BY DEBRA L. ECKERLING

Documentaries: Writing Real Life

PHOTO: ARI FOLMAN AND DAVID POLONSKY
COURTESY: SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

"I don't like the word 'documentarian' anyway, because it sounds like 'librarian.' It automatically gives this connotation of something that is academic. And yes, it's wonderful and it should be studied like any other art form. But 'documentary filmmaker' to me sounds much more appropriate because you are a filmmaker like any other visual artist or craftsman as opposed to an archivist."
— Eddie Schmidt, Board President, International Documentary Association

Though Michael Moore may have been the first mainstream documentarian, starting with the release of *Roger & Me* in 1989 through 2007's *Sicko*, with the Oscar®-winning *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) in between, the arrival of the penguins (*March of the Penguins*, 2005) and Al Gore (*An Inconvenient Truth*, 2006) heralded a documentary surge, moving documentary film from the fringes—PBS and "special screenings"—to mainstream box-office players.

These days, with higher technology at lower prices, documentary filmmaking is accessible to just about everyone: fiction and nonfiction filmmakers alike. Because, like fiction feature films, documentary is all about the story.

Finding a Story to Tell

"You have to be patient and diligent about making sure you find a story that's worth telling. That's number one," explains Oscar-nominated Scott Hamilton Kennedy, creator-producer of *The Garden*, a documentary about Los Angeles' South Central Community Garden's fight against eviction.

Kennedy was made aware of the farmers' plight when his producing partner at the time, Dominique Derrenger, sent him a transcript of the six-minute piece *Life & Times,* an L.A. newsmagazine program, did on the community garden. "He saw that piece and knew there was something there.

"Just from reading the transcript, I saw that there were so many elements of story here. I got off the plane at LAX and drove right to the garden and started shooting two days later."

In terms of story, Kennedy did not know what the conclusion of *The Garden* would be. Would the wealthy land developer successfully evict the 14-acre community garden, or would the community be able to continue its agricultural project?

"Once you think you have a subject that's worthwhile, you are going on faith that it's worth following through. You have to hope it's going to have an exciting outcome."

However, in terms of a historical documentary, the filmmaker is, in a sense, working backward from the conclusion. When the conclusion is already known, the question then becomes how to tell the preceding story in an interesting way.

"You could be telling a story that's already been told, like *Man on Wire*," Kennedy continues. "They knew the story elements were there because it had already happened."

Then there are the projects that grow out of the filmmaker's desire to explore a certain subject—*Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), *Deliver Us From Evil* (2006)—and ground it in the personal experiences of their "characters."

Award-winning filmmaker, screenwriter and composer Kurt Kuenne was finishing up a documentary called *Drive-In Movie Memories*, which chronicled the outdoor moviegoing experience, when the subject of his next film called to him.

"At the time I was finishing [*Drive-In*], unfortunately, is when my best friend Andrew Bagby was murdered," Kuenne explains, "which became the subject of *Dear Zachary*."

Bagby was murdered by his ex-girlfriend, who fled the country to Canada and then learned she was pregnant with Bagby's child. Kuenne decided to make the film for the child so he could get to know the father he would never meet.

"My first thought was not to make something for public release, but to make a personal documentary for friends and family."

Then, the Canadian government allowed Bagby's killer to roam free on bail, during which time she committed another gruesome crime. "A series of events happened over the course of a couple of years. When the outcome of the murder case was unacceptable, it became apparent to me and to Andrew's parents that this story needed to be told publicly if there was going to be any legal change to prevent a recurrence of this situation.

The Garden

PHOTO: DON NORMARK
COURTESY: BLACK VALLEY FILMS

"My goal was not to provide some objective journalistic experience. My goal was to make you live through the experience as we did, all the while giving you the facts."

Dear Zachary is definitely a case of "the documentary chooses you," in which filmmaker Eddie Schmidt, president of the Board of the International Documentary Association, strongly believes. Schmidt, who produced and co-wrote *This Film is Not Yet Rated* and produced and shot the Academy Award®-nominated *Twist of Faith*, is a big fan of the do-it-yourself documentary, especially when a filmmaker feels so passionate about a subject, he or she wants to begin shooting right away.

