THE STORYTELLING TRADITION AND DOCUMENTARY MOVIE MAKING

by

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The Storytelling Tradition and Documentary Moviemaking

by
Steven Kostant

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ABSTRACT
This thesis is concerned with the relationship between the storytelling tradition and documentary moviemaking. This relationship is evaluated in three distinct points of departure.

- The evolution of the storytelling process from a traditional oral form of communication, by word of mouth, to its integral incorporation into the electronic media, particularly through the dissemination of motion picture and television.

- The documentary moviemaker and the storyteller are potentially seeking the same quest as explorers of reality. They want to teach their listeners (viewers), and need "reality" as a canvas for telling stories.

- A personal examination of my documentary, By Word of Mouth . . . Storytelling in America. By actually making a documentary about storytellers at the 10th Annual Storytelling Festival, my personal understanding of the storyteller and the documentary moviemaker became a reflexive realization in better understanding these two forms of communication.

This thesis consists of a text accompanied by a videocassette of By Word of Mouth . . . Storytelling in America.

Thesis Advisor: Richard Leacock
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Once upon a time . . .

Storytelling and Communication Technologies

Storytelling is as old as man himself. In pre-literate society people transmitted information by word of mouth or by devices such as musical instruments, dance, rituals or ornate signals. The information or protective advantages of an ability for verbal communication are obvious. Language is a vehicle for related experience. We have scant evidence of the explanation of the origin of language and the early nature of speech. Certainly the physiological development of brain, teeth, tongue, and jaw may yield leads, but anything resembling a specific answer evades us and may always do so.

Whenever man first spoke, whatever he said he seemed to have waited millions of years to make records. The earliest known written records seem to be the engraved bones and stones found in Africa and Europe dating twenty-five thousand years old. Hundreds of such examples are already known and they push the history of both writing and storytelling back ten thousand years beyond the famous cave drawings found in France and Spain.

The roots of storytelling sprang from need, a need for companionship and consolation. Pre-literate people used stories as a way of connecting with their surroundings, their being, and their universe. The knowing of stories was
a way for an individual to pass through a series of rituals for initiation. Stories functioned as a primary educational vehicle for acceptance. The story became a sacred possession and the telling a source of knowledge. The transference of knowledge from one generation to the next was provided by the stories of that given culture.

In pre-print cultures, almost every member of society worked, and work was the major life experience. People traveled not for adventure or vacation, but only when necessity demanded it. The conditions of life at the time severely limited artistic and intellectual horizons. But if knowledge among the masses was sharply limited, it was also fairly uniform. Moreover, since children generally participated in work at a very early age, there was relatively little difference between the type of knowledge available to an adult and to a child. The growth of an individual, regardless of age, was then directly proportional to the stories he knew. The storyteller provided the culture with its shape in the transaction of knowledge.

The ritual of storytelling provided a source of movement in that transmission of knowledge to explain life meanings. Then expressed meanings in the form of stories became formulated belief systems and evolved into major religions. Examples include the Judeo-Christian and Greek mythologies. The tradition of the Judeo-Christian ethics was based upon storytelling. Beginning with the story of Adam, it progresses by stories through the hebrew bible to
the new testament. The tales throughout evoke a sense of unity, structure, and justice. The very existence of such acts of communication of stories, such as in Gilgamesh, Genesis, Greek mythology, or Plato, all begin with the basic assumption that stories actively seek an audience. The vehicle for stories is supplied by language, rhythm, and design not because it is primitive, but because its function for communication was desired by at least two parties - the teller and the told.

The storyteller retained a lofty position in the hierarchy of the pre-print society, for the teller was the individual who was able to transcend the life experiences of work and hardship into a meaning that gave the people a sense of unified tradition. This unified tradition eventually formed a culture inherent to the common experiences shared by the people and interpreted through the stories and the telling of stories.

Later, storytelling lost its lofty position with the advent of print and the invention of the Gutenberg press. In feudal times, the storyteller became a source of entertainment rather than a source of information for the landed gentry. The oral tradition of storytelling as a transfer of knowledge was generally carried through the common folk. The printed story passed from word of mouth to the written form which evolved into the classic fairytales.

As the storyteller took a back seat for the overall transference of knowledge, print became the major means of
non-face to face communication and millions could learn about the world through reading. Literacy naturally became a pre-condition for education.

