10

VISUAL EVIDENCE

Communicating with an audience through an existential, visual medium is far different from communicating in a face-to-face or voice-to-voice situation. Audiences have the perverse habit of assuming that the way they think you are communicating is the way that you intended to communicate. As far as they are concerned, the message they get is the only message there is. And you have no opportunity to defend yourself—to revise, clarify, or explain what you actually meant.

Therefore, it is important to think of the images you shoot as visual evidence. It is not enough that you can argue the case for what your images mean. You'll never get the chance. The only real test is whether the images can stand on their own and argue the case themselves.

For instance, in a documentary about a protest march, there was a shot of a cold-looking police officer standing by a police barrier. Behind him was a completely empty street. The narrator said, "Twenty thousand people took to the street in protest . . ." But the visual evidence said *nobody was there.* Imagine if the voice had come from an interview rather than from the narrator. The use of this shot would have suggested to the audience that the person in the interview was not telling the truth.

This, for me, is the essential difference between visual evidence and B-roll. B-roll merely illustrates what is being said, while visual evidence works to tell your story in visual images. Silent films were great on visual evidence, because that's all they had. Go back and get a look at some of the classics, run at the proper speed. Films of the silent era were shot

and projected at sixteen frames per second. Following the silent era, they were often played back on sound film projectors at twenty-four frames per second, which caused everyone to walk funny and bounce around sort of herky-jerky. Fortunately, silent films released on DVD play at the right speed, giving you the opportunity to see how visual evidence communicates.

A perfect example of visual evidence is a beautiful short film, *89mm from Europe*, which won an International Documentary Association award some time ago. The film shows how trains arriving at the border between Poland and the former Soviet Union must have all their wheels changed to proceed because of an 89mm difference in the width of the rails. Shot like a silent film—although there is voice, natural sound, and music—it is *all* visual evidence.

There Is No Substitute for Good Footage

You have to shoot the best analog of the actual situation that you can manage and then edit the footage into a single, coherent print that will clearly communicate your intentions to the people who will see it.

Advances in film and video technology have given us the ability to record images from reality that would have been impossible just a few years ago.

Cameras attached to telescopes and cameras mounted on satellites look outward into space.

Cameras using fiber optics, cameras mounted on microscopes, and cameras and video repeaters hooked up to electron microscopes, fluoroscopes, and God knows what else, are examining inner space.

Cameras take pictures in the dark using infrared film or light-gathering lenses.

Cameras operating at high speed slow down events that occur too quickly for the eye to follow.

Time-lapse photography speeds up action that occurs over too long a time for the process of change to be noticeable.

In the area of re-creation, models and miniatures are used to abstract significant details from events that are too complex to be observed in full.

Digital computer animation systems create three-dimensional pictures as if a camera were moving around—inside or outside—

structures that do not exist, presenting images of events that never happened.

Therefore, if you can think of an image, you, or someone, can make a picture of it.

Concrete Nouns and Action Verbs

The more concretely you can describe your documentary idea in terms of visual images, the better your chance of communicating it through film or video. Similarly, the more abstract or interpretive your idea is, the more important it becomes to build up evidence for the idea through specific, concrete images.

To be filmed, an image has to be solid, tangible, existential. For instance, there's no problem in filming the image-idea:

The boy runs toward the camera.

Just turn the camera on, yell, "Action!" and shoot what happens.

But it gets trickier with the addition of adjectives. How would you film this image-idea in one shot?

The frightened *boy runs toward the camera.*

Probably you'd try to have the boy act frightened—his face contorted, breathing heavily, looking over his shoulder, bumping into things, and so on. You might also try to film in a situation that helps the audience infer fright from the boy's actions: At night on a dimly lit street. In a dark forest. On a battlefield.

Let's try one more. In one shot, how can you film this image-idea?

The intelligent *boy runs toward the camera.*

You can't.

You need two scenes in sequence. First a scene that establishes the boy's intelligence, and then the shot of the boy running.

