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**A LETTER TO A
YOUNG FILMMAKER**
By Magnus Isacsson

Hi Elisabeth,
I'm sorry I had to run off
the other day before we had
time to finish our conversation.
My kind of filmmaking is a
little like being a doctor on call.
When something important is
happening in a story, I have to be
off in a jiffy. That's why I have
my own equipment and keep the
batteries charged. (Thanks for the
help loading the car.)
Anyway, here's what I meant to tell you.



The first thing is, this is only one take on how to approach documentary filmmaking. Others would recommend a different course of action, probably more thoughtful than mine, since I have a tendency to jump into things without necessarily weighing all the pros and cons.

The most important thing, if you want to be a documentary filmmaker, is to have something to say. You'll need to have a story to tell, and a real urge to film it. This is not an area of work you're going to enjoy if you're not strongly motivated: the conditions are too difficult, and the competition for limited resources too stiff. If you feel like working in the field but you don't have that drive for getting your own story or your own vision across, you might be better off working as a cinematographer, a sound recordist or an editor. They're important and creative jobs, all very challenging and indispensable to good filmmaking.

If you do want to make your own films, my sense of things is that while it's important to study, either formally or not, the most important is to get experience. "C'est en forgeant qu'on devient forgeron" goes a French saying. Getting experience by doing things is also a way to create a track record and in this business, while a diploma assures potential employers that you are not completely ignorant, what counts is what you have actually done. (Still, one should not underestimate the value of good schooling. The cinematographers I work with who were trained in Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union have a much more solid background than professionals from here and not just in camerawork. They also studied the history of cinema and art, the physical nature of light, you name it...)

Getting experience doesn't necessarily mean directing your own film right away. It means doing things, hands on, which will help hone your skills and test your instincts. It could be writing for the student newspaper or doing stories for the community radio, making an activist video or even just a home movie. I saw a terrific film the other day, *Mohawk Girls*, about growing up on a native reserve, directed by Tracy Deere. She incorporated excerpts from her own home videos. It was obvious she had been at it for years, learning as she went, and creating precious archives in the process.

But the time will come when you have your own project you want to direct and perhaps shoot, or do sound for as well. You will then face the often daunting prospect of funding the film, getting all the resources together, generating the institutional support,

which you often can't get without having a broadcaster or at least a producer. All these broadcasters and institutions have seemingly complicated rules and requirements. It's a bit like a jungle. So where do you start?

Well, I would say (others would disagree) that you should not start by trying to learn all the ropes, to become your own producer and learn to deal with all the institutions and their arcane requirements. When I left my job as a TV producer to become an independent filmmaker twenty years ago, I met many inspiring producer/directors, people like Peter Raymont, Barry Greenwald, Sophie Bisonnette and Sylvie van Brabant, who continue to have fine careers. Unlike them, I didn't want to produce. I was more interested in doing my own research and writing, and learning technical skills, in addition to directing. And I'm glad I went that way, because producing has become even more difficult than it was back then. Most productions now involve a multitude of sources of funding, all with ever more complex requirements. In most cases, I would suggest you focus your own energies on making sure that you have a good project, and then find someone to help you produce it. (More about this further down.)

Making sure you have a good project can be easier said than done. How do you know, if it's your first one?

Here's a rule of thumb. (Rules, of course, are there to be broken, when you have a good reason.) For your project to be worthwhile, and "fundable," you generally need five things:

A GOOD "STORY." Taken broadly, you must be able to relate a story, reveal or discover a particular universe or universal condition, offer an analysis to test and share, or take us on a quest, whether it be your own or that of the characters involved in your film.

IMPORTANT ISSUES. The film needs to be relevant to others. This doesn't mean you necessarily have to embrace some big political issue the way Michael Moore does in his films. It can be a story about coming of age, about sexual orientation, about relationships, whatever...but it has to have something universal about it. As we know from fiction, the universal is often found in the specific story rather than in generalities and abstractions.

A POINT OF VIEW. You have to know what you want to say. I don't mean that you have to take an editorial position. But you must be able to express your own vision, your take on the subject matter at hand, or your own specific way of discovering and sharing your point of view with the

audience. My friend Mark Achbar, who co-produced and co-directed the doc hits *Manufacturing Consent* and *The Corporation*, has this to say: "Not everything must be predetermined, and if you are open to learning as you go through the filmmaking process, even to the point of changing your mind entirely about the subject, you will probably end up with a more interesting film and feel more satisfied about what you've been through." In other words, your evolving point of view can inform the film.

