

INTRODUCTION

This handbook is for anyone who wants to make a documentary or ethnographic film. You may be a student, a professor, or out on your own, working independently. You may be a budding filmmaker or an emeritus anthropologist. You may have a burning desire to shoot a feature-length movie about a revolution in a remote spot of the globe, or have long hoped to make a ten-minute video about your grandmother. You may want to learn the technology simply to shoot research footage, or to improve your home video style. In any of these cases, this handbook contains the background information you'll need to work with moving images.

Making Films and Writing Texts

Since the early 1960s, documentary makers have been able to shoot films with synchronous ("sync") sound almost anywhere in the world. From the mid-1970s, portable video cameras have been widely available too, and they're getting cheaper, smaller, and better by the day. They're used by Yanomamo and Kayapo in the Amazonian rain forest as well as by hi-tech national television stations around the world.

Film brings people and cultures alive on the screen, capturing the sensation of living presence, in a way that neither words nor even still photos can. The cumulation of successive film frames evokes the sensation of movement over time quite literally *through* movement over time. Film language is the language of moving, seeing, and hearing. More than any other medium or art form, film uses experience to express experience.

This is why film is such an absorbing medium to work in. With documentary, additionally, the filmmaker enters other people's lives, their hopes and fears, their loves and hates, and then goes all out to resurrect them on the screen. The challenge is engrossing and often intoxicating. While it lasts, it can take over your every waking moment. It can change your and your subjects' lives forever—for the better or for the worse. If you are writing a book or an article, you can go home and write it all up afterwards. With film, you have to shoot events and activities at the time they occur. If you don't catch them then, they're lost forever. That's what is so special about film: it's linked absolutely, existentially to its object, a photochemical permeation of the world.¹

Film also has the possibility of reaching a far vaster audience than most academic writers could ever imagine. The subjects of your film are better able to judge your representation of them than if you write a book about them in another language. Your films can be seen and evaluated by all sorts of communities to which you'd otherwise have no access. And this can be a two-way learning experience.

As you start out to make your first films, and as you use this handbook, try to watch as many documentaries as you can. But look at them with new eyes. Look at the shooting style. Look at how they're constructed. Look at how cuts establish relationships that are not inherent in the images themselves. Look at how they build up characters and tell stories. Look for structures that don't revolve around straightforward stories. Look, too, at how films fail, at how much they leave out, and for other stories that could have been told. And think about what kind of a film you would have made instead.

Film and Video

This handbook covers both film and video. The basic principles are similar but the technologies are different. Film is still preferred by people with the resources or expertise, but most of us are now shooting video. Video doesn't yet have the same image quality as film, but it's the medium of the future. Because low-end video is relatively cheap and compact, it has a democratic potential that film lacks. People all over the world are buying or borrowing video cameras to document their own and others' lives. You may want to shoot some of your movies in video and others in film, depending on your budget and your aesthetic.

You don't have to choose one medium or the other, once and for all. Except where the context demands precision, "film" is used in the pages that follow as a shorthand for both film and video.

Practical and Theoretical

This handbook smuggles in a little film theory here and there. Apologies in advance! By contrast, most documentary film manuals are exclusively practical. But there's a problem with this. Styles of filmmaking, like styles of writing, change over time. Filmmaking conventions are continually conceived, used, abused, exhausted, and then recuperated. These conventions have assumptions built into them, often quite profound ones. As the ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall has noted, "Implicit in a camera style is a theory of knowledge."² This may sound a bit terrifying, but it's true. It doesn't mean that we have to go around thinking "Gee, what's my theory of knowledge today?" every time we turn our cameras on. But it does mean there's a mixed bag of assumptions that affect the way we shoot. These assumptions have to do with our relationships both to the realities we film and to our prospective viewers. Some of the assumptions we're aware of, others we're not. The more we can bring them out into the open, the better. That way, we'll have more of an idea what we're doing, and be less likely to repeat blindly the errors of the past. In addressing some of these assumptions, this handbook tends to pose more problems than it solves. This is because when "film language" is learned by rote and applied formulaically, without regard for subject matter, documentary is invariably diminished.

But who wants film theory? Most of it is unreadable to the uninitiated. In fact, it often sounds like gobbledygook to filmmakers themselves! So, when we've slipped it in, we've done our best to dispense with the jargon by using plain English. Feel free to skip over passages you think are overly pedantic. But if you can bear with us, it'll probably repay the effort, as we raise issues that are usually swept under the table.

