

“Partial View: Truth in Documentary Filmmaking”

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September, 1990

Riga, Latvia

This group could have selected a simpler subject for me than strategies for communicating “truth” in the documentary. First, you have to know what truth is, and that’s like diving into the deep, dark pool of epistemology. How do we know what we know? How do we know *that* we know? I’m a reporter, not philosopher, and I’m much more likely to have questions than answers.

We tend to think we know a subject when we can package it into neat little categories—which serve as names and labels for a sprawling continuum of a vision, an idea, or a concept.

Truth is one of those ideas. But cutting into it is like trying to slice water. It just flows around the knife.

The French aphorist La Rochefoucauld once said, “Neither the sun nor death can be looked at with a steady eye.” Neither can truth. As soon as we think about it, it starts deconstructing (which means, I think, that there is no absolute). Maybe we should call this talk deconstructing the documentary. It’s dangerous to do zero-based thinking about art. All we end up with is our words, our conventions, our norms, which are the building blocks of what we call “truth.”

Let me start with a story.

I recall the first hour-long documentary I ever produced, in 1970. I lived with, or practically lived with, some families in upper Manhattan, representatives of a segment of society that was soon thereafter labeled “The Silent Majority.”

The film was called, *The Man in the Middle*.

The families were hardworking, true believers—in family, God, and country. They supported the war in Vietnam. They feared every change that was happening in society—the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, which was just beginning, the student protest movement against the war. They and their friends were what we call blue-collar laborers—cops, city sanitation workers, electricians, bartenders. Housewives and mothers. Their children, good sons and daughters. They all went to church, and they paid their taxes. Their children usually did not go to college, because the family income was not enough to pay for it. I remember the script...because there was only one paragraph of it. For the rest of the film, the people spoke for themselves. The script said, “All they have to give their children were their union cards.”

I grew to love those people.

They knew who they were.

They knew what they believed in.

The world was a hard but simple place. Any change—such as giving opportunity to others—meant a change for the worse for them.

Good people. You could depend on them.

We spent a couple of months researching their world and their values, living their daily lives with them, interviewing them, and then filming.

And then we returned with the film to the editing room, and we edited. Edited their lives. The clay of their world was sculpted into a story, which took one hour to tell to fit the

television time slot. In cutting the film, I was cutting into myself, my experience, and the love I had developed for them. It was painful, but that's the process of filmmaking.

It was a fine show. It won many awards, including my first Emmy. But the program turned those people from subject into object, sympathetically, but necessarily, cutting, abbreviating, condensing. As a documentary, they became images, and then icons, of an age. The reality of their lives was transformed into story. If you do it well, you capture a reality, but never the reality.

As a documentary producer, you create a new reality. The "dailies" come closer to truth, but even dailies are only excerpts from life, not life: representations, not the realities, of life. And would an audience watch dailies anyway? We must seduce the audience with techniques for representing truth. The very language of images and beauty is a technique.

The process of documentary production itself gets between you and the truth, whatever the truth is.

Before I go on about the Object we are examining, Truth, let's identify the subject, the observer, Me. What is my perspective? POV?

I am and professionally always have been a journalist. That is, one whose occupation is in journalism which, in its simplest form, means the gathering of news. The word journalist comes from the word journal, which is an account of events and transactions... originally, a daily account. Reporters, writers, editors, correspondents, columnists, analysts,

critics—all are journalists, and so today are producers, individuals who work not only with words but pictures and sound as well.

I am a journalist, and worse than that, a television producer. For more than twenty-five years I was employed in broadcast journalism, which some regard as an oxymoron, an expression in which the words cancel each other, because they mean opposite things, like fact and fiction, truth and lies. All television programs are shows, and a show, even a news show, is entertainment. But reality isn't a show, although on rare occasions it's entertainment. So, by definition, according to some, television journalism is artificial to begin with, and there certainly is some truth to that, whatever truth is. In this group of filmmakers, television journalism has an even worse reputation. It's the Establishment and that which interferes with truth—the kind of reporting which the independent movement developed to counter and correct.

Now, as dean of a journalism school, I'm an academic, and that may be even worse than a broadcast journalist when it comes to seeking truth. But let's not get into that. Even as an academic, I'm still a journalist, and after this effort of trying to write an analytic, if not academic, paper for this conference, I've come to the conclusion that making a documentary, as hard as it is, is easier than writing about it.

