

DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital
Humanists

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4. Concept and Planning



Fig. 5. Watch the second lesson in our documentary-making course. <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/43f4c29c>



There are many ways for you to approach documentary production. Some are ostentatious and difficult to achieve, whilst others will require little more than a camera, a microphone, and a small number of interview subjects. There is no standard model to follow, and the nature of the medium grants huge amounts of freedom. Much is achievable if you are willing to invest your time in achieving a particular vision.

That being said, there are four fundamental schemas you may wish to consider at the outset of your filmic endeavours. These models are not the limit of what scholarly films can be, but they are a solid foundation upon which you can begin to formulate your own project.

Schema One — Essay Films

Perhaps the most comfortable model for many scholars is one that closely emulates the type of written work with which they will likely be familiar. Essay films can be constructed around commentary tracks, which might include discussions or analysis similar to that found in traditional academic texts. Such films tend to include a visual element, or set of elements, which interact with the commentary track. This imagery can be abstract and symbolic, or it can be a more literal representation of the discussion at hand. In either case, essay films should not merely be an academic essay set to a visual montage. The visual elements should help to deepen the arguments and discussions at hand; they can be illustrative, serve as counterpoints, or offer an alternative intellectual discourse which interacts with the commentary track in stimulating and engaging ways.¹

Perhaps the most famous example of an essay film is Orson Welles's *F is for Fake* (1973) but, as one might imagine from the director of *Citizen Kane* (1941), Welles's work achieves significant depth and is not easily emulated.² Instead, inexperienced filmmakers might be better served by considering Mark Cousins' *The Story of Film: An Odyssey* (2011). In this series it is Cousins' own commentary, working in tandem with the appropriately symbolic footage, which delivers the greater part of the analysis.³ The result is an accessible and engaging piece, which demonstrates how a well-constructed script defies the need for complex set pieces. A more abstract example, principally thanks to its minimalist deployment of commentary, is Tony Silver's *Style Wars* (1983). Documenting the emergence of hip-hop and, in particular, graffiti culture in New York City, it is a wonderful example of how a filmmaker can use the world around them to create visually

1 Defining essay films, as has been done here, is problematic. There is significant discussion about the nature of essay films and the definition given here is certainly more restrictive than that used by other scholars. For a discussion on this, see Kevin B. Lee, 'Video-Essay: The Essay Film — Some Thoughts of Discontent', *Sight and Sound*, 22 May 2017, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/deep-focus/video-essay-essay-film-some-thoughts>. See also Elizabeth Papazian and Caroline Eades (eds), *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia* (London and New York: Wildflower Press, 2016).

2 *F is for Fake*. Directed by Orson Welles. London: Eureka Entertainment, 1973.

3 *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*. Directed by Mark Cousins. Edinburgh: Hopscotch Films, 2011.

rich, in-depth discussions.⁴ Comparing and contrasting the first episode of *The Story of Film* with *Style Wars* should prove instructive for inexperienced filmmakers with strong ideas but limited resources.

Schema Two — Discussion/Interview Films

If the video essay is built around the filmmaker's thesis, the discussion/interview film differs in that it is instead built around a thesis (apparently) created by the film's key subjects. In many ways, *Style Wars* more comfortably fits into this category than that of the video essay, but its ability to appear in both highlights the fluid nature of the boundaries that separate these schemas.⁵ Rather than building a film around a written piece, the discussion/interview film instead places the emphasis upon verbal exchanges with third parties. In this model, interviewees appear to shape and guide the piece's thesis, though that is almost certainly not the case. The filmmaker-scholar's power, in this instance, comes from the questions they ask of their subjects, the context in which the interviews/discussions occur, and the way the resultant materials are assembled during the editing process. This model can accommodate a discussion with a single, particularly compelling subject, or it can contrast and compare ideas by juxtaposing dialogue.

