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THE MAGAZINE OF FILM ARTS FOUNDATION

The Genre Issue
Crime, comedy, and horror from an indie perspective

Reality in Three Acts
Adapting narrative storytelling to documentaries

Gauging Cinema
Film form takes shape at the International Experimental Cinema Exposition

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Top row: Mad Hot Ballroom (Photo by Claudia Raschke-Robinson); **Super Size Me** (Photo by Julie Soefer); **Metallica: Some Kind of Monster** (Photo by Annamaria DiSanto). **Second row: Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room** (AP Worldwide); **Tupac: Resurrection** (Paramount Classics); **The Story of the Weeping Camel. Third row: March of the Penguins; The Revolution Will Not Be Televised; Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter** (Photo by Tom Erikson). **Bottom row: The Times of Harvey Milk** (Photo by Daniel Nicoletta; courtesy of Telling Pictures); **Spellbound; Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern** (West City Films Inc.)

Dramatic Nonfiction

In her comprehensive article about adapting the three-act structure to the documentary, Karen Everett warns makers that constructing a compelling tale in the editing room is almost impossible. You must consider the "central question" of the story before you film. "Sometimes a few pick-up shoots and a well-written narration can do the trick," she writes about skipping this step. "Sometimes, the best advice is to move on to the next film." If you are embarking on a nonfiction project to tell a story that resonates with the power of a Greek tragedy, your first stop should be the next 12 pages. While "Squeezing Reality Into Three Acts" takes some time to read, it could save you hours in the editing room later, or even prevent the unthinkable, an editor telling you that you have no story.—*Shari Kizirian*

Squeezing Reality

As the recent box office success of films like *Super Size Me* ($11.5 million, 2004), *Mad Hot Ballroom* ($8 million, 2005), and *March of the Penguins* ($77.4 million, 2005) lure more documentary filmmakers to seek a risky theatrical release, audiences are lured, too, by the promise that nonfiction cinema can tell stories that are as dramatic and entertaining as feature films. Intensifying a trend that began a decade ago when the acclaimed 1994 film *Hoop Dreams* began its $7.8 million run, commercially released documentaries are more often satisfying a universal human craving for a good story. The late philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it. Were she alive today, she might have continued her quest for meaning on a weekly basis with a bucket of popcorn and a slate of story-driven documentaries.

Yet not every documentary filmmaker sets out to tell a story. Historically, many PBS-style documentaries have favored a didactic essay format, structured around a central hypothesis. This tradition thrives today in the films of Michael Moore, whose agitprop opus *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) generated a whopping $119.2 million, the highest theatrical revenue of any documentary to date. *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), an earlier Moore film essay structured around a series of questions, grabs the number three spot for box office revenues at $21.6 million. Developing quietly alongside this dominant essay format are Academy Award-nominated documentaries that have gripped audiences with the narrative twists of a well-told historical film (*The Times of Harvey Milk*, 1984), the suspense of a social-issue vérité film (*Harlan County, U.S.A*, 1976), or the character transformation of a powerful memoir (*Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, 1994). All these well-crafted documentaries borrow from the plot devices of fiction films.

Robert McKee, author of the book *Story* (Harper Collins, 1997) and infamous mentor to countless Hollywood screenwriters, built his career on his claim that "the art of story is in decay." His crusade to revive the craft of storytelling in "razzle-dazzle" Hollywood films may have rubbed off. In the past five years, the development of dramatically structured documentaries has accelerated, with the success of films like *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), *Tupac: Resurrection* (2003), and *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005). Oddly enough, some producers credit reality TV with paving the way. Others say that the newsmagazine format perfected the three-act structure for nonfiction moving pictures. "Robert McKee was old news in the early 1990s in New York," says Bob Calo, a former *Dateline* producer. "Clever producers who really wanted to write screenplays took the utter formula of the McKee book and laid it on top of news production—enter *Primetime Live, Dateline,* and *20/20*." Regardless of the origins of the trend, "narrative" films no longer have a lock on storytelling, and viewers now know that nonfiction can deliver drama. Still, as relative latecomers to the art of storytelling, documentary filmmakers can learn a great deal from screenwriters about the intricate design of three-act storytelling.

