

**University of Theatre and Film Arts DLA Institute**

**Research in the Documentary Film**

Summary of the Doctoral Thesis

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### ***Fundamentals of documentary filming***

In my dissertation, I aimed at summarizing the process of documentary research and preparation. Within this, I focus on the genre of a *creative documentary* whose market rules, realization possibilities and forms in the international professional space are somewhat regular, so the stages of research and development can be described.

### ***Chapter 1.: The genre of documentary based on the research process***

When I tried to summarize the practical aspects of documentary research, I considered the documentary as a communication process. According to Stella Bruzzi: "The documentaries are inevitably the result of the intrusion of the filmmaker onto the situation being filmed, they are performative because they acknowledge the construction and artificiality of the even the non-fiction film and propose, as the underpinning truth, the truth that emerges through the encounter between filmmakers, subjects and spectators.<sup>1</sup>"

There are two outstanding aspects in the moral aspects of the documentary during research and development: questions of reality and truth and their relationship, based on the contract with the viewer, and the responsibility of the filmmaker based on the relationship between the filmmaker and the protagonist(s). The director of a documentary is on a moral tightrope towards the present and future viewers, and it is better to think ahead of the moral guiding principle of the reality and the truth about the creative intentions of film making. The moral responsibility of the documentary director changes the life of the film's protagonists, so it is extremely important to see what is the moral basis of the director, how he/she protects its characters, regardless of the format of the film. The financial aspects include the interplay of the current market conditions, the possibilities of realising a documentary.

In my dissertation, I have taken into account the basics of two documentary fiction – Michael Rabiger: *Directing the Documentary*<sup>2</sup>, and Alan Rosenthal's *Writing, Directing and Producing Documentaries*<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Stella Bruzzi: *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, Oxon, Routledge, 2000. p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Rabiger: *Directing the Documentary*. Negyedik kiadás, Focal Press, Oxford, 2004

<sup>3</sup> Alan Rosenthal: *Writing, Directing and Producing Documentary Films*. Harmadik kiadás, Illinois, Southern Illinois University Press, 2002.

## *Chapter 2: The process of documentary research and preparation from a creative point of view*

In my dissertation, I summarize the phases and the practical process of research and preparation, from the birth of a documentary idea to the first shootings. What is it that launches a director to filmmaking? How does a director choose a subject? How does he/she starts to make the film? What kind of research, preparation and development process is ideal for documentary filming? How do you choose your character(s) and how do you build a relationship with them? How can a creator be prepared for unexpected positions in documentary filming? How does the professional, formal and financial background of a movie get together? In my dissertation, I structure the process as follows.

### *2.1. Choosing subjects and topics, motivations*

The motivations for choosing a topic can vary from one artist to another, but in order to start a documentary, we need to know our own motivations, because of the unpredictability and difficulty of the process. The theme selection also depends on the individual creative methods, in my thesis I give examples to these.

### *2.2 Commissioned documentaries*

When a movie made not based on the director's original idea, but by a producer, company, organization etc. the most detailed clarification of the customer's framework is recommended at the beginning of the workflow.

### *2.3. Phases of research and preparatory work*

There is a difference between the research processes, depending on when the subject of the project film is being played. In this regard, Barry Hampe's *Making Documentary Films and Videos*<sup>4</sup> provides the appropriate guidelines for the four subtypes described by him, starting with the timing of the topic in relation to the present: 1. *Recording the Present* 2. *Recalling the Past* 3. *Past and Present Combined* 4. *Investigative Films*. As for the research, I apply Hampe's methodological classification as it sets genre frameworks primarily for the creation process and assigns different tasks. These are the following:

2.3.1 Background material, background research

2.3.2. Findig the crew

2.3.3. Cast selection, casting

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<sup>4</sup> Barry Hampe: *Making documentary Films and Videos*, New York, Holt Paperbacks, 2010

- 2.3.4. Building a relationship with the protagonist, characters
- 2.3.5. Narrative form and structure
- 2.3.6. Style, visuality
- 2.3.7. Written materials - synopsis, treatment, outline
- 2.3.8. Trailer

#### *2.4. Production aspects of the research and development*

The research phase is still an "incubator" until the project is open to the public we work with an internal team, and we are doing a deeper job. When the materials have been completed, the process of financing starts with the first public presenting. At this stage, the producer's job is more active, as the director we work more silent, but at the same time, due to presentations and negotiations, a much more stressful period follows which consists of the following phases:

- 2.4.1 Cooperation with the producer – application material
- 2.4.2 International workshops
- 2.4.3 Pitching Forums

#### *2.5. Short film as a research material*

A possible form, method, and way of the preparation, research and testing of a documentary is a short film. It is an opportunity for the director to indulge in the subject, but at the same time it can be a test of relationship with the protagonist: in a short shooting we can find out how we can work together. And the opposite is also true – if we can not work together and there is not a possibility for a long documentary on the subject. In today's document-film financing reality, short-documentary films are most available in schools, universities.

### ***Chapter 3: The Making of a Historical Documentary. Escape of Jules***

There is a complex and diverse aspect of a historical film, and in 2011 I had the opportunity to start a "classic" historical documentary *Escape of Jules* about the only prisoner, Gyula Michnay, who escaped from the Reesk's forced labor camp. The goal of the film was to present an exciting story in a form that is valid today. I'm writing about the theoretical and practical lessons and experiences of the film in this chapter, especially the film's research and preparation work and tasks.

To me until the film about Michnay, history was an inaccessible, untouchable block that communicates facts in various ways and in form, but somehow already "written". Among other things, during the research on the history of the escape, I understood how this is not so, and how much history is subjective, beyond the fact that postmodern thinking had destroyed great historical narratives in the 80s. And also considering how, why and when some of the researchers turn to a topic that also raises political and financial issues at the moment.

#### ***Chapter 4: Experiences of research and development in the proposed film Partizan to Courtesan***

The last chapter of my dissertation is a good example for my research on the basic theme of my doctoral thesis, the research preparation process. My own, unpublished film has become a 'veterinary horse' – the rules I tried to follow in the stages of the research preparation were ruined by reality. I researched, prepared and filmed a documentary about Éva D. Kardos from between 2006 and 2017, *Partizán to Courtesan*. Although the research preparation consists of hundreds of hours of work, filming, networking, searching for archives, gathering on international workshops, participating in pitching forums, preparing pre-cut materials, making trailers, writing scripts and other work, I have to dismiss the film at this very moment. Nonetheless, the stages of research and preparation, their process, can provide enough lessons to see what problems arise during preparation of a documentary, during research, then during filming, and how complex a process is to prepare a movie.

Why could not the thorough research work lead to the film *Partisan and Courtesan*? What did I not "solve" besides my long studies and work experiences of my work? The question is, in fact, true in general terms: is it possible to explain how the research and development of a documentary determine the future film? The reasons and lessons of this failure are described in the last chapter in detail.