Foreword

For me, the making of a documentary film is in some ways the reverse of making a fiction film. With fiction, the idea for the film is transformed into a script by the imagination and work of the writer and/or director, which obviously precedes the shooting of the film. In my documentaries the reverse is true: The film is finished when, after editing, I have found its “script.” If a film of mine works, it does so because the verbal and pictorial elements have been fused into a dramatic structure. This is the result of the compression, condensation, reduction, and analysis that constitute the editing process for me.

Nothing in my films is staged for the camera. During shooting, which takes anywhere from four to twelve weeks, my goal is to accumulate material that interests me in the moment. I have no idea at the time which sequences, shots, and transitions will make it into the final film or what the themes or point of view will be. I generally use about three percent of the material shot. My work as editor, like that of the writer of a fiction film, is to try to figure out what is going on in the sequence I am watching on the editing machine. What is the significance of the words people use, the relevance of tone or changes of tone, pauses, interruptions, verbal associations, the movement of eyes, hands, and legs? Whereas the scriptwriter imagines a script, the documentary film editor, in contrast, has to understand and evaluate already existing sequences; their respective imaginative processes are totally different. The people whose behavior the editor is analyzing exist totally apart from his or her imagination. The sequences in a documentary are not staged but “found” during the process of shooting. Their importance for the film is determined by the editor, who initially evaluates them and then edits them into the form in which they will appear in the final film.

The shape of each sequence is important, but in addition the relationship

of the sequences to each other must make it appear as if no other order were possible. There has to be a rhythm that implies that the final film represents the only possible form for the material. The structure must create the illusion, even if it is temporary, that the events seen in the film occurred in the order in which they are seen on the screen. In this way, the form of my documentaries can be called fictional because their structure is imagined and therefore may resemble plays or novels, the more traditional dramatic forms.

I am very pleased that Barry Grant has transcribed five of my documentaries. My hope is that reading these transcripts will help the viewer understand my process in making films.

Frederick Wiseman
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