Notes on the micro-documentary

Thrown together by David Tamés, writingwithacamera.com

What is a micro-documentary?

What is a documentary in the first place? If we examine John Grierson's classic definition, "the creative treatment of actuality,"[1] there is no specific form of the work implied. While there is no doubt that historical factors have influenced documentary makers to follow particular conventions and forms, these are not pre-ordained and documentary continues to evolve.

A micro-documentary differs from a tradition documentary in terms of length, structure, and quite often, purpose. While most long-form documentaries tell a story with a narrative structure, shorter documentaries require a different set of strategies for structuring the viewer's experience. Most often a micro-documentary will be 2 to 3 minutes in length, though some can be as long as 5 or even 8 minutes. From the standpoint of a narrative arc, you don't have enough time to establish character, develop conflict, and reveal backstory the way you can in a longer work, therefore, alternative editorial strategies must be considered.

A technique that can be successful within the time constraints imposed by micro-documentaries is to make a strong personal connection or statement upfront or present a powerful set of images connected to a single theme with your focus on a **single character** or **story**, or **event**, or **place** or **process**. Then, from there, there are several possible editorial frameworks you can use depending on your approach:

- if you are doing an **issue-oriented video**, expose the issue and what you've learned is necessary to address the issue, then, use a specific person or organization's work as examples of that solution, all tied together by a single theme, or

- if you're doing a **personal profile**, show the person working and the process they go through to accomplish their work, followed by the person's (or possibly a third party's) reflections on what the work means to them or what they learned from it, all tied together by a single theme, or

- if you are having someone tell a **specific story** about something they did or made, show the person talking and use cutaways to illustrate the story they are telling, make sure the person tells the story in a concise manner and use your questions to evoke alternative sound bites to make your editing easier. Make sure you get some reflections on the part of the storyteller which will help you achieve closure, a good short story is one or more anecdotes, each followed by a moment of reflection, all connected in some manner, or

- if you want to convey an **impression** rather than tell a story or convey a message in a conventional manner, you can take the viewer on an audiovisual journey crafted with a sequence and/or collage of images based your observation of a single place, a specific event, or a particular process, without a central character to drive the story, yet tied together by a unified theme.

Any of these frameworks can be very effective for the creation of short works. There are many more possible variations, but the key issue to keep in mind is that a micro-documentary has to accomplish its goals in a very short time, so it must be tightly focused in terms of the range of issues covered and the number of characters driving the story. There is little or no time available for subplots, secondary characters, and backstory.

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[1] For a discussion and critique of the definition, see: Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real II: Documentary: Grierson and Beyond,* British Film Institute, 2008, pp. 14-15; Ivor Montague writes, "In a sense every work is the creative treatment of actuality. Actuality is the raw material that, as experience, must pass through the consciousness of the creative artist (or group) to become transformed by labour and in accordance with technical and aesthetic laws into art product," see: Ivor Montagu, Film World, Penguin, 1966, p. 281 (quoted in *Claiming the Real II,* p. 17).

Examples of micro-documentaries

I suggest viewing the following examples, they represent a range of styles, production values, and approaches. Consider the structure of these examples and reflect on which did you find engaging? Why do you think that is? Which did you not find as engaging? Why do you think that is? What do you think is the connection between content, visual style, and impact in each of these videos? In most of these examples there is a focus on either a single person or a single event. This is the key to a compelling, engaging micro-documentary, but there are always exceptions to this rule. Have you come across any micro-documentaries you like? Please share them with the class!

