasionally, interviews provide the best evidence about events that happened for which no footage exists. My friend Sy Rotter created a compelling series of documentaries about the rescuers who saved Jews from the Nazi extermination machine during the Holocaust, mainly by interviewing actual rescuers and Holocaust survivors. Their memories of those events, often filmed at the actual locations, were a powerful way to tell the story. And as Sy points out, the interviews provided not just the facts, but the emotion of the event.

EVIDENCE THAT THE WORDS WERE SAID

In our highly partisan political arena, there seems to be a news story every week (even more often close to an election) about a politician or candidate who said something he shouldn't have. The speaker often claims later to have been misquoted or to have had the statements taken out of context.

If an interviewee in a political film likens the president to Adolf Hitler and his administration to the Third Reich, that doesn't make the statements true, but the footage is evidence that this person actually made those outrageous accusations. The interview is visual evidence of what words were said, who said them, under what conditions, and in what way—as long as it is run uncut or we have access to the original footage to determine that the sense of the statement in the interview has not been changed by editing.

Pitfalls of Planning a Film Based on Interviews

The first and most obvious problem with basing a documentary primarily on interviews is that you have given up the major advantage of filming, which is the ability to *show* your audience something. There's a reason interviewees are called talking heads. That's what there is to see: a head, talking.

DULL, DULLER, DULLEST

Don't think that my prejudice against making documentaries out of interviews stems solely from my early days of shooting with a silent film camera and later adding nonsynchronous sound. As a documentary

scriptwriter for hire, I've spent hours and hours looking at interview footage and reading transcripts, because that's what the director had. And here's the truth: Most people are not very good in interviews. They don't speak in short, clear, convincing sound bites. They talk too much and say too little. They can't get to the point. They make grammatical errors. They use the wrong words. They repeat themselves. They say things in a way that doesn't make sense. Their statements often lack any real depth. They can be boring. They can be *very* boring.

Here's an excerpt, right off the transcript from an interview with a contract worker who was spending a year at Midway Atoll, helping to clean up the environment so the Navy could turn it over to the Park Service:

WORKER

The Navy's conducting environmental programs on Midway that are, ah, predominant. That's gonna be primarily linked to installation restoration or environmental cleanup. Um, since the Navy came to Midway a number of, ah, which we are learning now, bad decisions, were, bad decisions were made. The same as back in the States. Ah, we used to think asbestos was not harmful. We, also, used to think that lead paint was not harmful. Ah, so, we, like so many other places back in the States, we now have to clean up.

There's a bit of good information in that clip, but it's buried in a meandering response that runs for forty seconds. Sure, you could edit it to make it usable, especially if you were to use it in voice-over. Or you could place the good information economically in narration, while you show the cleanup work that is actually being done.

INDIRECT COSTS

While interviews may be cheap to shoot, many documentarians don't count the indirect costs of extensive interviewing.

The first of these is time spent managing footage after it has been shot. It takes longer to view and log interviews than visual evidence. A short description will often suffice for visual evidence, but some sort of transcript—or at least a summary of what is said—is required for interview footage.

Adding to the actual cash cost of shooting interviews, many documentarians now send out the interview footage for transcription by a stenographer. A whole new industry has sprung up to provide documentarians with transcriptions keyed to the time code of the video.

Second, since interviews are so inexpensive to shoot, documentarians tend to let each interview go on longer than they probably should, and to shoot more of them, because, hey, it's just video. Which results in a bigger pile of interview footage to manage *after* shooting.

Third, interview statements can be time-consuming on the screen. They may slow down the flow of the film. And obviously a talking head is usurping screen time that might better be used for visual evidence.

Fourth, and the most damaging from my point of view, time spent shooting interviews is time *not spent* finding and shooting visual evidence.

LEARNING THE WRONG THING

You learn from what you do. But you learn nothing from what you don't do.

If you plan and shoot your documentary around doing interviews, that will be what you learn how to do, and that will become your comfort zone.

But it won't help you learn how to find, shoot, and tell your story using visual evidence.

End of the Sermon—Somebody Say Amen

The best use of interviews is as a way to amplify upon, and help the audience understand, what is being shown. When used in moderation, interviews can provide the audience with background information, technical details, history, and, sometimes, eyewitness accounts. Statements from recognized experts can be used as a supplement to narration and will often add credibility to the documentary argument when they are combined with compelling visual evidence.

So yes, you are probably going to use interviews. We all do. What I am pushing for is that you don't settle for showing clips from an interview before you have explored other visual options. What would you do, for example, if the interview existed only on audiotape, and the interviewee was no longer available to be filmed?

Try starting with the question, "What will I show?" rather than "Who will I interview?"

No, it's not easy.

Yes, it will make you a better documentary filmmaker.

Talk is cheap.

Good footage is hard.

But it's worth it.

WELL, WHAT ABOUT REALITY?

As technology changed the way documentaries were shot, filmmakers could—and did—record events as they happened. And because they filmed real people (not actors) doing real things in a real situation, it was almost inevitable that they began to think of nonfiction filmmaking as documenting reality.

Recording "Reality"

The undeniable fact that spontaneous cinema and behavioral documentaries were shot in a real situation became the justification, if not the outright excuse, for any number of conceptual errors.

CONFUSING ACTUALITY WITH TRUTH

One was the error of trying to stuff reality into a box, which came from confusing the truth of the documentary with the *actuality* of the situation in which it was shot. If it happened, it's real, the argument went. And if it's real, it's true.

Not really.

It may be worth noting that the French chose the term *vérité*, not *réalité*, to describe *cinéma* as found in the behavioral documentary. What is shot bears only an ideal relationship to what is shown. The documentary shown to an audience is a carefully constructed analog that has been abstracted from the footage that was shot. It has been tempered by the overall truth of the situation as the documentarian understands it and, indeed, by the *honesty* of the documentarian in constructing the program.