"What I think appealed to me about documentaries is [either] I could write a script and I could get it in development and I could go to meetings and the financing could fall apart, *or* I could actually find something interesting and I could just start making it."

This "just do it" mentality is something Schmidt recommends for would-be documentary filmmakers. Find an interesting subject, practice filming, doing interviews, putting the pieces together, and go from there. "Go and scope-out reality and figure out how to make it into something," he says.

Writing the Documentary

Whether a documentary is dramatic or humorous, historical or vérité, traditional or modern, each will require some elements of writing. According to Schmidt, starting with a treatment has multiple purposes for documentary filmmakers. Not only is it an essential document to show a potential investor, it's also a good exercise for the filmmaker.

"You have to have some sense of what your structure might be, how you are going to treat your material, what your arc could be," Schmidt elaborates. "Because it's a documentary—unless it's a historical or archival piece—you don't quite know exactly where it's going to go.

"Documentaries, in a sense, tend to get written twice," Schmidt continues. "You write it as you're beginning: You met a fantastic subject, you researched it, and you realized there's a film there. Writing in one way is like the throwing down of the gauntlet—this is what I intend to do.

"Then sometimes there's a one-point-five step in the middle where you revise—you are constantly, in a sense, writing in your head. What should I ask this person? Should I go and interview this person?

"When you get into the editing room, you're somewhat adhering to the structure you set out with, but then you often radically reinvent the film, both in terms of structure and scene-to-scene."

The camera is, in a very real sense, the co-author of the story in terms of what story elements it discovers and how it follows the subjects of the film.

"If you decide to go in tight on someone's face as he is starting to break down, there's an

element of writing there: You didn't plan that beforehand, there was no storyboard, nobody told you to do it, necessarily. But you felt moved, and you went in tight. As opposed to writing a script where it says, 'CU tight on face, tears.' [The scene is] actually happening. If you are documenting live, the camera becomes an instrument of writing."

Kuenne concurs and takes that theory to yet another level. "I don't really think it's possible to be objective in the arts at all," he says. "I think when people say they are trying to be objective, that's fine and that's nice, but it's always going to be subjective because people always have to make choices. You always have to decide what's in the frame, how long it is being held, where to cut, what sound you're using, what music you're using, how you are structuring the thing. All of that is always a subjective choice. There are films that maybe 'feel' objective, but I don't think that actually exists."

Whether it's a documentary or a feature film, a short or a piece of prose, every story needs a beginning, a middle, and an end. The basic principles of structure apply, as they would in nearly any other medium.

"It's all storytelling," Kuenne says. "It's just one is made up out of thin air and the other was culled from real life with existing footage and footage you managed to get. But you don't have a second chance to stage anything or get it the way you want. When you're doing a documentary, you just grab what you can as best as you can. You can only plan so much.

"As far as presenting a finished documentary film as opposed to a finished fiction film, the same basic principles apply: Keep the story moving and keep your audience engaged. You have to treat the people in your documentary as characters the same way you would in a fiction film. Let the audience into their lives and make them become real and relatable for the people watching the film.

"To me [documentary filmmaking has] the same creative challenges, just starting with a different set of raw materials."

If the treatment and the planning are the first drafts, then the editing and re-editing, and re-re-editing are the rewrites. The editing phase also happened to be when Kuenne wrote his narration.

"When I got ready to edit the movie, I watched all my footage—I had like 300-something hours of material. I sat down and made copious notes that filled a huge binder. I pretty much had put the movie together in my head, but I sat down and wrote a quick, 10-page outline. That was the 'script' I worked from, cutting the film together.

"As I was starting to see how the things were coming together, I would scribble my narration on the back of the outline, record it, and put it in the film. So, it's writing with the pieces of film that you have and then creating new stuff, which is the narration, as you are going.

Kuenne looks at narration the same way as writing dialogue in a fiction screenplay.

"To me dialogue is kind of the easiest part because the hardest part is figuring out what the story is and how it goes together and working out the logic. What the people say to each other kind of comes logically at that point," he adds. "Once you know your characters and you know your story, what they are going to be saying becomes fairly clear."