That is the perspective from which I speak: the experience of a professional journalist.

What does “professional journalist” mean? According to a recently published academic paper, journalist means, among other things:

1. There is an expectation that journalists adopt a disinterested or impartial approach in dealing with the phenomena about which they report, write, and edit.
2. There is an expectation that the journalistic documentary will be factual, accurate, and fair.
3. There is an expectation that journalistic work serves the public interest—monitoring government action, fighting for public access to information, upholding the rights of free speech, offering constructive social criticism, and providing a forum for the exchange of public views.

The documentary form spans a broad spectrum of subjects, treatments, and purposes. In seeking to present the truth, we face innumerable choices in technique: the authoritative reporter; interpretive journalism; personal journalism; cinema vérité in which the subject speaks for itself; and others.

The journalistic perspective fits into this conference as one point on the documentary spectrum. On this, the journalist and filmmaker agree: that the documentary is a form of nonfiction. In the purest sense, documentaries deal with real people and real events, as opposed to fictional characters or imagined occurrences. The journalist supposedly operates within stricter limits of the documentary tradition than the filmmaker, which should make the journalistic documentary come closer to the truth. We'll see.

But the distinction between the filmmaker and the journalist is blurred, especially in techniques for reflecting truth. All the categories, the labels, we use to try to understand the process overlap—between subject and object; facts and perception; the externals of observation and organization and the internals of taste and judgment. The biggest difference between the artist-filmmaker and the journalist may simply be their purposes. The artist presents his or her vision. The journalist brokers the ideas of others. And there is a difference in the vocabulary and grammar of the film in the manner in which the reporter or filmmaker declares him or herself in the work. But for the filmmaker and the journalist the intent is the same: the representation of truth in real, or actual, situations.

Back to the original subject. What is real? What is true?

Those questions are reason enough to become a journalist. Journalists stick to the facts and just tell the story. In the journalistic form, the documentary is purportedly objective, appealing to the audience's intellect first and emotions second. The purpose is not to entertain, but rather to inform, to educate, to bring to the public's attention an issue or a perspective it might otherwise not encounter.

Only it is not that simple, even for the journalist.

What factors in documentary filmmaking interfere with capturing the truth?

The catalogue of factors is fat.

Take the factor of Time.

I think of an anecdote about a Native American Indian I met some years ago at a conference in Aspen, Colorado. As some of you may know, in Native American culture,

there is a different concept of time. He told me he used to be a journalist. I said, “Why did you give it up?”

He gave a simple reply, “I couldn't understand the purpose of a deadline. What is the point of a deadline, anyway?” he asked. “It didn't help my writing. It didn't help the story,” he said. He had a point and never having found a satisfactory answer, he had become the curator of a museum where the concept of time was more compatible with his culture.

The simplest intrusion of time into so-called truth in making a documentary is the time between research, location scouting, casting, and scheduling. In the best reporting documentaries, you must know your subject—before you shoot it. At least you must know the questions in order to get some answers. But will it be the same story when you return to shoot it? How can you predict what will happen in front of the camera? Truth is the appearance that materializes at the moment.

And when you arrive on the scene, what happens? I used to describe it as “trampling on the flowers.” There’s the scene, the “reality” that existed before you got there, the one you wanted to capture, and then the new reality after you arrived. There is no way your presence doesn't affect it. Lights, camera, microphones, action. Cue the characters who are no longer people but actors, prototypes. (Isn’t that why you chose them?) The time it took to capture the reality changed the reality. The event unseen is not the event you record. What does the documentary capture? Journalistic or otherwise? Well, it captures some reality. Or does it? Does it actually create a new one, like fiction, with the difference that this one exists for a moment?

What about the time it takes to get to know your subject, if you ever get to know the truth of anything in a limited period of time? When I was producing documentaries, there was always a cut-off point, a point at which I would have to—as we say in the business—“Go with what you've got.” What that means is there’s a deadline, and there’s no more time left for reporting. Whatever facts you have, that’s your story. The deadline is inviolable, except in extraordinary circumstances. Whether it’s three hours, three months, or three years. The so-called “truth” is determined by the time allotted, not vice versa. Is it possible to find truth on a deadline? Some facts, maybe, some accurate information that will add to knowledge, if you’re lucky. But the truth? Neil Sheehan took sixteen years to write *A Bright, Shining Lie*, the story of one officer in the Vietnam War. Claude Lanzmann took eleven years to produce the documentary *Shoah*. In television you might get three months or maybe four to produce a documentary hour. That’s time enough to gather a lot of facts. I’m not sure how close you come to the truth.