You can't film abstractions, such as:

Economics is the dismal science.

Nor can you film the absence of something:

On Tuesday, the mail didn't come.

Yes, of course, you can film two actors talking. One says, "Happy Tuesday, did the mail come?" The other says, "No." You could also put the statement in narration. You just can't shoot a picture of it.

The best you can do, in either case, is to shoot and organize a sequence of concrete events from which you hope the audience will infer your meaning.

But getting it shot is not all there is to making a documentary—not even when you are shooting events as they actually happen in the real world. Because it is not what *you* see happening that counts. It's not even what you aim the camera at that matters. It is the actual scene as it's recorded on film or video that provides the visual evidence for the audience.

Miss Darling and the Scene That Wasn't There

We were working on a documentary about open education in a classroom of third and fourth graders. The teacher was a beautiful young woman, very likable, very photogenic, who got along well with the kids. My crew immediately nicknamed her "Miss Darling."

One of Miss Darling's strong points as a teacher was that she related well to the boys in her class. Fourth-grade boys can be difficult, and some teachers have trouble with this. So I wanted to show what happened in Miss Darling's classroom.

We filmed a group of boys playing with dinosaurs in a diorama they had made until we used up the film in the camera. While Jack Behr, my camera operator on that film, reloaded the camera with a fresh 400-foot magazine, I looked around for another bit of behavior to shoot. In a quiet place, away from the other children, a husky ten-year-old boy in a football jersey was sitting with Miss Darling, learning to knit.

I liked the look of the scene and motioned to Jack and the soundman to move in and shoot. At first, I didn't have much more in mind for the scene than a few shots of a young, would-be football player and an attractive teacher, sitting together and knitting. But as we started to shoot, I began to realize that they were carrying on a conversation in low

voices. From where I was standing I couldn't hear what they were saying, but the scene was so poignant—the boy looking up with wide, trusting eyes, the teacher bent toward him with a tender look on her face, the quiet conversation—that I whispered to Jack, "I don't know what's going on, but I like it. Shoot the whole magazine."

I was convinced that we were capturing an intimate and personal moment in the relationship between a teacher and her student. It would serve as a shining example for teachers everywhere that (1) the classroom won't go to hell if you spend some quiet time with one student; and (2) boys, even rough-and-tumble boys in jock sweatshirts, can be interested in more than sports and all-male activities. Beyond that, it was such a charming scene that I was convinced it would enhance the film and please the audience. In my mind, I made space for as much as five minutes of this scene in the twenty-five-minute running length of the finished film.

Unfortunately, I neglected to tell any of this to Jack while he was shooting. He had started out concentrating on close-ups of the teacher and the boy and of their hands as they were knitting. From his point of view, through the viewfinder of the camera, he was too close to them to see what I felt was going on. As a result, the footage consisted of a set of related close-ups and two-shots that covered the process of learning to knit far more extensively than was needed, but barely hinted at the deeper, more personal sharing that I thought had been there. I spent three weeks trying to edit that footage to show what I wanted, and then gave up in defeat. No matter what had actually happened in that classroom during the eleven minutes we were filming, what we had on film was a rather prosaic sequence of a boy and his teacher knitting.

And that's all.

I remain convinced that the tender, almost loving, moment between Miss Darling and the boy actually occurred in the way I witnessed it, but there was no way I could use the footage we had shot to communicate to an audience what I had seen and felt. Even describing it in narration wouldn't do. The evidence simply was not in the footage.

A Great Opening Scene

Later, Jack found and photographed a scene so powerful that we used it as the opening shot to represent the theme of the documentary.

We were in the playground of a nursery school. The children had been tie-dyeing T-shirts, and one five-year-old boy was trying to hang his on a low clothesline to dry. He had the T-shirt in one hand and a clothespin in the other, with the clothesline bouncing up and down in front of him. The boy knew what he wanted to do. But he lacked the experience to hold the clothesline steady, drape the T-shirt over it, and secure it with the clothespin. He experimented with several different approaches, but always seemed to need one more hand than he had to complete the job. The more he tried, the more frustrated he became. This was such a clear example of the difference between knowing about something and having the skill and experience to do it, that we used the entire two minutes, uncut, as the opening scene of the film.