GOOD CHARACTERS. Unless you're setting out to make an essay film à la Chris Marker, the brilliant French filmmaker known for his very philosophical and reflective works, your doc will feature real-life characters and be dependent, to a large extent, on their strengths. Never evaluate the qualities of a good character just based on a transcript of what s/he says. One of the key elements of character is screen presence, if not charisma. Don't forget, most of the time you don't just want a talking head, but rather people whose actions will help drive the film. A character has to have more than just good ideas.

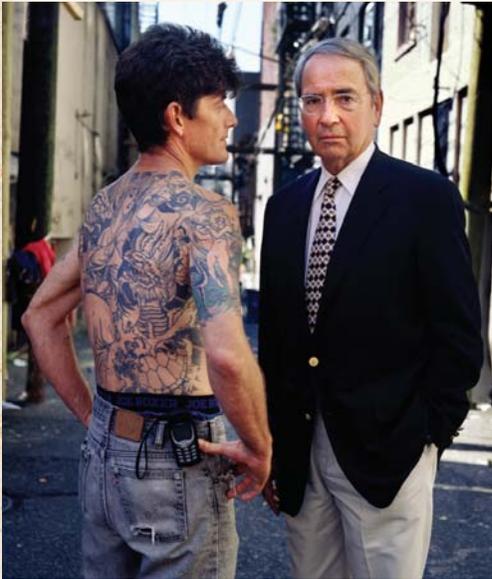
EMOTION AND DRAMA. Films, especially documentaries, can give you important information. They can be full of ideas, they can have a thesis, they can even put forth solutions, but in the end they are movies and they have to work as a movie. Therefore, you need to make sure that there is the kind of drama and emotion in the film that will draw people in and allow them to really engage with your material.

If one of the five is missing, fine – if there is a good reason. You might even be doing something really original. But if more than one is missing, you should think closely about what you are intending to do with your film.

At this point, I could get into some very essential aspects of filmmaking: the style, the aesthetics, the production values, and the technical qualities. But I'm going to leave them aside this time, just to keep my focus on how you get a project off the ground. At the end of the letter I'll list a few useful books dealing with those important topics.

Once the nature of your project is reasonably clear in your head, it's time to find the right production framework. For that purpose, you need to find all the resources needed to make the film, and in order to do that you need to create a momentum. You need to give your subjects, and the people who will give you the resources, the feeling that your film has to be made, and that it will be made, because

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Mohawk Girls | © Personal Collection of Tracey Deer



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you are determined to make it. You need to make people feel that while, of course, you're still a nice person (at least most of the time) and respectful of others, saying no to you is not really an option. To quote Luc Jacquet, the director of *March of the Penguins* which has grossed over 100 million dollars worldwide, "Even if you have no money, if you give energy to a film, it will eventually seduce a financial partner."

Momentum is important, even when you're no longer a beginner. When I rushed off to that shoot the other day, it was for a project that I don't have any funding for yet, a film about the Raging Grannies. The Grannies are a wonderful movement of elderly ladies who dress up in flowery hats and sing satirical songs, taking on neo-liberal and conservative politicians in the name of peace, social justice and the environment. If I wanted to make my film the "normal" way, it would probably take me and the producer, in this case Les Films de l'Isle, six to nine months to find some development money, another three to six months to do the research and writing, and then six months or a year to put together production funding—if the answers were favourable. And we would have to do all that work based just on texts.

Of course the "charging ahead" approach always comes with difficulties. In this case, some U.S.-based Grannies are taking bold initiatives, staging sit-ins in front of army recruitment centres to protest the war in Iraq and offering to enlist and replace their grandchildren in the line of fire. Documenting these actions in the U.S. is really stretching my credit limit right now.

Still, my preference is to start making the film while I look for the money. That way, I always have footage to show potential investors. The question is no longer "will this film be made," but rather "who is going to invest in this film." It's a way of setting the agenda, rather than letting others do it. My attitude is that it's not up to the broadcasters and funding agencies to decide if they are going to allow me to make my film. That's a decision I make, and then the rest will have to follow. I don't mean this to be a scheme that you can copy: I know I have a track record, and equipment, and friends who are professional technicians, so I can afford to do this. But I think you get my drift, about the momentum and the attitude.

