

DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital
Humanists

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2. Learning to Love the Camera

It is worth taking a moment to reflect and take stock. Making a film, of any length or complexity, is a wonderful experience, filled with unique and thoroughly satisfying challenges. In some ways, we are all filmmakers.¹ Perhaps the most important footage shot this century was that which captured the planes flying into the World Trade Centre. To be sure it was badly framed, the resolution was low, and the camera shake is almost unbearable. But those short pieces of film are far more important than any of the \$100+ million blockbusters that have followed since. Long after Michael Bay's *Transformers* movies are relegated to the memories of a few elderly millennials, scholars and the public will still look to that shocking footage, unintentional masterpieces of the moment, and gasp in horror.²

The relative crudity of such footage does not reduce its effectiveness. The footage of Rodney King's beating at the hands of the LAPD, captured on a consumer camcorder by an outside observer, is a dispatch from the frontline.³ It is far more emotionally affective than most staged pieces that aim to produce a similar effect. It is the honesty of that footage that gives it power.⁴ In all likelihood, there is footage on your phone or computer right now that is more honest and meaningful (at least to you) than anything you will see at the multiplex this year. There are moments of beauty, located on the very same device that you use

1 Don Boyd, 'We are all Filmmakers Now — and the Smith Review Must Recognise That', *The Guardian*, 25 September 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/25/all-film-makers-smith-review>

2 For a discussion of the ways that events like 9/11 have shaped and challenged the dominant schema, see Jacqueline Brady, 'Cultivating Critical Eyes: Teaching 9/11 Through Video and Cinema', *Cinema Journal* 42 (2004), 96–99.

3 George Holliday, *Rodney King Tape*. Camcorder footage. Los Angeles, 1991.

4 For a discussion on the impact of the King beating, see Ronald N. Jacobs, 'Civil Society and Crisis: Culture, Discourse, and the Rodney King Beating', *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (1996), 1238–72.

to order your groceries. That your smartphone serves many purposes, many of them banal, does not diminish the truth or power of the scenes you have captured with it.

Most people probably do not consider themselves to be filmmakers, but almost all of us make films. They may be crudely shot, badly framed, isolated moments with no narrative or innate beauty evident to outside observers — but they are important. There have been many occasions in the history of cinema where filmmakers, from Andy Warhol to the Italian Neo-Realists, have deliberately fostered such crudeness.⁵

You are already a filmmaker — and yet you are nothing of the sort. You document your own life (and the lives of those around you), but you do not capture the types of films that people outside of your immediate social circle would likely appreciate. You were already a filmmaker — but now you have chosen to be a *deliberate* filmmaker. You want to consider your shots, cut different pieces of footage together, and create something that is important to people beyond your immediate acquaintances. The change that you wish to make is attitudinal. Start thinking like a filmmaker: how can the skills, motivations, and experience you already possess be used to impact a broader audience?

Please fetch your camera.

It does not matter if it is the phone in your pocket, just pick it up and hold it. Observe its lines with your eye, noting the different materials out of which it is made. Observe the size of its lens. Is it a large, belonging to a DSLR? Or is it small and compact, the lens of a smartphone? Whatever it is, observe it and appreciate it. If your camera has a lens that you can use to zoom in, play with that feature. How quickly does the lens zoom in and out? How long does it take to lock its focus?

Start by getting to know your camera and appreciating its existence. Thank it for all of the good service it has done you in the past, the innumerable moments it has preserved already, or will likely preserve in the future. When you are old and wheelchair-bound, young interlocutors will be fascinated when you show them a picture of you as you are now. Thank your camera for saving you, just as you are right now, warts and lines and wrinkles and all your beautiful imperfections. Take a picture right now to commemorate the moment.

5 Greg Pierce and Gus Van Sant, *Andy Warhol's The Chelsea Girls* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2018) and Vincent F. Rocchio, *Cinema of Anxiety: A Psychoanalysis of Italian Neorealism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).

We shall wait while you do.

The moment has passed. It is dead and gone and will never be again. We hope you captured it. Do not ever forget that every moment you ever experience will ultimately be lost (as Rutger Hauer so eloquently put it) 'like tears in the rain'.⁶

Your camera is a powerful device and, over the course of this book, you are going to learn how to harness that power as effectively as possible. That process begins by appreciating what you have right now. You almost certainly have a device that will allow you to capture a fidelity of footage that would have been unimaginable to most people just fifteen years ago. And you are uniquely you — the only person exactly like you, with a unique perspective, set of life experiences, and future. And even that will change. In a few years, the person you are now will be gone. A memory will remain, but the current entity bearing your name will be replaced by someone else, someone whose life and experiences have changed them, maybe for the better, maybe for the worse. Either way, they will be changed.

Consider the implications of that for a moment. You have two lenses through which you are going to see the world as you work through this book. The lens in your hand, your camera, and the rather more abstract lens through which you currently experience, perceive, and interact with the world. It is both of those lenses, working in tandem, that give a filmmaker their power — one lens helps to focus the other. The intellect identifies a subject worth shooting, the camera accomplishes that goal.

So, appreciate your camera. Take care of it. See it as an extension of yourself. Clean it. Do not let dust or other debris build up on it. If it is a smartphone, bundle all of your photography apps into one location. Experiment with its different settings and possibilities.

And use it. You do not need a reason. Pick it up. If it is cold outside, put on a coat. If it is raining, take an umbrella. Walk out of the house and take some photographs or, if you're feeling adventurous, shoot a few minutes of footage. You do not need an excuse to use it. Aim it at an interesting building, where the lines of the structure do not align quite as they should, or where the lighting hits it just so. Try changing your position. Why shoot everything from the same height? Drop onto your haunches and shoot low. Now lift the camera over your head and shoot

6 *Blade Runner*. Directed by Ridley Scott. Los Angeles: Warner Bros, 1982.

high. What happens when you shoot a light source? If you like cats, take a picture of the stray that walks up and down your street. It will not let you get close? Drop down low and take a picture of it at a distance, but be sure to capture the cat's surroundings, its context. Tell the cat's story in a single image.

Whatever you do, just appreciate the fun (and absurdity) of the moment. You are documenting the world around you in an instant that will never come again. Your camera is facilitating that process. So, get to know it, treat it with respect.

This may feel foolish, but if you make the decision to start treating your camera seriously, you are making the conscious decision to start thinking like a filmmaker. Treat yourself and your equipment with respect and you will have crossed the first threshold.

We are all filmmakers. The difference is that you now know it. Congratulations.