

Producing the Documentary Film: The Role of a Scriptwriter

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Abstract

The art of filmmaking is an exciting and glamorous venture which has also grown to become a highly industrialized and mechanized medium. As a pervasive medium, film combines both aural and visual components to create an illusion of reality that influences the thinking and behavioural patterns of viewers. The documentary film is employed for purposes far more than entertainment as it also serves as one of the most powerful instruments for social influence in the world. This paper examines the artistic and aesthetic considerations in film production with a particular emphasis on the script. The film script is generally known to be a blue print from which a film is made. It contains a detailed statement of action, dialogue, artistic and mechanical directions that provides the basis for production. This paper examines the difference between a fiction and non-fiction film script. Whereas in most cases the writer's ideas are complete in almost every detail for the making of a fiction film, some documentary films however, allow the filmmaker some latitude to deal with the unpredictable and the uncontrollable. Three principal stages in script development are examined carefully and methodically to enable the reader gain insight into the importance and dynamics of a good documentary script. This paper advocates that whether a documentary film is meant to promote the corporate image of an organization, government propaganda, educational/ instructional or even a newsreel, a thorough research and a well-structured script is a sine qua non as it is the basic foundation upon which the entire film would be sustained.

Introduction

The cinema as a medium of communication and social change plays a very significant role in the society. The documentary film today has taken several dimensions to meet societal expectations as filmmakers produce

content that would cause a change or improve the society. A documentary may be seen as a non-fiction film that aims to document or record subject matter based on factual or actual people or events. Documentary films produced in the developmental years of the cinema were short actualities of performance such as dance, processions, parades and daily life activities. One of such films was *Moana* (1926) which was written, produced, directed and edited by an American filmmaker Robert Flaherty who is acknowledged as the father of the documentary film. It was John Grierson, a Scottish filmmaker who coined the word documentary and defined it as the “creative treatment of actuality”. Flaherty’s films were ethnographical in both content and style which he explored with care and persistence to record and present reality. Good documentary films only establish the issues at stake and unfold the actions and reactions around those issues. This confirms Flaherty’s approach to produce a factual documentary as he spent a period of time living in the village with the Samoa people as he filmed their daily life activities. His earlier work, a film titled *Nanook of the North* (1920) was about Eskimo life in the Hudson Bay Territory.

These documentary films were thematically structured rather than the usual narrative story format. Perhaps, no other type of film genre is as suited to the analysis of social problems as the documentary. Since documentaries tend to be socially oriented, the emphasis is often on the relationship between man and his environment placing particular interest on political institutions and their degree of responsiveness to the needs of citizens. The different types of documentary films produced today are:

- a) The cinema verite; direct cinema or observational documentary which records events with minimal intrusion by using a candid camera technique.
- b) The Informational, Biographical, Autobiographical; this follows the pure, straight forward narrative style which encompasses voice over narration with talking heads.
- c) The Newsreel Documentary records raw materials in actuality of current information by using bare facts with a narrative structure that plays a key role back up with visuals.
- d) The Docu-drama is a very specialized type of documentary film with good element of drama involving experts in scripting and directing.

This may involve recreating and dramatizing sequences. Docu-dramas are very educative, informative and entertaining.

- e) The Propaganda Documentary is a film with immense persuasive properties deliberately designed to educate and shape the thought of masses.

Each one of these documentary styles has its unique writing approach with some overlap where necessary.

In this age of social realism, most documentary films dwell on themes that examine the relationship of man to the world in which he lives. Documentaries have expanded their scope to include the material circumstances of civilization which create and condition the present cultural, sociological, Political, religious and aesthetic ideas of society. This clearly makes the documentary film the voice of the people speaking from their homes, markets, and lifestyles; thus making it a type of film with well-designed characteristics. Paul Rotha explains further that:

The immediate task of the documentary filmmaker is, I believe, to find the means whereby he can employ a mastery of his art of public persuasion to put the people and their problems, their labor and their service before themselves. His is a job of presenting half of the populace to the other, of bringing a deeper and more intelligent social analysis to bear upon the whole cross-section of modern society; exploring the weakness, reporting events, dramatizing its experiences and suggestion a wider and more sympathetic understanding among the prevailing class of society. He does not, I think, seek to draw conclusions but rather to make a statement of the case so that conclusions may be drawn (130).