Momentum is key, and so is a sense of initiative. Sometimes when you have a good idea and the timing is right, you just have to go for it even if it takes you out on a limb—preferably not to the extent of ruining your credit rating or losing your house! In the

spring of 1998, I was told that several movements were planning to block access to the Montreal Conference on the Multilateral Agreement on Investments (MAI) as part of a broad international campaign. Hundreds of activists and concerned citizens were receiving civil disobedience training and preparing for confrontations with police and, most likely, mass arrests. It would have been impossible to raise the money for a film on a few weeks notice but I knew my friends Anna Paskal and Malcolm Guy, who both had access to equipment, would be interested. With only enough money for tapes and batteries, we organized three crews to follow four particular characters, all neophytes, through the very dramatic events. As it turned out, the MAI was defeated due to citizen action, and with a unique inside look at the movement in the can, we ended up funding the film to the tune of about \$150,000 and winning the Quebec Film Critics award for best documentary. Lyle Stewart wrote an account of this experience, which you can find at www.socialdoc.net/isacson/3MC1SaRevE.html

With the new digital cameras and relatively low-cost editing systems, you can do a lot without a budget. Recently, I was asked by an environmental coalition to organize a competition for short films on climate change. We put out a call last September for short films, between 30 seconds and five minutes, dealing with this theme, and managed to involve many filmmaker organizations, professional associations and institutions so that we were able to offer several substantial awards. Guess how many films we received before our Nov. 14th deadline? 130! The quality was uneven, but there were about 40 really good-to-excellent films, which we selected for our public screenings. The vast majority of these were made without any funding. It just shows you what can be done to produce a demo for a film project.

One note of caution. Be very careful to not go out and shoot huge amounts of material without having a good sense of what you're doing. And don't shoot lots of visually decent material with bad camera-mic sound. It's good to take initiatives and get things going, but even better if you think through what you're doing and make sure it meets certain quality standards. Otherwise you will pay for it with a huge postproduction headache.

Your written proposals and ability to pitch an idea, a notion that I abhor but which has to be mentioned, are important here. It's essential to have a well-crafted one-page synopsis of the film. Some people

will not read whole project proposals, or will only read them if the synopsis is good. You should be prepared with photographs and video of the subjects, preliminary shoots, demo reels, letters and recommendations—anything that will help you convince people that the film is happening and that they would rather be part of it than not. My first proposal for an independent film, on the radioactive pollution from Canada's uranium mines on native land, was completely illustrated with colour photos of all the characters and situations I meant to film, giving people a sense that it was all for real. The NFB took it on as an in-house production.

As your proposal begins to take shape, you should consider talking to a distributor, publicity person, activist group or other potential end-users of your film before you fully conceive it. The reason you make a film, after all, is not so that you can watch it by yourself in your living room. You're making it for others—the more, the better. The smarter you can be about designing your film so that it will work for your intended audience, the more successful you will end up being. Mark Achbar invited Katherine Dodds, who did the publicity and grassroots outreach for *The Corporation*, into the film's creative process at the very beginning of the eight-year struggle to make that film.

Keep in mind that everything you do will reflect your approach to the project and send signals to the people you ask for support. When I get calls and messages from students or beginning filmmakers I generally know right away which of them are serious and would be good to work with, because their requests are clear and well formulated and show sound judgment. Sloppy writing, mistaken addresses, forgotten appointments and repeated lateness will put you in my "cat ate my computer cord" category of disorganized students. People who work in production are used to a certain protocol of responsible and respectful behavior, not the least when equipment is involved. You don't want to lend a light and get it back with screws missing, or find that your precious radio mic doesn't have all its windshields and little lapel clips when you need them.

You will also need the skills—and sometimes the track record—of a producer. That producer can be you, or someone else, or a team. Producers find the funds and other resources needed to make the film, are responsible for all the legal and contractual arrangements with broadcasters, institutions, crew and participants, and bear the overall responsibility for flow of the production

process and the quality of the result.

What kind of specific production arrangement you need depends totally on the nature of your film. Making a 15-minute video to raise funds for your local food bank is not the same thing as shooting a one-hour film for the CBC about the war in Iraq. And there is every kind of situation in between.

To obtain the funding and resources you need, there are various ways to go. In a very general sense, the main dividing line is between bigger professional projects that are destined for television and, occasionally, theatrical distribution on the one hand, and the smaller, more personal or community oriented films on the other. But of course many of the best documentaries will be hybrids which resist classification.