As well as being practical, documentary film manuals also tend to be prescriptive: they tell you how you should write, shoot, and edit your films. That is, they tell you *how* but not *why*. Unfortunately, many of their prescriptions are derived from conventions established for fiction filmmaking. But fiction and documentary have a different relationship

to the worlds they depict, and there are difficulties involved when you shoot a documentary with the liberties you would take for a work of fiction. Quite a few manuals even talk about “directing” your documentaries, as if you can direct what happens in front of the camera: this suits some styles, but it doesn’t suit all. While we try to get away from this talk about directing, it’s still a tension you’ll have to deal with yourself when you shoot. And though this handbook gives you advice about shooting and editing styles, feel free to take such suggestions with a grain of salt. What’s important is that you evolve your own style and that it’s born out of your encounter with your subject.

Ethnography and Documentary

This handbook covers documentary and ethnographic filmmaking of all kinds—at home or abroad, within your own community, subculture, or class, or about other ones altogether. There’s no precise distinction between ethnographic and documentary films. All films, fiction films too, contain ethnographic information, both about the people they depict and about the culture of the filmmaker. And some documentaries are richer and reveal more about human experience than films that call themselves ethnographic. Though ethnographic films have characteristics of their own, they can’t be weeded out from the broader documentary traditions from which they have borrowed, and to which, in part, they belong. So, unless the context demands a distinction, we use “documentary” to refer to both explicitly ethnographic and not-so-explicitly ethnographic documentary.

(Cross-)Cultural?

Is this handbook restricted to “cross-cultural” documentary? Not really. The chapters that follow should be helpful for anyone wanting to make any kind of documentary about human beings in society. But the handbook does take cross-cultural differences seriously, asks what they’re like in the contemporary world, and addresses the possibilities and problems of putting them on film.

Some people used to say that ethnographic films were about strange rituals in “exotic cultures” and documentaries were about modern life in industrial nations (and their rural provinces). But the world has changed, and anthropology and filmmaking have changed with it. The

world, though far from unified, has become increasingly interdependent. People, like corporations, are on the move, and they take their identities with them. Members of the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Worlds now intermingle and intermarry. The colonial expansion of the First World has been succeeded by its postcolonial implosion through a demographically expanded Third, and this, in turn, has been followed by the post-cold war fragmentation of the Second. The world's inhabitants, in short, are tumbling all over each other, and it's only natural that filmmakers should try to keep up with the times. Just as documentaries are now made at all ends of the earth, ethnographic filmmakers are "coming home" to study their own societies, showing their customs to be just as curious and conventional as anyone else's.

Cultural Differences?

So what's happened to cultural differences? They're being ceaselessly deformed and re-formed on your doorstep, wherever you are. Cultures are now less bounded and homogeneous and more porous and self-conscious than ever before, and cultural differences—of religion, gender, language, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on—are no longer contained within old geopolitical boundaries. Subcultures, cultures, and supercultures merge and emerge anew, ceaselessly. In the rough-and-tumble of transnational migration and capitalism, what was exotic yesterday may be domestic today. And what is domestic today may be exotic tomorrow. Cross-cultural filmmaking, then, can be as easily undertaken at home as it can in Timbuktu or up the Orinoco.

But cultural differences in documentary are more various than you might think. This of course only makes them more interesting. In fact, they may be at play in at least six different sites, any (or all) of which are worth highlighting in your films:

1. You (the filmmaker) may belong to a different culture from the people you film. You may be a Sri Lankan making a film about the maize or motel culture of the American midwest, or you may be an American midwesterner making a film about the Tamil Tigers. Many ethnographic films, but not all, continue to depict differences at this level.

2. You may make a film about people from more than one culture. Films about tourism (like Dennis O'Rourke's "*Cannibal Tours*" [1988] or, in part, David and Judith MacDougall's *Photo Wallahs* [1992]) depict at least two cultures or subcultures. Jean Rouch's *Madame L'Eau* (1993) is set on the canals of Amsterdam, in Holland, and also on the banks of the River Niger, in West Africa. Robin Anderson and Bob Connolly's *First Contact* (1984), *Joe Leahy's Neighbors* (1988), and *Black Harvest* (1992) are a trilogy of films about the intercultural fallout from the encounter between Australian gold prospectors and Papua New Guinean highlanders.

3. You may belong to a different culture from (some of) your spectators. If you do, it's possible that film subjects, filmmakers, and film spectators may all be from different cultures. (How many languages can communicate in such conditions?) Just as peoples are moving around the world, so are their films. And it's not only big-budget Hollywood films that are shown in buses, on walls, and in movie theaters on all the world's continents. Ethnographic and documentary films are there too.

