

A Frame of Mind: Researching Documentaries

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The documentary film frame can, at its best, invite us to re-consider a fragment of the world that it has offered to us as an image of reality, and it can do so with a certain intensity. It can do this with a demand for a contemplative alertness to the fragment of the world contained within it, and to the realities that flow in and out of it.

Looking through the Frame

It may be argued that in doing so it can only replicate the normal processes of cognition, intuition and understanding that we enter into while going about our everyday lives. The frame we use in everyday life is constructed out of our sensory capacities, as well as the abilities of reasoning, imaginative and associative thought, feeling and memory. At each moment we pay attention to the world as we live in it, even if unconsciously, even in our dreams, and we pay attention especially to those fragments which bear special meaning to our location within them.

What is it then that distinguishes the *attentiveness* of the documentarist at work from the *attention* that all of us pay to the world in an everyday sense? What marks the difference between the two acts of looking at life?

Perhaps a tentative answer to this question could be – ‘it is the porous line that separates “looking” from “looking again” at the world, and it is this line which also separates our negotiations as individuals from our engagements as filmmakers’. It separates looking and searching within our field of vision, from the act of looking again, searching again. From re-search. Can we then suggest that the act of ‘re-search’ is always an invisible and silent corollary to the act of filming that which we look at anyway?

In this essay we will not be offering a methodology of research for the documentary filmmaker, for we believe that each filmmaker finds his/her own methods. What we will be trying to do is to gesture towards a series of associations, speculations and metaphors that we feel make it possible to look again at what re-search is, and could be, for the documentarist and for those who watch documentaries.

Second Sight

If we remove from “research” its respectable institutional connotations – its images of white coated investigators in laboratories or the ethnographer-hunter-gatherer of

facts in the 'field' – can the word 'research' then be claimed as a significant motivation for all those who have gambled with the 'real' every time they let light into their lens? Can documentary filmmakers then be seen as the last living claimants of the heritage of shamans, (rather than as visual anthropologists who make shamans the objects of their study) by virtue of their pursuit of a "second sight" within the sphere of the real and peopled and ordinary and material world? Can we, then, make the imaginative leap to say that research for the documentary film which begins before a film is even conceived and doesn't end (in *a* sense) even when it has been made, is a form of 'second sight', redolent with all the intuitive, supra-sensory and associative turns of the phrase?

What a documentary film can do is open for its audience the leaves of another aperture on to this world. It asks us to bring our situatedness in our world into contact and dialogue with at least two other such senses of location, that of the filmmaker and that of the subject who is filmed. Thus, it sets off a chain of refractions and resonances by positioning one set of realities (that of the audience) against other, alternate realities.

By asking us to look at the way someone (the filmmaker) looks at the world, a documentary film is only asking its viewer to look again at what s/he may have taken for granted. But this reiteration of vision is at a heightened and conscious level. In other words, witnessing a documentary film can, through its insistence on a "double take" on reality, make us *aware of awareness* itself. It can make us doubt, take pleasure in, as well as experience the intensification of that awareness. By framing the real, by holding the real in the custody of its images and sounds, the documentary film can disturb our deepest and most dearly held ontological assumptions.

However, can this disturbance not constitute the first step in a tentatively transcendent consciousness that yet remains rooted in the material and experiential everydayness of the world that it contemplates? If we were to imagine a frame in our mind through which we see the world, as if we were looking out of a window, then perhaps research can shift the lines and alter the boundaries of this frame that we have in our mind.

The filmmaker and the film-viewer orient themselves from different vantage points on to the same frame. The filmmaker seeks out, screens what s/he desires to show from the reality s/he sees, and transforms this desire into something that s/he can throw with light onto a screen. The film-viewer sees this assemblage of images and sounds on the screen and then looks again at the world which has been refracted

through this fragment of representation. The filmmaker has “looked again” at reality with ‘second sight’ in order to fashion an image of it. The viewer comes away from this image to “look again” at reality as a result of the experience that the filmmaker has offered in the film. Both are transformative acts of research/looking-again, bracketing either ends of a transmittable experience of reality. That is why it is possible to say that the act of research in a documentary film does not end with its making. It only gets transposed onto a different register.

The Frame and its Parts

But how does research begin? How is that frame built in the mind of the filmmaker, onto which an image can be illumined from the realities that flow into and out of it? What is the frame of mind that underpins the filmmaker’s ‘second sight’? Or, conversely, how can research frame what a filmmaker does to transform all that s/he sees into all that s/he shows?