Reality in Three Acts

The three-act structure that originated with Aristotle has withstood the test of time in literature, on stage, and in the last century on television and movie screens. But how does this enduring dramatic structure apply to nonfic-

Into Three Acts

What documentary storytellers can learn from screenwriters

by Karen Everett

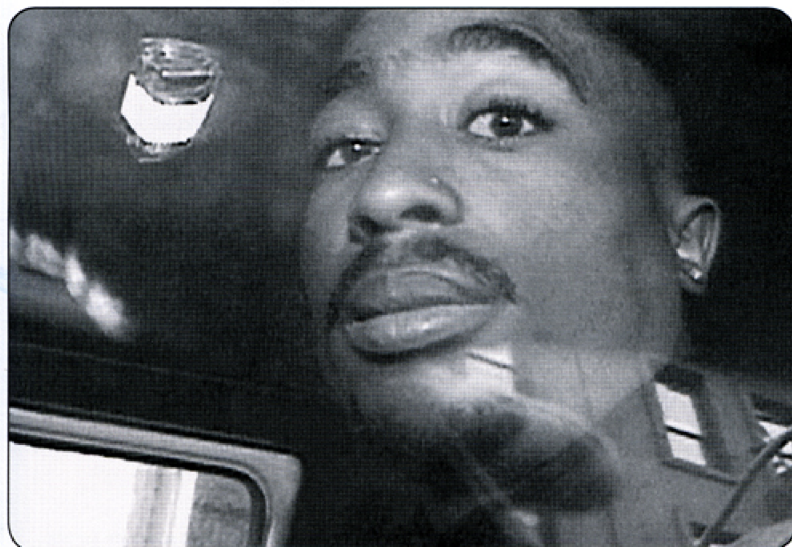
Novelists and screenwriters are limited only by their imaginations and by the credibility of their characters' actions. Documentary filmmakers, on the other hand, must design scenes based on the filming of real life.

tion films about real people and events? Novelists and screenwriters are free to design scenes into a scrupulously plotted three-act structure. They are limited only by their imaginations and the credibility of their characters' actions. Documentary filmmakers, on the other hand, must design scenes based on the filming of real life. These two constraints—"what was filmed" and "real life"—present special challenges. The documentary editor selects from a finite audio and/or visual recording of real conversations, actions, events, and images. If the bona fide event—what filmmaker Jon Else calls the "genuine article"—wasn't filmed substitutions must be found. The editor then attempts a meaningful ordering of real life. Whether the editor is using a three-act storyboard or some other narrative design, how does she stay true to actual happenings when she must persuade and contort them into climaxes and plot turns? "I've spent a lot of my career," says Jon Else in the book *Documentary Storytelling* (Focal Press, 2004), "trying to make real people in the real world behave like Lady Macbeth or Hamlet or Odysseus or King Lear." In this article, I outline the principles of classic three-act structure as taught by professional screenwriters, and examine how documentary filmmakers can adapt these structural demands to the limitations of their medium and the random unfolding of real life.

Definition of Story

Many first-time documentary filmmakers are stumped soon after they enter the editing room. They had set out to explore an issue by telling a story rather than narrating an essay-type film. They had heard that, unlike fiction films, documentary stories are often composed during the editing process. As they assemble footage from even the rosiest production scenario—brilliant interviews, stunning cinematography, and never-before-seen archival footage—these filmmakers discover in post-production that they are adrift. Their instinct to hire an editor, or at least a consulting editor, is correct. They are too close to the material. Sometimes, however, after reading the treatment and looking at the footage, an editor will determine that the project has a fundamental flaw: a story was never present from the beginning.

A story, in the screenwriter's sense of the word, is not a profile (for example, a film about an eccentric uncle who farms nuts), a condition (human rights abuses in Haiti), a phenomenon (the popularity of multi-player video games), or a point of view (Social Security should be privatized). Robert McKee defines story as "the great sweep of change that takes life from one condition at the opening to a changed condition at the end." The key question in defining this "great sweep of change"



Far left: Cinema verité projects like Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967), which revealed abuses in a mental health facility in the U.S. as they unfolded during filming, are increasingly difficult to fund as grant panels look for a beginning, a middle, and an end in a documentary treatment.

Middle: The popularity of documentaries like Luc Jacquet's *March of the Penguins* demonstrates that audiences respond well to carefully scripted nonfiction films that pack a dramatic punch.

Left: MTV producer Lauren Lazin could pinpoint the third act climax of her 2003 documentary *Tupac: Resurrection* before production: the 1996 drive-by shooting of the gangsta rap star.
(Photo courtesy of Paramount Classics)

is: "What does the main character want?" The answer to that question launches the film's narrative arc.