And talking about time, the limits of length itself—one hour, or a half hour, or ninety minutes, not to mention the internal time of the film and pacing itself, from slow motion to the ten-second sound bite.

Some other factors that come between journalists and truth: the producing organization itself, and, in particular, the organization executive. The organization has a view of its own, blind as those who work there might be to it, but beyond the collective view, there are even more blatant assaults on documentary truth.

I love this story:

I was producing a documentary on the subject of death—facing death as a fact of life. It was 1971, and the first time the subject was treated in long documentary form on commercial television. I was producing the program for WNBC-TV.

The station president was both interested and nervous. He asked to screen the program in advance, which was unusual. I had produced for the station for years. The president was not a news or editorial person, and usually he did not see programs before they went on the air.

He screened the program and was deeply moved.

Silence in the room when the screening ended. He stared at the screen.

“That’s beautiful,” he said. “And powerful. I’m going to kill the commercial breaks. That film should not be interrupted. One question, though,” he went on. “What is that dead body doing in the film?”

About twenty minutes into the film, after much talking about death, I had shown the picture of a man who had just died of cancer. No funeral cosmetics. Just a slow pan around a dead body on a table. A forty-two-year-old man. He looked about seventy-five. The image was *real*. There was a voice-over by a minister lecturing to students in a classroom about death, a scene that had been established earlier. The minister’s words were appropriate and illuminating about why it is so difficult to face death directly and honestly. The camera panned smoothly around the table on which the dead body rested—the film was black and white for death—and then we dissolved to a shot of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, in color, to represent life, and panned up into the sun. It’s from that program’s script that I remember the

quote from La Rochefoucauld: “Neither the sun nor death can be looked at with a steady eye.” We dissolved death into the sun. Moving. Aesthetic. Symbolic. For the time.

So, the station president says, “Can't you take that dead body out of the film? It ruins the whole thing.” I explained that that was the subject of the film, learning to face death as a fact of life, and argued vehemently to keep it in.

I won the battle...that time. But how many times has the editorial process in a journalistic organization interfered with truth? In fairness, I should say that most editorial advice in the organization was helpful to my work, much as an editor helps an author or a reporter. I might even mention, as a former program director for public television for which I viewed much independent documentary work, that an editor's eye is often what is missing from an independent's work, a critical eye that might have made the documentary much better. I realize that among documentary artists those can be fighting words.

When it comes to telling the truth, there's a wild card in the deck, a factor none of us can really control. That's the viewer. A documentary is like a kiss—it's unfinished, it's pointless, until it lands somewhere. And while we can try our best to tell the truth as we see it, we never really know where it will land, or what viewers will do with it when it does. Anything can happen.

Two examples:

A colleague of mine who taught writing to college students told me this story. In the week after the Grenada invasion she brought in tapes of the very first radio announcements, video cassettes of some evening news reports, newspaper articles written a day or so later,

and news magazine pieces summarizing the week's developments. She asked them, "Which medium is the best for immediate news? For complete news? For news analysis? Which medium do you trust the most? Turn to first? Is any medium more objective than the others?"

Every time they answered: "television." One student gave the reason for her faith. "In a newspaper," she said, "it's only one person writing, and that person might be biased. On television you see with your own eyes what's really happening, so you know it's true."

Now these students considered themselves sophisticated—the television generation who know the tricks. Yet it had never occurred to them that someone behind the scenes was picking through thousands and thousands of feet of tape, discarding most of it, and selecting the few minutes that millions of viewers would get to see. Seeing is believing, or so we think. In reality, believing is seeing.

That's one extreme: the viewer as worshipper. But there are also people who won't believe anything they see, no matter how hard the conscientious journalist tries. I was co-executive producer three years ago on a documentary Bill Moyers did about the Iran-Contra affair. Bill has a reputation for a strong point of view, and his documentary was critical of covert activity—secrecy—as a tool of foreign policy. After the program aired, a man wrote to say, "I didn't watch your show, but I didn't have to. I knew exactly what you were going to say. It was full of lies and prejudice, full of hate for America." The viewer with a closed mind.

