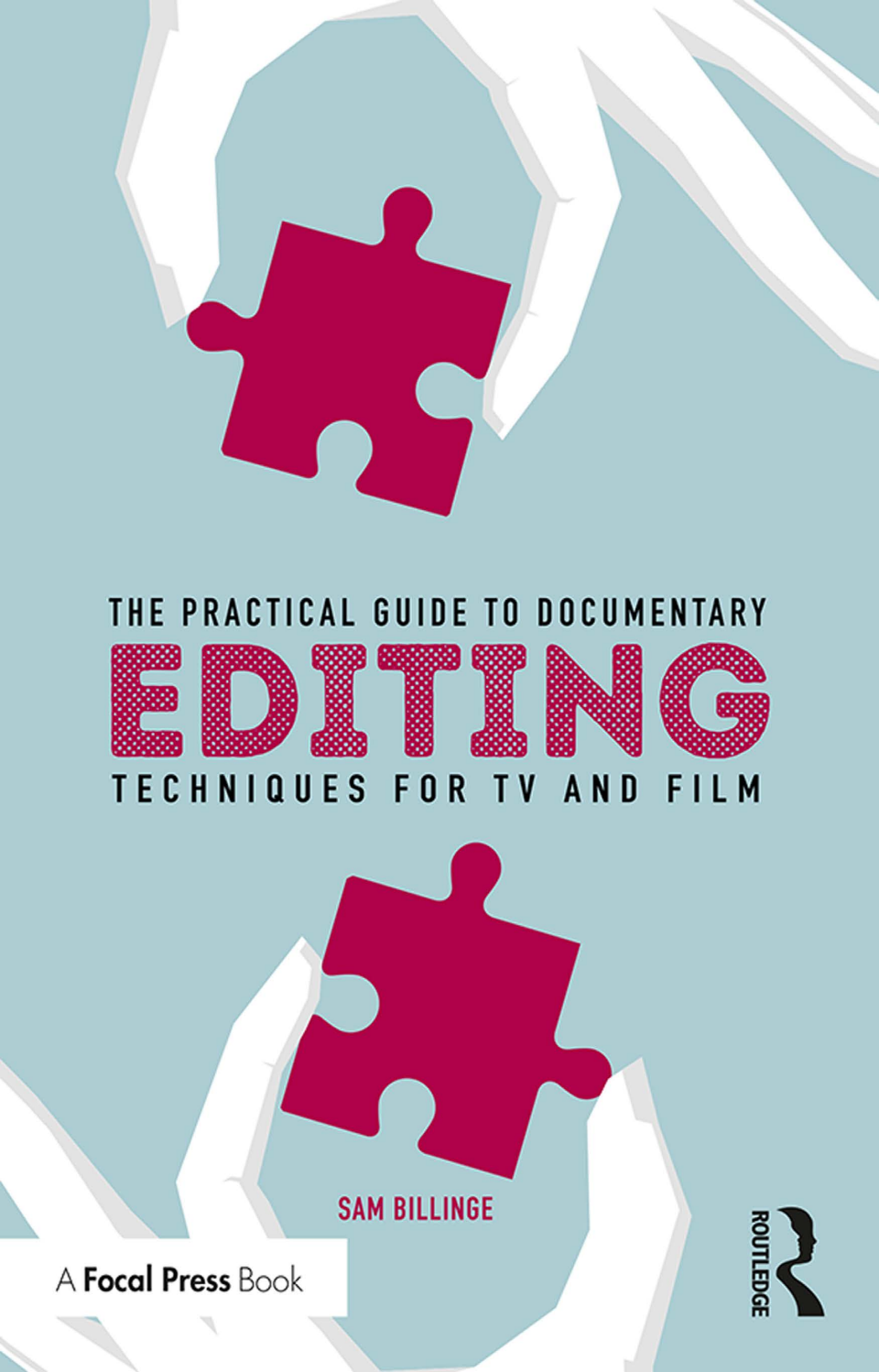
THE PRACTICAL GUIDE TO DOCUMENTARY
EDITING
TECHNIQUES FOR TV AND FILM
SAM BILLINGE
A Focal Press Book
ROUTLEDGE

THE PRACTICAL GUIDE TO DOCUMENTARY EDITING

The Practical Guide to Documentary Editing sets out the techniques, the systems and the craft required to edit compelling professional documentary television and film. Working stage by stage through the postproduction process, author Sam Billinge explores project organisation, assembling rushes, sequence editing, story structure, music and sound design and the defining relationship between editor and director.