Unfortunately, many novice filmmakers wait until post-production to come to grips with this question. Seduced by cheap technology and the thrill of directing the camera like a fire hose, they may have amassed hundreds of hours of footage but still failed to capture the launching point and plot turns of a story. Straddled with expensive transcription costs, they hope that a miracle-working editor can cure their post-production paralysis. Sometimes a few pick-up shoots and a well-written narration can do the trick. Sometimes, the best advice is to move on to the next film. Screenwriters understand that defining the hero's quest is the foremost dramatic requirement of a three-act structure. For documentary filmmakers, honing in on the protagonist's desire in their earliest concept paper is a mandatory preamble to rolling film.

The "central question" in Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni's *The Story of the Weeping Camel* is not about the family's survival in the harsh Gobi Desert. It is, "Can the camel mother be persuaded to take care of her albino offspring?"

Approximating the Three-Act Structure

According to Syd Field's *The Screenwriters Workbook* (Dell, 1984), "A screenplay follows a certain lean, tight narrative line of action." By contrast, documentaries do not fit tidily into three acts, and their narrative through-lines often take detours or are slowed with weighty exposition. Editing nonfiction is an approximation of the screenwriter's precise three-act structure. Devising a narrative arc, however, does not mean dividing the film into three parts, and then arbitrarily labeling each part an act. The first, second, and third acts look remarkably different from one another, and each fulfills a unique and specific purpose, whether in short stories, fiction films, or documentaries. Act One sets up the protagonist's desire (boy meets girl). Act Two presents obstacles that thwart the goal (boy loses girl). In the final act, the climax reveals whether or not the protagonist achieves his heart's desire (boy wins girl forever after).

Act One: Launching the Story

The function of Act One is to establish the world of the film, introduce us to the characters, and launch the protagonist's quest. In a two-hour dramatic film, Act One (also called the "setup") runs about 30 minutes, or a quarter of the film. At the start of the act, the audience is introduced to the film's setting

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and characters. The audience doesn't yet know whom to root for. When the world of the film is "normal," meaning without life-altering conflict, all characters have relatively equal value in terms of audience empathy. A true protagonist emerges at the "catalyst" or "inciting incident," when an external event upsets this character's world. This mandatory structural device kicks off the real story, as the protagonist begins her quest to restore equilibrium to her life. For example, in the action movie *Jaws* (1975), a woman is killed by a shark, and the town sheriff finds her decaying body. This horrific discovery is the inciting incident, or catalyst, because it begins the sheriff's quest to kill the shark and thereby restore tranquility to the terrorized resort town. The inciting incident does not have to be a negative event. In the love story genre, for instance, the inciting incident is the moment of falling in love, which launches the lovers' quest to stay together forever against the odds. The passion ignited between Romeo and Juliet in Shakespeare's play, though euphoric, uproots life as they knew it. Falling in love, like any catalyst, throws life out of balance and initiates these two characters into the story as "protagonists."

While filming *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, about Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, Kim Bartley and Donnacha O'Briain found themselves in the middle of a coup. This action provided the necessary "inciting incident" crucial to launch to the story of the film.

While many people use the word "protagonist" to simply mean "main character," screenwriters define the protagonist as a character who possesses a yearning or desire for something. In *Romeo and Juliet*, two protagonists share a common quest.

Portraying the Inciting Incident

The inciting incident plays such a critical function in the overall story structure that Hollywood screenwriters follow a rule: the inciting scene must be visually depicted on screen, preferably in present story-time. In other words, the story cannot be launched through exposition (boring) or back story (too removed). This imperative presents a major problem for documentary filmmakers constructing a narrative arc. Frequently, by the time a documentary filmmaker gets interested in a film, the inciting incident has already happened. Equally problematic, this rousing scene was probably not caught on film.

Sometimes filmmakers get lucky. They set out to film one story, and a more powerful story unfolds in front of the camera. In *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (2003),

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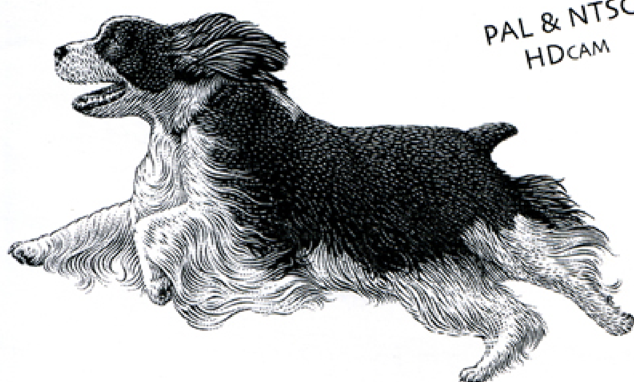

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To show the "inciting incident" in *Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern*, Jeanne Jordan and Steve Ascher cleverly built a sequence of scenes to launch the story of the Jordan family's struggles to save their farm from foreclosure.
(Photo courtesy of West City Films Inc.)

