

# DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital  
Humanists

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## 20. The Three-Act Structure

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Documentaries have more freedom to break the rules that dramas must typically obey. They tend to be self-aware and, as such, break the fourth wall. They often seem to lack traditional protagonists and antagonists and whilst some, such as Seth Gordon's *King of Kong* (2007), indulge this trope, many forego it. Despite all this, documentaries remain beholden to long-held structural expectations. A sound structure can help to turn any subject, no matter how seemingly banal, into an engaging intellectual experience. Likewise, any subject, no matter how inherently interesting, can be made uninteresting if it is explored in an unstructured or meandering manner. Facts and analysis may have significant intellectual value, but without attention to how audiences engage with (and absorb) cinematic formats, viewers can become lost or disinterested. You must, then, pay as much attention to the medium as you do the message itself.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true in the post-production process, when your film's structure is definitively realised. You may have had a sense of your work's structure early in the production, but it is during the editing phase that nebulous ideas are tested and the reality of your work becomes evident. Consideration of structure should therefore deeply inform this phase of your production.

The three-act structure creates a familiar and satisfying framework with which audiences are instinctively familiar. This allows filmmakers to set up a recognisable flow of information, which is easily consumed by audiences familiar and comfortable with this pattern. The presentation of the initial proposition and the first steps on the audience's journey occur in the first act; in act two, the substantive and most detailed part of the study is carried out; whilst in act three, the different intellectual or

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1 Richard Kilborn and John Izod, *An Introduction to Television Documentary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 115–64.

narrative threads hitherto explored are brought to a clear conclusion. In other words, premise and context (act 1) give way to investigation and analysis (act 2) which, in turn, give way to reconciliation (act 3) of the different intellectual and narrative threads hitherto explored.<sup>2</sup> As in an academic paper, wholly new ideas should not be introduced in the third act; new information can be presented, of course, but this part of the film should instead focus on using that new information to resolve the ideas already established in the previous parts of the film.

The three acts should not be equal in length. Rather, the second act should be the most substantive component of the film, and the third act the shortest. Visualised, this is how the three-act structure might look for a feature-length documentary:

Act One	Act Two	Act Three
25 minutes		
	45 Minutes	20 Minutes

Fig. 56. The three acts of a production each has a distinctive role to play. The first act sets out the premise, core ideas, and principle argument (or line of inquiry) for the piece. The second act engages in the substantive investigation and analysis. The third act brings those core ideas and arguments to their fundamental conclusion.

In a short film, a similar structure can be employed. In an eight-minute film, for instance, a two-and-a-half-minute first act would precede a four-minute second act and a two-minute final act.

The second act, then, is the most involved portion of your work, the space in which the bulk of the intellectual exploration takes place. Setup and resolution (acts one and three) are just as important as what occurs in act two, but the uneven spread visualised above is a reflection of the need to focus these sections so that they appropriately prepare the viewer for, and pay off, the second act. A tight structure

2 John Yorke, *Into the Woods: How Stories Work and Why We Tell Them* (London: Penguin, 2013), pp. 24–31.

can significantly improve a project's 'watch-ability', and thus the ease with which audiences can engage with it.<sup>3</sup>

In specific terms:

**Act one** is about introductions and setting up a film's basic scenario. Who are the main players; what are their relationships; what are the questions, social needs, or external forces at play which will allow for an exploration of the main theme or topic you wish to analyse? In this act you must clearly identify the core element(s) that will unite the individual parts of your film, the project's intellectual through-line. Is it a particular individual's life; a question about a particular social or political experience; the exploration of a dominant idea or theme? If a documentary is about answering a specific question, the question should, in one form or another, be posed here alongside a rationale for why that question is important.<sup>4</sup>

