

ON DOCUMENTARY

1.

Making documentary films means observing reality, and positioning oneself in this reality. That implies that observation is a major goal and the other aim is reflecting on the meaning of what has been observed: the people, their situation, and their actions we have been able to film.

2.

When we switch on the camera we start gathering raw material. The most important moment in the next phase is, when we start combining bits and pieces, when we start editing the stuff into a story. We are busy (again) to find the best language to do this. Probably every filmmaker discovers over time his or her own film language, and varies within that language for each new work, depending the requirements of each story.

3.

In observing, shooting and subsequent editing we will discover the ever important role *time* will play. The camera finds an activity. But for how many seconds or minutes will we shoot? Will the camera be on a tripod or is the camera on someone's shoulder? And in what way the cameraperson decides he / she will move, at what speed, from where to where? All this implies (im)possibilities for the editing. Special mention must be made of the importance of real time. The action is not interrupted, the only 'editing' that takes place lies in the choice the cameraperson made to eventually move his camera. (Good examples can be found in some work of Amos Gitai, Raymond Depardon and Frederick Wiseman). The opposite is to press an one hour event into less than two minutes. Adding similar but separate actions into one on-going event. (Bert Haanstra's rodeo scene in 'Ape and Super-ape'). These are two extremes: the rhythm, the pace of the film is essential when it comes to 'language'. How much time is needed to get the 'facts', and how much time a viewer needs to get an atmosphere, to understand more about hidden layers of information.

4.

The use of various sounds is so crucial that we should mention it especially. Of course – there will be in many cases the synchronous sound, made while filming. But then the role of a voice, a voice over or of music is so essential, that it deserves great attention. Here two phenomena. One is how a voice can guide the viewer to what should be seen – almost literally. Or how a voice can give to all what can be seen on the screen a different perspective. The second one has to do with our sensitivity for music. Music in a wide sense – going from the 'music' of specific natural sounds to the music of our voices (you can train yourself to listen more to the way words are spoken than to the content and discover how important the musicality of our voices is) and on to proper music. Many many people are emotionally touched by 'sound and music'. Many a time emotional layers of our consciousness are primarily touched by music – and then of course combined with the visual information.

5.

Is it important to define the difference between documentary and fiction? Maybe it is better to analyse the relation between the two. Isn't the goal of all our research, observation and storytelling the same in the end, apart from the question if the final form is fiction or doc? Because what we do is to give a personal account of what we have discovered and experienced. Only the means differ. Therefore an interesting issue is: why choose for fiction to unveil a certain theme, or why choose for a documentary mode?

(This is the moment to say that some subjects were thought of as only to be treated in a documentary way: the story of the camps during the war. Claude Lanzmann is the one who made it clear that what happened in these camps, what people did to each other, could only be told by very precise interrogations of survivors. Facts only. No imagination, no fantasies. But then, when this is true, nevertheless time proceeds, and memory fades. We can see how after the war the first films presented were just edited newsreels. The real thing. Raw. After that came the first reflective films: black and white (material from the war days) was mixed with color (what do the campsites look like today?) in *Night and Fog* from Alain Resnais with a brilliant text by Jean Cayrol. That was in 1955. Ten, fifteen years later many a film was made – the 16 mm handheld camera had been introduced around 1960 - which gave a voice to survivors, and then also to the perpetrators. In these films some images still remembered of the actual war days. But then: Lanzmann's *Shoah* only presented the war in how it still was remembered by survivors. No footage from the war any more. Only sites as they were to be found when the film was made – between 1975 and 1985. And after that thorough investigative report, what could be done? Two ways were open. One was imagination. We knew almost all facts. So we could try to imagine what in specific cases actually may have happened. Scripts were written, films were made. Let's say 'Pasazerka' (Andrzej Munk) or 'Schindler's List' (Steven Spielberg). We may also think of a film like 'Danton' (Andrzej Wajda) on the French revolution. History becomes a tale. Let's remember – over time all history becomes a tale. The Greeks found that a muse (Clio) should inspire those who wrote about history! Like music had its muse. And dance. In the end that is what we are left with: an interpretation of the facts that we unearthed. But still true documentaries are made on that same stuff. By a new generation which interprets the facts in different ways – and still finds unknown materials. So...)

And there is the issue that many times people cannot be filmed, or that we have simply no access to specific locations. Think of prisons, camps, hospitals, schools, boardrooms of big corporations etc. etc. What Michael Rabiger once dubbed as 'walled cities' leading to 'walled city films', the attempts to show what is almost forbidden to show to reveal unknown realities. At times it may be so important to portray situations, that on the basis of documents we make docu-drama to reveal reality.

6.

Making documentaries is one way to start a dialogue. Dialogue is life-giving. On the condition that equality is established beforehand. Dialogue means that you take each other serious. There is true interest in the ideas we both have. They are given form, and then we may formulate an answer, in a direct or a disguised way. Dialogue leads to transparency.

7.