Irish filmmakers Kim Bartley and Donnacha O'Briain set out to profile Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. Well into production, the directors suddenly found themselves in the midst of a coup. They caught the violent political upheaval on camera, the film shifted gears, and the filmmakers had a visually riveting catalyst for their first act.

Other filmmakers get lucky by discovering home movies or archival footage that will portray the inciting event. But these instances of serendipity are the exception. If a documentary filmmaker does not have footage of the actual inciting incident, how does she bring it to life on screen? One common solution is to comb through interviews for a sound bite that reconstructs the inciting incident. Sometimes even a periphery character can recall a particular moment that will change the lives of the characters forever. In *Capturing the Friedmans*, an 88-minute doc, the inciting incident occurs seven minutes into the story, when a postal inspector appears on screen for the first time. He recounts that in 1984, U.S. Customs had seized some child pornography addressed to Arnold Friedman. The postal inspector describes how he then entrapped Friedman by dressing up as a mailman. He delivered Friedman a magazine for pedophiles and returned an hour later with a search warrant.

Constructing an Inciting Sequence

If an interviewee is going to relate the catalyst event, an editor should choose the most detailed and charismatic telling of the incident possible. Remember, this moment is when the story is supposed to take off. If a lackluster sound bite can't fuel the launch, an editor may need booster material: narration, location footage, reenactments, or animation, for example. Whereas a screenwriter can start the story with a single inciting scene, the nonfiction storyteller must often construct an inciting *sequence*. As long as the sequence gets the story off the ground, it's fine to employ a slow burn rather than pyrotechnics.

The film *Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern* (1995) makes use of this solution, cleverly constructing a sequence of scenes rather than one inciting scene. Filmmaker Jeanne Jordan sets out with her husband and fellow director Steve Ascher to document her parents' struggle to save the Jordan family farm from foreclosure.

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Typically, by the time Jordan showed up with the camera, the inciting incident had already occurred. The family had held a terse meeting with the town's new banker, who declined to give them the usual terms for their annual operating loan. Now the farmers faced financial ruin.

To reconstruct this inciting event, Jordan (also the film's editor) begins with a shot of her mother tallying the family's troubled accounts and her father bottle-feeding a calf after sundown. She uses voiceover narration to explain what's at stake financially. She cuts to her father telling a joke about heartless bankers, followed by her brother who gives an incensed account of the meeting with the new banker. Finally, Jordan takes us into the imposing bank building itself, where we meet the clean-cut young banker. As he instructs her in the mechanics of risk assessment, we absorb not only the exposition about impending foreclosure, but we witness the cultural clash between struggling farmers and corporate bankers. And since the bank scene happens in present story-time, we feel we are witnessing the inciting incident itself. This injects suspense into an otherwise remote back story. By carefully constructing five scenes into an inciting sequence, the filmmaker sets in motion the quest to save the family farm.

Posing the Central Question

The inciting incident gives rise to the protagonist's quest—alternately called the "hero's journey" or "object of desire"—as well as articulates the film's central question. Will Romeo and Juliet stay together? Will the sheriff kill the shark? Will the Jordan family save their farm? The central question is always some variation of the question, "Will the protagonist reach her goal?" After a long period of struggle in Act Two, this central question gets answered for better or worse in Act Three, at or just following the film's climax.

Like narrative films, documentaries are at their best when the protagonist's object of desire and the movie's central question are concrete and specific. In *Troublesome Creek*, the family's larger desire was to survive financially, but their concrete goal was to pay off their loan and get off the bank's "Troubled Accounts" list. In *The Times of Harvey Milk*, the protagonist wants to promote gay rights, but his quest is drawn into dramatic focus by his bid to get elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors: Will he win the election? In *Spellbound* (2002), the central question that causes the viewer to hold his breath every time a child spells a word is very specific: Which child will win the national spelling bee?

> Many seasoned filmmakers won't undertake a film with even the most colorful cast unless they foresee that one character's quest will provide the film with a narrative spine.

