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STORY WORKSHOP-Finding the Point

By Kathy Ann March

March 1, 2006

Moderator: Melanie Wood Director/Producer

Panel: CBC Broadcaster Gary Marcuse, Story Editor Dianna Bodnar, Story Editor Dawn Brett, and Don White, Creative Consultant National Film Board

MW: Gary Marcuse sitting at the end probably has been making documentaries longer than I have and he has been on this side of documentary film maker and now sits on what we know as the other side the broadcaster side. And he will be speaking to us tonight from that point of view, he is wearing his broadcaster hat. Dianna Bodnar she has also been around for awhile and she can speak to us about the peculiarities of finding the point, within each episode of a series that has a prescribed story line-which has it's own challenges. Next, is Dawn Brett, Dawn again has done many things but one of the things we'll ask her to address tonight is the exception to the rule issue. Because like every rule, I before E except after C, there are exceptions to everything we are going to say. Because you're always going to find something, this film did it that way and they didn't have to follow the rule. There are always exceptions and we can ask her about that. And then there is Don White who is one of the few gurus in this town- the Major General of the point I would call him. So without further ado I am going to ask each of them to talk very briefly about what they feel the point is of the point. Why is it important to find the point early and own it?

DW: I think the point should have been why you should give the people sitting on the panel the questions before hand, What is the point? I would argue the point is important because story is important and story is all about developing an argument to prove a point. So if you lack the one and you haven't got the other and story I would say is what engages most viewers in a production and I'm not talking about drama, or fiction necessarily, I'm talking about virtually any genre. And I'm defining story as the development of character, development of argument, all of which is as much part of documentary as it is of drama or anything else. So, the point is what you are organizing story around. Your entire story is about that, and without that you struggle to find the organization

MW: see I knew you could do that without planning.

DW: Well I had to stall for a bit while I got a thought.

MW: Dawn do you have anything to add to that?

DB: I do actually, I don't quite agree because I think there is a million different points in a documentary, because I think that the thing that is the most important is the focus. Because I think without the focus you don't have a clear understanding or road map of where you are going. I favor the idea of a simple kind of construction. You need to have a because statement and within that statement

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you can basically figure out the boundary of the story you are about to tell, and there will be a million points I'm sure you'll make along the way, some points you'll explore as major parts of the plot major parts of the story line, other things will be throw away- things that support one little example that is not as meaningful, it's not like a structural support to the entire thing. So I don't know, I think focus is what I talk about when I work with people.

MW: I was thinking of the point as in the focus. Do you think they are two different things?

DB: I do, because I think even language confuses people, to be honest most of my experience has been collaborative and you're working with these people and you're all trying to make this film together, and it's a creative endeavor and you've all got a million ideas but until you actually figure out what the story you're all telling and you come clean with it and make a clear focus statement, then you're all not going to be on the same page making the right sort of film.

MW: O.K then both of you agree that story is the important –well obviously

DB: Well forget the effects-you don't need any of that –the story is definitely the most important

Dianna Bodnar: I agree because I approach documentary very often from using a drama model, for me I agree exactly with what Dawn and Don have been saying for me its about structure, and for me finding the point is within structure, and for me within documentary its really challenging and lots of fun because there are a couple of different points where you can freak out, regarding structure the first is at the proposal stage when you're trying to figure out what am I setting out to do and what is the story I think I'm telling and then after a while at either the midpoint of shooting or after shooting you step back and go "whoa" what happened there, what actually happened and what I got done, what did I set out to do and now that I'm done what actually happened. And you know how am going to tell that story in some kind of way that makes sense structurally, for me that is hugely important that sort of the building block of the way I work and maybe another analogy is to find the melody in a work it really is like listening for the throughline, but its like jazz where you have lots of improvisation but then you come back to the core and the throughline and to be able to have that focus and stability that keeps the piece anchored.

MW: So do you find though to maintain that structure or stay on path you need to anchor it around the point as in the focus, you still keep coming back to that central "here's what im trying to say" in the story, whether it's the new structure or the original structure.

Dianna Bodnar: I think you have to find ways to do it without beating it over the head. You inevitably do do that, you're always comparing, particularly in a series because in a series overall you have a particular format, generally or depending on the kind of series you're doing or the kind of structure, you know the series is about something..so you've got to keep that tension between what is the overall theme and what is the overall formant and what are you expecting to deliver within that format especially if it is a long-running series.you've certain kinds of expectations from that documentary There is a

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tension between what kind of format it is fitting within and the uniqueness of your particular episode. So there are two things to consider.

MW: Gary as a broadcaster is that something that you look for in proposals?

GM: It is hard to imagine it not existing somewhere whether or not you have articulated it- when are you to find it? For me it's a question of when are they going to get to the point. Whether it's somebody talking to me..or whether it's somebody doing their own research. And it's hard to imagine a short story without a point..unless it was kind of experimental rhythm of the day and even that might have a point. It's hard to imagine a news story without a point because that's the very nature of what we are doing. I remember John Turner used to argue A,B,C,D, and then he would get to his point, and by then every body would be asleep by then, so having one at the end of the tunnel is not necessarily a great virtue in its self. Kind of depends on how you get there and so my sense is that some of my friends say that,.. Nettie Wild.., great story tellers intuitively they come back from an event and they tell a great story, I seem to come back from an event and I talk about what happened, I don't get into my point until I'm deep into a documentary, when I was making them. So I'm kind of forgiving in a sense in that it may be buried in there. Strictly from the point of view of a commissioning editor looking at hundreds of proposals-one of the most frequent things that I find is that people will find a subject, they will be totally engaged, personally engaged with their subject, they haven't decided what about that subject they want to explore. And sometimes the only way you can figure that out is if you go to Don and he says "what's the point!". So since I've been at CBC I get pages and pages of stuff about how important this subject is. And so "what will you do if I give you money to develop this?".. "Well I'll find out more about the subject." O.k. good, but what kind of story are you telling? How are you going to tell it? I want to know how the person as a film maker starts to merge with the subject, to come up with an interpretation which we used to call a point of view and can you imagine a point of view without a point? It would just be an 'Of View', it would be an O.V. documentary

MW: Thank-you..we are going to start by what is a story editor, and at what point would you recommend bringing them on board? What does a story editor do for people out there who haven't worked with them.