Written by a working documentary editor with over a decade's experience cutting films for major British and international broadcasters, *The Practical Guide to Documentary Editing* offers a unique introduction to the craft of documentary editing, and provides working and aspiring filmmakers with the tools to master the art.

Sam Billinge is a documentary editor with more than a decade's worth of experience editing prime-time documentaries for British and international television.

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THE PRACTICAL GUIDE TO DOCUMENTARY EDITING

Techniques for TV & Film

SAM BILLINGE, GBFTE

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For my beautiful girls
Louise, Xanthe & Cora

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements x

Introduction 1
Preface 4
The Power of Documentary 6
Who Are Film Editors and What Do They Do? 8

1. The Fundamentals 11
   Storytelling 1.0 11
   Editing 1.0 17

2. Starting to Edit 41
   Understanding the Task Ahead 41
   Deciding What to Cut First 43
   Appraising a New Scene 45
   Structuring a New Scene 48
   Ordering Interview Clips 50
   Trimming Interviews 53
   Working With Actuality 55
   Working With Voiceover 56
   Deciding Where Voiceover Is Needed 61
   Voiceover Writing Basics 64
   Managing a Voiceover Recording 71

3. Picture Editing 77
Visual Storytelling 77
The Kuleshov Effect 78
Types of Picture Sequence 80
Types of Shot 81
Structuring a Picture Sequence 88
Sequencing Shots 94
A Practical Method for Building a Sequence 98
The Art of the Cut 99
What Makes a Good Cut? 100
What Shots Cut Well Together? 110
Judging Pacing and the Rhythm of Sequences 112
Enhancing the Visual Style of a Sequence 117
Working With Cutaways 121
Working With Stock Footage 124
Working With Still Images 127

4. Sound Editing 130
Working With Sound Design and Music 130
Understanding Sound 132
Working With Music 138
Why We Use Music in Filmmaking 139
Some Good Ways to Use Music 141
A Practical Method for Working With Music 148
Auditioning Music 149
Composed, Library or Commercial Music? 151

5. Story Structure 156
Ordering and Connecting Scenes 156
Common Documentary Story Structures 157
Working With Shooting Scripts and Paper Edits 162
Choosing a Running Order 164
Scene Cards 166
Working to a Deadline 169
Making Improvements 172
Viewing a Film for the First Time 173

Working to a Final Duration 182
Reaching Picture Lock 187

The Cutting Room Relationship 190
Workflow Summary 198
Conclusion 204
Glossary 207
Index 231

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INTRODUCTION

I was thirteen when I discovered skateboarding.

I spent every moment I could cruising the streets of Cambridge, in thrall to a counterculture that I had discovered by watching Californian VHS cassette tapes. The energy of these films, their beautiful pictures and soundtrack inspired me. I decided there and then that I wanted to make my own skateboard videos: a decision that soon led me to discover editing. I spent some years shooting and editing my own skateboard films and then selling the cassette tapes in local shops. I enjoyed all of the stages of production, but I knew immediately that I liked editing the most. For me, editing was the most critical aspect of the production process: the defining practice which gave films their feeling, energy and impact.

Eventually I found myself working as a runner for a television facility in West London. Whilst I had edited some basic films of my own, I lacked the experience and confidence to take editing to the next level. I had a clear idea of the kind of films I wanted to edit next, though I did not yet possess the skills to edit them effectively.

Nonetheless, I was keen to learn and set about reading and watching all I could. However, I was surprised to discover that there was almost nothing available that really explained and guided me through the editing process. There were a few books and videos that touched on aspects of the craft, though they tended to focus more on anecdotal tales rather than offering any

real educational pathway. The most significant advances I made came from my own trial and error, and luckily, a great many hours spent interrogating experienced professional editors.