Kennedy's preference is to write title cards to link elements and details within the story. Though not a huge fan of narration, Kennedy can appreciate its importance.

"I haven't found the right project that I needed to go that direction," he says. "I'd rather use the footage to tell the story. The voiceover can change the feeling that I hope an audience gets and make them very aware of the film. It can. Again, when's it's done really well, narration is as good as any other vocabulary we use to tell a story.

"I prefer the simplicity and elegance of title cards," Kennedy continues. "Hopefully, they are very clear and do not take you out of the story and do not show any bias either. They're the little stepping stones needed to get to the next part of the story and go forward."

Documentaries: The Sky's the Limit

A recent crop of documentaries, including the award-winning, animated *Waltz With Bashir*, are really breaking new ground in terms of structure, story and technology.

Low-Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing

Concentration in Writing for Stage and Screen
Curriculum includes:

- The Art of Dialogue
- The Mythical Structure of Screenwriting
- The Three-Act Structure
- Writing the Short Play
- Absurdist Drama

Learn more:
lesley.edu/info/script

MFA in Creative Writing at Lesley University Fiction | Nonfiction Poetry | Writing for Stage and Screen | Writing for Young People

LESLEY UNIVERSITY Let's wake up the world.℠ Creative Writing

Faculty

Kate Snodgrass Heideman Award-winner and Artistic Director, Boston Playwrights' Theater

Jami Brandli Elliot Norton Award-winner

Barry Brodsky Hollywood's Next Success finalist

Recent Visitors

Debbie Danielpour Writer for *Stand Accused* (Sony Pictures), *Star Trek: The Next Generation,* and *Deep Space Nine*

Cheryl Eagan-Donovan President, Women in Film and Video, New England

Deborah Kovacs Senior Vice President of Publishing, Walden Media

Lesley University Cambridge, MA

GA09_MCW_PA005

Kurt Kuenne, writer-director of *Dear Zachary*

PHOTO: RICHARD KUENNE
COURTESY: MSNBC/KURT KUENNE

"They are documentaries but, at the same time, they are boldly different from the documentaries we have seen before," Schmidt says. "*Waltz With Bashir* is about the idea of repressed memories, lost memories, hallucinations from a horrific war-time experience. What more interesting way to depict that journey and those themes than with animation?"

The new age of documentary is the reflection of a few elements: younger filmmakers, new technology, and narrative storytelling.

"Younger filmmakers have not necessarily seen distinction between what documentary was and what narrative was," Schmidt offers. "I don't mean in terms of not capturing reality, I mean in terms of how to represent reality. We can use all the wonderful tools of storytelling from cartoons to montage to music."

Part of the shift in conventional documentary filmmaking also comes from the advances in digital editing. Cutting actual film was a lot more expensive and time-consuming than playing with scenes and elements digitally. There are so many elements that can be placed in a documentary: graphics, re-creations, photo-effects, animation. And there's the flexibility to try different things, which could be both a blessing and a curse.

"You could put together a zillion different movies from the same pile of footage," Kuenne says. "Every filmmaker who comes to a pile of documentary footage would edit it and would make a completely different movie than any other, which is exciting.

"The only way to get through and not spend years of your life fiddling around with footage is to come into the cutting process with a clear vision of what you see at the other end. Otherwise, you could get sidetracked for months, if not years, just trying different things."

Using after-effects animation-type graphics to bring things to life is exciting and opens a world of possibilities. But the bells and whistles mean nothing if there's not a strong story to back them up.

"I don't get too hung up on style," Kennedy admits. "I just react if something works for me or doesn't work for me. As long as it's engaging, true, emotional, exciting, funny or whatever they are trying to do, if it works, it works.

"Because you have cameras and editing equipment available doesn't mean you are a filmmaker or that you have a subject matter that is going to make a film worth watching. We have to be ruthless with ourselves, as ruthless as audiences and critics are going to be with our film and as we are with other people's films.

"You have to be that self-critical of every step of what you are trying to do. Is the story engaging, is it dramatic, is it funny, is it exciting, is it going to change over time, is it surprising—all the things you want from a film experience. Are they there?"