Print dominated communication and structured the layers of society. The distribution of knowledge was proportional to the amount of literacy in the given society. Not only did print split the society into the educated and illiterate, it added immeasurably to the amount and variety of knowledge available. Print spread information to millions who never before had access. It made possible the evaluation and comparison of ideas on a global scale. This vast scale of exchange of ideas prepared the way for the Industrial Revolution.

Print therefore became the dominant means for communication and led to a modern society which enabled man to develop technology that would further the transference of knowledge.

In the process of defining new ways of communicating through technological innovation storytelling, which was once revered, fell from grace and became a source of entertainment and curious folklore. Yet the storytelling process remained a source of nourishment in relation to the behavioral aspects of the population. As the world grew more technologically advanced, the interrelationships between people and the environment became more alienated. People did not need people as much as in earlier times and psychological elements of personal exploration became more
necessary. The storytelling experience grew from a transaction of information to a transaction of personal communication. The roots of psychology are based upon the storytelling principle. In the process of healing and clarifying personal behavior or motives, storytelling is the mode for transferring and processing life's behavioral passages.

It is curious that today there is a renaissance which is rapidly reversing the spiral of decline of the storytelling tradition. The renewed interest possibly signifies that storytelling offers the world today something that the new electronic forms of communication cannot provide. Or possibly storytelling is complementary to these new modes of modern communication.

Today we are in an era of the post-literate society. Since the introduction of the telephone, radio, motion picture, and television, our society has undergone a dramatic qualitative change. Electronic media rather than the printed word are now our major means of non-face to face communication.

Electronic media signaled a change as radical as the invention of the printing press. Growing up in a post-literate environment, children have received a vast store of information about the world we live in without requiring the ability to read or write - a lack that would have condemned them to ignorance in a previous age. Today we know the environment of foreign countries by what we see on television. We understand natural disasters, such as
earthquakes, tidal waves, monsoons, and tornadoes as well as war, by the impact of the electronic media.

The process began with the radio in the home and later with movies. Both of these media communicate without recourse to print. Then television accelerated this expansion of experience and brought billions throughout the world into a new global system of communication.

Characterizing the new global system of communication does not mean that storytelling, print, and the written word are dead. Those who speak of the "space age" do not mean that airplanes and cars have disappeared. The post-literate society means simply that the shift of the communication of non-face to face information from storytelling and the written word to the electronic media is now dominant and has altered the impact of the former media.

The electronic waves of media suffuse the atmosphere we live in. Marshall McLuhan equated the media environment with the traditional definition of god, "whose center is everywhere and whose margins are nowhere."\(^1\) The media is within everyone of us. This analogy between electronic media and religious belief or god can be carried to an extremist perspective. However, the fundamental reality is that the electronic media quite seriously influence our lives and profoundly shape our beliefs. This profound dominance that has a deep and fundamental significance upon our lives is analogous to the impact the storytellers had upon the people in pre-literate society. As our ancestors
sat around the fire to hear stories, we too sit around a cool fire listening to the same type of stories yet disseminated through a different medium than by word of mouth.

For so long that it seemed primeval, we gathered around the fire. The fire was a source of warmth, food, solace, and stories. Is the fire out of sight now or has it been replaced by an electronic hearth that flickers the phosphorescent cool haze of television images? The act of sitting around the electronic hearth and sitting around the fire hearing stories from a storyteller are not coincidental nor unrelated. The power of television appeals to the masses because of our innate desire to hear stories and sit by the fire no matter what form it takes.

In America, the electronic hearth grows from 961 storytelling television stations aimed at 100 million listeners in 70 million homes. Americans are transfixed by the television storyteller for an average of 6 hours and 10 minutes a day. It is clearly pervasive and irresistible. McLuhan has deduced that all the tribes of the world will one day gather around the cool glow of today's storyteller in a common "global village." ²

Television cannot be ignored, whatever the individual's feelings are about this omnipresent medium. At its worst, television will make you want what you do not need and vote for people who are not what they seem. Yet, regardless of its abuse or use as a liar or inspiration, it is perhaps the most influential storyteller in history.
It combines the transference of information and establishes a belief system that storytellers evoked and shared with the community years ago on a world-wide scale. Yet, the greatest difference between the traditional storyteller and television is in its personal human interaction. That personal interaction by word of mouth to the listeners cannot be duplicated by the electronic waves that form signals on the television set. Although the television is filled with stories, and influences millions of listeners, can the storytelling process as a "live" personal communicator ever be mimed by the electronic media? Certainly, there is no direct one to one physical interaction, as in the teller, the story, and the listener. Yet the electronic media complements the storytelling process in ways that are of interest to both mediums for communication.