Requiem for the American Dream (2015) is a film built almost entirely around a discussion with famed scholar and activist, Noam Chomsky. Whilst not always desirable, this model nonetheless demonstrates how an interview with a single individual can result in a deep intellectual inquiry — particularly when the film's intended audience is already very familiar with its principal subject.⁶ *The Fog of War* (2003) is likewise constructed around a single interview, with former U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara. Audio outtakes presented at the start of the film make it clear that McNamara had a very specific agenda, which he pursued throughout the project — a revelation that helps the audience to frame his later testimony.⁷ Both of these films show how discussions

4 *Style Wars*. Directed by Tony Silver. New York: Public Arts Films, 1983.

5 Ibid.

6 *Requiem for the American Dream*. Directed by Peter Hutchison, Kelly Nyks, and Jared P. Scott. El Segundo: Gravitas Ventures, 2015.

7 *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*. Directed by Errol Morris. Culver City: Sony Pictures Classic, 2003.

with single subjects can create exciting opportunities to capture discourse that is so compelling it can serve as the fulcrum around which the rest of a project can be constructed.

Schema Three — Full-Production Films

Essay films and discussion/interview films, at least as they have been described here, can be created with minimal resources. Full-production films, however, are a much more ambitious undertaking. Such a project would aim to mimic or innovate upon the larger-scale productions commonly consumed by broad audiences. These films can include a variety of complex visual elements, such as historical re-enactments, animations, dramatisations, and other elements created solely for the film project. Collaboration, to one degree or another, is likely to be required in order to achieve such cinematically ambitious ends — but by carefully planning a project, more ambitious set-pieces can be achieved.

There are innumerable examples of full-production documentaries to which scholars can look for inspiration. One particularly noteworthy example is the BBC's ostentatious *Wonders of the Solar System* (2010) series. Whilst we are not qualified to pass comment about its scientific worth, its use of music, computer-generated animation, and exotic locales provide a level of spectacle that suitably mirrors the series' epic scope.⁸

Schema Four — Subjective Explorations

Documentaries have the capacity to differ substantially from typical academic texts. Unlike a journal article, there is greater scope within a filmic framework to explore an author's subjective and personal relationship with their topic. Whilst academic writing can indeed be a place for personal reflection, films offer an opportunity to capture subjective moments as they occur. They also offer the opportunity to openly explore the author's subjective relationship with a situation. Academic writing may not be the ideal forum in which to reflect on one's emotional relationship with a topic — film, however, can provide a powerful vehicle to engage in such a discourse.

8 *Wonders of the Solar System*. London: BBC, 2010.

Orson Welles' *F is for Fake* is a masterclass in using film to explore one's subject from a range of perspectives, including personal and subjective positions. Welles rejects the authority of the author, in part, by making himself (and his implied authority) central to the audience's experience. Welles spins an elaborate tale about Pablo Picasso and his relationship with a dealer of forged artwork. The tale is, Welles eventually confesses, a forgery, but it was a lie told to reach a deeper truth. By making Welles an icon of authority, his ultimate confession carries all the more weight. The audience has, under Welles' direction, experienced the power of the fake. As a result, they are in a position more fully to appreciate the truths revealed by the art of forgery.

Whilst this is not a model that one should necessarily seek to imitate, there is much that can be learned from a close study of *F is for Fake*. Our own film, *Looking for Charlie*, breaks the fourth wall in a very different way, by drawing upon our own experiences with depression to make a deeper, albeit subjective, observation about our subjects — Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and the suicidal comedians who inspired them. This approach is certainly not for everyone, but the tools offered by the filmic medium are powerful, and they can be used in a multitude of unexpected ways.

Of course, there are schemas beyond those covered here. This is a foundation upon which you can build, not the limit of what you can produce. Indeed, the barriers that separate each of these schemas are fluid and likely to be contested — where one ends and another begins is a matter of subjectivity and taste. There is nothing to stop a filmmaker-scholar from creating an essay film that includes full-production elements or substantial discursive sections. These models are merely suggestive frameworks.

Achievability

We cannot define your project for you. Only you can conceive of the type of film you might bring into being, its intricacies and intellectual potential. If you are reading this book then, in all likelihood, you already have some type of vision for a scholarly film — a subject area, thesis, chronology, list of topics, and so on. That part of the process is entirely yours and, as such, this guide can offer little specific advice.