GM: As soon as you're confused !-is a good time to start.

Question from the floor: going back to the point.. Is the point ever a question?

GM: Right here, it is (laughter from audience)-What's your point?

Question from the floor: When you are making the statement for a story, can you present it as a question?

GM: How do you frame the question, how do you get there? How do you bring people along where you get to the point, that this question is doing something for you and for them and for the world. There is a journey to be taken, and the journey usually requires a set of experiences, whether it's architecture or

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filmmaking that I'm going to go through before I get to the place where I understand what this question is that I'm supposed to be addressing. Should I embrace this baby, for example or should I press this button to see what happens?

DW: Before we go on to that next question, if you don't mind, spend a little bit of time just because..I don't know how everybody out there feels, but when I'm out there trying to get information I'm more interested in consensus than in a divergence of opinion and the thing that's kind of interesting here is that your first question was about the point, and then we switched to the focus and the value and importance of the focus, and then the value and importance of the structure. And then Gary went back to what the film is about and my sense is that the problem that existed is that we disagree, but that we are talking about slightly different things and so while we are going down the line, maybe we need to clarify what is meant by the point. So everybody understands and we understand what we are talking about. And to come back to the question just raised can it ever end in a question, I would say sure absolutely, but if it is a pure question without an answer, any answers what so ever I think it risks being unsatisfying. And I would suspect that most film stories that end on questions there is a certain part which is rhetorical and that piece which is rhetorical is what I would talk about when I talk about point. So that I want to throw out my definition of point and what it is I'm thinking about. When you talk about what is a story about or what is a film about, usually it is not just about an issue or a situation or a character, it is about some kind of truth about that issue, situation, or that character. And it is not just a truth, but it is *your* statement about that truth. And your statement about that truth is what I call the point. So when I ask what is the point, I'm asking what is your statement about that truth that you are espousing in this story. And of course, it is absolutely essential that we have focus, because without focus we're never going to get there, and it is absolutely essential that we have structure because that is going to define the journey. My suspicion is that we are all talking about the same thing, but over to you guys...

D.B. That's absolutely right, because when I think of the point I think of the universal truth, that's the catch phrase, but it's the truth that no matter what story you are telling even if it is your personal experience other people will see something in it that speaks to them. That's why they call it the universal truth I guess but that you are not just making a point to make a point, I guess-and from that story you will be able to reflect on a part of humanity in some way-the best stuff at least..

Dianna Bodnar: Part of that statement that you're making about this is very similar to dramatic structure, is that it is a value statement, it is how you feel about your subject, it's what your opinion is and that is where you get point of view.

MW. And would we agree that that includes the focus, would you say?

Dianna Bodnar: Ya, because if you are writing from a particular point of view then that leads immediately into focus. So you know,...

D.B...and that will define the universal truth

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D.W. and that defines where you're going to wind up.

D.B. because that way it helps you define the beginning and the end all ready. It draws a circle around the subject matter that you are dealing with. So that can know where you are going, you have a suspicion at some point about where you are going to end up. A lot of people when they undertake a film have a passionate feeling one way or the other about the subject matter and they have an inkling of where they are going to go with it ..so I think having a focus really helps set up the parameters where you find your beginning and your end and all the good stuff in between.

MW: and I presume that the point to the story focus is not: I want to make a story about...insert subject here.

DB: No, that's an idea

DW: I want to put that question to Gary, because Gary probably fields more proposals than all of us put together..and a lot of them will have built in weaknesses and some will have strengths, so when you see a story is about or a proposal is about...what are the weaknesses and what are the strengths that you identify when one of those crosses your desk?

GM: I would immediately qualify that with I am working with CBC, directly with documentaries, directly with news current affairs department that has a journalistic bias in the kinds of programs they are looking for , they are looking for contemporary stories with a certain edge to them with good film making qualities in them, but already there is a certain amount conditioning going on with what my eye is looking for in this job-so somebody could have a beautiful way of telling a story with a collage approach to their impression of a summer's afternoon...beautiful film, but I'm not responding to it, I'm saying try another broadcaster, socould you repeat the question? (laughter)

DW. What would you say is the biggest kind of problem or confusion that you identify in proposal that people confuse story with something else? Because you have already said that you are looking for story.

GM: As people become more familiar with what makes a good documentary and the more that you see good documentary and the more you see good documentary pitched and made, the more layers you begin to see it takes to fill up an hour, it takes a lot of different kinds of stories, and different aspects of that story is woven together, and so I think that what I am most intuitively responsive to is a sense that there are going to be these layers, so there is going to be different characters, different situations, this person is at a point of change in their life or this particular town is in a condition where something is going to happen. You can see that something is actually going to unfold that will give us the opportunity as filmmakers to go in there and kind of capture it live on the hoof, that's kind of where I'm looking these days. When I see those kind of things lurking on the horizon, that's when I get excited. When I get anxious is when I don't see them coming any closer. The filmmaker has quite figured out what those elements are or they only have one or two. Or they are so focused on the topic on the facts on the details

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on the background, they haven't quite been able to pull back and let that stuff synthesize or not dreaming about it yet. So that's when I started doing this Don and I had some meetings and I started asking people going into development if they wouldn't consider going to a story editor and then I started before I even had money to put into development offering people an opportunity sometimes to go to a story editor and just think about what they're doing, go to the story editor and come back again, because it needed that kind of reflection. And I also think it needs that kind of reflection in the privacy of the relationship with your own story editor, because if you're going to discover a story, it had bloody well be your story not somebody else's. And so sometimes I feel like I've had prescriptive reality based or just stories that people feel ought to be told, because I'm a filmmaker but no connection to it. I am wandering a bit here, but I hope that this is circling the area that you're interested in, so to finish that thought- I think the upshot of it is, is that I think that it is much more interesting for filmmakers to have a discussion with an experienced story editor who sits there like a blank slate waiting for you to assemble a story on the palate of their mind than it is with a broadcaster who comes with, even if they are trying to be speculative, you're going to start taking notes and saying o.k. they wanted one of these and one of those. So if I give them one of these and one of those, they better take it. Or you know we're going to have a dispute, so it's much better to go off and do the story editing with your own story editor in a way.

Question from the floor: So are you saying that when you have someone coming to you for development, you want them to say "I've got this story" as opposed to "I've got this topic-I've got all this information and I need some help to spend time on how to tell this story"?