Indeed, a documentary film should reflect the problems and realities of the present. Although some documentary films aim at a true statement of the theme and incident, no documentary can be completely truthful as the changing developments in society continue to contradict each other. Some documentary films are deliberately designed to instruct, teach, the

viewer on how to do something. Their approach and interpretation of the material is quite different as its method is the dramatization of the actual material.

Fiction and non-fiction documentary scripts

In the process of making a fiction or non-fiction film, the filmmaker cannot totally subject himself to the concept of objectivity as he has to design and structure the narrative in order to communicate effectively with his audience. It is therefore imperative for the film idea to be crystallized and well structured in form of a script at the pre-production stage. There are two basic categories of scriptwriting used in film production; the fiction and non-fiction. Fiction scripts generally present dramatic stories which are imagined or invented by the writer such as thriller, romance, mystery, fantasy, detective etc. where actors enchant their audience with believable narratives as contained within the script. The non-fiction script on the other hand, may address issues such as the real life of people, living conditions, real events, facts and true information including biography and autobiography of people. A documentary is a nonfiction film that aims to document or record a subject matter based on factual, actual people or events. Gorham Kindem and Robert B. Mushburger opine that:

Scriptwriting can be divided into two categories: fiction and non-fiction. Every scriptwriter should be familiar with the basic elements of both fiction and non-fiction writing. Principles of dramatic and narrative structure used in fiction may also be applicable in non-fiction, and principles of rhetorical persuasion and expository structure are of practical value to scriptwriters working in a variety of areas and formats (71).

There is a thin line that separates fiction from non-fiction as some projects may incorporate both or fall in between them. It is not uncommon to find dramatic and narrative structures associated with fiction also useful in the presentation of historical or contemporary events in works of non-fiction. Similarly, rhetorical structures associated with non-fiction are sometimes relevant to the presentation of characters and

themes in fiction. It is the opinion of this writer that scriptwriters should not restrict themselves to one genre but be acquainted with the basic elements of both fiction and non-fiction writing for the screen. In this wise, there is need for scriptwriters to focus on these elements of dramatic, narrative, rhetorical and expository structure which are of practical value in executing the creative craft associated with scriptwriting.

From idea to the screen

All productions whether drama, documentary, comedy or news features are professionally executed base on generated ideas. The idea must be logically arranged in some order and translated into action for dramatization by selected players. This demands a lot of creativity and unless you have a store of ideas one would find scriptwriting pleasurable. Creativity itself is the art of being skillful and imaginative, having the ability to produce something, in this case the work of cinematic art. Film content generally is shaped by the form in which the meaning is transmitted. The scriptwriter transforms the need to express to how to express. He must know what to transform, how to transform it and the best manner to do it. Every professional scriptwriter goes through a necessary process from inception of an idea to the final draft of screenplay.

Research

Research is one o the most important creative process that enables the scriptwriter gain access to new sources of information he requires to enrich his script. The impact a good research has on a movie script is enormous. To acquire a sound knowledge and a better understanding of the subject matter in focus is most essential especially where facts must be tested, verified and proven. Besides, good research makes one's work authentic and enables the writer attain knowledge which is crucial to the development of the script. Every aspect of the topic should be carefully and thoroughly researched before the commencement of writing the script. Subject matters such as culture, science, education, travel and tourism, instructional and promotional films require extensive research to freshen the "bare bones" with the desired "flesh" of information that

would give credence to the work. It is necessary for the scriptwriter to gather information from different sources and get armed with relevant information before settling down to write the script.