Print created a division in society and established a hierarchy of values. Television can be deciphered with equal ease by children, teens, and old folks of every race, class, and IQ. Because TV thus reveals everything to everyone at once, the print induced hierarchies can no longer be sustained.

This liberation of information to all is clearly akin to the storytelling model. The storyteller told stories to all sectors of the population and in turn the impact was felt by all listeners regardless of place or background in the pre-literate society. The stories represented a form of
both communication for work, thought, and play. Today, both children and adults now spend many hours a week staring at video monitors, whether video games or electronic database decisionmakers.

One way to characterize ourselves, as Joseph Meyerhoff says in *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*, is as "hunters and gatherers of an information age." Thus we may be returning to a world even older than that of the late middle ages, "a world without social barriers or territorial loyalties, but one in which we will all forage peacefully for data, stories, and not for food." But this idealistic formulation that is reiterated in *No Sense of Place* denies certain crucial facts about the electronic media. Unlike the wandering tribesmen, we viewers have almost no communal life, because the media are predicated on and often reinforce our separation from each other. And while those early gatherers led arduous lives, all our interactions via the media are completely disembodied from the connection of the communication of listener and storyteller in a physical one to one interaction.

The media, according to Meyerhoff, may lead "to a form of interaction that was once found exclusively in immediate physical interaction." Yet the difference between the influence of a cool stream of light emitted by a television monitor and the human presence by the fireside telling stories is certainly a different experience to anyone who
has had the opportunity of listening to a storyteller. This difference in the nature of the experience is like watching a TV "talking head" and observing a human living face - one response becomes intimate, while the other is informational and distant regardless of the impact of the content of the story.

Invoking McLuhan, the TV certainly does affect us and I do not wish to imply that because of its human presence, the pure storytelling experience is more effective than the media experience. The observation is simply "the difference" between the two forms of storytelling. I certainly believe, though, that the power of television is the result of our need to hear stories. It is a different type of storyteller, a surrogate storyteller using electronic images created by film and video makers who in turn use the television to tell their own stories.

In the transference of information, the television sets up an inherent belief system. One of the components of creating belief is through the television's formal properties, the ability to transmit truthfulness through documenting reality. The news, documentary programs or narrative styles that adhere to realistic portrayal, enter into the home and transform the viewer into a believer of that reality as portrayed by the filmmaker to the viewer.

As a filmmaker (I use the term to include film or video production technologies), I seek to express myself within this electronic medium. The vehicle that I chose for
expression is through documentary production. A documentary supposedly sets an inherent standard for believability by creating real stories that shed some type of influence upon the viewers. Hopefully, this influence is significant and positive.

*By Word of Mouth... Storytelling in America,* is a result of my desire to strive towards this ideal of "significance." The initial concept of making a documentary about storytelling and storytellers became a fascinating reflexive experience.

Beyond this reflexive exercise, *By Word of Mouth... Storytelling in America* pays homage to an ancient form of communication. I found that storytelling teaches us in ways, at levels nothing else does. My documentary is a tribute to a tradition that represents the seeds of influence which has made the electronic media flower into the powerful informational and entertainment medium that it is for us today.
Real Storytelling Through Documentary Moviemaking

Storytelling has been a source of personal nourishment throughout my life. I have always been fascinated by the power and process of storytelling. This fascination has culminated into a way of life in which storytelling has shaped my personal expression as a communicator of real stories through the art and technique of documentary film/video production.

Initially, I perceived documentary as a separate entity from the storytelling model. Stories had always seemed to relate specifically to narrative styles, whereas documentaries were journalistic and dependent exclusively on seeking facts. The most succinct and widely quoted definition is that of John Grierson, "Documentary is the creative treatment of actuality." If this statement truly defines the purpose of documentary, then it seems that storytelling, with its narrative framework, seems separate from the documentary format. One rarely hears a description or critique of a documentary based upon it's storytelling merit. The main concern in looking at documentary is viewing the subject of investigation as realistic and objectively portrayed.