Once I grasped the basic principles of editing and, later, some of the more advanced practices, I was able to develop my own project frameworks and build up the confidence to find my own personal voice and style. I have spent the years since then editing a diverse range of prime-time television documentaries for large international broadcasters, and I have remained consistently employed as a documentary editor. Over time, I have honed my skills and made them a part of my daily practice, honing them to the point where they are wholly intuitive. Then—suddenly—something rather startling occurred to me.

I realised that many of the skills practised by the expert film editor are treated as rather closely guarded secrets, perhaps because many professionals simply do not want to spread the craft too widely and so encourage competition for themselves. Alternatively, many editors would maintain that editing cannot really be 'taught' at all, arguing that the skill can only be acquired through practical experience and, still more importantly, from basic intuition. I agree, of course, that—as with anything in life—experience is important. However, I also believe that many of the skills required are simply 'knacks' that can be taught and learned with relative ease. For this reason, I suggest that the *real secret* is practice, patience and an unwavering commitment to the task.

As a result, I have written this book to help those who find themselves where I was early in my career: hungry to learn the skills at the heart of documentary editing, yet unsure where to find them. *The Practical Guide to Documentary Editing* draws on everything I have learnt directly through my experience as a professional editor, as well as those aspects of the craft I have learnt through discussion with many other successful (and consistently employed!) documentary filmmakers. I will attempt to explain in simple, practical terms everything I have learnt, every mistake I have made, and every technique that has helped me to improve.

This book provides the reader with a comprehensive overview of the techniques, knowledge and logistical methods essential to the professional documentary editor. It will guide you through the essential steps of project

organisation, selecting shots, ordering sequences, as well as working with sound effects (otherwise referred to as sound design) and music. Equally important, it will describe and help you to understand the nature of the close relationship that exists in the edit suite between the director and editor. It is my hope that, after reading this book and applying its principles through assiduous practice, you will be ready to face any project which comes your way: crafting compelling, cohesive and clear stories from disparate materials, whilst working harmoniously, to time and budget.

While I do not claim to have addressed every issue you are likely to encounter (and therefore to have provided *all* of the answers), I have produced this book with the intention of making it the most complete and comprehensive guide to documentary film editing yet written.

I hope this book will be of value to both the fledgling and the experienced film editor. Since editing is a core skill, I hope it will also be of use to practitioners in other areas of filmmaking—directors for example—not least by making them aware of the 'ingredients' which—properly assembled—make for a successful film; the challenges editors encounter; the decisions they face and the vital contribution they make during both the production and post-production phases of this enthralling and important enterprise.

PREFACE

Documentary is often used as a synonym for a particular visual style—usually hand-held and rough. However, documentary isn't defined solely by how it's photographed. It's much more about storytelling. So much so, that whilst there might only be one visual signature of the documentary genre, there is a whole range of narrative approaches one can take.

For example, observational documentaries typically focus on an aspect of ordinary life and circumstance, whilst presenter-led stories guide the audience through the perspective of an individual authorial voice. Drama documentaries mix real life events with dramatic reconstructions in order to tell their story. Further, documentary covers the whole gamut of human experience and accomplishment from science and the natural world to history and the arts. Documentary earns its name from this unique approach to story and storytelling.

While there are many genres of documentary, readers should know that in the course of this book I have focused primarily on the editing of commercial television documentary, since this form makes comprehensive use of *all* of the editing techniques and skills common to every other type of documentary. However, by extension, many of the practices described here will be of relevance to other genres of editing, including fictional narratives and adverts.

For the sake of brevity, I will sometimes refer to documentary films simply as *films*, since this terminology is common within the industry. In many instances I shall refer to editing as *cutting*. This is also an industry term, which

originates from the days of physically cutting celluloid, prior to the introduction of digital editing; a *cut* being the point in a film where one shot instantaneously changes to another. Lastly, I shall at times refer to the human beings featured in documentary as *characters*, since again, this is an industry term.

I have designed this guide to be independent of any specific software package or tools. Indeed, the principles discussed within the book can be used alongside any editing software of your choice. As a result, I have chosen to exclude any information relating to the technical configuration or setup of the tools, as well as everything directly preceding the editing stage itself.