Impressionistic and/or experimental approaches

- *Daybreak Express* (D. A. Pennebaker, 1953, 5:19)[2]
  https://vimeo.com/16674798

- *Junkopia* (Chris Marker, 1981, 6:21)[3]
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ymKAhoXyPA

- *iSolation* (Daniel Hume, 2012, 5:07)[4]
  https://vimeo.com/41961563

Profiles of people and/or places

- *Maricela Montoy-Wilson, 1st Grade Teacher* (Micro-Documentaries, 2011, 3:18)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mB7nOxmML6k

- *Coffee Branch iPhone Documentary* (Stephen de Villiers, 2012, 3:00)[5]
  https://vimeo.com/50726215

Issue oriented

- *Meet Connie* (Micro-Documentaries, 2013, 3:18)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJMA6ddEB3w

- *Making Safe Routes to School - WalkBoston* (Micro-Documentaries, 2013, 2:36)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQTWKf6j0Sw

- *A Girl like Me* (Kiri Davis, 2006, 7:15)[6]
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17fEy0q6yqc

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[2] The Third Ave. El in New York was completed in 1878 and ran from the Bronx to City Hall. Two years before it was demolished in 1955, documentary filmmaker D. A. Pennebaker made this short while riding the train, he wrote, "I wanted to make a film about this filthy, noisy train and its packed-in passengers that would look beautiful, like the New York City paintings of John Sloan." This is a fine example of an alternative documentary made without the traditional devices of interviews and cutaways.

[3] Codirected by Frank Simeone and John Chapman, filmed at the Emeryville Mudflats outside of San Francisco while Chris Marker was shooting the Vertigo sections of *Sans Soleil*, more notes on this film at: http://chrismarker.org/2008/11/junkopia/

[4] Exploration of isolation amongst people living in an urban center. Shot with the iPhone 4S, edited in Premiere Pro, color grading done using Magic Bullet Looks. I find the music heavy handed, which detracts from my experience of the work, but I chose it as an example because I saw some connections between it and *Daybreak Express.*

[5] A portrait of a person and a place shot entirely on an iPhone. The filmmaker spent a day with the folks from his favorite coffee shop.

[6] this video got a lot of press and triggered a lot of conversation when it was first released, demonstrating the potential power of micro-documentaries as a catalyst for dialog, winner of the Diversity Award at the 6th Annual Media That Matters film festival and shown on HBO, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Girl_like_Me_(film) and:
http://www.post-gazette.com/lifestyle/2006/12/26/Documentary-studies-renew -debate-about-skin-color-s-impact/stories/200612260092 (Post-Gazette article)

Artist projects

- *marisa dipaola: the octopus's garden* (David Tamés, 2010, 1:57)[7]
  https://vimeo.com/35625312

- *Mark Davis: Bumpkin Sky-Land* (David Tamés, 2010, 2:16)[8]
  https://vimeo.com/35625001

Someone tells a story

- *Steven Sasson, Inventor of the First Digital Camera* (Micro-Documentaries, 2010, 2:28)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpS-DKbyQEI

Documenting an event

- *156 Turns* (Seth Schaeffer & Greg Tracy, 2010, 3:24)[9]
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5JQdgvzuL0

- *MIT Activities Midway* (David Tamés, 2007, 2:19, starts @ 3:24 in Episode 10, *MIT Zig Zag*)[10]
  http://techtv.mit.edu/collections/zigzag/videos/338-zigzag-10-vga

What is the process?

Producing a micro-documentary is not a linear process, in spite of what the following steps may imply. You'll find yourself revising, reshooting, adapting, and moving through these stages throughout your experience producing your video. This process can be used for both planning your documentary and submitting as part of your optional process documentation.

Canonically, the steps may be thought of as:

1. Develop   2. Plan   3. Shoot   4. Edit   5. Share   6. Reflect   7. Repeat

Below are some triggers and exercises to help you become more proficient at each stage of the process.

Step 1. Develop

Some questions to ask yourself:

- What is **my idea**?

- What are my **goals** for making this micro-documentary?

- **Who** do I expect will watch it?

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[7] Shot with the Panasonic HPX170, hand-held with a monopod for stability. Audio recorded with Audio-Tecnica BP-4029 MS Stereo short-shotgun microphone. A Rycote Windjammer was used in order to reduce the effect of wind noise, which was considerable on Bumpkin Island. One segment of Maria's dialog when she was in the water was recorded with a wireless lavaliere.

[8] Shot using the same gear as described above.