As filmmakers and theorists have debated this point regarding realism, and as Flaherty truly understood,
this objectivity is no more possible in documentary film than in any other recording medium. The objectivity of the journalist becomes a narrator, a creator of fiction, a storyteller, simply in deciding which facts of his story he will record as significant. And the camera of a documentary filmmaker after all has to be positioned.

This decision of positioning the camera refers to the "intentionality" or personal choice made by the documentary moviemaker. Thus, the "creative treatment" as referred by Grierson is in itself the demonstration of intentionality and therefore complementary to the storytelling model. The documentary moviemaker chooses elements which he finds most relevant to evoke a dramatic narrative within the boundaries of telling real stories.

One can even go a step further by suggesting that the documentary moviemaker is in many ways more a storyteller than the narrative film director. The thread that ties the documentary format with storytelling is in the process of selection, elimination, and intentionality. Documentary like storytelling is a personal form of communication. The storyteller takes life experiences and through the prism of the imagination transforms reality into stories. This is also an individual act of selection, elimination, and intentionality. Both storyteller and documentary moviemaker represent personal exploration, whereas the theatrical film director relies on interpreting stories in a collaborating process. There is a detachment from the essence of
storytelling in the composition of theatrical filmmaking. By being predetermined, having scripts, performers, and departmental collaboration, the process of the theatrical film is less personal.

To further defend this premise that documentaries are a personal form of storytelling, one must assume that the documentary is exclusively a personal vehicle for exploration utilizing the technological components of filmmaking or video production. Certainly there are degrees of how personally involved the moviemaker becomes integrated into the documentary process. In the cinema-verite approach personal involvement becomes less obtrusive. This style is in contrast to the journalist "magazine" documentary approach utilizing set-up situations and voice-over narration. The common denominator is capturing reality and using it as the canvas for storytelling to teach the viewer something about this reality.

Storytelling is always the story of the individual in some sort of relationship to his social, political, or cultural environment. He can discover that environment, he can civilize it, he can find it chaotic or love and hate in it. These are the basic terms by which a story follows, a relationship to reality. That reality may be fantastical, yet the ultimate goal of the story, beyond its formal qualities, narrative presentation, or sociological implication, is to create a perception that teaches us something about ourselves and our lifestyles.
We become heroes in our own life story. The kind of story you want to tell yourself has a lot to do with the kind of person you are and can become. In a way life can be discussed within the context of stories. We grow from birth to death in the manner of a story. This does not mean we live a fictional narrative, but our activities are told and felt through the storytelling tradition of expressing life in a series of realizations that shape our values, convictions, and beliefs.

If life is perceived as stories based upon reality and the documentary canvas is reality, then by logical deduction, the documentary is seeking the portrayal of reality as stories.

But although we have come to expect documentaries as a portrayal of reality, we have also come to expect that the treatment of reality by the documentary moviemakers is highly subjective. The documentaries of Frederich Wiseman, such as High School, Meat, Basic Training, and Model, and the Maysles brothers (Salesmen, Gimme Shelter, and Grey Gardens) are parables of an intentionality of the filmmaker's subjective consciousness. This subjective view in the case of Wiseman, Maysles, and many others in the current documentary tradition intentionally creates almost a satiric dark side of reality. The aim is to project a story line that shows hypocrisy, brutality, or the crass inhumanity of the subjects. The vapidity of high schools in America, the life of a door to door salesman, or the
sleaziness of the fashion industry as themes portrayed in these documentaries, are certainly a far cry from Grierson's ideal of documentary as a vehicle for social responsibility and the general education for the masses. The impact of these documentaries reveal the social irresponsibility of the subjects and creates a negative propaganda. The technologies of these filmmakers stem from the same "exploration" perspective as Flaherty, yet Flaherty used documentary as a vehicle for creating epic stories.

Flaherty was a painstaking realist. He possessed a truly epic imagination. In the case of Man of Aran he created a work which, though "documentary," disturbed many of his socialist colleagues precisely because it is so unabashedly, courageously epic in scope.

The structure of the film is highly narrative, with characters portraying life in an episodic progression. The story is classical, survival, man against the environment and the development of man as a toolmaker to overcome the odds of nature, the sea, the land, and the hunt. In contrast to many documentaries today, Flaherty used the medium to tell stories that immortalized man's innate essence as being men as decision makers in the course of discovery.