**Act two** is when a film gets under the hood of its central conceptual mechanisms. In act one, the filmmaker introduces viewers to their intellectual world, setting up its basic rules, assumptions, questions, and so on. In act two they must then explore their core issues in depth.<sup>5</sup> In *Looking for Charlie*, a documentary about Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and the harsh realities of life in the silent film era, the first act set up a discussion about the ways in which contemporary society discarded performing artists who fell out of favour with audiences. In its second act, it makes the case that society is short-sighted because, even after performers have been discarded and forgotten, their influence is frequently long-lived. To facilitate the deepening of this discussion, the

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3 Despite being a popular film, the ending of Peter Jackson's third *The Lord of the Rings* (2003) movie is often criticised. It seems to go on for too long — the audience keeps expecting it to end. From a narrative perspective, this extended ending allows for many emotional storylines to be resolved but, from a structural perspective, it is messy and unfocused, defying audience expectations to the frustration of some. For examples of some of the criticism of *The Return of the King*'s ending, see Jen Chaney, "'King' Gets Royal Treatment in Extended DVD", *The Washington Post*, 14 December 2004, and Andrew Blair, 'Ranking the Endings of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*', 8 September 2017, <https://www.denofgeek.com/uk/movies/lord-of-the-rings-return-of-the-king/51754/ranking-the-endings-of-the-lord-of-the-rings-the-return-of-the-king>

4 Yorke, *Into the Woods*, pp. 24–31.

5 Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York: Random House, 2005), pp. 89–105.

range of subjects in act two was increased substantially. The first act was primarily constructed around an exploration of the relationship between Charlie Chaplin and Marceline Orbes, the clown whose approach to pathos and comedy had so deeply inspired him. In act two, however, Buster Keaton and a range of other subjects, including the filmmakers themselves (in an autobiographical twist) were added to the mix. This growing cast allowed for overlapping experiences, perspectives, and themes to be brought to the fore; the case study in act one was thus transformed into the foundation for a discussion about the universality of the human experience in act two.<sup>6</sup>

**Act three** should then serve to bring the thematic and narrative threads developed in act two to a resolution. No new questions — at least major new questions — should be posed here.<sup>7</sup> In Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), act three is the point when oppressed workers and other victims of the economic crash of 2008 are shown to begin a self-actualised recovery. Inspired by their actions, Moore then (literally) ties off the main themes of the film by sealing off Wall Street behind bright yellow 'crime scene' tape. Act three is when the beaten get back up, dust themselves off, and stare down the barrel in utter defiance. In the case of a factual documentary, this is the period at which truth, as understood by the filmmaker, is articulated in its clearest terms. Moore is melodramatic in his attempt to provoke his audience to action, but most documentaries end their films in a similar, though less on-the-nose, manner. The truth (or at least a reasonable candidate for the truth) has been revealed.<sup>8</sup>

Act two should have provided a deep enough exploration of the film's core issues that the conclusions generated in act three appear logical and justifiable. Indeed, the audience should receive a sense of intellectual (or, in the case of much of Moore's work, for example) emotional closure. Moore's ending to *Capitalism: A Love Story* is somewhat sentimental — in actuality, the actions of the workers are

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6 *Looking for Charlie: Life and Death in the Silent Era*. Directed by Darren R. Reid and Brett Sanders. Coventry: Studio Académé, 2018.

7 Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 303–16.

8 *Capitalism: A Love Story*. Directed by Michael Moore. Los Angeles: The Weinstein Company, 2009.

unlikely to have produced any serious, long-term improvements to their situation — nonetheless, their act of defiance, and the small victories they secure, leave the viewer satisfied. The film tells them that positive change can happen when people act to protect their own, collective interests.<sup>9</sup> This is a precise inversion of the film's opening sequence, which emphasised the powerlessness of ordinary people in the face of macro-economic forces. Moore thus brings his audience full circle on their intellectual and emotional journey, mirroring the film's opening portrait of despair with one of hope instead. One is, of course, free to disagree with Moore's thesis, but dismissing the effectiveness of his work is far more difficult.

In most examples, the third act of a documentary sees the filmmaker resolving their case. It is that resolution (even when it demands further action from the audience) that allows the film to end in a satisfying manner.

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9 Ibid.

