

THE NARRATIVE DOCUMENTARY

BACKGROUND, TECHNIQUE, TEACHING STRATEGIES AND PARADOXES

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BACKGROUND Narrative documentaries, also called story documentaries, are like cinema vérité films of old: they set out to reach the audience primarily on an emotional level by developing three-dimensional characters. In this sense, they're more closely related to fiction films than to educational documentaries.

So, for example, NOVA producers traditionally interlace expert testimony by scientists with narration; the scientists are there in support of the driving premise of the film. In a story documentary, however, the scientists *are* the film. So, the audience may learn the science eventually, but they learn primarily *through* their attachment or identification with the characters as complex human beings.

Narrative Documentaries are not better nor worse than traditional journalistic forms. But they are rare since they're hard to make in terms of time and money: most producers can't afford the associated risks. Some examples: Seventeen, The Farmer's Wife, Happy Mother's Day, To Be and To Have , Salesman, Bombay Beach, and Only the Young.

NarDocs (we shortened the name when, about 15 years ago, a student asked to enroll in my 'Narwhale Course') immerse the audience into a world where the audience forgets they're watching a movie. We learn how to shoot a scene on the fly that edits together seamlessly, without hanging on the undercurrent of VO or interviews.

John McPhee is the inspiration: He is to writing what we are to filmmaking. He travels the world, meets people, shares them with his readers. McPhee is the introducer, the conduit to his new world, but then he steps aside allowing us, the audience, to connect directly with his subjects themselves. He does this *through the elegance of his technique* - his precise, efficient use of words. But our *language* is not words; instead we use composition, movement, light and sound.

TEACHING NARDOC The course is a Practicum. Students generally shoot solo, and in stages. Practice is the only way to learn. Students first establish a working relationship with their subjects. We don't spend hours and weeks with our characters, waiting for them to get used to us. (This approach sends an implicitly negative message to our subjects - that we're taking something *away* from them.) We don't use voyeuristic long lenses, hoping to catch them off guard. We don't pretend we're not there. Neither are we *flies on the wall*, dispassionately observing.

What DO we do: We establish from the get-go that the filmmaking process is a partnership - a dance - made up of equal halves. The subject reflects the light rays, the filmmaker gathers those rays into her lens. The respect between each 'dance partner' matters more than the film itself.

STRATEGY ONE So, initially, we film our subject undertaking a process, a task. It's important to recognize how characters reveal themselves by what *they do* as much as by what *they say*. Bathing a child, carving a pumpkin, building a rocket - any task with a beginning, middle and end. Process footage provides: inherently visual material, a story with momentum already built in and, finally, keeps the shooting ratio low, eliminates round-the-clock filming and thousands of hours of random footage.

Process scenes work because they take the pressure off both the filmmaker and her subject to perform. Instead, the task itself becomes the common goal.

Furthermore, Process Footage of common, everyday tasks reveal details of character. These scenes allow our audience to recall their own experiences thus giving them a way to identify - or not - with those of the film character's. This two way relationship builds empathy.

STRATEGY TWO Find a cinematic story in the first place. This step requires understanding how cinema works fundamentally: as a visual medium traveling along a locked (that is to say, sound-driven) timeline. Thus. Search for stories with cinematic gifts built in. This means:

- A scene with depth, with a reference - literal or suggested - to the world beyond. Windows, exits, frames within frame. We seek the potential for 360° coverage since we're shooting cinema, not making theater.

- A scene with sparkly rich sync sound - and not necessarily from words - plus scenes with the possibility for shifts in sound *dynamics*.

EXAMPLE SCENE MADDY AND SIVAN The composer, Sivan Eldar, refines Maddy's, vocal technique at the Deyl Conservatory in Prague.

I shot this scene on the fly in twenty minutes, without having met Sivan before, or seen the location. But the scene came with inherent cinematic gifts: backlighting, light gradient, muted color palette, intimate sound. Most important: my subjects were engrossed in a *task*. They had a problem to solve. There's a natural engine to the story.

PARADOX ONE You can't approach NarDocs with an agenda, a script, an outcome in mind. You can't presuppose what and who your characters are. And yet! You must be prepared. You resolve this paradox by:

- Constantly practicing your technique, building muscle memory.
- Learning how to recognize a cinematic story when one passes by.
- Above all, draining your ego. Learn how to respond only to what is there, you see and hear. Not what your ego *wants* you to see and hear.