This concept of "discovery" is paramount to the storytelling process and directly related to the documentary structure. The perspective of the documentary filmmaker can be highly subjective, with a value judgement attached to
every frame, yet the concept of discovery is inherent in every documentary because the story must be viewed by an audience. And the ability to engage the audience is dependent upon the realization of "a discovery" that is found within the documentary story.

A documentary seeks to make its audience look at the actual world in a totally new spirit. Its realism is for the sake of enabling the viewers to grasp the entire import of what it is and to become aware of the obstacles which are in the way of its realization. With every documentary, as in storytelling, the conveying of that realization is discovering events or individuals that change, inform, and ultimately unfold the meaning of the story.

Both storytellers in the traditional sense and the documentary moviemaker wants to gain a response from the audience. The structure of both may share common episodic elements. The documentary generally has a beginning, middle, and end. Film sequences are balanced to reveal the "discovery," which brings the audience into the reality portrayed by the moviemaker. There is a sense of rhythm, cadence, and structure formed in the editing process that enhances the effectiveness of these goals. There is no question that documentary is clearly distinctive in its method of portraying a story. The storyteller relies on the immediacy of the "live" interaction, by word of mouth. The documentary is made up of flickering images projected through a television or in a darkened movie theater.
However, the storyteller and documentary moviemaker are both explorers of reality. They both seek images that connect their perceived subjective uses with reality. The images of the storyteller may be in the mind's eye of this listener through words and metaphors, and the documentary moviemaker uses real images of film and video, but their interpretive goals are very complementary as they both evoke visual images to convey their stories. Through history, each means of communication survived by doing what it can do best. The traditional storyteller has been usurped by other modern forms of communication. Yet, the traditional storyteller is still telling stories. The storyteller may be a grandfather, a parent, or yourself, yet the true impact of these stories is greatly dependant upon intimacy from a one to one human interaction. Throughout the making of By Word of Mouth . . . Storytelling in America, I had the opportunity of exploring the traditional and revivalist world of the storytellers, who use language, gesture, and presence to convey stories. In the process of making a documentary about storytellers, I gained a better understanding of the relationship between the documentary and the live storytelling experience. My aim was not to imply what many critics of today's electronic medium find, that the true nature of the human spirit is not being satisfied because of the lack of one-to-one communication, and that the television is a crude distant imitator of the essence of storytelling. I simply wanted to explore the
reality of storytellers in a unique setting. The result was a documentary on a set of storytellers and listeners in a festival of storytelling.
By Word of Mouth . . . Storytelling in America

When I first approached Ricky Leacock - the head of the Film/Video Section at MIT - with the idea of making a documentary about storytelling, his first concern was: how do you make storytelling, an existing oral tradition, visual? One is accustomed to hearing stories, yet the idea of watching storytellers seemed potentially incongruous. Yet the storyteller, in the words of Jay O'Callahan, a renowned storyteller, uses "hands, eyes, sound, movement and body" to fully convey the impact of stories to an audience. It was my intent to document this integration of sight and sound in the process of storytelling. It seemed that film/video was a natural medium to record the total experience and dynamic of storytellers in action.

D. A. Pennebaker, in an interview, mentioned that the impetus behind making a documentary is "a film that decides you don't know enough about something." Certainly this was my motivation in pursuing a documentary on the subject of storytelling. There are many approaches to take in the course of making a documentary, and it became evident that my influences were fostered at MIT in the Film/Video Section. I was most affected by the documentaries akin to the cinema-verite or direct cinema approach. This approach emphasizes observation and exploration.
Documentaries by such luminaries as Flaherty, Leacock, Drew, Maysles, Wiseman, and Pennebaker project a sense of truth and intimacy.

The final outcome of the cinema-verite technique is that it integrates the filmmaking process, selecting a subject, shooting it, and editing it. This integration becomes a personal form of storytelling and the concept of being where the action takes place rather than telling about the action through narration seemed extremely genuine. The narrative discovery is in the observation of recording real people in uncontrolled situations. Instead of having people come to the camera, the camera goes to them. The final documentary represents as much non-interference as possible, and if preparation, performance, or organization are restrictive, arbitrary, or conventional, they are to be eliminated or minimalized. The goal is a recording of untouched reality, reality as it exists at a particular moment in front of the camera lens.

