THE DETECTIVE

Q – What does documentary film mean to you and what excites you about it?

Nick – It covers an enormous genre of very different films. Some of which have very little to do with one another. You can lump films like *The Weeping Camel* in with documentaries even though it has nothing to do with documentary at all. So I guess the term is really inadequate and confusing in and of itself. Subsequent terms like cinema verité or observational filmmaking are slightly more accurate because they define a particular style or approach. I suppose the thing that excites me about them is their rawness and spontaneity and the uncertainness of the interaction between the filmmaker and the subject. Those amazing moments that are completely unique to that form of filmmaking – that only otherwise happen in real life encounters where you're in conversation with someone and/or something quite remarkable and unexpected happens. Fiction tries to imitate that, but very rarely comes up with anything as complex or as amazing. I think documentary encourages filmmakers to be very flexible in their approach. To not go into subjects with a thesis all carefully worked out. They have to be open and on a voyage of discovery themselves and take the audience with them.

Q – Your style has something of that, as your films tend to be about you making the film as well as whatever your subject matter is.

Nick – That's implicit in any film as the filmmaker goes on a journey. It's just off camera to a greater or lesser extent. Making documentaries is a very intimate relationship between the subject and the filmmaking and the extent that the relationship is successful is completely reflected in the film. I feel it's easier to acknowledge that relationship and use it as a very positive structuring device. Sometimes, not always. I think there are certain films that don't require that kind of structure. Films from institutions or films of processes or films of events that have a built in beginning, middle and end don't require another structuring device like the filmmaker telling the story. But if you're doing a film that seemingly has a lot of arbitrary connections and those connections only seem to connect in the filmmaker's mind and require those connections to be made explicit, then it's very useful to have the presence.

Q – Do you tell your interviewees that you're going to walk in with the cameras rolling?

Nick – I say that I'm making a home movie and I'm filming everything. If I come in with a film camera rolling, don't be surprised.

Q – With your style, you're able to get things from subjects that they probably wouldn't say in a conventional interview. What tips would you give new documentary filmmakers on interviewing subjects?

Nick – The main thing is not to box the interviewee into a corner and to not make the situation so formal that it's inhibiting. Or in any way to make the interviewee feel inadequate. They can't feel as if they or their house are messy. They have to be made to feel absolutely OK with exactly whom they are, which is exactly what you want for your film. So the main thing is to make people relaxed with you and to enjoy to a certain extent, your presence. I'd say have a very tiny crew. I think the ideal size is two – one on camera and one on sound - and just to get on with it. Don't say too much about what you're doing and why you're doing it. You're obviously there to make a film.

Q – Do you think going in with the camera rolling gets a gut reaction from the subject?

Nick – The initial meeting with people is often the moment at which your first impressions form and those are the strongest. You resort to an almost animal instinct in your judgment of people. It's almost before your intellect has started working. You go on what they're wearing, how they look at you or if they're fat or thin – all these animal things that have nothing to do with their political position. They all influence your reaction to them and indeed, the audience's reaction to them. And as you're taking the audience on a journey that you're involved in, those initial meetings are essential to the audience because they're meeting them for the first time, too. They want to see the houses that they live in and the kind of curtains that they have in their windows.

Q – You don't seem to ask rapid questions. You give them a chance to breathe.

Nick – Maybe that's because I think of them as conversations or interactions. And hopefully you've done enough work where you can be fluid and flexible in the order in which you ask your questions or steer the conversation. Realistically, unless you're structuring the film around one interview, you're only going to cover a couple of main topics. It's very rare, in my films for example, that an interview will last more than three to four minutes. So in that time, you only can cover a couple of things. I prefer to go back and re-interview them on different questions rather than stand them up and ask the same thing, which creates a static feel as you keep going back to the same interview throughout the film. I think maybe your first interview is wide where you're covering lots of different topics and you're getting to know them and you are asking a lot of background stuff, but subsequent interviews become more and more specific and more and more centered around one or two topics.

Q – How important is it for documentary filmmakers to listen to their subjects?

Nick – That's the reason you're making the film.

Q – Sometimes when someone interviews a subject, they end up filling in the blanks for them.

Nick – I know what you mean, but I have never done it.

Q – When you're recording your phone conversations with your subjects – do you have to tell them that you're doing it?

Nick – I think you're probably supposed to.

Q – Have interviewees ever said that they refuse to let you use what you shot of them?

Nick – I've never had that problem, but I 've occasionally decided to not use footage in order to protect someone.

Q – Would you suggest that people pay their subjects for interviews, as that sort of proposes a contract that they have agreed to do it?

Nick – If you're taking up a great deal of someone's time and you're invading their house and eating their food, it'd be a customary form of the society we live in that you'd offer them something. But if they're super rich, then you might be insulting them. Most people kind of like to receive something. Not always. But some people feel it's appropriate. It shouldn't be something that would change their objectivity or that they would in deed start telling you things that they wouldn't have or they start to perform and make you happy. You don't want to pay people money and that changes the basis of your relationship.

Q – Do you need to have clearances for selling the film?

Nick – Yes, you do need to have clearances. And sometimes you need to have clearances so that the people in the film acknowledge that they've in fact given you their permission and that there won't be any argument later. I suppose if you don't have hidden cameras and a big camera is pointing at them, they know you're making a film and they carry on. There's an implicit agreement for them to be filmed. And obviously, if it's someone who's serving in a public capacity like a policeman, schoolteacher or politician, somebody who in a way has sacrificed their private persona because they are fulfilling a public function and as such are accountable. With other people who are very private and you're in their home or whatever, it's appropriate to get a release form them. And also I suppose in terms of Errors and Omissions later, it's generally useful to have releases. Although, I think that everyone would agree that a release is not watertight. If anyone wants to sue you, they'll sue you anyway. It's interesting – every TV station has very different releases. HBO I remember were very scornful of the BBC release. The BBC has a different release from Channel 4. No one really agrees as to what a correct release should be. And if you pull out a complicated release that is pages and pages long and people feel they have to read it all and they don't understand the language, it doesn't make your job easy.