While casting the right subjects is critical to a documentary, many seasoned filmmakers won't undertake a film featuring even the most colorful cast unless they foresee that at least one character's quest will provide the film with a narrative spine. In a historical documentary, this feat is relatively doable with the advantage of hindsight. But the dramatic arc of a vérité

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film, in which life is recorded as it unfolds, is understandably difficult to predict. Filmmaker Frederick Wiseman probably did not write a detailed, three-act treatment for *Titicut Follies* (1967). Likewise, the Maysles brothers couldn't have foreseen the dramatic arc of *Salesman* (1969) before filming. Sadly, these grand experiments in cinema verité would most likely not get funded today. Commissioning editors and foundations require that a treatment for a vérité film describe the protagonist's quest, articulate the central question, then envisage the conflicts the protagonist will face during the course of the production schedule.

The Act One Climax

Each act in the three-act structure concludes with a climax, an emotionally charged plot point that takes the story in a new direction and makes necessary the ensuing events. According to Robert McKee, the first act climax may or may not be the inciting incident. In *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* (2004), the inciting incident and the first act climax are two separate plot points. The inciting incident occurs a slim four minutes into the 140-minute movie, when an MTV news clip announces that the bass player has left the band. This incident launches the narrative arc of the movie, as the remaining three members seek to improve their interpersonal relationships and, by extension, their next album. The first act's climax, however, is a separate event. It occurs 32 minutes into the film, after a series of creative quagmires and arguments prompt singer James Hetfield to enter rehab.

Sometimes the inciting incident *is* the first act climax. In the Oscar-nominated film *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, the first 20 minutes of the 88-minute film introduce us to a family of herders in the Gobi Desert. Their quest for survival is not the dramatic arc, but the "normal" way of life in this unforgiving land. The real story begins when family members assist a camel through a difficult pregnancy. One quarter into the film (the textbook length for the first act) they pull the newborn—still breathing—from the birthing canal. But the mother will have nothing to do with the tiny, albino-looking camel. Can she be persuaded to nurse and keep her offspring alive? The inciting incident, which poses this central question, is also the first act climax.

Act Two: The Long and Winding Road

In Act Two, the protagonist encounters obstacles as she pursues her goal. In a two-hour feature film, the second act will typically last 60–70 minutes. This vast stretch, known as "progressive complications" or simply "development," lacks the guiding mandates of Act One (setup, inciting incident, defining the central question) and Act Three (climax and resolution). Many screenwriters rely on the help of a guidepost halfway through the long act called the "midpoint."

The Midpoint

The midpoint is a crisis, often of life and death proportions, that provides the second act with momentum and direction. In action films, the hero often faces death or his nemesis at the midpoint. In the first *Star Wars* movie, Luke Skywalker nearly dies in a contracting galactic garbage bin. In character-driven films, the midpoint may spell hazard to a character's old way of being, or to the life of a relationship. Screenwriting teacher Jeannine Lanouette illustrates this concept with the movie *Thelma and Louise*, a narrative film about two

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women whose weekend getaway turns into a run for the border (*Release Print*, November/December 2002). Halfway through the film, a drifter robs them of the money they needed to make it to Mexico. This catastrophic event transforms Thelma, the true protagonist of the film, from a docile housewife into a formidable outlaw.

The concept of midpoint easily applies to documentary storytelling. In *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*, lead singer James Hetfield returns from an alcohol recovery program a quarter of the way through the second act. "I'm in a very different place," he tells his band mates. And indeed, James has learned to identify and express his feelings. But he is still a control freak. At the midpoint (67 minutes in), drummer Lars Ulrich lashes out at James, calling him "self-absorbed" and accusing him of "controlling us with rules." The band members face an existence-threatening crossroads. Lars warns, "I don't want to end up like Jason," a reference to a former bass player who quit the band because of James's oppressive personality. The midpoint scene also marks the start of James's true transformation. Prior to the midpoint, he controls the band's membership, practice schedule, and even the tempo of the songs. After the midpoint, he changes to work in an increasingly humble and collaborative fashion to create the best album possible.

In Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky's *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*, the midpoint, or crisis, occurs when drummer Lars Ulrich (right) lashes out at lead singer James Hetfield for being a control freak.