Still, it is worthwhile thinking through how the careful planning of your film can allow you to achieve your intellectual or creative goals: as you are conceptualising your film, you should always aim to keep at least one eye on practical considerations. By all means, explore the ways in which intellectual ideas can be visualised but do not forget that, sooner or later, it will be up to you to realise your vision. Do not curb your enthusiasm (or ambition), but work to ensure that your vision is an achievable one.

One way to ensure achievability is to think about the following three goals for your production — and then picking *only two* of them: quality, speed, and affordability.

The idea here is simple — in all likelihood you cannot make a film that is cheap, quick to produce, and of a high quality. You can, however, produce a high-quality film on a small budget; but it will likely require a lot of time. Likewise, this model tells us that you can make a good film in a short space of time; but doing so will not be cheap. Perhaps most importantly, it suggests that you can create a cheap film in a short space of time; but it will likely be of poor quality. In order to ensure quality, a significant amount of money or a significant amount of time will need to be invested.

Hardly scientific, this model is, at best, advisory — but it makes a good point. If money is not an object, there is little that you cannot achieve by hiring the correct equipment and crew. Assuming, however, that you do not have a substantial budget (perhaps you do not have one at all), the option of buying your way out of a problem will not be available to you. That being the case, you need to accept that time, rather than money, will be your principal currency; time to learn how to use your equipment; time to grow your skills as a writer, editor, interviewer; time to allow you to work with the goodwill of those people you invite to be a part of your production; enough time to ensure you will not have to make undue sacrifices in your personal or professional life.

Time does not entirely negate the need for money, but it can certainly help. Some things will simply not be achievable on tiny or non-existent budgets — but some version of your vision may be, if you are willing to take the time required to think around the problems at hand. An excellent case in point is Peter Watkins' docudrama *Culloden* (1964), which sought to re-create, and then document, the Battle of

Culloden from 1746. Thanks to careful planning and imaginative use of camera angles, Watkins was able to give the impression that his film was shot amid an unfolding battle — despite him only having access to a small number of amateur actors and extremely limited resources. By focusing attention on individual moments within the battle and never attempting to depict its full scale, Watkins was able to take audiences into the unfolding conflict, speaking to important subjects and exploring their perspectives as events appeared to unfold in real time around them.⁹ The result of this subtle subterfuge really is quite remarkable and effective.

On first blush, creating a documentary about a battle that involved 15,000 people might seem like the type of enterprise that would require a massive budget. Indeed, it might even appear an impossible task for most independent filmmakers. But by carefully utilising the available resources, Watkins demonstrates that it is possible to carry out such a challenging brief. *Culloden* is far less interested in depicting the mechanics of the Jacobites' defeat or the scale of the battle than it is with exploring the attitudes of those involved in it. As a result, much of the film is built around faux interviews with important leaders and lower-level participants in the battle. Military manoeuvres are depicted, but such scenes focus upon small groups, representative of the larger whole. These moments are then intercut with on-the-ground 'interviews' whilst, in the background, action (which could be accomplished with only a few extras) carries on.¹⁰

The intellectual drama of *Culloden* comes not from the thrill of seeing an extensive battle depicted by an army of actors; it comes from the contrast between ordinary soldiers and their leaders, particularly on the Jacobite side. Structural inadequacies in the organisation of the Jacobite forces are brought to the fore, the arrogance of their leadership is demonstrated, and, as a result, the ordinary soldier is cast as a type of tragic figure. Whether one agrees with it or not, the film has a clear thesis which it makes with force. The scale and scope of the battle did not need to be depicted because it was in intimate moments that the film's case

9 *Culloden*. Directed by Peter Watkins. London: BFI, 1964

10 For a personal reflection on *Culloden*, see Alex Cox, 'Not in Our Name', *The Guardian*, 9 July 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jul/09/featuresreviews.guardianreview12>

was made. One is free to disagree with the film's argument, or its use of fictive evidence (staged interviews), but denying its effectiveness would be much more difficult.