No audience has ever misunderstood that scene. At first they laugh at the child's difficulty, but after about thirty seconds, a large part of the audience is leaning forward as if to help him. The scene is so visually compelling that it serves as a defining moment that sets the audience on the right track to understand the rest of the movie.

That's visual evidence.

Seeing What Is There

Being able to see what you have actually recorded can be tough, even for an experienced professional. I wanted the footage of Miss Darling and the boy to be usable so badly that I worked at trying to edit it long past the point where I should have admitted to myself that the evidence simply wasn't there.

And for the person who is new to documentary, learning to see what is there can be especially hard. Most of our experience in looking at films and videos, from grade school on, has been in interpreting them. And I take the word *interpreting* quite literally to mean translating from visual imagery to some form of verbal response.

For example, I was working with a graduate class in the use of visual communication in education. I showed them *The Birth of Aphrodite*, a short, somewhat abstract and artistic film about the myth of Aphrodite rising from the sea. Then I asked, "What did you see?"

At first their responses were either generalities about beauty, art, mythology, and the human condition, or had to do with creative writing, the classics, and how to use film in the classroom.

"Yes," I said, "but what did you *see*? What is in the film? What happened within the frame? What was the first shot? What was the next shot?"

With a great deal of difficulty, and with everyone contributing, the students slowly were able to start re-creating and describing from memory the sequence of shots that made up the film.

As they worked on it, they got better. When they came to the last few shots, where we see the naked Aphrodite dancing in the moonlight at the edge of the sea, several people remembered that the "just-born" goddess had the white outline of a swimsuit on her otherwise beautifully tanned body.

We can only speculate as to whether the filmmakers noticed that flaw when they were putting the film together. Perhaps they did, and thought they could get away with it. They almost did. Or perhaps they didn't see it at all. It takes time, training, and experience to look at your own work and see it for what it is.

Behavior Is Visual Evidence

Films of behavior have to be made up of visual evidence, because no one today is willing to settle for an illustrated lecture. For instance, *The War Room* shows the behavior of people working on the 1992 Clinton campaign. There are no interviews. There is no narration. *It's all visual evidence.* I love this kind of documentary. I wish there were more of them.

Reading People

Making documentaries—and to me that usually means filming the behavior of people—gets you involved in trying to capture pieces of a process on film or video. People are seen in the middle of the process, between their history and their hopes. The documentarian can choose to trap them in roles—the manager at his desk, the housewife at the supermarket—or to explore them more fully as individuals.

It's not simply a matter of getting a lot of background footage of these people in other situations. That's the solution most often proposed by film students when they sense a caricature in the footage rather than a portrait. "If I could only see her at breakfast, or playing with her children," they say, "then I'd understand her better."

Could be. And I'm not opposed to fleshing out a portrait with anything you can get that works—if you've got the time and space in your film. But a cardboard background of a cardboard person will simply lend cardboard detail to the caricature.

When the visual evidence is well realized, however, you can get a sense of the situation in a flash. The fact is that we are all skilled at reading people. We attend not only to what is said but to the way it is said and the nonverbal behavior occurring in the situation.

Even though a documentary is not the same as face-to-face interaction, it is similar when we show a person talking with an interviewer or speaking directly to the audience. The difference is that there is no feedback channel for the audience to test their impressions of the person. They can't say, "You frowned when you said that. Are you angry about it?" What they see is all they've got. And that makes it all the more important for us, as documentarians, to record and show as accurately as we can the visual evidence in the scene.

