

The Art of Nonfiction Movie Making

Published by Praeger from the collections of ABC-CLIO 2012

By Jeffrey Friedman, Robert Epstein and Sharon Wood

By Cynthia Close, published in Documentary magazine, 2012

Great filmmakers don't necessarily make for great authors or teachers of their craft, but in the case of *The Art of Nonfiction Movie Making*, Jeffrey Friedman, Robert Epstein and Sharon Wood manage to bring all their expertise as award winning filmmakers and weave it, seamlessly, into this excellent and practical guide to documentary making. If you were unaware of their pioneering contributions to gay identity and history through films starting with Academy Award winning *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984) moving on to; *Common Threads: Stories From the Quilt* (1989), then the groundbreaking study of gay stereotypes in Hollywood movies, *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), followed five years later by the deeply unsettling Sundance award winning *Paragraph 175*, by the books conclusion, you will feel as though you have experienced all the ups and downs in this complex process of moving making right alongside some of the best in the business.

The filmmakers decision to include in the book their more experimental 2010 film *Howl*, honoring the 50th anniversary of the publication of Allen Ginsberg's poem of the same name, allowed them to, as stated by Epstein; "transition from documentary to scripted narrative using a lot of documentary techniques". This was a great way to segue from all the traditional aspects of doc filmmaking up to the fusion of genres, often practiced by the next generation of filmmakers (those most likely to read this book) that we are seeing more of every day.

The hardcover version that I was lucky enough to review was well designed following what I consider the most logical structure for a book conceived of as a "How To" manual for making non-fiction films. Organized to mimic the actual step by step process in bringing a film to life permits the information to build organically and logically from Part One: Development, to Part Two: Preproduction, to Part Three: Production and wrapping it all up in Part Four: Postproduction which also includes launching your film and all the vagaries inherent in distribution today. Having taught many workshops on the business of documentary film I have found this way of presenting my material most effective. I was also pleased to see when photographs were used, they were clear, good quality reproductions, an area surprisingly neglected in most other books I've reviewed covering filmmaking techniques.

There are plenty of books on the mechanics of filmmaking but as evidenced immediately in Chapter One these author/filmmakers explore, in depth, the answers to some frequently ignored questions such as: "Where do Documentary ideas come from?" In the section titled "The Idea" we are told that "Documentaries emerge from the world around us" which may seem obvious, but what helps us to deal with this rather broad notion, we are offered up the chance to follow the filmmakers when in 1986 they happened to be in Washington DC to witness the first unfolding of the

NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. When there, a mentor and filmmaker friend, Peter Adair said, “Someone should make a movie about this.” Which was all that it took to set Friedman and Epstein on their journey that resulted in the feature length doc, *Common Threads: Stories From the Quilt*. For me, this section on dealing with the genesis, quality (What makes a good idea for a documentary?) and fundability of an idea, as well as the “worthiness” of the idea is perhaps the most valuable part of the whole book. So many potential filmmakers never get past the notion of “I want to make a movie about...” without ever asking themselves why and figuring out if there may or may not be an audience for such a film, only to find out at the end, after months and sometimes years of effort and money, that the idea was simply not worth spending their energy and time on.

In each section the filmmakers use their own work as valuable case studies to either prove their points when things went as planned, or, more often, how they managed to deal with adversity, not give up, and find success at the end. The book is full of sage advice such as “A very large part of producing and making films in general is talking people into things – convincing your subjects, your funders and your crew that you are trustworthy and that your project is worthwhile”, so if you have difficulty in the art of persuasion, you should perhaps rethink your career, or work with a partner who does possess those skills.

A thread that runs through the book is the necessity for your absolute commitment to making your film, which as the authors point out “comes through when you pitch it to funders and collaborators, and keeps you going during hard times, as well as a willingness to adapt your concept to the circumstances in which you find yourself.” Another strength of the book is in giving you a clear path to follow to make the transitions from one stage of the process to the next. Once you have convinced yourself that the idea “has legs” then the next thing is to gain entry into the world that your subject occupies, whether it’s an historical event or a situation that unfolds as you film it. The best way to do this is through thorough research, “read everything, talk to everyone (within reason)”. One thing that is pointed out in this chapter is the fact that different types of films call for different approaches to research. This is an aspect of the filmmaking process that I had not considered before. I will certainly include it in any future workshops that I may teach. Rights and licenses are also covered in this section under research, and sample contracts such as On Camera Release forms and Deal Memos are included in the Appendix.

Writing for film, story-telling strategies, defining style, developing proposals and budgets are included in depth along with actual, real world, successful examples. At the end of each chapter there is a comprehensive conclusion, a summing-up in a few neat paragraphs what has been covered, reinforcing the basic concepts that you discovered by reading the case studies, and pithy advice that went before. This book is the best example I’ve seen of truly combining the “Art” part of filmmaking with the more pedestrian “How To” part. While both are important, the authors leave us with the thought that commitment trumps all, and that if “commitment is there, with

perseverance, blind faith, commitment to craft, and direct, honest storytelling, you can make your dream a reality.”

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