GM: It's not quite that easy, to tell people "oh you're not quite ready to develop this or that" People bring you things at all stages of speculation and development and some people have done five years of research on something before they even thought of the film and they know too much, they can't pull out of that, other people have just got this glimmer, but it seems to be brilliant but you're all ready to go into development. So it's really hard to say, I think that if you just have a topic-you're not quite ready to talk to a broadcaster or talk to me, it's harder. Unless I have a lot of time to sit around and speculate with you and then I'm kind of worried that you might start making my program at that point, because I'll just get excited. So sometimes I see a glimmer and the story is not there, I'll say go work with a story editor, but since I'm asking you to do that I'll pay for it. Or on the other hand sit around with your friends, I think a lot of us just do this kind of story editing with our friends all the time, because they're filmmakers, they're going to ask us the inconvenient questions. You don't have to pay somebody to do that.

MW: Questions like: why would you want to make that film? You mean questions like that?

GM: Oh, you really want to spend the next two and a half years of your life...

MW: So Dianna at what point are you called in to be a story editor, or does it vary a lot?

Dianna Bodnar: It really does vary- I've been called in at all different points right from, actually right from concept when people are just talking around an idea something that they want to do, when actually there may be a subject and maybe I get referred to just as a sounding board, to ask them questions, to ask

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them what kind of characters they found, what kind of access they have. All of those kinds of things, to help them weave through their ideas to come up with what seems to be the most fruitful kind of approach for them. And what they want to do. I've also come in in the middle of a project when there is footage all over the place, and all kind of stuff going on, and to help again to see the forest for the trees and the very end to help polish and tweak. So it can happen at any point, but really it is when you are most confused, or you feel like you need some outside assistance or clarification.

MW: Hm, Dawn how about you?

D.B. I kind of stumbled upon this by accident, actually I come from journalism, and for the past 10 years I've been a free-lance journalist and independent documentary maker. I've jumped around from being a feature writer with the Vancouver Sun to doing CBC radio documentaries, magazine articles, that kind of stuff, I just happened to do a one hour news documentary, I call it that because it wasn't very good as far as 'arty' budget or anything like that, on the whole APEC debacle. I think that CTV at the time was desperate to do something about APEC because it was all over the news and they couldn't afford to send a reporter to cover it and I had just been following it out of personal interest and got all the on the ground footage-just basically why did this whole clamp down happen at APEC thing here in 1997. So basically I just did a one hour piece and didn't think much of it. Well jeez, journalism is kinda going down the...well nobody is doing the kinds of stories that I thought I went to school to do which is the long form journalism where you actually have some context and it's not just a minute thirty. And so from there I just stumbled along until Mark Akbar, the co-director of Manufacturing Consent, saw my film and asked me to work on The Corporation and so that's how I kind of got started in a consulting capacity. I consider myself a story consultant because I like to talk about focus, I like to talk about economy of time, as a journalist I'm sure that a lot of people appreciate that you don't have a lot of time to go out shooting, you don't have a budget to go out wasting lot of time following a bunch of leads to put something together so essentially what I do is I come in and try and help people to figure out their own mental environment of figure out what story they're trying to tell, what story they hope to tell and find ways to do that, so I end up co-writer on a couple of things, because if you have an ongoing relationship then it turns out you end up writing stuff but just to define the whole story consultant-editing thing I always go by the Writers Guild of Canada definition which is: a story consultant gives you advice about anything from research, to creative type things, how you structure your story..maybe fix your act three for you, give you a bit of advice. A story editor really gets their hands dirty, polishing and rewriting and junking stuff and generally they take their advice one hundred percent, whereas with a story consultant, you can give them advice, whether they take it or not, is up to them-it's their story.

GM: A hundred percent? (laughter from audience)

DB: Well, maybe not a hundred percent, but your right in there, you're part of the story.

MW: Don when you're called in...I can tell you want to talk about something other than that...

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DW. I don't know about anybody else, but I'm finding this fascinating because Diana, Dawn and I seem to have been doing the same thing for a number of years locally and we have never met (audience laughter) and I know that one of the objectives is tonight is to network a little bit, and when I'm saying this I'm not saying that I'm disagreeing with any of this, but what I'm finding really fascinating is that I'm getting opinions 'cause I don't really know the answer to this question, but I like Gary's thing, I like you bring somebody in when you're confused. I would suggest that exactly when you do it and there are different points that that'll happen, I also like there is a lot of value in what

Dawn is suggesting in the WGC definitions of story editor especially if they're working on a drama and they're sitting down doing script changes and those script changes are going ahead and so on as opposed to a story consultant. And one of the reasons I'm a little confused about this is that like Dawn I never started out to be a story consultant or story editor it's just something that happened and it happened because I had spent many years as a writer and director of documentaries, so I was asked in as a trouble shooter, and it was always when twelve weeks of editing had gone by and they couldn't come up with a cut that was getting accepted. And at some point during that process when I was sitting trying to problem solve with the film maker I had suggested a couple times that this was probably a little late to be thinking about these things and it probably would have been a lot better to think about it a lot earlier. That kind of led to someone saying "Well, we have an interesting proposal here why don't you work with that person" and it's something that has developed and honestly about formal definitions about story editors versus story consultants I'm a little bit muddled about that myself so that's why getting these perspectives is interesting.

MW: Now, does anyone have questions before we move on?

Question from the floor: It's around what Dianna is saying: getting your focus, finding your point, and getting to the shooting stage and finding out what you actually get in the field, then you get into post, and what do I do with the stuff that I've got..but so often when we are pitching stuff at the development stage or pre-development stage..we're imagining what's going to happen. And it's like this really scary nether world because I can get really carried away dramatically, but in the end, we don't know what we're going to get, especially with some of the better ideas. It's a mystery and that's why we want to do it. If you have everything nailed at the beginning, it's so cut and dry and you might as well not even make the film then. I would love to hear what you have to say about that kind of nether world and what you think goes on in that process and how much you can identify stuff at the very beginning.

Dianna Bodnar: The nether world of proposal writing...treatments, .so as I understand it do you need a point or a focus at that treatment stage. Do you need to say I am making this because...