For young filmmakers, living in Quebec is an advantage, because our provincial government has a strong policy of supporting the creative arts. If you're under 35, you can apply to the Jeunes Créateurs program at SODEC (Société de Développement des Entreprises Culturelles), which will fund both the development and the production of a film. Even if you're older, SODEC can fund research and scriptwriting for filmmakers who don't have a broadcaster. (Since I saw you, I learned they will invest in my *Raging Grannies* film.) Sadly, not to say shamefully, Ontario no longer has the OFDC (Ontario Film Development Corporation), which used to support filmmakers like Barry Greenwald, Ron Mann, Janis Cole and Holly Dale. In its place is the OMDC (Ontario Media Development Corporation), which has a broader mandate and less money to help filmmakers produce their work. As far as I know, all of the other provinces also have programs to aid filmmakers but none of them are as strong as those in Quebec. But you should check to see what's available where you live.

One route to consider when you're starting out as a director is to take your film to a producer at the NFB. The Board could possibly be involved as a co-producer of the project. The NFB has policies supporting the development of new talent, with particular emphasis on visible minorities and Native communities.

To simplify, let's talk about three kinds of productions:

A) A STUDENT FILM, A LOW-BUDGET PERSONAL FILM OR A COMMUNITY VIDEO.

For this kind of film, you will probably not have a broadcast license, and you will likely not be approaching big institutions like Telefilm and the Canadian Television Fund. You might be obtaining equipment from



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your educational institution, from supportive people in the industry or from a local film and video co-op. There may be family members, private individuals, community groups, or foundations, which will support your undertaking. If the story originates in a particular community or focuses on a subject with its own network of people, organizations and foundations can sometimes be persuaded to make small grants. Betsy Carson, who has co-produced all of Nettie Wild's films, points out that research about the subject will turn up many useful connections: "The value of good research can't be overstated," she says, "both for the depth of the film's vision, but also for the funding opportunities. Also, web sites are now often connected to short film projects, and the possibilities can be very rewarding if you're just starting out. New Media funds exist to help people whose work is destined for the internet." You may be able to obtain support from the NFB's filmmaker assistance program or its web site Citizen Shift.

With this kind of production, it is quite feasible even for a beginner to be a producer. If you go that route, you will have to be a quick study, very organized, and put a lot of emphasis on your relationships with all the people involved. You'll need to put much effort into the planning and execution of your project, making sure you don't spend (too much) more than you have, and that you don't leave a trail of people feeling that they were cheated or let down. If people do you a favor by working for free, for reduced rates or for deferred pay, you need to honor the commitments you made, thank people for their contribution, and give them proper credit. You need to make sure everything that is in your film is credible, supported by the evidence, and not slanderous. And of course you will be the only person responsible for the quality of the film, which is not always so easy when you're into it up to your ears and have been for several months or even years.

Mark Achbar has more advice to add here: "You are not the first person ever to make a film, and many of the procedures and paperwork that go into making a film are formulaic. You don't have to re-invent the wheel for every contract or release form you will need. And you should have contracts and release forms, even if your project is no-budget, no-broadcaster, so that everyone is clear on what they're giving and what they're getting in return (even if it's only a credit). Not everyone respects the words on the piece of paper they signed, but at least it's a basis for discussion if there are

misunderstandings later on. Proper releases also ensure that if your film becomes more successful than you anticipated, you will be in the clear to maximize its distribution potential around the world. This is good practice for the day when you make a larger budget film. These documents exist and, with only slight modification, can be made to apply to your project. It is time well invested to seek out a mentor or other source of these documents, on disc, so that can be easily modified. Other people have thoughtfully spent small fortunes on production managers and lawyers to draw them up—just so that you don't have to."

B) A CREATIVELY ORIGINAL FILM FUNDED MAINLY BY THE ARTS COUNCILS.

If your film is original and has artistic merit in addition to the importance of its subject matter, you can apply for money from the provincial arts council, in our case the Conseil des Arts et Lettres du Québec, and from the Canada Council for the Arts. They will fund research and development, script writing, experimentation and production. You will find all the relevant information on their web sites. The Councils receive numerous proposals, which are adjudicated by juries of your peers, an ideal system. It is important to realize that your project needs to have true artistic merit to obtain arts council funding. It is not enough to present a regular documentary project and stick on a few sentences full of buzzwords like "creative" and "original" to convince them.