There is no doubt that the storytelling tradition is linked to the communication media of film and television. However, I wanted to document storytellers who tell stories as a livelihood. The National Association for the Preservation and Perpetration of Storytelling (NAPPS) is an organization formed in Jonesboro, Tennessee. Their goals are to revive the art of storytelling and disseminate the true nature of this ancient art form to the general public. This organization provided the means to make By Word of Mouth . . . Storytelling in America.
The documentary centered around a festival of storytelling and individuals who were deeply committed to the "preservation and perpetuation of storytelling." Each year NAPPS draws thousands of listeners, patrons of storytelling, to an annual storytelling festival where the most prominent storytellers from around America gather to tell, share, and swap stories in a festival atmosphere.

This event seemed to be the ideal opportunity to show and document many aspects of the art of storytelling. The festival format also provided a direct link into an existing tradition of documentaries that have successfully been portrayed through cinema-verite techniques.

In documentaries, such as Gimme Shelter, Woodstock, and Monterey Pop, the use of cinema-verite provided a moving eye on to the performance and ambient quality of the "live" festival. In each case, there is a strong sense of spontaneity which mirrors the intent of the documentary, to create a sense of "being there" for the viewer, as if they were participating. Because of the multiple facets which are inherent in a festival gathering, including the performance, the listeners, the organizers, and the location itself, cinema-verite is an ideal approach for capturing the total dynamics of the experience.

In performance documentaries the moviemaker seeks an anchor to create a story. That anchor is generally hooked onto the performers themselves. Pennebaker claims that Monterey Pop is about "music." Yet, I dispute that he really
reached those thematic goals. Monterey Pop is certainly a period piece about a musical climate prevalent in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It really seems to be focused upon particular performers and the spirit of a gathering reminiscent of the communal freedom of the time. Without the intentionality of the moviemaker's cameras pointed at the performers, Monterey Pop would lose the spine and input of its historical significance.

Performance documentaries are strongly contrasted to "portrait" documentaries. In portrait documentaries, the essence lies in a portrait of actions of the individuals. The degree of commitment that these individuals feel is proportional to the degree of magnetism the viewer feels towards the subject portrayed in the documentary. Leacock's Community of Praise is about Faith. We are brought into the concept of understanding faith through the family that is portrayed in Muncie, Indiana. As a viewer, the audience is cast into the dynamics of "faith" because of the family's ultimate commitment to faith as a way of life. In performance documentaries, one is drawn into the event by the magnetism created by the performers. The performers therefore become the heroes of the documentary story.

In the case of storytelling, the impact of the storyteller is revealed through the story, the storytelling process, and the effects the story has upon the listener. By Word of Mouth . . . Storytelling in America concentrated upon these three interrelated components. In utilizing
cinema-verite, there is an inherent sense of truthfulness. This truthfulness pervades into the building of relationships between the moviemaker and the subject, both on and off camera. It was essential to build trust between the storytellers and the moviemakers to successfully create an accurate recording of the storytelling process and performance.

On network television one sees stylized performance programs such as Great Performances, Live at the Met, The Boston Pops, and Dance in America, whose goals are quite different from the exploration process of documentaries. The emphasis is exclusively on the performance and functional recording. Where I refer to "functional recording," I am speaking of the technical component of creating a television literate observation. This observation involves the cohesive juxtaposition of wide, midshots, and closeups in a static composition that has a functional respect for the proscenium and uses the medium of film/video as a recording device. Critical judgement is determined by the technical quality of the recording and the performance itself, and the personality of the moviemaker remains an anonymous storyteller. There is no personal imprint upon the event. I find this technique of recording performances alienating, objective, and essentially distant.

This format of production would deny the whole essence of what I tried to capture at the 10th annual Storytelling Festival. To lock down cameras and switch on-line only the
performances of stories from the point of view of the cameras would imply that the listeners and moviemakers were unessential to the storytelling process. Yet, as I found through the production, there was not only an interrelationship between the listeners and the storytellers, but curiously enough between the listeners, the storytellers, and the moviemakers.

In terms of production logistics, I used two 3/4" video ENG production units to cover the festival. Video was chosen because of budgetary considerations. It was my first time using video and I found the medium extremely flexible. The concept of being able to view "rushes" immediately after shooting was a great advantage. In those times when the moviemakers sat around to view rushes of the day, we discussed our role in the storytelling process. There was certainly a fascinating element of reflexivity talking about our ability to create visual stories about the stories and storytellers that we were videotaping. Our choices of shooting sequences that appealed to our sense of "what was interesting" related to our intent of being visual storytellers creating a documentary story.