Question from the floor:...what I'm saying is that when you're trying to describe the structure, some of the events at that early stage, you need to be somewhat descriptive in the pitches, expecting what people are going to say....

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Dianna Bodnar: In my experience it's boy, proposals and treatments are a whole special area in themselves and will break anybody on the wheel. But what I found what is helpful, it's sort of a blend of confidence and foolhardiness in a way, it's knowing when to stop your research and start putting some questions together. I find that the more that you can research what you want to find out about, that you can have a fairly decent grip on your subject matter and then sit back a think about what is your focus. How do you feel about the subject matter you've run across, how do you feel about the characters, little intriguing things, little carrots that have been dropping down in front of you-when you can pull some of those ideas together, it is sort of at a point between then and writing a proposal-and writing a proposal, to me I've had the most success with them when I can help someone put together something that will tell whoever is reading it that will give them the confidence, that you know what you're doing. That if you don't know exactly where you're going, that you know what you want to find out, you know how you're going to start-you got a plan. You've got steps, you've got characters that you want to flesh out, you are not blindly groping in the dark, you have a plan, you know generally where you want to go, you might find out when you get there but you're not entirely sure-if that makes any sense at all.

Question from the floor: I've done this before, I've put a story in, and then started shooting and then the most interesting part is the part that you never thought about-you talk about focus and maintaining your focus through it, would you say; stick with the original story, although it might not be as interesting or quickly go to this new one, although you won't have any focus on it?

Dianna Bodnar: that's a good point...obviously a point of confusion, obviously involve your partners at this point-the broadcaster.

GM: Well one theory of filmmaking goes, you write your proposal, you get your money then you go out and make your movie. Maybe, I'd agree with you maybe I'd say..fabulous...how do you merge those two events-how do you follow that line while keeping a story going..I might also tell you sure,Is it going to go there is it going to work. Who wants to leave a good story behind, it's journalism in it's own way. It's storytelling and it's exploration, we don't know where these things are going..... I don't think that any of the really terrific films, people knew what was going to happen by the end of it. I'm thinking 'Gerrie and Louise'-Sturla Gunnarsson's film they shot in South Africa. Who would have guessed that the lead characters would get married, or that he would get access to certain people or by borrowing a very expensive car and parking it in front of the General's house he'd be able to get that interview. You know, there are so many intangibles in good film making and exciting film making. I think the problem where you will have most difficult changing focus is when you are dealing with a reality series or anything with a bible. The bible is hard to change, you know, two minutes and fifty second's in you're supposed to have reached a certain plot point, and that point hasn't passed the producers are fainting away in the editing room. I've had that experience, with the best of friends.

MW: Don White I think would like to add to that.

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DW: I think that it's useful to point out that when you're making a film you're dealing with two different kinds of risk. And the first risk is that, you don't know what you're doing at all-and you just go out and start shooting, and which equates to spending money and you discover your film in the process and you wind up with something that is less effective and more expensive than it need be. That's risk number one. Risk number two is; you research it to death, tightly script it, go out and shoot it and discover that what you've done, and lose all the spontaneity, originality, juice that you might have in the film; and that's the other one. Either one of those approaches, exclusively, is likely to be detrimental to what you're trying to do. And as a filmmaker what you're trying to do is preventing; you waste your money by not knowing what you're subject is, and at the same time preventing that you lose the life, the spark and the spontaneity of the undiscovered or the unanticipated event. And the better you know your story, doesn't mean that you are closed to the unanticipated, rather you recognize it for it's value and what it represents when it happens and you can use it. So I think, that's what you're trying to do, is knit those two and minimize the risk and find some kind of optimal path through it.

GM: At a science congress in Europe I was talking with somebody worked with the BBC, and they were talking about a particular science series that will remain unnamed, where the researchers would go out and interview all the key scientists involved, then they'd come back, they'd write the script, right down to what these people would say, and then they would send an associate producer out to interview them, who would then proceed to torture the scientists until they said the right things. Because they knew what they were going to say- and then they would put it on the air and people would say very crisp specific things looking maybe a little pained. But did the pain matter? You know. I mean what kind of film are you making? Does the pain matter or is it the spontaneity that is most encouraged. In some ways you want to be prepared to do all the different kinds of film making, one where you work very specifically to fill it out, and other things where you're investing more of your own time and more of your own creativity. I always felt as a filmmaker that the more creative latitude I had the less I was being paid, and the more shooting I could do, and I think there is often a relationship that is rooted in this financial issue that Don is invoking here which is if someone has x amount of dollars and they need a specific result, they want [to get] the specific result. Are you going to work as a technical filmmaker in that sense, this gets close to an industrial maybe you can make some good money, go on vacation and think about your next show.

DW. It can be less formal than that, you can say you got a broadcast license and two hundred grand, and I want an hour that's just going to knock 'em dead. And that's it, and that's all you need, and that's hardly an industrial, but if you go out and discover what your film is about on your last day of shooting, you're in trouble. And the point I'm trying to make is all the films that I was originally brought into to do trouble shooting on, were films where people had'nt known what they were making a film about when they started shooting, so that's the risk.

Dianna Bodnar: and that is coming back to the importance of having a point.

DB: it's funny this idea of the focus, obviously I'm so hopelessly devoted to the concept, I see it as a organic living breathing thing. I'm going to write this film and a universal truth is going to come out of it,

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and it's going to be great. The whole point is that, again, it is the road map, it's not the road trip. You've haven't taken the trip yet, so you don't know what's happening. But you generally know that you're going out west, who knows what's going to happen, but when you have that focus, when those unexpected things pop-up how does this serve my original focus. Does it really serve it, doesn't it? Does it completely not fit at all? Well it was a great point, but "when in doubt, cut it out". But then sometimes you may come across something, a development that takes your film to a deeper level, a better place. And in that case you rework your focus to incorporate that, and maybe that is what takes you on your journey, but it is definitely an organic process. It's not like you write it down and it stays that way.

Dianna Bodnar : although there is huge value in writing it down, and revisiting to rewrite your focus and revisiting it regularly and checking in and making sure that's still what it is..there is enormous value to that

DB: and the focus is not the story, there is an idea, there is a focus, and then there is the story. The story is something that represents the actual superficial story that you're telling. Saw a film last night it's called 'Brother's Keeper'-it was so good. It naturally had a dramatic story arc. It was based on this dimwitted farmer, sixty something year old farmer, who was charged with the murder of his brother. So you immediately have the dramatic story arc of the trial, where this illiterate farmer is up against a system that he doesn't understand. But what's the focus? The focus is not we're following this guy see what happens to him. Because the truth is, the man and his brothers, who lived in squalor, they grunted a lot, they didn't talk much, one guy couldn't even tell time.