We will consider this frame of mind as having four sides as any good frame should. And we will give each arm a name before we consider them in turn. The first we will call ‘Embodied Curiosity’, the second ‘Lines of Sight’, the third ‘Rhetoric and Resonance’ and the fourth ‘Means, Resources and Materials’.

Embodied Curiosity

Research for the documentary film is in the first instance an act of embodied curiosity. It is a curiosity that is not a passive thirst for information, but an active inter-subjective engagement of the filmmaker, and his/her consciousness, with people, history, the material world as well as the realm of the imaginary.

It is a desire to unravel and an unwillingness to conceal motivations, not the least being the filmmakers own in making the film. It is a willingness to encounter numerous and sometimes contradictory motivations for representation and then being open to letting them contend with each other. The filmmaker and subject may have different or differing desires for entering into the act of representation, and the film could, through its re-search, allow these desires to encounter each other in an explicit fashion.

Also, there may be contrary motivations for representation within the filmmaker’s own consciousness. Take for instance the task of representing difficult human conditions, of acute poverty, suffering or violence, where the filmmaker might find himself caught in a force-field of tension between the need to represent that condition with accuracy and sensitivity towards the human dignity of those being

represented. In other words, s/he may be faced with the question – ‘How can we represent a difficult human situation without making a spectacle of it, or belittling the suffering that it entails?’ A careful consideration of the way in which the filmmaker articulates for him or herself the response to this question is a necessary part of the thought processes of research.

Lines of Sight

In an unequal world, the struggles around the question of who is able to render whom visible and for what purpose is central to any reflection on how we see and are made to see the world. In any given situation there is more than one line of sight. Naturally, these contentions between different lines of sight, these differing vantage points, lie at the heart of documentary film practice. A film that asks us to look again at the world must also needs ask us to question how it constructs its own frame. The task of research is to open out this frame for debate and to be aware of the politics of definition which occur whenever lines of sight criss-cross. This can happen in the following ways.

- The Subject’ contests the Filmmaker’s definition of itself.
- The Subject defines its identity and offers/imposes on the Filmmaker its authoritative self-definition. And the Filmmaker contends against being governed in its act of seeing by the Subject’s self-definition.
- The Filmmaker struggles against the Filmmaker’s own definition of the Subject based on the recognition that definitions can erode enigma, richness and complexity. But at the same time, the Filmmaker also struggles to define the Subject because the Filmmaker wants to demarcate how much s/he wants to know and what s/he wants to make known.

Here the first two cases are straightforward instances of the asymmetries of power, with the terms reversed — Filmmaker and Subject in either case. While the first instance — of the power of representation over the represented — is familiar, especially from the domain of the mainstream ethnographic film, the second, of the immense power that a Subject can wield over the act of framing and discourse, cannot be unfamiliar to the experienced documentarist. This is the situation where the person being filmed calls all the shots by virtue of their social status, political power, or by their sheer charisma. In the third case the conflict is within the filmmaker’s own consciousness, an equally difficult battleground!

There could also be instances where the Subject has been rendered invisible by a variety of historical or cultural factors. And the bringing to light of the existence of the Subject by the Filmmaker is in itself fraught with the nuances of power. Is the consequent visibility that is suddenly focused on the Subject a function of the Subject's empowerment or is it again its continued position as an object of a discourse of power, this time of the Filmmaker's power?

A final instance centres not on the actual seeing, but is related to secondary sources that a documentary filmmaker might refer to in the course of research, or as evidence within his/her film. Land revenue documents, medical and psychiatric records, factory registers or penal documents are typical cases. This is the kind of narrative that those in positions of power have already inscribed on those who are powerless. There are, for instance, enough accounts of the insane and the infected by medical experts, but there are hardly any accounts of medical intervention written by those who have undergone treatment.

In all these instances, the task of research is not only to present information, but also to lay open to scrutiny how information is gathered and how images are made or narratives inscribed. Only then will the second sight of documentary illuminate the darker nuances of the games that power plays with visibility.

Rhetoric & Resonance

The many traps that a film can fall into, of which the ones laid by power are perhaps the most significant, lead us to the view that a filmmaker has to seriously think about and carefully compose now a trim presents itself to its viewer.

Just as no human figure can be imagined without simultaneously conjuring a particular conjunction of history and biography, so too no argument in a documentary film can be bereft of its human resonance. Conversely, no human figure in a documentary film is ever also not simultaneously a carrier of the film's ideas and arguments. Taken together these constitute the rhetorical and affective topography of a film.