Q – You seem to like lightening in a bottle characters, like Courtney Love. Do you think character first before story in order to get a more personal approach?

Nick – I don't think you start with a character and then find a story. I mean that film was to be a study of Kurt Cobain and it turned into a story of Courtney Love because she was such a monster and she was trying to stop the film. So it was the only story I could tell. I think you have to tell a story about what's happening rather than the story you may have originally set out to make. Terreblanche – I did know about him before, but the film was going to be about him and the AWB. He is obviously a very colorful character, but I was more interested in his driver and the driver's wife than I was in Terreblanche.

Q – You seem to push the interviewees a bit to the point where it seems that your life may be in danger. Do you find that you get more out of them this way?

Nick – I think you're generally on a quest for truth of answers. And I think any filmmaker is in the capacity of an odd father confessor figure. The subjects very much see you that way because you're asking them about their lives and this is their moment of truth. Their moment to define themselves. It gives you the ability to ask questions that you wouldn't do in normal conversations probably. Or certainly in a more blunt fashion. I think it is an acknowledgement of what's going on. Films always make things larger than life, partly because they're seen by so many people and are on a big screen. The mere fact that you study something that has been removed from life and is being shown back produces something that takes on another significance. Asking questions that are more pointed than normal just acknowledges that.

Q – If you are not getting what you want out of a subject, do you ever jig things up a bit?

Nick – I remember once with Victoria Sellers who was giving me nothing and lying to me, I turned off the camera and said, *"I'm tired of this shit you're giving me. We aren't going to continue unless you start answering some of the questions and telling me the truth."* That had the desired affect. She was very drugged out at the time. So occasionally I think you have to do that.

Q – Is there anything you do while you're filming in terms of trying to get more out of your subjects?

Nick – Not really. I think you try to find out what connections they make between things. And you try and copy those connections in the way you interview. If that makes sense.

Q – In your documentary on Terreblanche, the driver comes out with an "out there" theory and it seems in your response that you're playing dumb. Is that what you're doing to get a further response out of him?

Nick – No, with some of his weird theories, I really don't understand him. I suppose it gives him an opportunity to really express what he's going on about. They are certainly nothing I know about because they're weird theories about the Jews

or the Bible. But those things you need explained. Those are genuine questions of not understanding what he's talking about.

Q – Ethics in documentary filmmaking is a hot debate. How would you advise filmmakers to handle this?

Nick – I think they need to answer their own consciences and do what they are comfortable with. I think a good test is that when you sit through your own film, do you feel comfortable about certain things that you have done which might not be fair or might not be representative of the situation? Or might not have been a reasonable way to behave? That's a very subjective thing. People have a very different ethic about things. I think one wants to get away from there being a McCarthy ethics board documentary. And there have been moments of that and there have always been bad times for the form. There can be a slight religious quality to documentary sometimes which can be a little too Puritan.

Q – Are there any ethical boundaries that you wouldn't cross?

Nick – What? Like sleeping with my subjects? (laughter) I'm sure there are plenty. I think all the time you're assessing what you think is appropriate in the same way you do on a day-to-day way of living. You try to do good things that you can justify to yourself. I think it's very important to be aware of the reason you're making the film and what you feel the bigger picture is. That'll justify certain things that you wouldn't be doing otherwise. It's a big responsibility in a way.

Q – You've shot most of your movies on film. What do you think of the quality of digital video?

Nick – The main thing really is the story that you tell – much more than the means by which you tell it. I love film, but on the last couple of films I've used HD and I have to say that I like the look of HD. It's very flexible and I like that kind of information. I think it makes film look like from a different era. I'm sure in five years time, we may have moved to a different form, but no one will be using film. I think this is a transitory debate. It's a bit like should we be shooting on black and white or color. And indeed, I like black and white – shot my first film in black and white – but you wouldn't think about black and white anymore. I miss very much cutting on film against in a digital way because that's how I learned to edit and I'm quite frustrated editing the other way. I think it's important that one has the best resources at one's fingertips. HD certainly is.

Q – Do you think there's a certain discipline missing today because people aren't learning how to shoot film?

Nick – I suppose they will learn that discipline in the cutting room because sooner or later you have to work out what your story is and how to structure it. And maybe that's more painful when you have shot so much material and have to cut it down. I'm sure you shoot less the next time.

Q – Are there any mistakes that you see documentary filmmakers make that can be avoided?

Nick – With myself, there are a couple of films that if I had carried on filming for a couple more weeks, I could've had a really remarkable film. And by not carrying on, I shortchanged the film. That is one really big mistake that one shouldn't repeat. I suppose the other one is in second-guessing oneself. I remember when I was making a film about Lily Tomlin, I never thought she was funny. But everyone else thinks she is funny, so she must be funny. And the film wasn't funny. I should've really listened to my own feelings.

Q – Any advice for new documentary filmmakers?

Nick – If there is a subject that you really want to make, on your first film you just have to go out and make it without having proper financing. Then use that as your passport to make films that are funded in the future. It's sort of a vote of confidence in yourself that you'll do that and it might take many months and it is a big gamble. But it's better than sitting around waiting for money that probably will never come.