Remember to shoot people doing what they do, even if you're mainly interested in what they have to say. Plan the location so that it becomes a part of the evidence of the scene. If you're filming an expert on juvenile delinquency who is proposing alternatives to putting adolescents in adult prisons, film her at the prison rather than in her office. You'll have the visual evidence that says this woman is talking about concrete reality, not just some theory she's concocted.

Words and Actions

Remembering that what is said and what is done should both be considered behavior, what happens when people's actions seem to contradict the words they are saying?

Here's a situation from a video of a counselor working with a husband and wife whose marriage was in trouble: If you simply had a transcript or an audio recording of the words being spoken, you could easily come away with the feeling that while all was not right with the marriage, at least the couple was trying. But if you looked carefully at the body posture and behavior of the husband and wife—with or without sound—you couldn't escape a quite different conclusion. The wife was eager to please the marriage counselor, trying to put a good face on things, quick to cooperate. The husband said little and did nothing.

At one point the counselor asked them to turn their chairs to face each other and talk to one another about their problems instead of talking to him. The wife immediately moved her chair. The husband didn't budge. He sat slumped down, hands in pockets, present—but not there. It was clear from the visual evidence of their behavior that she was living on hope, desperately clinging to the marriage, while he was already gone.

Filming Visual Evidence Takes Preparation

Making a documentary with visual evidence requires the filmmaker to go out and find something happening in front of the camera that tells the story to the audience far better than any interview with an expert. And that depends on the filmmaker being prepared to find the visual evidence, or to recognize it when it happens. You have to plan for filming in situations and at locations likely to provide useful visual evidence, and you must also be prepared to recognize visual evidence when it occurs, even when it doesn't show up in the way you might have expected.

A critical part of the preparation for any documentary project should be to ask yourself what you can show your audience that will help them to understand the subject. What can you show that will catch their attention? What can you show that will make them want to know more?

I regularly receive e-mails from people who want to make a documentary on some subject, but are having a hard time figuring out what to film as visual evidence and wonder if I can help. The e-mail is almost always accompanied with some statement about the people the filmmaker has lined up to give interviews. Which to me means the person is thinking about the project, which is good, but hasn't distinguished between basic research and principal photography.

One of the things you should do is to ask your interview subjects, "What can I film that will show an audience what we are talking about?" They know. They'll tell you.

Another would be to imagine you have to shoot with a silent camera. What could you film that would show the story of the documentary to your audience? What would make them say, "Wow!"?

I'll give you a hint: It isn't an interview with an academic expert.

In Sol Worth's documentary film class, when we would talk about our film ideas—and these were often pretty strange, esoteric, not very visual ideas; we were graduate students, after all—Sol would ask, "OK, how are you going to show that?" And we would kind of flail around until we finally thought up some sequence of images that we thought might convey the idea we were talking about.

Sol would listen, and if we had come up with anything that someone might conceivably record on film and edit into a communicative sequence, he'd say, "Good. That's good."

And just as we were going, "Phew, got away with that OK," Sol would ask, "How else could you show it?"

It was a way of tuning us to look for images to tell the story. And it was also a way of reminding us that even if we didn't get the perfect picture—the one in our imagination—we should be on the lookout to find something else that might work.

Quite often, the images we found were far better than the ones we had thought up.

Visual Evidence Is Not the Same as B-roll

Some filmmakers might argue that what I call "visual evidence" is the same as what they call "B-roll," but most of the time it's not. For instance, suppose they were filming my documentary idea about short WALK lights and cars that turn on red without stopping so pedestrians can't cross even when the WALK light is on. If they've shot some good visual evidence, they won't say, "I've got great *B-roll* of cars turning right on red without stopping." They'll say, "I've got some great *shots* of cars that don't stop before turning right on red. One almost hit a pregnant woman." Because they really think of B-roll as cover footage, just as I do, and they know their "great shot" is visual evidence.

Much more about B-roll in the next chapter.

Gathering Evidence

It's not enough to know what you want to shoot. It's not even enough to know what really is happening in the situation you shot. You have to have the evidence on film or video.