(Photo by Annamaria DiSanto; courtesy of IFC)

In *Capturing the Friedmans*, the internal transformation of Elaine Friedman marks the midpoint. In the first part of the documentary, Elaine is a dutiful mother and faithful wife. She asserts that the pedophilia charges against her husband were "hard to believe," and she defends him saying, "He wasn't proud of the porn." Even when she calls her marriage a "big mistake," she laughs and gives a self-effacing shrug. Then, 53 minutes into the 105-minute film, Elaine reveals the dynamics that will doom her devotion to her family when she complains that her husband and three sons "were a gang" in which she had no membership. A minute later we see Elaine at a family dinner looking depressed. At 57 minutes Elaine calls her husband Arnold "a rat." At 58 minutes, home video of a family dinner shows Elaine getting angry for the first time. At 59 minutes, she explodes at her son David, "Why don't you try for once to be supportive of me?" As Elaine's passive persona dies at the mid-

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point, a new aspect of character is born. By the second act climax, when she discovers that her husband has lied to her, she says, "I went berserk." At the end of the film Elaine screams at her sons to leave the house. "I cannot put aside my anger," she shouts. "You have been nothing but hateful, hostile, and angry ever since this began." After her son Jesse is sent to prison, Elaine divorces her husband. "That's when I really started to become a person and started to live," she says. Her transformation from long-suffering housewife to self-actualized person is complete. The midpoint marked the tilt.

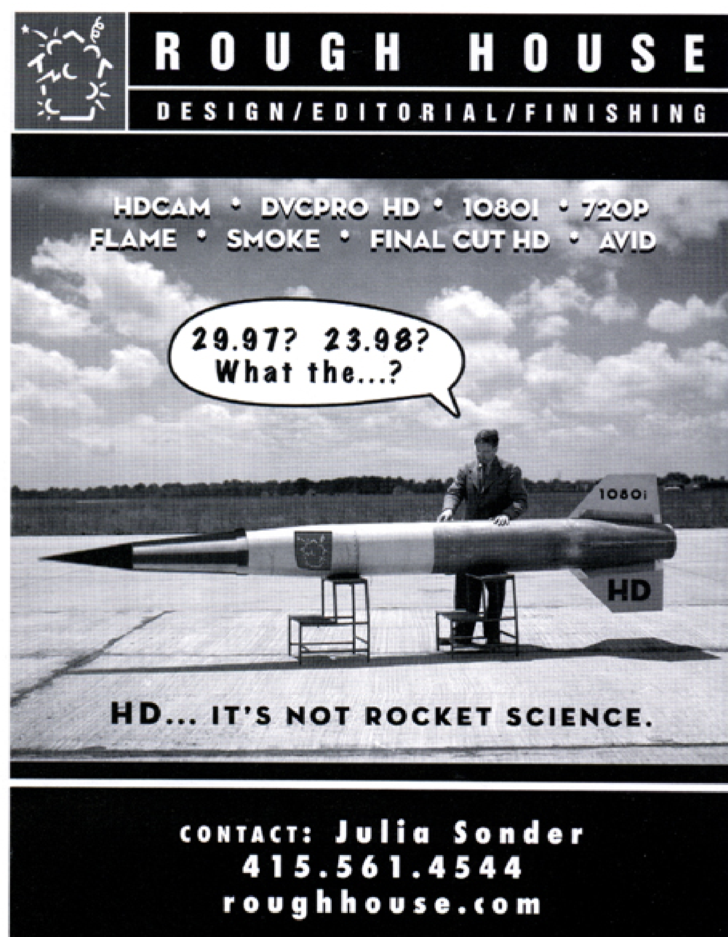
In *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* (1994), about the filmmaker's relationship with her mother who is suffering from Alzheimer's, Deborah Hoffmann uses a "reversal" to solve the problem of pacing in Act Two. (Photo by Tom Erikson; courtesy of Women Make Movies)

The Problem of Pacing

Having gauged the film's direction with the help of a midpoint, many editors' biggest challenge in Act Two is sustaining momentum. Since Act Two is the longest act (a little more than half the film), the editor needs to ratchet up conflict. Ideally, each barrier the protagonist faces should be more daunting than the last. A screenwriter can plot progressive complications without being constrained by journalistic ethics, but what can a documentary filmmaker do if the actual chronology of conflict ebbs and flows rather than steadily escalates? How can he ramp up the action while staying true to the facts?

One solution is to shuffle the order of events, recognizing, in the words of Jon Else, that "a chronicle does not have to unfold chronologically" to be true. For example, an editor can begin Act Two with events unfolding in the order they actually took place, and then reveal a crisis that happened years earlier. The back story is revealed when it provides maximum impact, raising the stakes for the protagonist and contributing to an escalating sense of crisis.