STRATEGY THREE Students continue with process shooting but edit their material into discrete sequences as they go along. The idea is to create tiny movies - scenes with a beginning, middle and end. (This introduces the idea of efficiency: learning to tell a cinematic story by delivering the most information in the shortest amount of time.) The class critiques the sequence, helps identify possible stories by letting the filmmaker know which moments resonate, which fall flat.

As a class, furthermore, we identify what moments need further exposition; perhaps text, or the voice of a character or even a narrator. In other words, we don't dismiss words entirely, we just make them *earn* their way in. This ensures a proper balance between filmic language and word language.

SHOOTING TECHNIQUE The following tips have a unified goal: to eliminate the presence of the camera.

- Match the camera angle with the plane of action. If you're filming ice skating, get down on the rink, shoot those blades from rink level. If you're filming a seated child, squat down, line up your lens with the child's eyes and hands. (Do not, in other words, plop your camera on your shoulder like a wet serape and pan/tilt the camera up and down. Hold the camera at a flexible point in front of you, close to your center of gravity, bend your knees, and *track* up, down and sideways.)
- Make sure your camera moves *only* when motivated. For example, a beautiful tableaux does not *ask* for movement. Yet, a plumber intently wrestling with her pipe *does*. Learn how to integrate your tripod work with your handheld.
- Respond with your camera to your character's movement with sensitivity and precision but know when to lock your frame, when to allow your subject to wipe off. Give yourself, in other words, a cut point. (This helps you avoid aimless "following shots" of your character's back...)

- If there is movement in your scene, include three parts to your shots: begin with a locked frame, taking enough to be useful as a shot in itself, then make your move to connect actions with faces, then go back the other direction and end with a static shot again. The idea here, once again, is to avoid cutaways and give yourself match cut options.

- If you're filming multiple people in conversation, shoot the speaker precisely and carefully at first until you're satisfied you can establish the voice with the person. But then shift to shooting The Listener and let your shot continue *until he or she speaks*. This gives you a shot with a huge visual bed under which you can place sync from another speaker. You can make a long L-Cut in other words; you create seamless edits and so avoid the subtle but powerful effect of manipulation.

- Seek graphically powerful foreground elements to incorporate into your composition and so enhance a sense of depth.

- Make sure all graphic elements are precise and level. If you have a vast horizon and it's crooked, we see the angle first before we see the content.

PARADOX TWO Fall in love when you shoot, immerse yourself so entirely into your world that you lose consciousness of your process. *At the same time*, coldly calculate whether your coverage strategy tells a story or not. This is the filmmaker's equivalent to the wave/particle nature of physics. Difficult to explain, but vital to human nature.

And here's where the main principle of cinematic storytelling comes in: Agogics. This idea comes from music - that a sound is loud only to the extent that the *preceding* shot is quieter. So, as in our world, a dramatic shot works only to the extent that it was set up properly. In other words, if an exciting moment unexpectedly happens while shooting, figure out what material you'll need in order to set up this pay-off later, during the editing stage.

STUDENT EXAMPLE: SALTY DOG A portrait of a lobsterman's day.

Students, Zack and Dimitri, are specialists in the frame-within-frame idea. They enhance their role as observers of the lobsterman by filming *through* naturally occurring frames provided by the translucent boat windows, lobster traps, deck machinery. This approach builds depth into an otherwise confined space.

It is, narratively, a relatively flat portrait yet there is a bump, a sort of climax, to the story. This is the point when we watch, through the cockpit window, as the fisherman eat his sandwich. A seagull, appears reflected in the window; it tiptoes over and pecks. The two images line up perfectly so the seagull appears to eat the lobsterman's sandwich. The moment is a cinematic gift.

Zack and Dimitri realized this could be the pivot point of their subtle portrait so, they shot more coverage of seagulls and then, while editing, found ways to introduce the seagull early on, in an organic sense. The pay off shot then tucks itself neatly into the story without any sense of contrivance.

PARADOX THREE All NarDocs should look and feel different. Yes, your technique must be impeccable but you must recognize at the same time that there is no Golden Standard High Up The Heavens against which you're being measured. Your technique should *evolve*, should respond to the idiosyncratic nature of your singular subjects.

CONCLUSION Paradoxes are a GOOD thing. They keep us from becoming dogmatic, they keep us tense; always learning, always sensitive to the material in front of us, not within. Paradoxes remind us constantly of how we can best serve our characters through our technique.