This has two important implications for the documentarian: First, during shooting, it's important to keep firmly in mind that the documentary is

going to be edited in order to organize it to communicate with an audience. And second, during editing, it's necessary to forget, for a while, what you intended to shoot and look at what you've actually recorded.

Editing Visual Evidence

Obviously, you can't show everything you've shot. In editing, you abstract visual evidence that will serve as an accurate analog of the events that were filmed. And you organize it into a statement that will communicate to your audience—honestly, directly, and forcefully—what you know about the event.

Clearly, you have to be careful, in editing, not to distort the evidence. And that can be hard. You were there when the footage was shot. You know everything that happened. It takes only a little bit of the footage to spark your memory of the entire event. But your audience wasn't there. So the footage you choose for the scene has to stand as an accurate analog for everything you remember.

Cutting the Part Where Nothing Happens

Suppose the marriage-counseling sequence had been edited into a scene in a documentary, ending with the marriage counselor giving a summary of the case. And suppose, as so often happens, it had been edited to keep what was being said flowing smoothly. The long pauses where the husband said nothing might be cut out because the editor found them uninteresting. And the scene in which the husband didn't move his chair might be eliminated because nothing's happening. The visual evidence would have been altered so that it seemed to support the verbal statements that everything was going to be OK.

Then it would unquestionably come as a shock to the audience for the marriage counselor to state—as he actually did to me—that there was very little chance of this marriage lasting, and that a divorce might be the best solution for both parties.

Good Mother—Bad Mother

Here's a problem that came up in one of my documentaries. I had separate sequences of two mothers and their two-year-old children working and playing together. Let's call one the Bad Mother. Her own behavior

was pretty neurotic, and she tended to see only her little boy's faults, never his good points. She often couldn't understand what he was doing or make sense out of what he said.

The other was clearly a Good Mother. She talked freely with her daughter, paid attention to her, and encouraged her to do things on her own. She was also a person who liked everything clean and neat. I filmed her daughter helping her mix the batter for a cake.

In editing the film, I put the two mother and child sequences back to back, the Bad Mother first. Each sequence ran about four and a half minutes, cut down from nearly two hours of original footage.

In the sequence with the Bad Mother, I had focused on the little boy. It was his behavior I was interested in. I had sidestepped and cut around the mother's neurotic outbursts as much as possible, because I wanted the audience to watch the behavior of the boy and not waste time psychoanalyzing his mother.

In the Good Mother sequence I was especially interested in one point, where the daughter is handing eggs to her mother to crack and put into the mixing bowl. Then the daughter tries to crack an egg herself. The mother exclaims, "No! Please, dear! Let me do that." But the little girl persists, and finally does crack one egg. I had been concentrating on the talk between the two, leaving in as much as possible.

When I ran the two sequences, I realized I had made a big mistake. I had included almost all of the footage in which the Good Mother clucked about the mess, worried about neatness, and said "Don't . . ." to her daughter—a total of about a minute out of the forty-five minutes of original footage.

As a result, while I had neutralized the Bad Mother, I had inadvertently ended up making the Good Mother look pretty bad. Enough that, by the time the daughter tries to break an egg on her own, an audience was quite likely to miss the point that the mother could have stopped her, but didn't. I was afraid they might see it instead as just one more case of a fussy mother worrying about the mess. So I reedited.

In the final version, the concern of the Good Mother for neatness is shown, but it doesn't overpower the important behavior of the child. And it doesn't turn a really good mother into a villain. The visual evidence of the sequence is in balance with what actually happened.

When Pictures Contradict What Is Said

When I talk about visual evidence, I'm concerned primarily with the images that are an integral part of your documentary. Every documentarian knows he's got something going if he has evidence on film or video that contradicts what the speaker says. Suppose you're doing a documentary on industrial waste. The president of a chemical company says in an interview on camera that his company is not polluting the river. But you've got footage that shows raw chemicals being discharged from his plant directly into the river. You're going to use that footage, along with the company president's statement, to show that either he is lying or he doesn't know what he is talking about. That's an obvious situation and needs no comment.