What are the modes and registers in which the film makes its arguments, what are its textures, its rhythms, and how does it juxtapose different features in its internal construction?

In a fiction film, this is possible through characterisation, through symbolic allusions, through the constructions of archetypes and the available conventions of different genres. In a documentary, the options before the filmmaker are limited, in the sense that only those *that* are immanent in the material *can* possibly be considered.

Reality is far too obstinate to allow it to be scripted into coherent narratives that obey dramaturgical principles.

The search for a documentary film's rhetoric begins as a series of questions with which the filmmaker encounters reality, and it follows the path of his/her attempts to make sense of the answers that these questions will raise. The co-ordinates of this path are located along the axes of the filmmaker's research and through the making of the film. The 'narrative' development of a documentary film could be described as the path taken by a filmmaker's questions in search of answers through his/her material as s/he looks again at the world that gave rise to them in the first place.

No expository decision can be made without the filmmaker repeatedly examining various rhetorical potentialities within the reality that s/he is encountering and the images that s/he is fashioning. It is the task of research to discover the modes best suited to respond to a given set of questions. The rhetorical turn back into the world from the original question and then onto the making of the film is as vital in the case of the documentary film as plot development mechanisms available to the scriptwriter are in the case of the fiction film.

The arguments and thoughts of a documentary film never stand-alone. They need the living breath of affectivity, of different textures of emotion and the unconscious play of visual and aural associations. Often this relationship between argument and effectivity, or rhetoric and resonance, is best seen in the case of the intensely emotive qualities of archival footage. The usage of archival footage can never fulfil a solely evidential function within a film. It is as if it is too redolent with accumulated human experience to act as merely rhetorical signpost. Its resonance often brings to a film concentrated traces of energy, and the peculiar emotional quality that arises out of any imprint of human life on a medium that is in itself a frail, sometimes damaged or faded repository of memory. Research can discover patterns of relating argument to evidence by using archival footage which bestows upon the rhetorical turn the overlay of deeper and buried experiences.

If the different things that we see as a result of our deployment of rhetoric and resonance, reason and intuition, can be likened to shifting tectonic plates within the film's surface of meaning, then "in-sight" is the substance buried in the fissures between the masses of vision. The location and monitoring of these fractures and the witnessing of the emergence of the 'insight' stuff from below the surface of contending visions is another function of the filmmaker's second sight.

Means, Materials & Resources

During the process of research the filmmaker has to develop an intimate understanding of the people, places and periods that will figure in the film. These are the means, materials and resources on which s/he will have to depend to construct the film. In our experience we have found that much of this needs to be done a great deal before the actual filming begins, so that we are on firm ground regarding the questions we ask or the details we attend to during the filming process. What follows now is a rough sketch of the ways in which we have found it useful to approach people, places and periods in the course of our research. It is not meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive in its elaboration but may prove useful for the kind of approaches and questions that prove to be fertile during research.

People

When dealing with people the filmmaker may find it necessary to enter into a series of open-ended inquiries, the results of which may not even enter the film, yet nevertheless provide essential contextual material about the subject. Much of this can emerge from sustained and non-intrusive observation that looks closely and carefully at the matrix of everyday interactions, the routines of the day, the network of friends and family, work mates and acquaintances, and the structures of class, status and authority that the subject is located in. The research encounter can also allow for observations of the rhythms of the body at work and at leisure, and act as a catalyst for questions about pleasure, denial, hope, anxiety and perceptions of danger. It can become a way of constructing a relief map of a person's life, featuring their strengths and the things they know and have learnt from experience. It can reveal the ways in which they are connected to others and to the world, as well as to the hazy areas of the realms of their imaginations, their dreams and their personal and experiential terrain. The filmmaker can also research the various ways in which the person has already been inscribed and documented by institutional records. Birth and death certificates, school reports and doctor's prescriptions, police, hospital and medical records, marriage registers and property papers, legal and financial documents, newspaper reports and official statistics – all construct a person's biography. It is often revealing to see such documents juxtaposed in relation to the way a person witnesses his/her own life experience, both in conversations and in the other ways that they express themselves. These other ways can be letters, poetry or stories, diaries and accounts of travel, photographic albums and drawings, or any other personal materials

that they might want to make accessible to the filmmaker. Looking at these materials may reveal a strain between the person's self-description and the ways in which the discourses of institutional power inscribe the person. Such a 'double take' can also lead the subjects on to a deeper reflection on themselves and their relationships with these institutional agencies of inscription.