4. There will probably be cultural differences among your spectators. Even if you make a film that's only shown in classrooms in the U.S. or Britain, it's already reaching an audience with a tremendous degree of cultural diversity. If you make a film abroad and your film is shown in the country where you shot it as well as at home, the spectators will be more diverse still. If your film is screened at festivals around the world, or broadcast on television in a few countries, you'll lose control over its reception altogether: there's no way you'll know what kinds of people are watching it.

5. If you work with a film crew, there could be cultural differences among your crew members: they may come from various backgrounds. When you collaborate with your subjects (for example, ethnographic filmmakers often work with a sound recordist from the community they're filming in), then your crew is inherently diverse. As you go about filming, you and your crew may respond in various ways to the scenes you shoot. Wittingly and unwittingly, these different perspectives may be incorporated into the film itself.

6. Finally, even you, in and of yourself, may, in a sense, be cross-cultural. Whether through your life experience or your genealogy, you may span more than one cultural tradition. You may be Hopi and Irish-American; you may be Chicana; you may have dual citizenship (legally or illegally) in Canada and Chile, India and Indonesia, or Britain and Bolivia; you may have an American father of African descent who grew up in Paris and a Japanese-American mother who was interned in California during World War II; you may be considered white when you go home to Liberia but black when you're living in exile in London; you may be a Guadeloupean descendant of French slaveholders, African slaves, Carib (West) Indians and indentured (East) Indians, but live in Pondichéry and be married to an exiled Anglo-Tibetan; and so on and so forth. "Fragmented" identities and multiple affiliations of this kind (as the academics like to call them) are the way the world is going, and films are being made that reflect them.

So, whether disenchanted or just discombobulated, today's world is no less fascinating or stupefying for it. We hope this handbook gives you the incentive and resolve to represent it on film.

The Terms We Use

On top of using "film" indiscriminately for film and video, and "documentary" to encompass ethnographic as well as non-ethnographic films, a few other words require explanation right off. There are two groups of people who appear so often in this handbook that we use various terms for them. These are the people you make your films about, and the people who watch them. The people you feature in your films are usually called "subjects," but this can get a bit cumbersome after a while, so we also talk about "actors" and "characters." These terms typically refer to fiction film actors, but they're pertinent for documentary too. "Actors" points to the performative quality of documentary, in which social actors are for a time, for better or worse, also film actors: they act out their lives, more or less self-consciously, in front of your camera. "Characters" hints at how you, the filmmaker, have to construct and develop your characters on the screen, and at how documentary conventions of character development over the course of a film are uncannily close to fictional ones. Additionally, the people who watch

your film are also referred to so often that it would be repetitious to stick with just one word. “Viewers,” “spectators,” and “audience” are all used interchangeably.

Finally, there are two words of nasty but unavoidable jargon that crop up now and then. The first is “pro-filmic” or “pro-filmic event.” This basically means whatever takes place in front of and around the camera, as it’s rolling. The term is important because documentary is not just a presentation of reality (i.e., it’s not reality itself), it’s also a representation of it. Filming is as much a process of selectivity and interpretation as writing; there’s some distance between the actual film and what it depicts. The “filmic,” then, is what is on the film itself, after it’s been mixed and edited. It’s the *re*-presentation of reality that the film makes. As such, it exists apart from the pro-filmic, which is the multitude of processes and activities that *actually* happened in the shooting of the film, some of which were recorded, others of which were missed, ignored, unknown, concealed, or denied. So if you used special lights to illuminate a scene but kept them out of frame because you didn’t want your spectators to know you used them, they’d be part of the pro-filmic but not the filmic. Or if you cut between two shots of your main protagonist that were filmed on two different days, but manage to make it look as if the two shots represent a continuation of a single action, set at the same time and same place, the two different events (“what really happened”) would be part of the pro-filmic, and the synthesis into a single event as implied by the cut would be the filmic: it would be a connotation of the film.

Documentary has a different relationship to what’s in front of the camera from fiction. Fiction films generally negate the pro-filmic; that is, as spectators we suspend disbelief and forget about all the lighting, staging, acting, and makeup that we know is there “behind the scenes.” But when we watch a documentary, we usually assess it as a record of the pro-filmic events we see magically projected on the screen. When we describe a documentary as good or bad, complete or incomplete, objective or biased, we’re evaluating it in terms of its faithfulness to the reality it has recorded. And because different documentaries represent reality in different ways, they have different relationships to the pro-filmic.