History, present, future. Language, so also documentary film-language, changes over time. Language is constantly developing. Or: symbols are changing. We have to deal with these elements:

a. the theme and how to give that form in a film.

b. the language used should be the language that the filmmaker feels is the best to tell the story.

c. the filmmaker must at the same time control if and to what extent the story is understood in the way he / she desires.

d. since form is part of content much work needs to be done to find the proper form for the chosen content. The filmmaker will discover that the content changes – many a time in unexpected ways – when he / she experiments with formal elements. Therefore the making of every film is in principle always a ‘laboratory situation’. And we realize that that is essential.

8.

We decided that filmmaking should be taught in a school. Of course we still can learn to make a film (or a programme, or a video-clip etc.) by being an assistant, by buying a camera and just starting all by yourself, by watching what others did and do. But many people go to school to become a filmmaker. Whatever the way we choose, there is one essential question. That is: how do we learn? How do we understand what it is to tell a story? So: what then is a story? For instance: are there bad stories? Or are there only good stories that may have been told in the wrong way – when we feel it was a bad story? What craftsmanship is required and how do we acquire that? Is there a difference in learning to tell a story on one hand and when it comes to this craftsmanship of lighting and framing and editing and making soundtracks on the other hand? Is there a difference in the need for imagination when we frame and make a shot, and when we compose a story?

I believe a film school is the place where people – in the first place – find out what filmmaking means for them, what they want from it. And then: what they are good at, what they want to be involved in etc. I think that – linked to this ‘finding out’ – the various small / short films that you make at that stage also lead to a first recognition, that (film-)making is a process of thinking, opening up, realization of what is important for you and what not – and (see 15) the fact, that you need to go beyond limits to find out who you are and therefore what you want to make films about.

This sounds heavy. It is heavy. And of course – you may discover also that you want to make comedies for the largest possible public. That you want to make fun-films, and not that bloody serious stuff. You do not have to save the world. Perfect. We need comedy just as much.

All this to get back to that one question: how do we learn.

9.

We probably never have a story ready in one moment. What happens is, that we are attracted by some characters and what happens to them – or, vice-versa, that we hear about an issue, and that we find the people who have to deal with that situation. We find the people who live the conflict. Then we collect information, and on the basis of that information we start imagining possible scenes. These we put in a certain order – a story starts to exist. More information – the story may shift, may disappear to be replaced by a better one and so on. It is a dynamic process. That is the heart of the matter. It is a chaotic and quite personal affair, composing that story. It is a process of discovery. Two possibilities (and everything in between): in the first case you research and imagine your story before one single shot is made, in the second you start filmmaking right away. The making of the film is the result of the discovery of your story. You discover what actions, what shots work and which ones don't. You discover at the same time what kind of shots work for you and what stuff you feel does not fit. On the road you learn to make (your) film.

The fact that we discover the story, the film, in a dialogue with both ourselves and the situations and people 'out there' is the essence of the learning process. So: when we want to learn to make a film, we have to find situations in which a question is asked. The question will be put in a more and more precise manner. When we then start answering the question we have to adapt to the precise way the question was asked. Then the process starts as described above. And the question will be answered. We learned a bit of filmmaking. We invented a story, and we found the way to tell it.

10.

I personally believe that we only learn by experience. We have to experience all the phases of the process. And we have to find out how these phases differ from one subject to the next – there are great numbers of different stories to tell. And they all lead to different films. With their particular film language. Of course reading books, watching films, advice from more experienced people can help us, but we can never 'apply' or 'copy' working methods of others. We have to find out how we might want to work with these 'found' ideas – we have to make them our own, by making film.

Therefore we can say: since we learn by answering question and the answer is making film, the learning process will be answering interesting questions and putting these in sort of 'logical' order. Then, alongside, when we gather experience, we may want to see films from the present and the past, we may want to see how these were made, and start comparing to what we have just experienced. Etc. We can also say: we want to find out how film language developed over time. What the relation was and is between the socio-political circumstances and the films made. Because you want to position your film in this context. Apart from this 'knowledge' of films from the past and present, we discover also how problems were solved in specific contexts. We discover, we re-discover the element of passion as it can be found in every single fine film.

Then comes an essential element. Different from 'filmmaking' as such. You are the filmmaker. And there are the other people. the outsiders. What is the role of the outsider? Of the teacher? That person is the sparring partner of the (new, younger) filmmaker. That person should read what has been written,

watch what has been shot and edited, and describe as detailed as possible what he / she thinks is the essence of that material. So the filmmaker-to-be gets feedback and can decide how to improve – and yes, of course, the teacher can suggest solutions (eventually remembering the idea, that many a time there are more solutions than one). Again: the dialogue is essential.

11.

We touched on it, but did not go further into the issue. We learn to speak this new language of filmmaking, we make it into our own language, that satisfies us as filmmakers-to-be, but we now have to confront the others, the public, and show them what we've done. Is our language intelligible? Is it understood the way we want it to be understood? Here we may be confronted by the following issue: we want our film to be personal. When the film is not 'read' by the public the way we want it, we can say: 'too bad for the public'. They should pay more attention to the way I tell the story! Perfect. My new language is not well understood, but it is my language. I believe in this way of filmmaking. I put my work out there, and that is the way it should be. Of course we can in such a situation also decide that changes should be made. Because I want my film to work. I want that my film gets seen.