The festival was scheduled for the first weekend in October. My first concern was in establishing a relationship between the moviemakers and the storytellers. When we arrived in Jonesboro, Tennessee, the eight members of the Film/Video Section of MIT split into two separate crews. Each crew was made up of three persons with a roving
engineer who checked out the technical aspects of the production. I served as producer, scouting locations, arranging meetings, suggesting ideas to the crew, and defining guidelines regarding what I found as priorities in regard to the storytellers, NAPPS, and the festival itself.

The basis of what I wanted to shoot involved overall exploration of the festival. This included the storytellers amongst themselves, the audience listening to storytellers, the audience swapping stories, the audience engaged in discussion about stories, and the storytellers in performance. The entire crew was versed in cinema-verite technique and utilized the moment to capture certain spontaneous events. In one sequence some kids are playing around and the camera approaches. Their response of being fans of a certain storyteller and their innocent sincerity about our storytelling club represented a pure moment that in many ways is a capsule of the entire message of storytelling.

In other respects, we as a production team did not adhere to the "purest" sense of cinema-verite. There were instants when I would arrange a meeting with a storyteller and the camera would shoot the storyteller telling stories to a small group intentionally for the camera. Yet, as Jean Rouch implies, the presence of the camera on the subject invokes a definitive naturalism because of the subject's knowledge that they are being recorded. These pre-arranged moments were also a way of getting to know the
storytellers. Throughout the festival, certain crew members took a special interest in observing and capturing on videotape specific storytellers. This act of building a relationship between moviemaker and storyteller certainly enhanced the goals of *By Word of Mouth* . . . *Storytelling in America*. I credit this inherent quality of establishing intimacy and honesty between subject and process to the crew and to the use of cinema-verite techniques.

Cinema-verite is a technique that builds relationships based upon the vision of the documentary moviemaker as explorer and storyteller. I believe the affinity that was so strongly felt by the moviemakers and the storytellers was in the commonality of their mutual roles as storytellers. It was ironic that at the onset of the festival the board of NAPPS was very apprehensive about our presence at the festival. They wanted a recording of the event, yet there were certain restrictions that we had to adhere to: 1) no excessive camera movement in the tent while the storytellers were performing, and 2) lighting was to be at a minimum, with no lights pointed at the audience.

I think it is an appropriate side comment to mention that NAPPS' precautionary fear was derived from prior experiences with the media. In the past the media had been involved in shooting video of the storytellers for news stories on local or national network programs. The techniques of these news gathering media crews had been aggressive, typical of media omnipotence. A situation which
contrasted our approach involved cameramen with sungun in hand, barging into a performance, pulling at their favorite storyteller and asking them to stare into the lens and tell their best story. They would then catch a few cutaways and split the scene.

Our approach certainly appeased their fears of media intrusion. Yet there were certain handicaps that I had to deal with, particularly in the editing process. The drawback of being unable to move in the tents during performances was unfortunate. It certainly limited the opportunity of creating a juxtaposition of angles which would have been useful in establishing audience relationships, or abridging the story without unnecessary cutaways. In retrospect, I believe that this handicap of being in one place in the tents was also turned into a production advantage. This restriction forced me to make alternative choices in structuring the documentary.

When viewing *By Word of Mouth . . . Storytelling in America*, one can see that the performances were certainly vital to the essence of the festival and the documentary. Yet, other aspects of the festival were certainly involved and I believe those sequences outside the tent performances provided a cinematic texture that influenced the overall perspective of the documentary. Many informational aspects concerning who the storytellers were, what stories are, how do you tell stories, NAPPS, and who were the patrons of storytellers were observed, videotaped, and edited into the
final version. The real exploring was done in these outside sequences. It would have been possible to just show the performances without any regard to the festival. But as a storyteller, a visual storyteller using video, I selected the story line that would concern an overall perspective of the event. The advantage of making a choice and creating options through using cinema-verite was an instrumental lesson in structuring the documentary.

The viability of creating a sense of overall festival perspectives certainly was enhanced by D. A. Pennebaker in Monterey Pop. He captured a mood and culture beyond performance. It is curious to note that in his recent film, Black Dance in America, the audience reactions and location itself was minimalized, and performers represented the major focus of the documentary. He used a roving camera cinema-verite approach, yet as he mentioned in a discussion, he was greatly affected by the time constraint imposed upon him by creating a documentary for television.