These are not people who you put a camera on, and they are going to wax eloquently about how they feel about situations. So what the film makers did, which I think is brilliant, is they widened their focus. So on the surface, it is about this dairy farmer that is charged with the murder of his brother. It is not the mystery of : did he do it, didn't he do it, which is a great element. What they ended up doing, (the filmmakers don't know, did he do it, how are they going to know if the cops don't know..) So they widened the scope to a community rallies around a former outcast because they feel he is being unfairly prosecuted for the murder of his brother, which he could or may not have committed. That's the focus. So, no matter what happens at the end -you have a beginning, middle, and end. There's a journey that the characters have taken, and I think that film in particular was a great example of good story.

Question from the floor: What kind of questions can I ask myself to get to the focus.

MW: that's when you see a story editor.

DB: Every one has got their own way of getting to those moments. Something I have used for years and years, to help me think about those elements, to figure out what story I'm telling and where I'm going. A few years ago some producers came to me with: they wanted to do something about rage. I said "Rage-o.k. It's timely, people get angry that's good footage-angry people," they immediately got funding

GM: CBC?

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DB: No, not CBC, it was actually Global, and all sort of people raging-it'll be great. Basically I had to come up with a story-what do you want to say about rage?...do you want me to get into to all this now?

MW: Well, if you have a formula, a math formula, but there is a way. How does someone sit down and think about it.

DB: My personal take on it, which is pretty simplistic. It is rooted in journalism, I start with what's the idea, ...let's see there's the story about the dairy farmer...

MW: How about engines..jet engines, I want to do a story about jet engines,

DB: O.k, so you want to do a story about jet engines, which is a terrible idea (laughter from audience)..lets get to why anyone else would care,or why they would watch it. O.k. , so you're trying to define your focus, what's the issue about jet engines, what's the impact, what's the scope, and what's the edge. So basically accounts to: O.k. you've got an idea about jet engines what story do you want to tell-you've got to do some research, you've go to know if there's a story about jet engines , I'm sure you wouldn't just say "jet engines" and figure out what the issue is. I prefer something a little more complicated. So maybe I could change the above.

MW: O.k. jet engines using fossil fuels

DB: O.k. so it's an environmental film, So what's the issue; The issue is jet engines use too much fuel. So what? Why would anyone care? Because Why? So jet engines use too much fuel because they're cheaper to make that way for the manufacturing companies. What's the because statement. Well because these companies are making them cheaper, what's the impact. Well the impact is these companies making cheap engines affect the environment. It's affects communities, it affects everybody in the world whose dealing with pollution. Who is impacted by this-go to the communities where they are building the jet engines and figure out if there is a story angle from pollution, the people who are affected by it, the ones who are the most affected by it. Then maybe you go to the factories where they make them-just do some research so that you can come up with a focus that is broader than: jet engines are ruining the world, because that's a point, that's not necessarily a story that can keep you going. And from there you can figure out a story arc-and through that research y ou'll know what story you are telling-that's an issue based documentary, those aren't as compelling. But they can still be done, more in a news style.

MW: both Don White and Gary would like to jump in.

DW: One of the questions that Dawn just asked and I think is really important. I've sat down with people who have dealt with stuff at CBC, talking with Gary, and they're almost at the point of tears, and they say: "He asked why he should care?" (laughter from audience). And, but the thing is, that is probably the nut, because what that question embodies is why is it relevant to me, why is it important, and what truth are you advocating here. And that's why he should care.

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GM: and now you know why I like to have this stuff happen in private. It's kind of a terrible responsibility to be looking at other peoples work when its in a kind of a vulnerable nascent form, in a way. Because they have tried to ask themselves that question and may have succeeded in answering it or not. They may have made a lot of films or not. They may have had the experience of being in journalism or story editing or not. And so I throw out a lot of the questions obviously, but in some ways I think all the more reason to explore them in the privacy of your own relationships. But I do think that another way of getting at your question is that, you start to talk about it all the time. If you have a partner, my partner said to me at the beginning, of the one about the Artic, she said "I guess I going to be hearing about the Artic for the next two years"but there is something going on in that.. But are people responding to it or are they getting bored?

Dianna Bodnar; It's a good sign once you start getting close to the territory and start poking around in the material and finding your characters. Because the other thing to think about is start unrolling your mind movie. Because, there are so many projects I've worked on that should have been a radio show. Where generally you have to gently tell them that this is not visual. So that's another really important thing, is to allow that movie to start unspooling and how you imagine that story being told visually and as you're poking around, it's hard-it's worth going down that road where you start finding interesting people who are connected with your story, who add to that visual aspect story, and start driving that story telling engine, those are some of the hooks.

I just want to go back a bit to why would I care, because I think it's critical because after you've done research for years and you're passionate about the environmental impact of what is jet engines, or whatever it is you think everyone else should be too, but there are many, many, many issues in this world. We can't care about all of them, and somehow I think that's the point of all these people sitting here because we have to find why we care. Why I care, why the broadcaster cares, why one person watching would care. Isn't that what we are talking about here?

DW: I would suggest it is, I would suggest, the secret to gaining an audience is having something relevant to the viewers that you want to watch it. Because people are not going to watch something that has no personal relevance. And that's what "the why should I care" what is it that is relevant enough to gain an audience. What is it about the jet engines that's relevant, that keeps me wanting to spend an hour of my time watching it. Unless you can identify it yourself, you're going to have a heck of a time building it into a program.

DB: Unless you are not looking for a ,essentially, a dramatic story arc. And your looking to do something for Discovery Channel on the biggest jet engine ever built. I'm sure they would go for that.

Dianna Bodnar: Although, a recent series that Discovery Channel commissioned from Paperny films is called Jet Stream. Although it follows the lives of people who are training to become fighter pilots. There it is, just because it is Discovery doesn't mean that they're not going for dramatic story arc.