In fact, the research process can at times become, for those being filmed, an occasion to deal with many questions about their lives in an explicit and articulate fashion, perhaps even for the first time. This may lead to responses that may seem at first to be contradictory and confusing, (as opposed to the apparent clarity and coherence of official documents) and which shift emphases from day to day. The filmmaker needs to understand that it is this provisional, unstable and seemingly incoherent account which is in fact the very substance of the subjects' faceted and layered attempt at seeing themselves and the world.

Through such conversations between filmmaker and subjects, which try and locate everyday concerns within more historical, social, cultural and psychological categories, it becomes possible to piece together the elements of an image of a person that may become the key to how the filmmaker will approach him/her as a character in the film. This could well be the impetus for the narrative development of the film, and only the research process can provide us with clues for tracing this path.

The research process is inherently dialogic, and it sets the terms for the encounters that constitute the actual filming. It is an opportunity as well to draw in the subject into a process of consciously co-authoring the work of the film, adding another view (the subject's own), and letting it contend with the filmmaker's perspective within the film. This is a procedure that may not work in all circumstances, and depends entirely on the levels of control that the filmmaker wishes to exercise in the whole enterprise. But the risks are well worth taking, even if only in terms of pushing the logic of the research encounter as far as it can go.

Places

The sound of a musical instrument being played in an empty subway at night is markedly different from the sound of countless commuters' feet as they traverse the same space at rush hour. In a film, as in life, a space can mean very different things at different times.

A place is not just the backdrop for the characters in the film to stand against. It can be as much a character or a protagonist. This is not true only of remote

wildernesses, the oceans, or extraordinary landscapes; it is just as valid in terms of the character of a suburban neighbourhood, an apartment in a housing block, an inner city zone, a village, a factory, a school, a bus station, a hospital or a marketplace. It is rewarding to spend sufficient amounts of time in a space during research to observe how it is transformed by the rhythms of days and nights, and seasons, and to see the ways in which people react to the space. When dealing with a space the filmmaker's research should be willing to enter that space and look at it as an interpreter of its own stories, secrets and possibilities.

Space

In our practice of research and in discussions with fellow filmmakers we have found that there are certain questions that we all tend to ask about a space. What follows are some of these questions.

> “What happens to a space when it becomes active, bustling with people, and what happens when it becomes empty?”

> “What happens to the nature of sound and to the shifts in the patterns of light in a given space at different times of the day and in different seasons?”

> “What are the personal and emotional associations that people in the film have with particular spaces and Landmarks? How does damp, cold and heat change the way people relate to the same space?”

> “What are the social, environmental, economic and political patterns that configure a particular space? What is its ecology and how has that been transformed? What happened to the forests and rivers and wildlife in that area? Where are the factories and mines? What do they produce and who works in them? Where are the offices and markets? What are the land use patterns, tenancy and ownership patterns and what are the ways in which class, caste, ethnicity and gender influence usage, access to civic amenities, habitation of the space and claims on its resources? What is the history of migration into and out of the space? What are the kinds of conflicts, wars, riots and civil unrest that the place has seen?”

> Who are the different kinds of people that inhabit the space? What are the relationships between them? How do these relationships affect the distribution of space, and the architecture of their houses? How high are the walls, how wide the roads and how do people transport themselves? How public or private is the space? What are the restrictions on movement into and out of that space, and why do these exist? How are the boundaries and frontiers marked? How connected or isolated is the

place to the outside world?’

> ‘What are the myths, legends, folklore and histories related to a particular place?

How can its ritual geography be delineated? > What are the sacred sites and places with ritual significance? Where and when are fairs and festivals held?’

Period

A documentary film doesn’t occupy a spatial dimension alone, it also inhabits and describes a time, sometimes more than one time. Even the film that lives and breathes time-present without obvious reference to time-past is also indicative of the special period of the here and now. It is full of visual and aural references to the ‘now-ness’ of the time that it represents. A film shot today about the streets of Delhi would perhaps necessarily include in some of its shots posters and advertisements of competing mobile telephone and internet service providers, if only because of their ubiquity in the urban landscape. This offers us a clue about how the city is getting connected with itself and the world. This is a visible fact and could provide interesting leads as well as interesting questions.