Contradiction in Narration

But what happens when the images and the narration are in conflict, as in the protest march film showing an empty street while the narration talked about a huge crowd? These elements are under the control of the documentarian, and the effect is to put image and sound in contradiction. Visual evidence shows what the film is about. When the images show an empty street, then that's what the film is about no matter what the narration says.

Lying by Exception

Or let's take this situation from a public relations film made to recruit students for a famous university. Many of the strong points of the school are brought out in the film. But two scenes stick in my memory. The university is located in a cold northern city with a long, bitter winter. But there are no shots of cold, snow, and wind in the film. None. There is, however, a rather idyllic sequence of students sunbathing and swimming at a lake which almost certainly was shot during summer school, not during the regular academic year. The narration explains that the students enjoy their outings at the lake, and adds, almost as an afterthought, "Of course, it's not always like this. It can get pretty cold in winter."

In a sequence on the life of a student, the filmmakers chose to shoot an attractive female graduate student living with two other young

women in an expensive townhouse close to the campus. Again the disclaimer in narration, "Of course, not all students live like this," followed by a reference to the availability of student dormitories for most undergraduates—although these are never shown.

Such disclaimers in narration mean next to nothing. The visual evidence is that if you go to that university, you'll live in an expensive townhouse and enjoy sunny afternoons at the lake.

Because that is what is shown.

Misrepresentation

A documentarian was doing a social documentary on teenagers. He had done a highly successful film about the college protest movement and wanted to look at younger people of high school age to see if he could find the roots of protest in a suburb that sent most of its children to college.

The opening scene of the film shows a lot of sixteen-year-olds, dressed up, looking very somber. The boys look sad; the girls seem on the verge of tears. I think this was used without comment as the title background. Although nothing is said, certainly the visual evidence of the footage is that being a teenager at this place at this time is a pretty serious thing.

After the film was shown on TV, the charge was made by residents of the town that this scene had been filmed at the funeral of a classmate. I don't know whether that's true or not. My point is, if a documentarian takes a scene like this out of context and uses it as evidence to give a false impression, that's lying on film.

Sure it's real; it really happened. But it's not the truth in the visual argument of the documentary.

Similarly, taking statements made by one person, but at two different times and two different locations for two different purposes, and putting them together as if they were one statement made at one time for one purpose is at least misrepresentation and probably lying. More on this in chapter 14.

Unreal Images

The modern documentarian has available a number of tools that simply did not exist a few years ago. Or even if they did exist, they were too expensive to use in a documentary. But today, when it's an easy thing to

rearrange the location of the pyramids by computer, digital effects and computer animation make it possible to create images of *anything*.

I think this is wonderful, and the documentarian has every right to make use of these images, as long as they are used honestly. That means labeling made-up images as simulations. It means not using digitally enhanced images as if they had been recorded in an actual situation.

Fiction Footage

I've already mentioned documentarians using footage from fiction films to illustrate historical documentaries. I have no problem with this *as long as the audience knows what they're looking at*. But if scenes are taken from fiction and used as if they were actuality footage, so that the audience is led to believe that what they are witnessing really happened, then the documentarian has left the truth behind in order to serve some other purpose, such as keeping the story interesting. Unfortunately, that's what docudrama does, and why it is fiction based on fact and not documentary.

Reenactment

Reenactment has been a technique of documentary from its earliest days. It can be an extremely effective way of showing an event for which no footage exists. In reenactment as with any other footage not documenting real events, the documentarian must be honest and accurate. It might make a great dramatic scene to show Thomas Jefferson having a lover's quarrel with Sally Hemings, but it wouldn't be honest.*

If you are going to dress people up in costumes and give them the tools and weapons from an earlier time, be sure what you show is correct for the period.

*As I write this the Jefferson-Hemings issue still has not been completely resolved by historians and may never be.