The battle became a background detail in *Culloden*, which, in turn, allowed the overall film to feel much larger than its component parts. As a result, it is a study of what can be accomplished when available resources are utilised carefully and imaginatively. If you wish to recreate a historic episode, do so; but like Watkins, use your available resources with care. Construct a film that utilises (rather than suffers as a result of) these limitations. Use local locations, students of drama and theatre, amateur actors, readily available costumes, the cameras at your disposal, and so on. If you wish to emulate the *Culloden* style, a camera capable of shooting in a shallow focus (allowing background action to be blurred) will make it easier for you to create the illusion of background movement without requiring highly detailed costumes or props for your background actors. This would also allow the same actors to be employed in numerous roles as their faces, bodies, and costumes will be so blurred that they will be functionally unrecognisable. An easily reached location may not be ideal if it is not the spot that is supposed to be depicted, but a shallow focus can be used to eradicate unwanted details that might otherwise identify the setting. In such a way, a relatively small number of actors could, in a carefully planned shoot, be used to create an illusion far grander than initially seemed possible.

Case Study — Signals

In 2017, we began work on a short documentary about the maritime history of the Scottish town of Arbroath (working title — *Signals: Scotland and the North Sea*). The opening sequence of the film depicted the arrival of a group of eighteenth-century smugglers. In the most ambitious version of this scene, a small rowing boat would have landed on a secluded beach in the dead of night; a smuggler crew would then have begun unloading their wares, before dragging various chests and barrels up the steep path from the beach to some nearby clifftops. Crude wicker torches would have lit the haggard and sea-worn faces of the crew; the light dramatic, the atmosphere oppressive.



Fig. 6. Our smuggler crew prepare to ascend the Seaton Cliffs in Arbroath.



Fig. 7. The scenery around the town of Arbroath is inherently dramatic, adding significant production value to any scene shot there. No tall ships were required to give this scene a sense of drama.

Unfortunately, such a dramatization would have required a substantial budget: the cost of lighting a scene at night, safety marshals to ensure the wellbeing of cast and crew in low-light and low-temperature conditions, a support vessel with trained lifeguards, a wide variety of props, and so on. As originally envisioned, the scene was simply not achievable within

our available budget, but that did not mean that the essence of this scene could not be realised.

The first challenge we faced was populating the scene. We reached out to local amateur dramatic societies and recruited three actors to play our crew of smugglers. As an arrival by boat would have been cost-prohibitive, we instead envisioned a much simpler solution: the camera, close to the ground, water lapping against the sand. Feet, clad in old boots, step into the shot. They shuffle through the scene, the legs and feet of our crew struggling as they drag their wares through the frame. Finally, we cut to a more traditional waist-up perspective. Not as dramatic as an arrival by boat, but vastly cheaper (and just as effective).

Rather than insist on the inclusion of elements that were either costly or difficult to execute, we instead decided to work with the resources that were freely available and easily accessible. We had ready access to a stretch of coastline, consisting of cliffs, beaches, coves, and caves. For no outright cost, we were able to film in a location filled with texture and inherent drama. Our actors' outfits were provided by a local theatrical costuming business and a large chest was purchased to serve as the scene's main prop. A friend of the production, with experience in the theatre, volunteered their services as a makeup artist. What could have been an expensive and difficult scene ended up costing very little. Significant effort and goodwill was required to realise it, but the final sequence captured the substance of the original vision.

The shoot was efficient and effective. We had already storyboarded the entire sequence, generating a list of shots that we needed to capture on location. We utilised Google Maps and other such resources to map out precise shooting locations, calculating factors such as travel time, rest time, and so on. We also consulted weather and tidal reports to ensure a safe and comfortable environment for the cast and crew. We started shooting at 9am, ensuring sufficient natural light. By following the production schedule that we had created in the weeks prior to the shoot, we were able to shoot efficiently — and in the knowledge that we would capture all of the coverage (necessary shots) that we would require in the editing process.