Most importantly, I have structured this book in a way which best explains and unpacks the many interconnected aspects of documentary film editing. I strongly recommend reading it to the end before beginning to apply this knowledge, as many points discussed later in the book are integral to earlier stages of the editing process. Thereafter, the book can be used as a reference resource and dipped into as and when appropriate.

Finally, I would like to emphasise that there are many ways to approach an editing project. This guide is based on a method that I have developed over many years through my own experience. I have, as far as possible, drawn on my wider experience of the professional community, to give the most appropriate context and clearest perspective on best working practices. Though this book remains necessarily subjective, I hope, at the very least, that my methods will serve as a guide and an inspiration, which you can adapt as required to suit your own personal working practices. Certainly, I have found that my methods have helped me to make good decisions and have consistently produced results which directors respect and the public finds appealing.

Thanks for picking up this book. I hope you enjoy it and profit from it and that it supports you in your pursuit of the art of film editing, which I believe to be one of the most powerful and rewarding contributions to filmmaking.

In setting out the ideas and techniques central to this book, I have tried to be as clear and unambiguous as possible. However, there is always room for improvement: so your thoughts and feedback will be gratefully received. I will endeavour to incorporate them into future editions of the book.

Sam Billinge, 17 August 2016
www.sambillinge.com

THE POWER OF DOCUMENTARY

> "After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in this world."
>
> —Philip Pullman[1]

Documentary storytelling is arguably the most powerful change-creating art form available to us today. The power of documentary lies in its unmatched ability to inform and educate an audience in a manner that is both entertaining and authentic. The results can move people in astonishing ways.

Errol Morris's pursuit of truth in *The Thin Blue Line*[2] led to the reopening of a murder case and Randall Adams's eventual release from jail. Adam Curtis's *The Power of Nightmares*[3] changed the way in which those who watched it perceive the threat of Al-Qaida and challenged the way in which, as a society, we often accept uncritically received opinion.

A great documentary endeavours to convey the *whole* story in all its rich complexity by focusing on the people and actions that have shaped it: gathering, selecting and ordering the information into a thought-provoking yet entertaining package. Even though the recorded material and other elements that make up the documentary have been carefully chosen and arranged during the editing process, the events themselves are not fabricated. When we watch a documentary, we are watching a representation of real life, albeit through the lens of a camera.

This is where the power of documentary really lies, for if we are able to *engage* our audience, connect them to narratives with which they are unfamiliar and allow them to experience both the conflict and resolution such narratives engender, then we are in a privileged position to inspire and enlighten them. More ambitiously, we can help shape the debate and perhaps even improve the world in which we live. Such a position brings, of course, responsibility: not least the responsibility to tell the story appropriately and with integrity of both purpose and technique.

WHO ARE FILM EDITORS AND WHAT DO THEY DO?

> "The person who makes or breaks a film is not the scriptwriter or the director, but the film editor."
>
> —Alistair Cooke[4]

Whilst editing is not the only important contribution to the documentary production process, it is the stage of production where the film can be most radically shaped and, thereby, significantly defined or potentially destroyed. The editor works with footage gathered by the director, making selections and combining these shots, along with other elements, into sequences that ultimately constitute the finished film. The editor's job is both technical and creative: working with images, dialogue, graphics, music, sound effects and other elements to create a compelling and meaningful experience for the audience. The editor is the last person in the filmmaking assembly line and so is the ultimate determinant of what the audience will see in terms of both content and context.

Editing is highly idiosyncratic. The same material given to a different editor is likely to result in an entirely different film. Editing is not, as many industry outsiders might think, a job that simply consists of cutting out 'the bad bits.' In a world which at times seems predominantly left-brain orientated, editing is a remarkable antidote. It is both analytical and system-orientated (left-brained) and creative free-thinking (right-brained).

Almost all documentary films come together in the edit. Some films arrive in the cutting room with only the loosest of scripts and, ever more commonly, in the absence of directors who are still busy shooting the rest of the film. The editor is charged with finding the story within the material, clarifying the information, making selections, then structuring and presenting the story in the most effective way. Even films that arrive in the edit with a robust script often leave transformed, as story ideas evolve during the editing process. It is perhaps not too far-fetched to liken this to the process Michelangelo described in sculpting: finding the finished sculpture already contained within the stone.