12.

Circumstances one. As documentary filmmaker you define yourself at times in relation to 'what happens out there'. You wonder: in what ways should I be involved – or not? What – by experience – do I want, what am I good at, what is not my cup of tea. Yes, all this is a private affair. But I wonder, how many people might be alone in their searches for the wrong reasons. Since filmmaking depends on dialogue, since working together can be such an inspiring experience, we may take time to find out with whom and for what reasons you want to team up. 'Finding the fellow-traveller' was a chapter in a book (was it G.W.Young in 'On High Hills', or R.L.Irving in 'The Romance of Mountaineering?') on climbing mountains. Because it is hard to find the right people.

Therefore meeting as the group of filmmakers – especially at earlier moments, and also definitely in film schools – we should ask questions, define issues, watch each others films. We are a film community and I may want to find out if I want to belong to that group or not, what I can get from it and what I can give.

I might find myself together with some filmmakers – colleagues from elsewhere, from other backgrounds most welcome – to discuss two issues. One is: what film do I want to make today? My mind, my heart tells me that I should make this particular film. Questions number two is: today, in our society, what should we talk about, what should be discovered, what is socially needed to be shown? Meeting the other can be a method to find out. To see what apparently needs to be done. By telling your dream you feel how strong the wish, the need really is. And by talking about the world that surrounds us we may be inspired as well. By talking you have to define, and by defining you discover time and again what is the source of your enthusiasm. What are the roots of your ideas.

Remember: that is the world where our work will be written, financed, shot, edited, and finally shown, used, discussed, appreciated.

13.

Circumstances two.

I come back to 'how do we learn'. I made it clear that is indeed a personal affair – but how can we influence that process apart from setting up a series of exercises, a development in the acquiring of capacities, giving information on film and history?

When I decide that I want to be a filmmaker (cameraperson, editor etc.) it is strange to stand in front of the mirror and say to myself: 'here I go! I'm going to be a filmmaker!' What gives me the feel that that person in the mirror has the capacity for this? Gee, to take myself serious in this, whereas deep down I can also laugh at the pretention! So – it is going to be making discoveries in a dangerous country, where you do not know the rules. Uncertainties all over the place.

(I believe, that quite some teachers do not know too well to get to the heart of the matter, and therefore rely on teaching technicalities. How does the camera work? What about new editing devices? Relying on watching well-known classics etc.)

Point is that a working relation must be established between the one who wants to learn and the one who has something to tell. The 'teacher' and 'the student'. A good working relation depends on trust. Trust is linked to the fact, that teacher and student are equal. Essentially equal. The difference is, that the teaching person acquired experience in filmmaking which the student does not have and anyway not to the same extent. But the student may very well be more talented than the teacher is. So – we should work for a situation, in which we can talk freely. Acknowledging these facts.

I must also realize that I cannot make a working relationship with virtually everyone. There will be people who should find other colleagues to talk to, with whom they can set-up a good work relation. I may have the wrong background, speak the wrong language, have the wrong personality. That is not a real problem at all. We pick crewmembers along the same line: with which people can I make my film? Who understands what I am after? Etc.

14.

Circumstances three.

Telling the truth – that is the key element. A student sets him/herself a goal, makes a film, shows it to the teacher. Say, I am the teacher. I have to go first. No, not 'what do you think yourself?' or such bullshit. No. I will explain what I have seen. No good or bad (yet). This is what I believe the film is about – and when that was the goal I should say what I feel was appropriate, what worked for me, what less – and time and again I have to be able to explain why. Into the details. I know that there are teachers who say: 'I come back when you cut five minutes out'. No. I go first, that means I expose my understanding, but also my weakness. I may not understand what the student wanted to show. I am the dumbo who does not get it. I have to take that risk – being the dumbo. So – I tell as much as I can, and we engage in a dialogue. On meaning. On technique. Then the student gets back to work. I am not taking over. I may suggest possibilities, but I am not going to make his or her film.

15.

Circumstances four.

Final remark. What do I really do when I stand in front of students in my role as a teacher? What actually happens when we watch a cutting copy, when we discuss a plan? Apart from all the technicalities, when we try together find the 'truth' of the film, around the film, I believe I only bring energy. I must make it clear that the work done is a serious affair, which is worth to talk about, worth to eventually improve and continue to work on. That it is important to find out how that cut can be improved and how it can be done that the rhythm of the film as a whole gets better and so on. I try to distribute energy. And at some point I may say something about my own fears and weaknesses. And that a very important matter is to go to the very end of your thoughts, to these unknown areas, where you are in the dark, where reasoning does not help anymore. The place where the only thing you can do is to have the courage to find your road into the unknown. That is what creativity is really about.

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