The Premise, Synopsis, Outline and Treatment

Any idea for a film is as good as nothing if the writer does not follow the professional way to process it. Every good treatment is preceded by the writing of a simple concept known as a premise which describes the basic story idea. The premise can be used as a story opening “pitch” of a script or screenplay. The synopsis also known as outline is a brief summary of the (subject) film, otherwise a brief description of the basic story line. An example of a synopsis could be something like this: Amina and Okonkwo are deeply in love and are on the course of getting married, because they are from different parts of the country and of different religious faiths they have numerous obstacles on their way. A film synopsis like the one cited above is required when writing a script for several reasons:

- a) It keeps the scriptwriter from straying away from the nerve of the story
- b) It ensures that the writer’s focus remains sharp and direct to the story
- c) It is a blue print for building the structure of the script/screenplay.

The outline defines the major plot points, character and major events.

The treatment is another important step in the development of a script. According to Brendan Shehu:

The treatment: the story in the film presented in straight forward plain language without technical terms. The main reason is to enable everybody concerned in the film to study the project, whether they have the knowledge of film technology or not and give an opinion on the style, mood and shape of the film as it will finally emerge.

While the treatment provides a narrative summary of the basic story line written in the third person and in present tense, it contains more detailed description of character, setting and plot twists. A good treatment adopts a lively prose style that dramatizes the basic premise and effectively communicates the tone of the story. Rilla Wolf submits that:

The most creative approach to the treatment is for the writer to imagine a screen, to project upon it the images of this film and then to write down a descriptive summary of what he sees there, the taller the description , and the more detailed the summary , the easier it is to elaborate it into the screenplay props (34).

Similarly, Hugh Braddely points out that:

The treatment must be sufficiently detailed to indicate the method of presentation and style of the film. “Will it have spoken dialogue, or commentary or both? Will it indicate where music can be used as an important ingredient in its own right? Will the subject be presented factually, impressionistically, or will it be dramatized? Will the mood be serious or light-hearted and how will the film be? (13).

Reflecting on Wolf and Braddeley’s accounts above, one may likely compare the treatment script with the architect’s building plan. Filmmaking is very much like building a house and the script is like the architect’s blue –print, the drawings that give him an impression of what his intended finished building would look like. Once the idea has been given shape and substance, it is broken down into its component parts. These parts are individually tested and developed and finally reassembled into a finished product. A good treatment should task the scriptwriter to be imaginative without deviating from the truth. Visualization of a treatment script /scriptwriting is product of sound imagination which includes dramatic actions that would attract and hold people’s attention by putting life into inanimate visuals. When a writer does a story from a human angle, it brings the story closer to the viewer. Human angle stories do easily excite emotions and make serious impact on the audience. There are instances whereby it may be apparent that a script cannot be fully developed prior to shooting. It may only be possible to shoot a disaster, riot or any calamity and structure a narration script there after to accompany the visuals. Wildlife documentary film making is one of such subjects that may not necessarily follow the laid down pre-production

approach to making a documentary. Michael Hughes laments that wildlife photography is often the most difficult treatment to outline as much of it may be unscripted:

A documentary on wildlife may be totally unscripted until shooting is done and a story comes out of the footage. A documentary on the life of Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, would be tightly scripted before the cameras roll..... we could dress up some actors in costumes of the period, give them lines to speak (which may never have actually been spoken but help to tell a historical story), build a set based on what we know of Alex Bell's laboratory, and shoot a dramatic segment or two. Or perhaps, the whole documentary might be shot in the dramatic style (111-113).

Herbert Zettl postulates that:

Documentaries or documentary type shows are frequently fully scripted. Because a documentary is intended to record an event rather than reconstruct one, scripts are often written after the production. Documentary scripts, therefore guide the post production phase, rather than actual production. The scripts will often indicate the voice-over segments by the off-camera narrator (436).

Every type of documentary has its demands regarding the method of script to be used. While documentaries dealing with the unpredictable such as wildlife may not have a detailed script prior to the shoot, the story can be written and structured normatively during the post production process.

Commentary / Narration

Another area that deserves serious attention in documentary filmmaking is writing the commentary which is over-writing when too many words are used to describe a picture. It is often said that the most effective

commentary is that which is barely noticed or hardly aware of by the viewer. The picture should be so absorbing that the viewer pays his whole attention and is vaguely aware of the exact words of the narration that are spoken. The viewer is busy at every second of the film as his primary attention is absorbed in the visual content. This sample script illustrates the point.