[9] A good example of a micro-documentary shot entirely using an iPhone. It would have been nice if they took morecare in their sound recording during some of the interviews (they could have done double-system sound with a portable sound recorder) however, it's an impressive feat to shot an entire piece like this with a iPhone.

[10] This is an example of a micro-documentary shot and edited in a very short time frame. Matt (correspondent) and I (producer/videographer/editor) met at the event, we went around interviewing students for an hour, then I went back around to shoot cutaways of the groups associated with the students we interviewed for a second hour, the mariachi band made perfect "book ends" for the piece, that was pure serendipity, but also comes from thinking while shooting, "how might I be able to cut this."

- **Why** would they watch it?
- **What** do I want the audience to take away from it and/or what do I want them to do after watching it?
- If your working with an organization, what are their **goals** for the micro doc?
- Can I convey this story **visually** in under three minutes?
- What **elements** do I need to assemble this story?
- Is there a **character** I can build this story around, and what is their **motivation**?
- Is there a **place** or **event** I can build this story around, and what is **unique** about it?

Answering these questions will help you when, not if, things change. Understanding your idea lets you imagine what the audience needs to see/hear to experience what you intend. Stating your goal clearly/reviewing it during production will help you make trade-offs and notice opportunities. Addressing the visual limitations early prevents costly mistakes, especially in terms of time.

Brainstorming elements generates the list you will use to **prioritize** (remember you can't shoot everything so get your most important shots early in the process). Finding a character with a specific need or an interesting personality/quirk will carry your micro-documentary. Good documentaries, even those about ideas, are always primarily about specific people. People convey their character through their actions.

Even in a three minute piece, you have **focus on conveying ideas visually**. For example, even if you're using interviews, you have to think about what's in the frame and the role it plays in your visual storytelling. You have to be very focused with your choice of images to tell the story and editing that keeps the viewer engaged and wondering what's next, since the viewing context is usually in a browser or mobile device with many other media options simply a click away.

Example goals

- Present an interesting person to entertain or enlighten, provide viewers with a feeling of having met someone
- Provide viewers with a sense of being at a particular location
- Advocate for a particular cause to elicit a particular action (e.g. make a donations, contribute to a Kickstarter campaign, etc.)
- Covey the mission and activities of a student organization so that prospective students understand why they might want to join
- Describe an academic program so prospective students understand its value

Examples of a character's motivation or need

- Stopping an activity they feel is wrong
- Encouraging people to participate in an activity they feel will benefit the community
- Figuring out the the solution to a problem
- Making something
- Explaining why something needs to get done

> Exercise: Write a short treatment under 500 words
> How would you describe your micro-documentary as a one paragraph description of the story written using present tense? Describe events as they happen. Imagining how the film could play out before you start will clarify your ideas, and help you prepare for when, not if, things change.

Step 2. Plan

Some questions to ask yourself:

- What do I **need** to make this happen and how will I **obtain** it?
- What are the possible **pitfalls**?
- What **questions** need to be asked/answered?

Even the smallest, no budget, micro-documentary has resource needs and planning helps you get the most out of the resources you have. While planning, think about who, what, and where you'll be shooting. Consider both technical and story related things that could go wrong. *Talking with your fellow students and teachers at this point is extremely helpful.*

Plan your **interview questions** around eliciting stories, not descriptions with facts and figures. You want to find the dramatic aspects of the story. Prior to the shoot talk with interviewees to learn more about how they can fit into your story as well as how articulate and animated they are and what they are passionate about.

Let this interaction trigger new or different questions, and don't be afraid of going off course, as your interviewee's passion should drive the story, not a pre-existing agenda. The exception to this is when you start off with a specific agenda, in that case, you'll have to do more directed guidance of where the interview goes.

Example planning questions

- Do I need location permits?
- What kind of releases will I need?[11]
- What human, logistical, and natural/weather problems might I encounter?
- What equipment will I need?
- Am I familiar with the equipment I will be using?
- Do I have enough batteries and media storage for the shoot?
- Will I have access to power for lights (if used) or to recharge batteries?
- Do I have backup gear (microphone, camera, lights, etc.)?
- Am I ready to improvise when, not if, things change?