Planning

Complex sequences should be pre-planned and, where necessary, rehearsed. The actual shoot should be the culmination of a process that has been thoroughly planned. Do this effectively and you will be able to extract every ounce of value from the time, and resources, you have available to you.

Storyboard pre-planned sequences. Combine photographs with simple renderings of your characters or subjects to create a visual guide to all of the shots you will need to capture. Storyboarding may well intimidate those of us who cannot draw effectively. This need not be the case, however. Take still photographs with stand-ins, either on location or at home, to create a series of still images for your storyboard, or utilise one of a number of apps that allow you to use stock art (including 3D models) to create storyboards. Examples of these include Previs Pro and Shot Designer for smartphones and tablets. This will allow you to pre-plan all of the different shots you will need once you are on location. From your storyboard, generate a shot list. Organise this list into an efficient and achievable shooting schedule.

The creation of a sequenced shot list will thus generate a schedule of actions, a clear plan that will lead you to capture all of the necessary raw footage you require. You must now study this plan and calculate the time necessary to execute each individual action or shot.

Remember, cameras must set up in the correct locations, shots must be composed, and settings adjusted; the featured actor must be wired for sound (if they have dialogue); the audio equipment be set to record; extras must be directed; discussion between the director and their cast and/or crew may follow. Once the camera starts filming, it will take a period of time to achieve the precise shot or performance you desire — perhaps it will take several attempts. Once the shot is completed, this entire sequence of events will need to be repeated. Many different shots from many different angles may be required to create a usable bank of footage. On some occasions, the scene will be filmed in close-up. At other times the camera will be further away from the action. In each instance, cameras will probably need to be moved, lighting adjusted, new direction given to a performer, and so on. In practical terms, this means that you will need to move and re-frame

your cameras and actors multiple times. There is a time implication for each new setup.

In all, then, a sequence designed to take up no more than a few minutes of screen time might easily take three to five hours to shoot, or even longer — perhaps significantly longer. Even if you are able to move and setup your equipment with military-grade efficiency, actors will give uneven performances and lines will be forgotten. Tempers will become frayed as the cast and crew grow increasingly tired. They may become fatigued and require rest. The lighting, particularly if it is natural, might change in unexpected ways. Many factors can lead to a seemingly simple sequence becoming a rather drawn-out or difficult affair.

But there are economies of scale at play that can help you to optimise your time. If you have a camera setup that you intend to use for several shots, shoot all of those sections together, regardless of whether this is consistent with the internal chronology of your scene: film shot 1 from Sequence A, shot 3 from Sequence B, and shot 2 from Sequence C, and so on. You should plan this ahead of time using your shot list, which, at the very least, should attempt to anticipate how much time each camera setup and performance will take. Early in your filmmaking career, you will certainly underestimate the time required. Indeed, by working through the practicalities of the process and creating your shot list (with anticipated times) you may discover that you simply cannot shoot all of your desired footage in the available time. If this occurs, a change of approach will be required. But at the planning stage, this realisation is unlikely to upend your production. If this realisation occurs on location, however, where your ability to adapt may be more constrained, more significant problems may follow.

With a detailed shot list and schedule, you will now be in a position to compile a list of the precise resources that you will require to complete your sequence. Compile a list of every piece of required equipment, taking care to ensure that you include necessary accessories, such as tripods or a variety of different lenses (see chapter seven). You will also need to generate a list of collaborators: does your planned sequence require you to hire or work with a large number of other people? If so, it may be necessary for you to reconsider your sequence; a large number of participants will increase the complexity of a shoot, and likely slow it

down significantly. The more complex the machinery, the more prone it will be to breaking down.

With a resource list, you will be better positioned to recognise if your planned sequence remains achievable and within your means. Discovering that a relatively simple sequence might require a large number of actors who, in turn, would all require costumes, props, and food, may well require you to rethink your plan. In such a case, once again reflect upon the intellectual or dramatic essence of your sequence and consider how it can be achieved with the resources that are within your means. Remove superfluous action or difficult-to-achieve shots. Consider alternatives that are easier and quicker to produce, but are just as effective and intellectually satisfying.