VIDEO

FADE IN.

EXT. MINING POND – DAY.

An abandoned mining pond surrounded by a green vegetable farm.

Gyang 55 in work clothes and his son DAVOU 15 are fishing by the pond

ANGLE ON GYANG/DAVOU

Father and son patiently wait as Gyang notices a bite on his hook

DAVOU'S POV

Gyang delightedly reels his line struggling with a big fish

CUT TO:

Davou watches his father with great delight.

CUT TO:

Gyang brings out the fish from the water and drops it in a basket.

AUDIO

(Natural sound of birds Chirping/
atmospheric sound

NARRATOR

Mining Ponds on the Jos Plateau were seen as death traps in the past.

Today, these provide a source of livelihood for many people.

Fishing is fast becoming a way of life

what a lovely catch!

A good meal for the family.

Agreeably some narration is necessary in some cases just as a caption is written to explain a newspaper photo. Documentary films are always associated with narration or commentary which provides the viewers with additional factual information accompanying the visuals. Commentary

writing should be stripped down, terse, economically written and spoken in note form rather than in long complex sentences and paragraphs. After all, we see the picture and understand what is happening. The writer's commentary should contain only what is not apparent on the screen. In his treatise on a better understanding of the film medium Sadiq Balewa opines that "filmmaking as a craft is essentially the ability to tell a visual story by combining visual image and sound; it is therefore fundamental to understand the difference of showing as opposed to saying" (114).

The commentary can explain in few words not necessarily in sentences but a simple word or phrase can expound the significance of the happening. The scriptwriter should ensure that:

- a) Sentences are as short as possible
- b) The length of sentences should vary so that all the sentences are not of the same duration.
- c) Not all sentences require the formal structure with subject + verb + object. The use of present, active voice is encouraged as it is most effective in changing or eliciting a response or reaction.
- d) Where a technical word must be used, there is need to breakdown the word with an explanation e.g.
Onchosochiasis = River Blindness
Incubation = the time an action takes to hatch or evolve
Brucellosis = Bovine (Cow) abortion
- e) Be more explanatory than reportorial. Do not describe what is seen on the screen, e.g. "the masquerade is dancing on its head", Let the picture tell the story. You should rather say why the masquerade is dancing on its head.
- f) The sound track must have a "breathing space", where there is free play for sound effects, music or even silence on the track without any voice will suffice. The mind and the eye of the viewer need such "breathing space" in order to digest and consolidate the picture information from time to time.

Gorham Kindem and Robert B. Mushburger stress the fact that:

A nonfiction scriptwriter should use simple sentences and action verbs. Words should be particular rather than

general, concrete, and specific rather than abstract and indefinite. Narration should be factual and informative, directing the viewer's attention to specific details or enhancing the mood and atmosphere by using adjectives that create a more vivid and memorable experience (63).

The significance of the commentary or narration therefore is to add relevant information to the picture on the screen. Commentary should also be used to classify some visual relationship that require verbal interpretation as well as relate what the viewer is looking at to what he has already seen. Narration should clarify images and provide important additional information rather than redundantly describing what sound and images say. Narration should increase or hold back the tempo of the film and in some cases, direct the viewer's attention to what action to take as a result of seeing the documentary film.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have established the fact that the script is a blueprint from which a film is made. To this effect, conscious efforts have been made to analyze the necessary steps to take and structure a script for different types of documentary films as a contribution to the genre's scholarship. Scriptwriting demands visual thinking. Scriptwriters are aware of the full creative potential of moving images and sound. Preparation for scripting includes performing a thorough research on the project so as to write a good treatment which provides an outline that would serve as a guide for future writing. This paper puts a lot of emphasis on research because it is the bedrock of every documentary which requires factual information. The structure of any documentary varies especially when dealing with fiction and non-fiction materials which may require dramatization in some sequences. What matters here most is the factual reproduction of an event to drive home the message of truth. The need for writing a concise commentary is highly recommended as scriptwriters make use of expository and rhetorical structures to convey information and to make persuasive appeals to an audience.

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