This aspect of keeping to programming formats also affected me in creating a final structure in the editing of By Word of Mouth . . . Storytelling in America. My target for distribution was PBS and regardless of how much material is shot, the final outcome must be 58 minutes to fit into the designated time slot of a PBS hour of programming. I chose the PBS hour for a framework because of the programming philosophy. However, it is interesting to note that the structure of a documentary is regimented by the random framework of the distribution medium.
In the editing process, I relied heavily on the stories themselves as a vehicle to bring the documentary viewer into the storytelling process. *By Word of Mouth*...

*Storytelling in America* is about storytelling, but its framework is pulled together into a narrative story by the sense of location and festival environment. There were many options in editing the material yet in all these basic variations, the themes of listener, storyteller, and story in relationship to moviemaker were constantly being reinforced.

Throughout the editing, I sought to convey a sense of moving action complementary to the festival atmosphere. This was revealed in constant cutaways, hand-held sequences, and montage. However, I wanted the documentary to simply show the world of the storytellers and not speak for the storytellers through narration.

The use of narration was limited to a few individuals who were active participants of the festival. The transfer of information was essentially revealed through the progression of interviews, observations, and stories.

In the process of editing together these informational and entertaining aspects of the recorded material, I became aware of my role as storyteller/moviemaker. Each selection or elimination of video sequences was made by my own intuitive sense of telling a cohesive story. My goal was to create an intriguing "real story" that had a sense of movement, vitality, and characters that were worthy of attention and edification by a viewer.
The reality of the recording, the festival itself, was certainly dynamic. However, to convey this life experience into a one hour observational documentary was made possible by the inherent quality of being a storyteller/moviemaker. Although my tools for conveying a story were different from a storyteller's, I was using video images and recorded sound in the same way a storyteller uses images, expressions, and language. Our aims were the same because of our need to convey the information to an audience or a listener.

This realization was illuminating, that beyond technique and materials was a common thread of storytelling for anyone who seeks to convey information. The methodology may differ, yet the intent is the same, to teach and to illustrate a sense of related experience to a listener. In documentary, the moviemaker tries to create a real story and through camera and editing establish a sense of episodic and dramatic progression that makes the audiences care about the real dynamics of the recorded event.

In the eyes of the moviemaker, I was trying to retell an experience recorded on videotape. This process of retelling in any medium must take the form of storytelling. The method of disseminating the story was through television. This medium uses stories to affect the listener (viewer). The element of effectiveness becomes a debatable issue perceived exclusively through the viewers eyes. Yet, the documentary moviemaker needs television to tell stories.
I believe the most illustrative way to speak about this element of "effectiveness" is in reference to the final story told in By Word of Mouth . . . Storytelling in America. The story is told by Ron Evans, who is an Indian and a purist in the traditional sense of storytelling. I placed the story at the end of the documentary because its message truly represented the summation and reflexivity between storyteller, moviemaker, and television.

It is also interesting to note that Ron had many reservations about our presence at the festival. By the end of the festival, Ron and the moviemakers became close friends. This in itself was a crystallization of the dynamics of cinema-verite documentary moviemaking, and the common goals of telling stories. He felt an affinity with us due to our common need to tell stories. Yet, he clearly illuminated upon the limitations and boundaries of how far we can go, and have gone, beyond the primeval fire and into the cool haze of the electronic hearth.

Ron Evans: Before I tell you a story there is something I wanted to share with some people here . . .

A friend was telling me about it this summer - he had been to Africa and had visited a village where they had just put electricity in and had a community television set - and nothing went on in that village for about two weeks except everyone glued to the TV set - and then they got sick of it and never watched it anymore. And he was a little puzzled and he asked this one man in the tribe. He said, well, tell me why is it that you don't watch the TV anymore? Oh, we don't need it, the man said. We have the storyteller. And the man said to him well don't you think the television set knows more
stories than your storyteller? And the man looked down at the ground and thought for a while and looked up with a huge grin on his face - Oh yes, the television knows many stories, but the storyteller knows me.
Footnotes

1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*

2. Schwartz, Tony, *Media: The Second God*

3. Joseph Meyerhoff, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*

4. Kostant, Steven, from *By Word of Mouth . . . Storytelling in America*

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