

INTRODUCTION

We tell ourselves stories in order to live.

—Joan Didion

Fire on Earth, if spotted by creatures living elsewhere in our galaxy, would serve as evidence of life on this planet. Fire needs oxygen. Plant photosynthesis releases oxygen into Earth's atmosphere, and animal respiration cycles this oxygen, keeping the supply in stable balance.

Long before there were human beings, those aliens, having seen fire, could have predicted that intelligent life would arise on Earth with the emergence of a species able to carry, control, and use combustion.

The Promethean spark was ignited about a million years ago when *Homo erectus* and other hominids walked the Earth.¹ The generation of warmth, enabling bands to migrate into and survive within cold climes; the flames that protected them from predators; the increase in calories that came from burning animal habitats for hunting and scavenging; and the ability to cook food, reducing the energy needed for digestion, were powerful factors in hominid evolution, making possible the growth of a brain able to invent symbolic forms.

According to neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, storytelling emerged at the dawn of "full-fledged human consciousness." Imagining "early humans sometime after verbal language established itself as a means of communication," he concluded that narratives have shaped human identity and cultural evolution ever since.² Thanks to fire, and often by firelight, human beings have told the stories that make our worlds.

Stories make the world, for "the world" is not a fixed entity. Although the term refers to natural places and human creations that endure over the ages, these change continually as subjects for discourse and arenas for action. The world connects and separates people who, influenced by stories, maintain and expand the web of human relationships or clash in ways that tear it apart. Some groups assert an identity that defines others out of their world, categorically rejecting them as evil, ungodly, or less than human. Some include all of humanity within their

world, others all of life; and people from the beginnings of human life have experienced a world that encompasses all of nature from the stars above to the ground beneath their feet.

We need stories to orient ourselves within the flood of impressions and the multitude of possibilities. Hannah Arendt thought that in order to say what is, to distinguish reality from “the totality of facts and events, which, anyhow, is unascertainable,” a person “always tells a story, and in this story the particular facts lose their contingency and acquire some humanly comprehensible meaning.”³ According to Atul Gawande, “Life is meaningful because it is a story, and a story’s arc is determined by the moments when something happens.”⁴

Stories hold groups together in shared associations over vast reaches of time and space. They inspire transformational events, including wars and revolutions, and make reconciliation with adversaries possible. Personal stories, imagined and remembered, mark the continuity of a life while explaining changes in roles and situations. Stories are so intrinsic to being human that their influence can be taken for granted, just as people may take health for granted until illness affects their lives.

Today, when individuals have more access to international travel, information, and communications than has previously been possible, humanity has a common objective world yet one whose subjective boundaries continue to shift, its lines drawn as much by stories as by armies and alliances. Today, when an unprecedented variety of apparently true accounts is accessible to all, those who seek understanding have to find their bearings. Choices about who speaks truly and what is right can matter greatly not only in guiding individual lives and the course of nations but also humanity’s response to the global impacts of Promethean fire.



This is a book about nonfiction storytelling. In writing it, I have woven together four strands: reflections on storytelling as a crucial human activity whose forms, from primeval firelight to lighted screens, include ceremonies, theater, paintings, photography, and movies as well as the spoken and written word; profiles of individuals, some of whom I have known, whose storytelling has had an enduring influence; inquiries into the subjects of various documentary films and the choices involved in representing them; and insights based on my experiences as a filmmaker in turning a wide range of subjects into stories for documentaries.

Investigating a subject from multiple points of view is a skill that reporters, playwrights, and documentary makers have in common.

Through the process of developing a story worthy of public attention that makes sense from all credible perspectives, one attains an impartial viewpoint. The work that results offers neither *an* opinion nor *the* truth but a way of looking at things based on valid sources.

The combination of cinematography with the recording of ambient sound and spoken words makes documentaries a compelling form of nonfiction storytelling. Documentaries make it possible to see things from unfamiliar vantage points, to go almost anywhere, and, via archival film, to travel through time. Yet their use of actual sounds and images does not ensure truthful depictions of reality. Documentary is necessarily an art of illusion. Its carefully selected and edited content reaches the public after audio mixing, color correction, and other forms of technical manipulation. Nonfiction filmmakers can portray any subject in a variety of ways, with emphasis on different characters, themes, and events, each version yielding a different meaning.