However, editors do not usually work alone. Filmmaking is a collaborative art form. Editing is primarily a partnership between two people: the editor and the director. The director will have broadly conceived and shot the film, and then once in the edit, he or she will work with the editor to wrestle the narrative structure from the mass of materials. The director will generally have an interest in the aesthetics of the film, including the picture sequences and choice of music, but it is usually left to the film editor to first scope, appraise and craft the available resources.

As the editor, we do not have to handle all of the storytelling ourselves, though it is essential that we are confident storytellers, capable of spotting story gaps, creating connections and meaningful juxtapositions in narrative information. We must be capable of understanding and even doing much of the director's job in the cutting room so we can step in and assist when required to do so. We must also develop a keen sense of what the film requires in terms of audio/visual approach and design.

Two disciplines are, therefore, central to documentary editing: editorial composition and the crafting of pictures and sound. They will form the basis of this book.

It is worth remembering at the outset that editors can only work with the materials they have at their disposal. As editors, we are often fixing or working around other people's mistakes to make the best of everybody else's contribution to the film and trying to make them look their best. A simple rule, quickly stated and often remembered is: *the less you notice the editor's work, the more successful they have been.*

It is for this reason perhaps that the role of the film editor is often misunderstood and even more often undervalued. Little is known about editing

other than by editors themselves, and very few outside of the industry seem to care much about it. The only people who *really* know what goes on in the cutting room are the editor and the director.

Despite this lack of wider recognition, editing is hugely respected within the industry and rightly recognised as an absolutely critical aspect of film-making, not least because, for the audience viewing the finished work, it is the contribution with the most immediate, visceral and exciting impact. A film is made, but can just as easily be broken, in the edit suite.

Key Point

- The documentary editor's job is primarily based on the mastery of two storytelling skills: editorial composition and the crafting of pictures and sound.

NOTES

1 The Guardian Online, "Sustainable storytelling is a powerful tool that communicates vision". Accessed 19 October, 2016. www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/blog/sustainable-stories-powerful-tool-communicates-vision

2 Errol Morris, *The Thin Blue Line* (Miramax Films/Umbrella Entertainment, 1988).

3 Adam Curtis, *The Power of Nightmares* (BBC, 2004).

4 Alistair Cooke, *Alistair Cooke at the Movies* (Penguin, 2011), "Coalmining in Hollywood—Longevity: Letter from America, BBC, 11 April, 2003".

1

THE FUNDAMENTALS

STORYTELLING 1.0

"The shortest distance between truth and a human being is a story."
—Anthony de Mello[1]

Storytelling is the most powerful and enduring means of communication. It has been fundamental to the development of society as far back as human history can be traced. As individuals too, many of our early learning experiences are likely to have involved stories through the spoken and written word, as well as through creative role-play. Even before we had the ability to articulate our thoughts and feelings in written form, we learned to make sense of the world through stories.

As a result of this early conditioning, it seems that we all have an in-built understanding of story. When we watch a film, it is the story that speaks to us most immediately, and so it follows that it is the story that is the single most important aspect of any film.

In order for a film to be great, it must have a compelling story to tell—and that story must be told in the most effective way possible. As editors, we cannot always choose the stories we are given, but we can help to shape them and thereby influence both their reception and impact. We can help structure and clarify the narrative through the arrangement of events and the careful inclusion and exclusion of content, and we can strengthen its impact through

the imaginative use of pictures, sound and music. We can also regulate the ebb and flow of the story through our choice of pacing and rhythm.

Since the central narrative message is the key to all great documentary making, the editor's primary focus must be first to understand the story in all its depth (what is this film about?) and with all its nuances (what points of view can be brought to it?) and then decide how best to tell it. Every subsequent aspect of editing is built on this foundation.

Establishing the Story Foundations

> "Conflict is to storytelling what sound is to music"
>
> —Robert McKee[2]

Nearly all successful stories, from the earliest folk tales to the latest blockbuster films, appear to share a singular common feature: a narrative arc that begins with a conflict between people or situations and ends in a successful resolution. This 'formula' appears to satisfy some deep-seated human need to find order in disorder, harmony in discord and sense in confusion: a pathway through the woods, as it were, to the beckoning light of home. This desire, to be presented first with contradictions and then with reconciliation determines whether we find stories gripping and/or their conclusions satisfactory. Stories without conflict lack interest whilst conflicts without resolution leave us either disappointed or distressed. It follows then that conflict is the driving force of all good stories and that every story must involve conflict of some kind.