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DB: Without a doubt, I'm talking about frontier construction sort of : lets see them build the Chunnel sort of thing. But make no mistake, good writing has always been about people, it's not about issues, it's not about things, it's about people. People struggling with issues, it's about conflict basically.

Question from floor:

There are so many themes that are explored over and over again, how much currency do you give to someones individual experience of what inspired them with the idea in the first place. What value do you add to the point of view that it's coming from?

GM: I am always interested in who the film maker is, and why they are making the program, and I rarely get beyond first meetings without finding something out about that. I mean if someone doesn't really care about it and they are doing it for money, I'm probably going to sense that. At some point-that doesn't happen very often, people don't stay in the business... You have a point of view, occasionally, in journalism it could become problematic if you have a point of view that prevents them from being able to explore the story.

You can run up against your own limitations that way, and we should look at that and sometimes that means sending in somebody else to do a set of interviews. There are ways to deal with it, but that certainly should be put on the table. Don't underestimate the importance of conveying to a broadcaster why you really want to make this film now. Because it's not money that is driving you, and it's a long tedious process, and it's only people who want to make films who are going to put in those hundreds of extra hours. I think that's really key, from my point of view I may get to participate in setting four or five films in motion. That's four or five filmmakers that didn't get to make something and that's a million bucks at stake. It would be nice if something came back that people want to watch. So the fact of being really being invested in your film and having a craft are useful too.

Question from floor: You said earlier to be sure that it is your story that you are telling. And I'm wondering if you can separate telling someone elses story and seeing someone who has an interesting story and wanting to get in there and help them tell it, and involving your self that way.

GM: It kind of adds up to the same thing. I don't think I said "make sure your telling your personal story"-but be sure it is a film you want to make, is what I'm talking about there.

MW: before we move on I'm interested to know how many out there are interested in making a film that is a broadcast series because that seems to be one of the things we need to do.

GM: You mean series as opposed to singles? Or strands?

MW: Either

GM: You mean television

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MW: Yes, Because if that's the case there are particular questions and problems associated with trying to make a story that fits within a series bible or strand bible. Dianna would you like to speak a little bit about those peculiarities?

Dianna Bodnar: There are so many different kinds...

MW Let's start with a series that has a bible and a show format and every single episode of that, will have this format. And if you are pitching to do one of those you need to find the point, the focus, the...

GM. May I..Strand to my mind is something like the Lens or Passionate Eye, which is very heterogenous, takes all kinds of things.

MW: We will start with series, then back to strands.

GM: because with Strand you're back to stories, you're telling one of a kind-which we've been talking about all along.

Dianna Bodnar; The kind of series that I have experience on are reality series. Which are completely different animal, sort of going to the dark side. They are a really specific animal in themselves, and then there are series that are episodic series. And in my experience, it's funny because in terms of becoming involved with that kind of series, I've never been involved in a series where a director has actually come and pitched a concept, that would fit in with that series. Either the people who are running that series, they know that they have a certain number of episodes they have to do, they are in search of characters or episodes to fill those particular slots and they have their own research departments.

MW: I'm thinking along the lines of Megabuilders or Buy Me, some of those documentary reality series-they do take outside pitches-because if anyone is hoping to do that.

Dianna Bodnar; That's an interesting question because if I was working as a show runner or creative producer on a reality series, which I am currently doing, if actually if a director came and pitched me something that actually fit. And had a character that fit my bible, I would be thrilled. I'm sure the Producers would be thrilled to, because it means that part of a huge job in reality is casting and looking for characters, it's everything, it's absolutely everything. So if that happened, that would be absolutely terrific, the thing to do is to know that show's bible cold. To really watch the show and really know a lot about it's format. And if your interested, it's never hurts to contact the show's producers and ask to see the format and the bible, they may say yes or no, but I think it's really worth it if you're interested in it.

MW: Anyone else have any questions out there?

Question from floor: Can you elaborate on what you mean by a bible?

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Dianna Bodnar: Ya, a series bible is exactly the same as it would be for a dramatic series, it's a big fat document that says everything about the series. That will go through the format, it will be very explicit about it, it will talk about the philosophy of the series. It will go act by act through the format and talk about what absolutely has to happen in that format. What kinds of variations have happened, it will give examples. The bible is everything you need to know about the kinds characters, the storylines, the purpose of the series. It is a very complete document. I don't know how easy it is to get to see a bible, I don't think I've every shown mine, or ours, to anyone outside the series. But it is something that we can not operate without....it's our point

Question from floor: You were just talking about, in reality shows, casting is everything, characters are everything-is that not possible in the nature of TV documentaries themselves-can there just be character driven, people will go on the journey because they really care about the characters or somewhere in there, there still has to be some point, or you can't just go on a journey.

Dianna Bodnar; Oh ya, that is a standard principle of any good documentary film.

DB: and any good writing-there has to be something at stake, if these characters, they could be the kookiest greatest characters in the world and we love them, if they're not doing anything, if they're not on a journey where they are up against something or something is at stake-then I'm not sure that anyone is going to care long enough to watch for more than just a couple minutes. It's the idea, that we want to learn about what other people are doing, and to see reflections of ourselves in other peoples experiences, and see their humanity revealed and their characters revealed. And so it's the idea that they are on some kind of a journey, it basically goes back to the idea of dramatic storytelling. Documentary film, the ancestor is not radio-it's film and so you need those stories where something is happening, there is a struggle, there's to make it simple, there is conflict: man against nature, man against himself-they're trying to do something-it's not: here's an interesting environmentalist let's go watch him go and hand out a bunch of leaflets. This guy is going to hang out with a bunch of Caribou, and go on this crazy journey and try and achieve something. We need to see them with a goal that has a stake involved. Or at least the best one's do or else it is a slice of life piece, or something. Like Mike McCartle....nothing wrong with slice of life pieces...

GM; I've got a question for Don actually, -so there's story, we'd all like to have a nice story at the heart of it., and I feel that you start with an issue then you drift towards the story, and then comes the real puzzle of making films which is-how do you tell this story? And that's where life becomes much more diverse and interesting. And when you get out of script driven bible stuff, quite unpredictable. But I wonder, when you are doing story editing workshops do you find that there is a place where people; "now that you have helped me pull out the threads"-, but have you spent as much time now on how you are going to tell that story? What goes on from that point from you. Because that's where the chemistry begins to happen in a documentary.