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[11] You'll find in the "Release Forms" handout the following releases: Appearance Release, for non-actors; Minor Appearance Release, for children, it must be signed by a parent or legal guardian; Materials Release, for obtaining permission from the owner or license holder to use photographs, audio, video, film or other media which may be copyrighted or owned by others; and a Location Release, for use when you are filming on property you do not own.

Step 3. Shoot

Some questions to ask yourself:

- Do I have a **variety of shots**/angles/establishing shots and details?

- For **cutaways**, keep shots short, at least five seconds at under ten seconds for each, though it depends on the type of shot and the nature of your piece. Variety with angle changes (30 degree rule) and shot size (close-up, medium, wide) changes will go a long way to make it easier to edit together your piece. If shooting a conversation, am I paying attention to eye-line match and the 180-degree rule?

- Do I have enough **interview material** to tell my story in different ways?

- Do I have **notes** on what, where, when, how I shot?

Shoot for the edit

To compress time you need a variety of footage, but too much can become overwhelming. Consider you'll want flexibility when editing, so make sure you shoot a variety of shots including establishing, dialogue, close-ups, and cutaways.

Shoot interviews early on and let them suggest visuals you can shoot for use as cutaways as you learn more about your topic. Always schedule time to shoot both the interview and the cutaways you will need to tell a visual story!

Keep notes. You are not going to remember everything when you get into the editing room. Develop good workflow habits, e.g. make sure your always transferring media to the right folder and come up with a naming convention for your media assets.

More shooting tips

Follow the rule-of-thirds when composing your frames. Are you close enough? Are you too close? Avoid the zoom, consider moving the camera closer (or farther) rather than zooming, it looks better. There's more magnification in telephoto shots, so you increase the amount of camera shake. Avoid the use of digital zoom in your phone or camcorder. Hold your shots still. If the camera moves, your moving shot needs a starting and ending position that makes sense. Focus on the salient details of the scene. If something looks interesting, shoot it. You are a good proxy for your audience. Follow your interests and you'll probably have enough variety of shots to edit. Even more shooting tips are available in the "Shooting Guidelines" handout available in the Course Materials section in Blackboard.

Step 4. Edit

Some questions to ask yourself:

- Do I know where my audio, video, image assets are?

- Do I have a backup of everything?[12]

- Do I know how to make it easier to find specific footage using the description field in the Project pane (you can click and drag column names so they appear in the order you want)?

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[12] It's safe to assume your media is safe when stored on the Isis server in Shillman Hall, since this server manages data redundancy so that even if one of its drives crashes, your data is still safe. If you don't keep all of your media assets on the Isis server, then you'll have to worry about backing up the media not on the Isis server.

- Have I prioritized my media elements using the log notes and description fields in the project window?

a. Transfer

Transfer you media from cameras and audio recorders to media folders in your project folder on the Isis server organized by date or some other system. Import your media into a Premiere Pro project. Make sure you have a logical workflow that results in back up copies of essential elements and makes it easy for you to find things when you need them without having to constantly scan through your video. Remember, importing in Premiere Pro simply creates a reference to the location of the original media asset on the server or your hard drive.

b. Organize

Organize as you log your footage. Use the Description and Log Notes fields in Premiere Pro to identify your clips and pull out the best material. You can also use the Labels column to place clips in specific categories (and you can rename what each label stands for). A good system of description an consistent use of keywords will make it easy to find the pieces you need. Even though this is a short, concise project, it's a good idea to develop these habits from day one. At this phase you would also sync your video and audio clips as needed if you are doing double-system sound (recording sound and picture separately and bringing them together during the editing process).