John Yorke, speaking primarily of cinema and theatre, describes this archetypal story form in the following way:

> A protagonist is introduced with a goal, a desire with which the audience can easily sympathize, and then an antagonist is introduced, as an individual or a representative of an opposing force, standing in his or her way. The movie becomes their conflict, and its sequences become the more or less linear escalation of that struggle, the cowboy with the gunfighter, the lovers with parents opposing. . . . This seamless conflict built to a third-act confrontation—the climax—and ended

> with a resolution that fit the mode, death in a tragedy and marriage, most typically, in a comedy.[3]

In documentary, this conflict usually comes between a character (the presenter, interview subject and/or other contributors to the film) and his or her physical or social world, within his or her personal relationships or within himself or herself. Since documentary is a highly visual and linear medium, we tend to focus on external conflict which we can readily see, that is, inter-personal conflict or conflict with the physical or social world.

In *Man on Wire*,[4] high-wire daredevil Philippe Petit (protagonist), hears about the planned construction of the World Trade Center and is seized by the idea of tightrope walking between the two towers (his goal). He plans the stunt for six years, away from the authorities who threaten to derail his plan (forces of antagonism). Philippe experiences many challenges in reaching his goal: how he will gain access to the building, scale his way to the top and get the heavy wire across the two buildings—as well as the various natural forces which threaten the success of the crossing itself (the escalation of the struggle). Despite these challenges, Philippe makes the crossing (the climax) and becomes something of a star, making history in the process (the resolution).

This notion of conflict inspires our journey through the film and stimulates our quest to resolve it. This search for resolution then determines the places we go, what our audience will see and what they will learn. Understanding this conflict takes us through time and eventually on to the finale, where the conflict is resolved, and where we, in turn, reach our conclusion. The journey will make our characters and our audience change the ways in which they see the world.

The path to resolution is rarely singular and never without alternatives: during the production process, and even more so at the start of the edit, there is usually a wide (sometimes bewildering) range of possibilities for the film.

The director is likely to have grappled already with this near infinite number of possibilities and, using both instinct and careful research, will have boiled things down to just a few. He or she will arrive at the edit with a fairly robust, yet broadly untested, idea of the direction in which they would like to take the story. This is where the editor's contribution usually begins.

The editor must help decide the direction in which to take the story from here on, choosing what to include, and crucially, what must be excluded to make the narrative clear and compelling. This can seem a daunting prospect at first. Fortunately, we can break down the decision-making process into a logical series of steps.

- **First ask, what is the film about?**
  We need to understand the nature of our story and the conflict within it. This is what our film is about. We should be able to describe this in a sentence or two. The result is referred to as the *central argument*. Every aspect of the film will hang from and depend upon this argument.

  Understanding our film's central argument at the beginning of the project, and keeping this in mind throughout the edit, will help keep our efforts focused and maintain clarity in our thinking. Every decision we make should be seen through this conceptual 'lens.'
- **Next ask, what are the scenes about?**
  Once we know what this conflict is, we must attempt to understand the various tests and experiences our characters will need to go through to resolve it. Each of these tests will form the basis of our scenes.

  I usually find that each scene tends to work best when it addresses just a single significant aspect of the film's central argument at a time: illustrating one part of the challenge faced by our characters, testing their ability to measure up to that challenge and, ultimately, motivating them to change their stance or understanding. This change makes them stronger, taking them (and the audience, too) from a place of relative ignorance to a position of knowledge. This new-found knowledge provides us with the 'piece of the puzzle' we need to move on to the next step of the journey—the next scene and then the next—incrementally building the wherewithal to resolve the central conflict and, in so doing, allowing protagonist and audience alike to reach a satisfying conclusion.

  This path through the film is often referred to as the *story arc*.

  Having said this, it is clear that the documentary editor cannot always be successful in giving the audience all of the answers. Often a superficially simple story can become more complex and irresolvable as it