

# Modern Construction the Documetary

RICHARD CLARK

*There is little of studies about the research and writing of the documentary in Canada. Until recently, the thought of film makers concerning this subject was limited to the small circle of practitioners and investors.*

*I would like to talk about the subject of research and writing for the documentary and its relevance. I, for one think that research and writing about documentation is underdeveloped and ignores the importance of preproduction and preparation.*

## *Myth of Improvisation*

In the business of film making in general, it is important to look at the monetary value of the proposed production. In the case of the documentary, one must also consider it relevant. As film makers know very well the quality of a film is related to the preparation prior to the film making itself.

I think we must therefore dismiss the ongoing myth most of the time spread by the film makers themselves. The myth is one about improvisation and spontaneity as the golden rules for quality documentary film making. I think this kind of argument has often been the justification for laziness, all dressed in form of a thesis.

You must note that it is for lack of a better word that I use the term script for the purpose of documentary film. Research, reflection, synthesis and image writing is the basis of the script. This must take various forms according to the nature and the usage of film makers.

From the moment I intend to take a deep look into a certain aspect of the human condition, social or cultural, I am taking a position. If

we are making a documentation based on a large pool of fact, we must make the tough choice of choosing information from a certain point of view. The script writing has to do with it. It is certainly a sensitive issue but critical for the film. It is a necessity, and my long experience tells me that it has to be done.

If there is a form of creation which can not pretend to be a totally free and automatic expression, it is cinema as art, in which the stages of construction (creative and technical) must carefully proceed. This is the reason why I don't believe in films made on the basis of intuition and improvisation.

## *Conditions of production*

Whatever one might think about it, in the actual context of producing documentary film, in private industry as well as at the National Film Board of Canada, it has been virtually impossible to make a documentary film without a script.

The time has past where, at the NFB, anyone could make his own research with the camera in his hands, filming a lot of shots and being assured by intuition that something will come out of all this.

Such a way has produced the best and the worst, depending on luck, but it is now over. No one would now have the privilege of filming on the basis of a single quickly written one-page screenplay, nor have the opportunity for a whole month of freedom and 30,000 meters of film to shoot anything that is not fully prepared. For the high costs of production have definitively set an end to this kind of documentary essentially created in the editing room. But many still think that making a documentary is like fishing.

The new demands of a precise schedule, of exact timing and of a certain length of film allowed have forced the film makers to seriously prepare for the shooting itself. The preparation itself does not guarantee success, it is a basic requirement for anybody who takes film making seriously.

## *Better preparation for better improvisation*

I firmly believe that it is the deep knowledge of his subject that allows the film maker the freedom of

improvisation at the moment of filming. The script however must leave enough blank space for spontaneity and surprises that might arise in the life of the subject being documented.

## *Each his own method*

There is not a single model for script writing. Every subject, each film, has its own and special way. Every film maker has his particular unique method.

In fact, documentation, characters, events, and so on, are closely related and in a continual dynamic that contributes to documentary.

The selection of subjects is often decided by the film maker's desire to discover new fields of knowledge or portraying realities in new perspective. Or due to his desire to use film as a tool of reflection on a certain subject.

I propose no chart of analysis here. Reality is too complex and society is too often marked by the sea of contradictions to be strictly fixed in any sort of chart. I am interested in an artist because he is a person involved in the world of creativity and not because he is famous.

## *Research*

Research is an open-ended field. It covers both the theoretical (collecting and reading of newspapers, books, studies, meetings with specialists of the subject) and the practical (meeting with people on the street, spectators of a play, etc.).

One must be without any kind of prejudice in his research, any kind of preconceived idea about the subject itself. One must go to the field and talk to people from all walks of life. The purpose is to gain maximum amount of information in order to gain insight to the subject.

It is quite perilous to make a film on a matter one already knows too well. What is the point of making a film if one is not firstly urged by a certain curiosity?

Generally speaking, after some time of research, plans must be drawn. For example, if anyone wants to make a film about a youth group, one must study their living styles. Find out how the majority of them operate. Feel their happiness and frustrations. Many of them fail to envisage a bright future and are not as hopeful as the generation twenty years earlier. This evidence allows us to view things in historical perspective.

## *Characters*

In any kind of film, it is the characters that make the film interesting. They inspire the audience and charge the film with emotion.

If the synthesis of research and creative thinking of the film is to be achieved the choice of the characters is critical to the success of the film. However, I must stress that in film it is important to limit the number of characters. If they are too numerous, the spectator will not be familiar with them, as he has no time to do so, and the film becomes simple report. One must choose the ones who are exceptional, because of their intelligence, their humor, their experience of life. It's no use to make a film about characters who are only average. They must add to the wealth of information regarding the subject matter.

The character chosen must meet the requirements as well as fit with all the visual needs of the film.

In short, one must find characters that are available at the time of filming and visually fitted to the film reality. These characters are the only messengers to be identified by the spectators.

Once the characters are chosen, the film maker must then make an effort to build a good working relationship with them, to warm them up with confidence and complicity that allows the spontaneity to come up at the moments of shooting.

But I must stress that this alone is not sufficient. Although we care about finding interesting characters, they must be placed into a characteristic situation. The quality of the synthesis affects the whole of the quality of the film. And this synthesis, strictly speaking, is up to the film maker himself. If it is not, he takes the risk to be taken over by the characters instead of directing them.

Documentaries that require the characters to speak must be placed in appropriate social context. Invasion of privacy might result in uncomfortable conflicts.

## *Spectators*

At the beginning of research, film makers should know who are target spectators. For, without knowing the kind of spectators the film will aim at, he might be at a loss to find the right manner of communication with them. It is evident that the spectator is intelligent. Film makers provide information, without taking over his place.

Introducing a fictional character

who gives the film maker's point of view may permit an easy solution. But I do not recommend this type of intervention, for I generally prefer to set up ideas built up by the editing, more than personal interventions that are often directive. To obtain this type of editing, the film maker must have full sight of the synthesis a long time before the shooting, so that he can reach the right material at the right moment.

I do use statistics or other factual information to justify my choices even if I know that it would be simplifying things. I prefer to present reality by well chosen images and characters and not figures or statistical charts.

We must let the spectator read between the lines and let him have the chance of active participation. The film done in this manner will have stronger impact.

For sure, this open approach drives the spectator to his own interpretations. With his own subjectivity and his own knowledge, he can interpret a film the way he wants. The same would happen for a humorous film. Those who have a certain sense of humor would not react in the same way as those who lack of it.

I prefer this active reception to the passive one of the telespectators facing the newsreel report. Documentary film is here to challenge.

## *Conclusion*

Research, realization and production for me is an excellent opportunity for discovery and learning. It is an immersion into the reality of people from diverse classes. A way to gain new insight of every day lives of people. The motivation of wanting to learn more gives me the desire to create films.