More than accurate representations of sounds and images on the screen, what gives these works credibility are the makers' methods and integrity. Everyone's view of reality is shaped by the particularities of each life; every worldview has a horizon. The art of making nonfiction films includes methods for overcoming, or compensating for, those limitations. Rather than impose a meaning or preformulated opinion upon the material, the conscientious artist explores a subject with an open mind, in search of knowledge from numerous vantage points, often spending years on one project. This process contrasts strongly with the rapid production and distribution of content by commercial and social media, many of whose makers send out—and whose consumers seek out—information and opinions that echo their existing views.

The veracity of a nonfiction film matters especially when it presents an alternative to the acceptable range of subjects and interpretations that support the powers-that-be. When a documentary that represents reality independently and impartially challenges the political and nationalistic partiality of news sources and the ideological partiality of believers and propagandists, it must be able to withstand charges of bias and factual error.

Impartiality is not the same as objectivity—a standard mistakenly applied in judging documentaries. Like the storytellers whose lives I portray, and in contrast both to writers of fiction who have no commitment to factuality and to reporters whose stories' primary purpose is to impart information, I choose subjects I find meaningful. Objectivity implies the absence of personal interest. Impartiality results from a journey that, from the beginning, matters to the writer, filmmaker,

or other teller of tales, then moves beyond personal interest toward a horizon that interests the public at large.

How then does one begin? The measure of a good beginning, Ian McEwan wrote, “is how much sense it makes of what follows.”⁵

For me, the beginning came when I encountered Erik H. Erikson’s concept of the “identity crisis,” which helped me come to terms with youthful feelings of confusion and alienation. This idea concerns the loss of ability to grasp the continuity of one’s self as situations change. However it comes about, an identity crisis can be described as an absence or breakdown of the story that gives meaning to life and guides a person’s actions.

Erikson taught a freshman seminar that I took my first year in college. He was an innovative storyteller, interpreting the lives of world leaders in light of his clinical experiences as a psychoanalyst. He even sought to understand the beliefs of a California Indian tribe in relation to their childrearing practices and the ecology of their riverine homeland. After the course was over, Erikson agreed to guide me in an independent major looking at the relationship between societies, their mythologies, and their environments—between their stories, that is, and their worlds.

Erikson’s support led to a stroke of fortune: an anthropologist who was one of his colleagues gave me a field studies grant to go to Peru. There I met Pedro Azabache, an artist, and Eduardo Calderón, a shamanic healer. Azabache’s paintings of his Moche Indian milieu in conjunction with the journal he kept suggested a form of storytelling that combines visual representation with verbal expression. Calderón’s dramatic ceremonies made me think freshly about the roots of theater, for at the time, I had no knowledge of documentary making; my identity revolved around playwriting. Only years later did it occur to me that the magic of seeing across great distances, even across the divide between the living and the dead, which shamans activate, is achieved through the technologies of nonfiction film.

The ability to think across great distances and differences in order to throw light on contemporary events was Hannah Arendt’s exceptional skill. Having found in her work a profound yet unconventional understanding of civilization and the catastrophes of the twentieth century, I went to graduate school to study with her. Of value to me also was Arendt’s love of theater and her grasp of the ideas underlying the power of tragedy. I did not anticipate that her thoughts about the origins and importance of impartiality would influence my work not only as a playwright but also as a filmmaker.

Arendt spoke about “the inalienable right to go visiting,” a right I exercise in traveling and in making friends with strangers. Writers are typically advised to “write what you know,” yet I learned from my mentors and from experience that writing is an excellent vehicle for exploring what and whom one does not know.

Throughout my journey, documentary making—usually as a screenwriter, sometimes as a producer—has enlarged my world.⁶ I hope that the stories I tell about nonfiction storytelling and about people I have known, whether personally or via projects, will enlarge yours as well.