c. Rough assembly

Assemble your video, think sketching during this phase. You can work with multiple Premiere Pro sequences (timelines) within the same project, and copy/paste clips between them. For example, this allows you to have different versions of your piece, maintaining access to prior edit configurations. Don't worry about effects, transitions or tight timing at this point in the editing process, simply bring clips into the timeline in the approximate order you want them. Assembling your interview audio first can make the edit go faster (this is often called the "radio cut").

d. Rough cut

Once you have a solid story structure that works, it's then time to perfect it. This phase will probably include a mix of:

- fine tuning picture edits
- rough sound editing as needed (finesse will come later)
- simple dialog editing
- adding some music as needed
- making sure you have a cohesive story
- less is more!

e. Fine cut

- fine tuning picture edits with finesse
- ambient tracks
- clean up audio edits
- fine-tuning dialog edits
- placing the final music

- mixing (adjust all the audio levels with just the right fades in and out)
- use audio compression (in Premiere Pro, Audio Effects => Dynamics, Compressor, 1.85:1 ratio to start) when you need dialog to "cut through the mix" without excessive peaking (a little goes a long way)
- perform color grading for a pleasing overall look
- add transitions judiciously
- add titles if needed, keep them simple and to the point
- less is more!

f. Export edit master and distribution copies

When you're done and you don't have any more changes you want to make, you've reached the point where you're ready to export your **edit master** the final cut of your micro-documentary. You will end up creating an edit master along with a **distribution copy**:

- **distribution copy** (a high-quality, H.264, 50 Mbps QuickTime movie for screening in class).
- **edit master** (best quality) this is your master copy exported using a high-quality, virtually lossless codec (ProRes 422) with no additional compression added (so it will be much larger), this version is a master from which you can make a variety of distribution versions

g. Archive

Archive your original media if the materials warrant it. If you anticipate to re-edit in the future archive everything. Regardless of whether you archive your camera and sound recorder originals, make sure you have a good reliable copy of your Edit Master (final video) saved somewhere safe.

Step 5. Share

Time to share your work. Along the way you should show rough-cuts and fine-cuts to your fellow students and friends. Once you are done, you may want to share your micro-documentary with your intended audience. Vimeo and YouTube are currently two good ways to share short videos. Specific. If you're working with a partner organization, make sure you share your video with them and get feedback throughout the process and especially before you complete the fine cut. How and when you share the video online should be coordinated with the partner organization if you're working with one.

Step 6. Reflect

Reflect on your experience. What worked? What didn't? What was most surprising? What were some of the most serious challenges? What skills would you like to hone for future shoots? What did you learn? Collect viewer feedback. If you established any metrics connected to the goal of the film, how did you measure up?

Step 7. Repeat

And of course, repeat the process as often as possible, the more you make, the better you get at it! The best way to learn video production techniques is to make videos, reflect on the process, do some readings (mostly in the subject matter of your piece, with a little sprinkling of documentary craft), and repeat the process. A class is only a starting point and like any craft, you will become more proficient with visual storytelling through the process of practice. Even if making videos is not your primary interest, how might your incorporate video in your studies or work?

Resources for further study

Handouts

Visit writingwithacamera.com for access to handouts

- "Shooting guidelines"
- "Release forms"
- and more...

Video tutorials

Available from LinkedIn Learning:

- "Premiere Pro Essential Training"
- "Foundations of Video: Cameras and Shooting w/Anthony Q. Artis"
- "Video Production Techniques: Location Audio Recording w/ Anthony Q. Artis"
- "Video Production Techniques: Location Lighting w/ Anthony Q. Artis"
- "Foundations of Video: Interviews w/ Anthony Q. Artis"

Books

- *Visual Storytelling* by Nancy Kalow, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University, 2011, PDF, http://tinyurl.com/vba-text
- *Documentary Storytelling: Creative Nonfiction on Screen,* 3rd ed. by Sheila Curran Bernard, Focal Press, 2010.
- *The Filmmaker's Eye: Learning (and breaking) the rules of cinematic composition,* by Gustavo Mercado, Focal Press, 2011.

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Set in Baskerville and Myriad Pro using Apple Pages on a MacBook Pro