The film *Metallica* doubles back to earlier years on several occasions. In one instance late in the second act, archival footage from MTV introduces an important back story. In April 2000, Metallica drummer Lars Ulrich sued the music-trading Web company Napster for copyright infringement. Ulrich criticized Napster for selling technology that allowed fans to download the band's music free of charge. The so-called Napster controversy made headlines worldwide, and turned Metallica into a target for angry fans. This back story, placed well into the second act, achieves two important structural goals. First, the stormy incident



steps up momentum at the required time—as the story approaches the climax of the second act. In addition, the Napster back story raises the stakes for the very next scene, in which band members discuss going on tour and whether their album will be a hit or not. With the recollection of hate mail and irate fans in the viewer's mind, the stakes of the band's album tour become even higher.

Reversal

Another way to create escalating suspense is to allow the protagonist a taste of success, or a respite from the fray, just before a particularly stormy turn of events. The "reversal," writes Linda Seger in *Making a Good Script Great* (Samuel French, 1994), "catapults the story by forcing it to take a new direction." In her personal documentary *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* (1994), Deborah Hoffmann uses a reversal in the portrayal of her struggle to come to terms with her mother's Alzheimer's disease. In Act Two, the ruthless progression of the disease supplies a predictable structure of increasing tension, but the truth is, sometimes life seemed to get better for Hoffmann and her mother. As a filmmaker, how could Hoffmann stay true to what happened while satisfying the structural demands for increasing conflict?

In Act Two difficulties mount. Hoffmann tries to correct her mother's jumbled memory, but despite a rash of reminder notes, the declining woman begins showing up for medical appointments on the wrong days. In the middle of Act Two, life gets harder when Hoffmann's mother expresses shame at being her "stupid mother," then forgets she's Hoffmann's mother, and eventually directs hostility at her daughter. Finally, Hoffmann has what she calls "a liberating moment" when she realizes she doesn't need to insist on reality. If her mother thinks that the two of them went to college together, what does it matter? Hoffmann's acceptance of her mother's version of reality makes things easier for a while. Then at the climax of Act Two, Hoffmann retrieves a frightening phone message from her. The 84-year-old woman has locked herself outside her San Francisco apartment at night. Hoffmann must face that her formerly independent mother cannot continue to live alone. The placement of the second act climax directly on the heels of Hoffmann's reprieve is a clever "calm before the storm" juxtaposition. It compresses yet stays true to the times when Hoffmann's life was relatively tranquil (the length of the reprieve in real life is unknown). Equally important, the reversal satisfies the dramatic requirement that Hoffmann's life was growing, in her words, "out of control." By abruptly reversing the languid mood, the second act climax jolts us into Act Three.

Act Three: Answering the Central Question

Comedian George M. Cohan said that in the first act, you chase your man up a tree. (His "quest" is to get down safely.) In Act Two, you throw rocks at him. And in Act Three, you force him out onto a limb that's ready to break before you finally let him down. Screenwriters know that at the end of Act Two, things should be as bad as they can imaginably get. Then in Act Three, they get even worse. The function of the third act is to ramp up suspense to a crisis that is so unbearable that the protagonist must summon a supreme effort. This crisis, the story climax, will conclusively answer the film's central question: Did the protagonist get what she desired?

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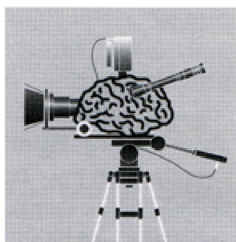

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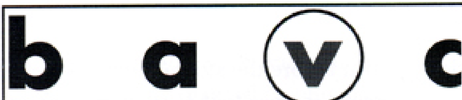

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***Daughter from Danang* (2003), a vérité documentary by Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco, delivered a powerful third-act climax that neither the audience nor the filmmakers could have predicted.** (Photo courtesy of filmmakers and American Experience)

Screenwriters often begin plotting a film with two points in mind: the inciting incident and the story climax. With these two coordinates in place, they can chart progressive complications from inception of quest to quest pinnacle. In the documentary world, only backward-looking films can provide a treatment with a conclusive climax. For example, in the Oscar-nominated *Tupac: Resurrection* ($7.7 million, 2003), a film made after the gangsta rap star's death, MTV producer Lauren Lazin could pinpoint the film's climax as the 1996 drive-by shooting murder. In cinema verité (or direct cinema), the ending is impossible to predict. By extension, so are the production schedule and costs—which is why observational films are unpopular with funders. Vérité films that are good bets for funding are likely to be structured around a contest, an election, a performance, or a challenge of some kind, i.e., having a baby or organizing a trade union. These measurable endeavors furnish predictable obstacles and probable climaxes within foreseeable time constraints. For example, *Spellbound* (2002), a film about a national spelling bee, and *Journeys with George* (2002), a vérité film about George W. Bush's first campaign for president, each contain an obligatory scene (the contest or election) that supplies a treatment paper with an obvious third-act climax.