If you are dealing only with arts council money, it is not that difficult to produce a film on your own. In some cases, though, you can combine those funds with monies from the Canadian Independent Film and Video Fund (CIFVF) and tax credits (a percentage of the money you spend on wages, which will be reimbursed by the governments) to make a film without broadcaster involvement. Many excellent Quebec films have been produced this way by Sylvain L'Espérance, Daniel Cross, Sylvie van Brabant and others too numerous to mention. Examples from English Canada include *The Drawing* by Jason Buxton in Halifax, *Watching the Movies* by Toronto veteran Gail Singer and *The Tunguska Project* produced by Gisèle Gordon, a first-time long-form doc director, who also lives in Toronto. The CIFVF, which many of us are working right now to defend from impending cutbacks, requires that you work with a recognized producer and provide ample proof of the distribution potential and educational relevancy of the project. CIFVF funding and the tax credits require very serious

accounting procedures. So at this point we are well on our way to my third category.

C) A LARGER-SCALE PRODUCTION INVOLVING BROADCASTERS, TELEFILM AND THE CANADIAN TELEVISION FUND (CTF).

With the exception of films produced in-house by the National Film Board, the broadcasters hold the key to the main funding stream for Canadian documentaries. With a television license, an investment and broadcast agreement provided by the channels, you can access funds from major institutions like Telefilm Canada and the CTF. Other sources can be combined with these, be it by taking on the NFB as a co-producer or acquiring additional money from the CIFVF or special funds like the Rogers Fund.

For an undertaking of this scope, I don't recommend that a beginning filmmaker try to be his or her own producer. In my case, after making some fifteen films, I still would not want to take that on. The tasks of the producer on this level are extremely complex and require considerable knowledge not just about filmmaking styles and techniques but about the broadcasters and funding institutions, their rules and regulations—which tend to change every year, of course—as well as a host of legal and contractual matters. In addition, both broadcasters and funding agencies much prefer to deal with established production companies and experienced producers, whom they see, not always without reason, as guarantors of both a viable production process and a quality result.

So my advice here is not about how to become your own producer but about how to find a good one.

To have a producer is not, to my mind, some kind of necessary evil. A good producer is not an overbearing boss that you want to keep out of the creative process, or simply a cash cow, or someone who is there to remind you that you're running out of shooting or editing days. A good producer is potentially your best ally, someone who will not only find you the resources to make the film but also help provide the creative space and stimulation you need to do the best work you can. At this level of production, the producer-director relationship is key to the whole filmmaking process.

This is how I see it. You are the filmmaker, and you need to develop and refine your vision. Often you have to be prepared to defend it. The producer on the other hand has an overarching responsibility for the overall process and the quality of the finished film. You are the one whose vision will be up there on the screen, and you will

“Not everything must be predetermined, and if you are open to learning as you go through the filmmaking process, even to the point of changing your mind entirely about the subject, you will probably end up with a more interesting film and feel more satisfied about what you’ve been through.”

—Mark Achbar



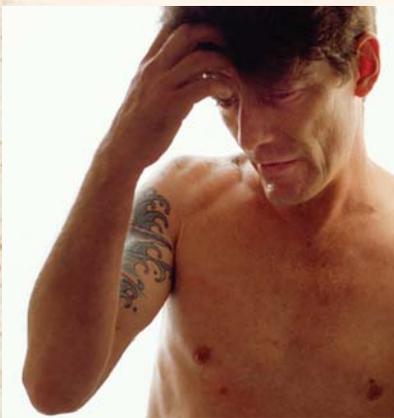
The Corporation

be judged based on the film’s creative strengths and weaknesses. But s/he is the one who answers to the broadcasters and agencies, and his or her credibility with those agencies is also at stake. These two imperatives can co-exist in a very dynamic and fruitful way. Personally, I welcome all suggestions and challenges from the producer, as long as he or she respects my vision and way of working. A good producer will not try to order you to replace a character or a shot, or tell you how to cut a scene. But s/he has the perfect right to say: I feel this or that part of the film is not working; try to find a way to strengthen it. I don’t think I would be living up to my part of the bargain if I didn’t do my best to respond to such a request.