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DW: And I think that that perhaps ironic. Even at the beginning of a workshop I usually make a disclaimer, that the workshop is NOT about how to tell a story. Because there just isn't time to deal with that, we spend most of the time just trying to find out what the story is.. And how to tell the story, is really the craft of filmmaking and it's how you're going to approach it and at least within the scope of those particular workshops we don't get into the how at all. It's just really trying to find out what's it about, what's the rough structure and (perhaps the difference isn't as clean as I suggest) because in the pursuit of those questions and in the pursuit of that structure, you immediately dealing with how. Because you're thinking what can you put on the screen that would show such and such a stake. Or such and such an event, or develop the character like their talking about. And I think what you said about character is really important because there really is no distinction between documentary and drama, in terms of the importance of character, the importance of development, the importance of any of those things. But within the workshop, the how of filmmaking and the how you would realize that is sort of ..it's a constraint that is always in the background of what we do, but it is not really about the how, it's more about the structure because that's what we set out to do. And of course nothing is quite straight forward because I did a couple weeks ago I did a workshop in Calgary that had a different set of parameters, and those parameters were that we would come out of the end of the workshop with a shooting script. So then of course we segued into the how very quickly.

MW: I wonder as I have very rarely sat in a room full of filmmakers who haven't had some kind of disagreement. If you guys have come across when you are working with people, if you meet resistance or get at an emotional level that the filmmaker goes "Aaaaah, I can't think about that I don't understand why you are questioning me" any of that, do you come across that? How do you work out that relationship between the editor, the director and the storyeditor, consultant. Well the consultant is easy... you can ignore them I'm understanding.

DW: did you say ignore them or annoy?

MW: ignore them and annoy them probably

D.B. I did both on this last flm, that I worked on. That's a tough one, because this last film I worked was a very personal story by a filmmaker Mary-Ann Kaplan-great lady, about her son who suffers from a form of autism called Asperger syndrome. Basically makes him behave socially awkward, basically it's a form of social blindness. So he can't read whether you're angry or mad or happy. So he ends up putting him self in some pretty terrible situations where he is bullied mercilessly and life is pretty miserable, especially when he is on the brink of adolescence.-makes it even worse. I was very fortunate, she was a totally gung-ho director and she was willing to do, right from the beginning, what do you want to do with this film? To what degree do you want to open your life and your home up to the public like this.?.

MW: ..and her son

DB: and her son. Which is a twelve year old kid, and she is extremely protective of him, but so much so that she wants the world to understand more about his disability. And so that was her personal struggle as

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a mother and she got criticism from relatives and “what are you doing, what are you doing” she had to deal with a lot of it. She realized that she was passionate about making this film because 1) she is a filmmaker and this is what she does and 2) because she wanted people to understand more about it. And so we worked on some parameters-some basic things, tenets from journalism. You don’t name kids, you don’t say what school they go to, simple things like that. But also she didn’t shoot some things that I would have preferred that she shoot. But that’s her choice. I pushed for more creative dramatizations in key parts of the film. She didn’t feel comfortable doing that-it’s her film. So basically what she has is a very close family story. Not about Adam, we had originally pitched that Adam would do a video diary everyday and talk about his life. But once we got into the filming that structure was That’s when we had to widen the focus to the family and that’s when we had her come in and give her feelings and move the story along in a parallel way with Adams story-because in a way she was an extension of her son. Always there to protect him look out for him, that sort of thing. So there’s definitely some things she wouldn’t do, and that’s fair, that’s her choice.

Dianna Bodnar: One of the things that I have found most valuable working on any kind of project whether it’s documentary or drama, as a story editor is for any of the key creative team-what I’ll will ask everyone to do is write a statement of intention and that has a lot to do with focus. I’ll ask them to write down: what they want this film to do, what they really don’t want this film to do, what they would be absolutely horrified if this film became. And then to clarify, to work together, to clarify what the theme is, what the intention is, what the focus is. And then we get to write one document and put that down on paper and then when disagreements arise with what to do with the film or certain scenes, characters, ideas-it always goes back to that joint document, that piece of paper that everyone agreed on in the beginning. And if it doesn’t fit within that, then it goes. And it’s painful, but at least when you do that up front at the beginning it is less painful than it might be otherwise.

MW: Do you call it cutting off your little finger?

Dianna Bodnar: Ya, (laughter) Melanie and I are working on a project where I’ve had to gently suggest that there are little fingers that need to be cut.

GM: Eating your children..there’s always some..didn’t have time for dinner working to late. You were asking me; are there conflicts between directors and broadcasters?

MW: I was asking when filmmakers work with story editors where the conflicts come and how you deal with that.

GM: Well generally when filmmakers are working with story editors, generally the story editors are part of the team. So the very conflict itself is part of the creative tension of making a film.

MW: For example when you send a perspective filmmaker to Don-what resistance do you run into..

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GM: to go there? I thought people might feel patronized, but everybody I've offered it to says "ya, phew, great. Your paying for it right?" And it's a chance to lift your head out of the trough. And talk to somebody about the story-who of us doesn't like to talk about their own story and sort of get together. What I'm interested in is: What did you get from that? Will you write me a paragraph. Where did it go. Sometimes it just happens in the nature of conversation about a piece.

Glen can I talk a little bit about your film? JJ Lee, a conductor in the film and a former partner in the film came to me and they want to make a film about the history of Vancouver's Chinatown-the history of it, a very interesting idea. And I said great history project, where's the current filming, what are you going to do as filmmakers to give me a backbone, a thread, find something you can film in the present-where would that go? And they came back with this idea called Tailor Made, which is about JJ's apprenticeship, which Glen is filming and I still don't know to what degree they're going to smuggle in your film about the history of Chinatown, but they're shooting in the middle of it with two guys who have lived through the entire history of it. So the window is constantly open to go and do that, and I know there are threads that will lead to us finding out the rich history of these guys being there for sixty years. There was a case where just a couple of little questions led to out to be storyediting session. Help me care about this by giving me something that is fun and interesting to watch, which will unfold, which will allow you guys to work as film makers. At the same time you can do this other story and create another layer. A rich layer, all these archival resources, and I know all this stuff is out there, and old films. So suddenly the thing starts to have depth. There was Marsha Newberry and Bob Foggard, doing a film, originally called- a Minor Rockstar, which is now called Rock and Roll kid. About a twelve year old, Danny Swenson, but he's out there, on the verge of making a career for himself-his dad pushing him along. So they had access to the family and interested in early stages- get it into development, look at the footage, really interesting stuff happening here. Lets get a treatment here, more development because things are happening-it started to roll. They had gone in really early on to talk to Don, and came out saying-"you know, the story is not what we thought it was." Because you think, on the surface, great, it's about rock and roll, the kid's got a dad, he's going to push him along, he's going to succeed-people are going to talk about him-going to be on stage-Much music stuff already..But, what they came out of this thing with is: actually the film is about the relationship between the parents and the kid and what the impact of what the kid's success is having on the family. Because that affects the kid. And suddenly the camera spends more time looking at the little brother. It changed the strategy for the DOP working on this thing-suddenly there was a wider focus and reactions were important and family dynamics, and I think that that was just an insight. This is true, Don, did you see that happening.