How much do viewers really understand of the process of getting and airing the news—or making a film? How much explanation do we owe them? Is it fair to let people

believe there is one truth, and we have found it? Can we help it if they believe? Can we help it if they don't? Questions like these can whirl you straight into a hall of mirrors. Maybe the only truth in film is metaphorical—that which the viewer understands in his own experience.

I don't want to go into every factor that affects the truth of a documentary in the journalistic genre...*where* you shoot your subjects, the location, meaning the message of the background. How often do we contrive or manipulate a setting to seduce the audience? What about music? Where does that fit into journalism, if it is not actual music in a given scene?

And then there are the limits of knowledge on the part of the reporter, producer, or correspondent. To put it bluntly: ignorance as bias or point-of-view. Note the clip of Mike Wallace in *Eyes on the Prize* and how the Black Muslims and Malcolm X were characterized in that first report on network television. All Mike knew of the story was what the film portrayed. That turned out to be like the slice of Venus we saw in the Magellan picture from space. If that's all we were ever to see, would we know the shape of the planet? No, we wouldn't. That goes for any subject we cover.

And I don't exempt *Eyes on the Prize* from the questions of truth we are raising. Great as it is to have that brilliantly produced record of the civil rights movement, as much as it captured in film clip and oral history, isn't that, too, just a slice of time and truth? How much should we accept history by film clip? If it wasn't shot, we come to believe it didn't happen. Is history what happened or only selective collective memory?

And, finally, last but maybe it should have been first: Money. That's a whole other research paper. What is the equation? T (for Time) x M (Money) = T (Truth)? I know the

independent filmmaker is obsessed, if not haunted, by the subject of money. Who will pay for documentaries on unpopular, controversial subjects? Who will pay for the truth? Without financial support, one more idea, one more testament, is swallowed into the ocean of forgetfulness and its lessons lost to the future. Money, we know, can buy freedom and beauty. Does it also buy truth?

The audience justifiably expects a level of accuracy and objectivity from the nonfiction form. If all of the above are just a few of the factors that interfere with truth for the journalist who produces under industry guidelines and restrictions, what happens to truth in the hands of the documentary filmmaker playing with techniques of fiction?

Errol Morris made use of dramatic techniques to tell his story in *The Thin Blue Line*. By doing so, did it help him come closer to truth or just help to make a more arresting film?

Critics of *Roger and Me* claim Michael Moore broke faith with the audience by misusing statistics, slanting facts, and presenting events out of the sequence in which they occurred. But do we accept his film as documentary? If we do, the allegations are quite serious. And if we do, how does that affect our definition of documentaries?

But it would be just like Truth to be paradoxical, that in using techniques of fiction, we come closer to the truth.

You may be surprised that I have more tolerance than might be expected from a journalist and a journalism school dean for subjective reporting and fictional techniques. There are precedents for pushing the boundaries of journalism, and even if there weren't, in the interest of the vitality, growth, and development of the documentary form, there should

be. We should always be trying to “push the envelope” as long as the documentary remains true to its purpose—that is, to capture reality and, as closely as possible, to represent truth. We should be pushing the envelope with ideas, strategies of storytelling, subjects, techniques, and technology.

Even in print, there is precedent for relaxing the rules of journalism, and strict fact and objectivity, in the pursuit of truth. In the '60s we saw the growth of “new journalism,” a style that introduced techniques drawn from the novel, including inner dialogue, composite characters, point of view. The great journalist John Hersey said:

“I’ve thought quite a lot about the issue of fiction and journalism as two possible ways of presenting realities of life, particularly such harsh ones as we’ve encountered in my lifetime. Fiction is the more attractive to me, because if a novelist succeeds, he can enable the reader to identify with the characters of the story, to *become* the characters of the story, almost, in reading. Whereas in journalism, the writer is always mediating between the material and the reader; the reader is conscious of the journalist presenting material to him.”

In *Hiroshima*, Hersey experimented with techniques of fiction. He built suspense and cut back and forth between stories. Time was opened up. Stories were reconstructed, all dramatic techniques that are now standard in the documentary and indeed all nonfiction journalism.