While funding may be hard to come by, filmmakers undertaking less predictable vérité films can take heart. A vérité documentary can deliver a powerful third-act punch precisely because the ending is unexpected. In *Daughter from Danang* (2003), the startling story climax helped earn the documentary an Academy Award nomination. The film begins when a young American woman named Heidi Bub travels to Vietnam to meet her birth mother, Mai Thi Kim, who gave her up for adoption as a baby. The goal of Heidi's journey is to reunite with her biological mother. The poignant reunion at the airport (the climax of Act One) belies the heartbreaking story climax. Like a well-constructed scene in a fiction film, the climax scene begins at one emotional extreme (or "beat") and ends at the opposite extreme. Heidi's Vietnamese family gives her presents at a farewell gathering. Through the help of a translator, Heidi's brother says he hopes that she will be able to bring their mother to America someday. When Heidi says that would be "impossible," her brother suggests she might be able to help the family out with a stipend. Feeling hurt and betrayed, Heidi shakes her head, holds back tears, and leaves the room. When her mother tries to comfort her, Heidi sobs "No!" and pushes her away.

While difficult to portray in words, this climactic scene captures the real-life dramatic complexity that makes documentaries, and particularly vérité films, so compelling. According to critic Nigam Nuggehalli, writing in the online journal *Culture Vulture*, the suspense of this climax scene is palpable because "no one, including the filmmakers, have a clue about what's going to happen next."

Daughter from Danang could have been scripted by a screenwriter, paced by a director, and performed by an actor. But the documentary crew capitalized on the essence of cinema verité: noninterference. Director Gail Dolgin could not have predicted her third act climax. She could only have laid the groundwork by building trust. There's no evidence that cameraman Vicente Franco cued participants; family dynamics seem to play out in front of his lens naturally. And editor Kim Roberts, cutting with the confidence of an editor who doesn't have to hunt for a story, permits the climax to unfold in long takes.

Denouement: Giving the Audience Closure

In documentaries, as in narrative films, the denouement (also called "resolution") serves two purposes. First, this short ending sequence provides viewers with a moment to catch their breath after the climax and gain their bearings before the credits roll. Second, the denouement gives viewers a glimpse of what life is like now that the protagonist has concluded her journey. Whether or not she has reached her original goal, how has her struggle changed her personality and her circumstances?

The denouement is occasionally constructed as an epilogue, a device more commonly found in documentaries than in narrative films. As in *Daughter from Danang*, the epilogue can take the form of a "two years later" vérité snapshot. Or, the epilogue may consist solely of end cards that tie up loose ends and update viewers on character's lives. This short and snappy textual summary, generally accompanied by music, can provide desirable relief from dialogue-laden documentaries. Some films, like *Capturing the Friedmans*, combine both vérité scenes and textual narration to resolve the story.

Whatever form the denouement takes, it should not drag on. After the story's climax, the audience is ready for the film to wrap up. Allow protagonists a minute to say what it all means, give significant updates, then roll the credits. Ambitious attempts to spell out the film's meaning, or the influx of new conflicts that require a bumpy double climax, can be fatal to a film. Audiences want one ending, not two. They appreciate a denouement that will allow them to exit the theater with enough energy to ponder the story's meaning in their own company, not the director's.

Audiences today bank on the promise that nonfiction cinema will thrill them with the hero's call to adventure, bringing them into a real world they have never visited before, and then safely guiding them through the obstacles, reversals, and climaxes of a meaningful story. While screenwriters aren't the only ones who can deliver good narratives, their stories can provide invaluable structural guidance to today's emerging documentary storytellers.

Karen Everett's documentaries include I Shall Not Be Moved: The Life of Marlon Riggs *and* Women in Love

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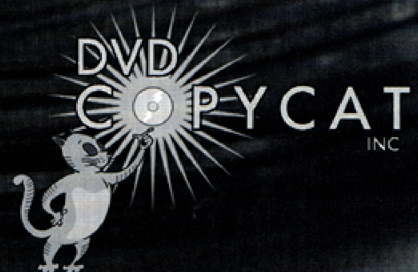

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