For instance, in a film that looks at the question of the human consequences of epidemics and transmittable diseases, it may be limiting to focus only on, e.g., the precise spread of the HIV virus in the late twentieth century. If the film were to take a detour to glance at the way in which the plague was constructed as an epidemic in the medical and cultural discourse of the medieval world, it may lead the film on to asking questions about how we frame a virus in cultural terms today. Here, the comparison between two periods provides us with the speculative and imaginative space within which we can fashion an argument. The vehicles of this argument could well be the different personal and social markers and modes of talking about a disease that construct the discourse around it. Through comparing and juxtaposing public pronouncements, edicts, medical treatises, case histories and personal testimonies from the two different periods we can piece together questions regarding patterns of social behaviour that point to conclusions we would not necessarily have reached if we had remained focused only on the contemporary in the film.

The task of research then becomes to provide any period that we are looking at, whether past or present with its corollaries in another time. It also becomes possible through research to bring together at least two seemingly disparate phenomena which happen to be located in the same stratum of time, by searching for common underlying themes. In our own research for a film (which is yet to be made) we were surprised by the

connections that we could find between the images of war propaganda posters and anthropological photography. Such connections led us to ask questions not only of the time but also of the practices that constituted the political and social climate of that time. Researching a period means keeping ones eyes and ears open for a wide range of archival as well as 'found' materials. These could be archival film, newsreels and photographs, posters and photo albums, calendar art, newspapers, billboards and advertisements. It could be graffiti and street maps, paintings and icons, oral traditions and popular histories, music and myths.

Searching for these materials would require the researcher to move between streets and libraries, between coffeehouses and archives. It would require the paying of attention to the visual and aural minutiae of everyday life. It would require also a willingness to enter into all repositories of public memory, even though the custodians of such spaces (especially archivists and official record keepers, at least in India) may not be sympathetically disposed to the curiosities of filmmakers! At another level, it requires larger outlays in budgets for research, for the acquisition of archival materials and also a commitment on the part of the concerned institutional authorities to the public's (and consequently the filmmaker's) right and access to information. Too many documentary filmmakers have horror stories about how the retrieval of vital materials from public archives in India is a nightmare. For well-researched documentaries to be made more regularly, this is one attitude that certainly needs to change. Ultimately, the researcher's task is not only to collect these masses of information, and answers, and unanswered questions. But also to trace links between and paths through them. It is also to know when to stop collecting material, as too much information can be as debilitating for the filmmaker as too little. And finally, it is to connect the people, the places and the period into an engaging picture. This requires both analytical abilities, a capacity to process and interpret various strands of information as well as an active imagination. Funders, audiences and sometimes even filmmakers, suffer from the delusion that all that it takes to make a film lies before, not behind our eyes. The exhaustion as well as the exhilaration of the research process continues to suggest otherwise. In the end, it is the nature of the conversation between what goes on both before and behind our eyes (both as filmmakers and audiences) that makes a documentary film what it is.

The Case for Research

Through this essay we have tried to make a case for understanding the place of research as an essential component of documentary filmmaking practice. We have attempted to

draw out a relationship between the concept of research and what we have called “second sight” (to denote the act of ‘looking again’ at the world) which we consider fundamental to documentary film making and viewing. We have stated our view that research is a form of curiosity that allows both filmmaker and audience to enter into intense inter-subjective negotiations with people, places, periods and with their own acts of seeing the world. We have seen how it could lead to an awareness of awareness itself, as well as a consciousness of the play between knowledge and power.

We have considered the means of research and the domains where it can be pursued. We have recognized the role that research can play in shaping the rhetoric of documentary filmmaking and in its play of affective resonance. We have alluded, finally, to the possibility of ‘insight’ as a viable category in the imaginative apparatus of the documentary filmmaker.

In doing all this, our attempt has been to extend and deepen the way research is looked at within the context of filmmaking. It has also been our attempt to lay open the argument that filmmaking practice is a serious and imaginative contribution to the dialogues and processes that constitute our understanding of the world.

As latter-day, or even fallen, shamans we cannot lay any claims to healing power, or to prophecy. Documentary films do not heal a wounded world. They transform nothing by themselves. But they can and sometimes do affect our awareness of ourselves, of the minutiae of life that ultimately constitute our times, the world, and our place in it.

They can egg us on to ask questions of the world and ourselves. It is possible that a certain kind of question can sometimes begin, though not encompass, the process of healing by its very utterance.

The more the filmmaker works with his/her own faculties of awareness, the more the film has the possibility of transforming the awareness of its audience. This working with the faculties of awareness is what we have called research. This possibility of the transformation of awareness is the gift that research gives to the audience

Sometimes, at the end of a film what remains with us as filmmakers is not necessarily the perfect take, but the small epiphanies that constitute getting to know your film, your subject, your terrain, and through them – yourself. This is the gift that research gives to the filmmaker.