In *The Thin Blue Line*, dramatic reenactment was used to bring out the truth. Would I call the film journalism? In the informational sense, yes. Would I call the film objective reporting? No. Although the film appears to present a variety of evidence and testimony and

to let the viewer decide who is guilty, we know that the selection and the presentation of images and voices are shaped by Morris's own belief. He directs us to his own conclusion. As it turns out, the film came closer to the truth, or at least the facts, than a lot of objective reporting, and it had real life consequences for a man unjustly convicted of murder. Randall Adams is a free man today, largely as a consequence of *The Thin Blue Line*. But the dramatic technique didn't help the journalism. It simply helped call attention to the journalism.

Are those techniques of fiction—for example, dramatic reenactment—acceptable then as journalism, a question that was asked again and again in journalism circles this year?

There are, in fact, lines to be drawn. Concerning dramatic reenactment, I would say, absolutely “no” in news, but possibly “yes” in some public affairs programs.

It was *The Thin Blue Line* that inspired, if you can call it inspiration, ABC News in the reporting of the Felix Bloch espionage story on its evening news program—with the dramatic reenactment of the passing of a briefcase. (No less with time code added to make it appear more authentic as a piece of hidden camera action tape. Invention and imagination can be a handicap in journalism.) That visual, as an illustration of the story, came right out of the vocabulary of Errol Morris's camera, a piece of directorial plagiarism. Except that news is what happened, not what someone says happened, or what someone thinks happened, or as someone imagined something might have happened. That's a violation of the convention of news, the very ground on which we've come to trust it. I'm a purist and a fundamentalist when it comes to visual illustration of news.

But in public affairs and documentary reporting, I'm willing to take a more flexible view. Particularly since I've done it myself in several public affairs productions.

But there is one place I do believe a line should be drawn in the documentary waters, and that is when the very intention of the documentary is distorted by a purpose other than the pursuit of truth, as in propaganda.

Advocacy has a noble tradition in journalism and in the documentary form. Advocacy may be the documentary at its most effective—the truth as one person sees it, the object illuminated and the subject revealed.

Advocacy has a place in the public dialogue and the documentary tradition, but I would argue that advocacy differs from propaganda, and that propaganda has no place in the pursuit of truth. Too many fail to see, or make, the distinction.

Advocacy defends, by argument or example, a particular point of view. Propaganda is the systematic, deliberate manipulation of ideas with the goal of indoctrination. It pretends to be the truth, but, in fact, it is filled with deception, distortion, and even lies. Advocacy aims for the heart but does not avoid the reasoning mind. Propaganda plays to prejudice and irrational passion.

The Thin Blue Line fits nobly in the advocacy tradition. *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* as well.

Roger and Me is much closer to propaganda in its manipulation of events, but I'm not sure that's the appropriate question. A better one might be: Is it documentary? Is it fact or fiction? Is it truth or lies? It uses real situations to tell its story, but the story is

refracted through a Michael Moore lens. There is no attempt to capture the reality of General Motors minus Moore. The filmmaker uses himself, which he states in the opening, and real characters, situations, and documentary gossip to create a caricature of an institution. And like a caricature or a cartoon, clearly Moore captured an emotional, if not factual, truth. If we accept this description, then *Roger and Me* becomes less a corruption of the documentary than a new genre within it. Does it need a new name or label so that we can deal with it? Like the nonfiction novel? How about a documentary cartoon? Or “docutoon”?

The documentary is not a single form but a universe of forms. It is not a single language but a universe of languages with an infinite dictionary of images, symbols, and ideas. It is at its best when it captures a spark from the sun of truth. It is at its worst when it lies and misleads in the guise of the pursuit of truth.

The documentary is, in a sense, the most aesthetic form of journalism. As reporters, producers, and filmmakers we transform the raw material of the facts as we know them—the words and the pictures—into an integrated work that includes drama, color, and characters. We report a perceived reality, objective or subjective, but we also create a new reality in the process of making the film.

So how do we judge the finished product? By the journalist’s standards of accuracy and objectivity or by the artist’s standards of wholeness and effect? Are the two mutually exclusive? Probably not, but as a reporter and a journalist, I end where I started—with more questions than answers.