DW: I think what you're doing and this comes back to part of the question you were asking earlier, about the pain and the struggle, whether it's the storyeditor or story consultant or whatever. What I see is someone who is really attracted to a particular story or particular project and is not really clear why. And a lot of the discussion is them discovering why the story is important to them.

MW: This is where the therapy comes in in Don's workshop..

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DW: Well the more personal the story, certainly that's true. And I think what happens is, is when they make that kind of discovery, that things become richer and multi-layered.

GM: And then I think that this then plays out to the rest of the crew-because if the crew doesn't know what film you're making-you're lost.

DW. It's interesting, an old time cinematographer, who is no longer living here. Years and years ago, it was the first film I had directed for the film board. I think he was trying to tell me something and he gave me his definition of a director on the way out to the first shoot. He said, "you know a director is really like a conductor of an orchestra, the job of the director is to give everybody else their vision, then get the hell out of the way and let them do the work." And to a large extent, the thing of giving your vision as a director is true and giving your vision as a writer is true, and giving your vision as a filmmaker is true, and it's almost directly dependent upon how well you are able to give your vision to your crew, that your DOP is going to be able to actualize it, in footage and sound. So a lot of the thing is really discovering what your vision is. And that's one of the things that really surprised me in this process, because I never, ever thought that I was going to have to ask somebody what the point was. The first couple of workshops that I did for the film board, the producers used to attend with people. And they were as surprised as I was that when you said "Well what's the film about." People really didn't know. And so it's discovering it's personal relevance because how you going to convince me that it's relevant to me, if you don't know why it's relevant to you.

GM: And there-in lies the story

Question from the floor: I wonder if Dawn can talk about The Corporation, and was there a story there when you came into it.

D.B. The Corporation has to be the worst example of story that there is. I guess what the corporation does do is that it speaks to the idea that there are very many different story structures out there, and obviously the best ones are the ones that have characters you care about, a very clear dramatic story arc-that sort of thing. The Corporation is none of those, The Corporation is a great magazine article made for film. We did it backwards, when I came on board it was early 2000, and Mark had already worked for years trying to get funding and it was a nightmare to put that piece together and I think everyone in Vancouver worked on that film. For free or paid at some point in its life span. The thing about The Corporation is that it wasn't designed to be a feature, a theatrical release. It was a three part, originally we had it as a four part, documentary series. It is a book, it made a great book-it's a fantastic non-fiction book.. The way that Mark had it translated for film is that we did not have the book written. Joel didn't write the book and then Mark came in-it was all done at the same time. So where I came in I just came in to do some research for a couple of weeks and it turned into the most intense work experience of my entire life. I have never seen anyone work so organically before. But he's also the sort of guy who is in the luxurious position of being able to work on an opus like that for so long. So he was able to dabble for years, until he found his focus. It all started because he wanted to do something on globlization, so when I came on

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board-I said I have no idea what this film is about and because I'm very anal, and I had my little thing, what's the focus, what's the issue because I needed to know if I supposed to be finding stories for this film, if I'm supposed to in any way contributing to the key creative meetings with Mark and Joel, I needed to have an idea of the film they thought they were making, and so when we sat down and talked about it, I don't think that Mark was paying much attention, he's a real character-When we got down to the root of it, we realized the film essentially was not that corporations are bad or that corporate people are bad or corporations are psychopaths-that's actually a point, that's a great point-but it's not the focus of the film. If you look at the scope of the film, you'll realize that the focus of the film is something like: corporate social responsibility is not the cure all for society's ills, because corporations by their very nature can only pursue profits. Because they are legally bound to pursue profits before anything else. All this protesting in the streets, all this being upset with the corporatization of globalization-is happening at a time when corporations are being more philanthropic than they ever have been in the history of the institution. What we were trying to do is to say-it's just a shell game, they wouldn't be doing these things if they weren't seeing a profit or return on it. The reason the Corporation was really successful in my view was because Mark is definitely a genius in his own right for timing and being able to bring these things in a humorous satirical way-stylish way to film. He's got a built in activist audience-so that helps, there is an audience for this story. And you couldn't get it more timely, right, with all the stuff that was going down and everyone, just after the battle in Seattle and everyone wanted to talk about it but they didn't know how. So basically the only character we had in that film was the institution- the corporation itself. I think it worked on a lot of levels, but is definitely not the thing to study. It is the exception to the rule.

GM: Actually it falls into a whole family of films, that are based on ideas. I have a weakness for them, those happen to be the kinds of films I made when I was making films for *The Nature of Things*. I do think that it is a testimony to a particular story, that hung in there. Very early on when I was sitting in some story meetings, not as a broadcaster, with Mark and Joel, they were trying to design a three or four part thing, and they were trying to come up with different themes. And that point, I had been doing some stuff on psychiatry as well and so the conversation fell to the nature of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual for Psychiatric Care-fourth edition, which prescribes, which Mark eventually used as his check list for psychopathic behaviour. And, it may have me, but we were talking about the parallel between institutions and individuals, in terms of all the behaviour that is natural... So this parallel between, anti-social behavior, no feelings for others, no capacity to be generous, self-centered, these are the definitions in psychological manuals of psychopathic behavior and lo and behold they fit very neatly into corporate behavior. This was not an original insight from any of us but it became a hook for the first chapter of the series, and eventually it was the only hook they had really for the whole show.

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