So how do you find a producer who will respect you, and who will really work for your project? I would say, start by seeing who does what. The producers and companies that make real auteur or point-of-view films aren’t that numerous. Check out their track records. If you like what they’ve done, that’s a good starting point. You wouldn’t take a personal/political film to a company that just provides assembly-line episodes for specialty channels any more than you would take a social issue doc to a company that specializes in adventure films.

Then, talk to other filmmakers about their experiences with producers. Don’t hesitate to call people whose films you admire, at a reasonable hour, to ask for advice. I remember the day I called Maurice Bulbulian from my office at the CBC and said, “I’m a TV producer but I admire your films and I’d like to meet you.” He was accommodating; so was Martin Duckworth, who responded to my suggestion that we meet for lunch with a typically pithy response: “I think I’d like something with tomatoes.” Go to meetings and screenings where you can meet people in the business. DOC, the Documentary Organisation of Canada, holds meetings and screenings in major cities across the country. Don’t hesitate to do volunteer work. If you do a good job, it will soon lead to other opportunities. Over the years, I have hired many students who started as interns. My friend Mila Aung-Thwin had an apprenticeship which changed his life. He has become a partner of his old mentor Daniel Cross, in the dynamic Montreal production company Eyesteelfilms.

Whether you’re working with a producer or not, you may find the opportunity to propose your film to a broadcaster. There again, you have to figure out who will be interested in what you are pitching and



FIX: The Story of an Addicted City | Nettie Wild



Discordia | Liam Maloney | © NFB



Pressure Point | Caroline Hayeur

which stations will be appropriate for your film. Most broadcasters and programs have specific mandates, stylistic requirements and areas of focus. The CBC has recently created positions for regional reps who will help direct you to the right program. Michelle van Beusekom, who holds this position for Quebec and Ontario, has this to say: "I remember getting pitched a 13 part series on the mating habits of crocodiles in the Everglades while I was at the WTN (then called the Women's Television Network). It was a thorough proposal, nicely presented, Fed-Exed all the way from Vancouver and wildly off the mark in terms of what WTN programs. Sending a proposal to a commissioner for a genre they don't work with can create the unwanted perception that the person doesn't know what they are doing. In the same way that being familiar with a production company's body of work will impress a prospective producer, knowing a broadcaster's documentary strands, programming approach and target demographic also creates the impression that you are dealing with someone who understands the business."

The approach to broadcasters and producers brings up another more general point about your relationships with people whose support you seek. You need something I once heard referred to as "emotional intelligence," or EQ, which will often get you further than IQ. If you treat people respectfully, as intelligent professionals, they will usually respond in kind. Inside those intimidating and seemingly anonymous funding agencies and broadcasters, there are real human beings who care about what is going on in the world and who are often willing to support you if your case is well made. Being thoughtful and articulate will impress people more than pretentious bluster. In the end, it's all about convincing people that you are serious about what you have set out to do, that you will do your absolute best, and that you definitely deserve a go at it.

IF, SOMEWHERE ALONG THE WAY, YOU FEEL DISCOURAGED, GO BACK TO BASICS. DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO TELL? IS IT SOMETHING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT? IS IT IMPORTANT? IF IT IS, THEN YOU CAN DO IT.

Good luck!

POV

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Magnus Isacson has made more than a dozen independent documentaries since he left his job as a television producer 20 years ago. Among his award-winning films are Power, The Choir Boys, and Pressure Point. He is presently working on Doublethink, a film about Orwell and Huxley in the 21st Century, and Granny Power, about the Raging Grannies.

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Pictured: DOP François Beauchemin, Magnus Isacson | Photo: Simon Bujold

BASIC DOCUMENTARY READINGS:

Writing, Directing and Producing Documentary Films. Alan Rosenthal, Southern Illinois University Press, 1990

New Challenges for Documentary. Ed. Alan Rosenthal, University of California Press, 1998

Cross-cultural Filmmaking. Ilisa Barbash & Lucien Taylor, University of California Press, 1997 (Though its focus is on ethnographic filmmaking, this book has a lot of good pointers for anyone working in documentary.)

Directing the Documentary. Michael Rabiger, Boston/London, Focal Press, 1987

Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film. Erik Barnouw, Oxford University Press, 1974

Introduction to Documentary. Bill Nichols, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001

Brink of Reality: New Canadian Documentary Film and Video. Peter Steven, Between the Lines, 1993

Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary. Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins, London, Faber and Faber, 1996

Thanks to Jocelyne Clarke for compiling this list.