The second word also comes from the world of film criticism. This is “diegesis,” or “diegetic.” A film’s diegesis is its story: the universe it constructs on the screen, everything that the events and characters signify. One has only to look at the films of Robert Flaherty or Jean Rouch to see that documentaries can tell stories. The concept of diegesis is closely linked to the pro-filmic. A fiction film’s diegesis (i.e., story) denies its status as a record of the pro-filmic (the actors and set), while documentary diegesis stakes some claim to affirming it. “Extradiegetic,” then, means elements of your film that aren’t supposed to be a natural part of the story, that are somehow outside your narrative yet are integral to the film. For example, if you linked two sequences with a montage of short shots of your protagonist engaged in various activities (say, growing older in her teenage years) and added a music sound track over the montage, the music would be extradiegetic. That is, the viewers would realize that it wasn’t recorded in sync with the images, that you’re not pretending that the music was actually playing along while your subject was aging. You may be using the music to “make a statement” about the montage images, or just to add feeling to them, in order to bring them alive.

Images can be extradiegetic as well as sounds, though this is relatively uncommon in realist documentaries. For instance, in his personal film about Paris in 1962, *Le joli mai*, Chris Marker condenses a conversation by cutting in images of cats and sounds of harp music that have no narrative relation at all to the discussion. They are rather an editorial commentary, however ambiguous, on the conversation itself. Images and sounds can also be viewed as simultaneously diegetic and extradiegetic—that is, part of the narrative but also a “statement” by the filmmaker. Equally, too, it may be hard for a spectator to tell whether the filmmaker intended a shot or some sound to be considered as integral to the story or as their own statement about it. As a filmmaker, you’ll find you have the power to play on this ambiguity.

So, to sum up, your diegesis is the story you construct in shooting and editing (be it real or fictional), and the pro-filmic is what was really going on when you were shooting. With these two words defined, this handbook should be accessible to filmmakers and non-filmmakers and anthropologists and non-anthropologists alike.

How To Use This Handbook

This handbook can be used as an introductory textbook for instruction in documentary and ethnographic film. Whether for classes given in anthropology, film, art, sociology, ethnic studies, or journalism, it provides basic information about all aspects of documentary, theoretical and practical.

The book is also meant as a guide for the independent film- or video-maker, as well as for anthropologists who want to try their hand at a camera. Half a century ago, just before he was appointed to the chair in Ethnology at the Sorbonne, André Leroi-Gourhan lamented the untold opportunities lost by anthropologists who had “turned the handle of a film camera for the first time in the field, with only the vaguest ideas on lighting and angles, and no serious notion of how to construct a film.”³ Now’s the time for things to change.

There are three parts to the book. “Getting Going” begins with a brief account of documentary styles, from the scripted to the spontaneous (chapter 1). It then discusses the kind of preparation you need to undertake before actually filming, the ethics of image-making, various forms of collaboration, and how you can home in on a suitable subject for a film (chapter 2). You should read “Getting Going” first.

The second part of the book, “Nuts and Bolts” is the densest and most difficult. But it contains crucial information both about how film-making equipment works and about the aesthetic principles you put into play when you use it. Chapter 3 is about the film picture, and chapter 4 about film sound. Parts of chapter 3 will seem familiar if you’re a still photographer, and you may be acquainted with some of the information in chapter 4 if you’ve already recorded sound or are an ethnomusicologist. Chapter 5 then runs through the differences between film and video, and their respective formats, to help you decide what medium and equipment to use.

If you can, read through these chapters in order. But if you find the technical sections too laborious at first, try skimming over them, and come back to them later. If you already have your equipment and know how to use it, you may be able to skip chapter 5 altogether. But if you’re starting your first filmmaking venture, you’ll need to refer back to details in all these chapters at various points throughout your production.

The last part of the book, “Stages of Filmmaking,” describes the different steps of filmmaking itself: preproduction (chapter 6), production (chapter 7), postproduction (chapter 8), and finally distribution (chapter 9), what you can do with your film once it’s finished. These chapters are relatively straightforward, and you should read them all before actually starting to film. How you envisage distributing your film, and how you edit it, will also affect how you shoot and prepare for your locations.

Of course, no handbook will ever replace hands-on experience. Much of the technical information will only really make sense when you have the equipment and instruction manuals in front of you. Most people can learn to shoot (low-end) video by themselves. High-end video and film are often thought to require instruction, even though it’s actually a lot easier to shoot *well* on film or with a professional video camera than it is with a consumer model. Real film aficionados often manage to teach themselves anyway. In any case, the more practical experience you can have, the more helpful this handbook will be.

Good luck!