

‘Script as a hypothesis: Scriptwriting for documentary film’

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Abstract

Writing the script for a documentary film can be problematic. According to some documentary filmmakers, it is not possible at all, because one cannot know beforehand what is going to happen. On the other hand, some attempt to produce a written script is often required to obtain financing for a documentary project. This article deals with different work practices and forms of documentary script. It analyses two case studies: the writer’s own films *A Man from the Congo River* (2010) and *Kusum* (2000). The first is the story of an engineer who worked in colonial Congo at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is based on diaries and other historical material, and therefore it was possible to construct a very precise script for the film. *Kusum* is an observational documentary film following the healing of a young Indian girl. The script was produced prior to production, but during the shooting process many core elements changed, including the main character and storyline. The form and dramaturgy of documentary films are created in the filmmaking process and in dialogue between the film-maker and real people. A documentary script can be considered a hypothesis about the reality that the film-maker will encounter via the process of filmmaking. Instead of ‘a screen idea’ we could speak about ‘a documentary idea’.

Keywords

documentary scriptwriting

documentary film

documentary idea

filmmaking process

dramaturgy

script forms and formats

The man was called Bhagat. He was a well-known Indian spiritual healer, and I wanted to make a documentary about him. But then I had an idea: What if the main character was, instead of the healer, a patient – if the story was told from the point of view of the patient, rather than that of the healer? After all, the patient is the one to whom the story happens, as the healing can change his or her life, sometimes fundamentally. The film was going to be observational; we were planning to follow up the complicated healing process from the very beginning to the end. Will the patient and healer beat the disease and the evil spirits? Will the patient be cured? That would be the true drama of real life for the film.

The idea was great, but there was a problem: the script. It should be noted that I use the word ‘script’ instead of ‘screenplay’ when referring to documentary film scripts. A documentary script is a written plan, which is more or less descriptive, often including motivation to make the film and background information. It is made before filming, so it is sometimes called the ‘pre-shoot script’ to separate it from the ‘post-shoot script’ or the ‘editing script’, which is done after shooting for the editing phase of the film. If not specially mentioned, a documentary script means the pre-shoot script in this article. Thus, without a script, it was impossible to access funds to make the film. I also wanted to follow the process from the very beginning, and so it was not possible to choose the main character half a year or year before the shooting. I didn’t have a main character, I did not know what was going to happen, I did not have a story. But I had to convince the financiers. Ultimately, we achieved this by researching the film and writing a script. But how was this possible? And, in general, how is it possible to write scripts for documentaries? What kind of

documents are they? And finally, what is the role of the script in the process of documentary filmmaking?

In this article, I try to give some answers to these questions based on my own experiences as a documentary filmmaker and scriptwriter. I focus on two core case studies, two films of my own, which are very different kinds of documentary films. *Kusum* (2000) is an observational film following real-life events happening in front of the camera. *A Man from the Congo River* (2010) is a historical documentary about a seaman who worked in colonial Congo at the beginning of the 1900s. The main character, Akseli, witnesses racism and colonialism during the so-called 'rubber terror', which took place in Belgian Congo when the Belgian king Leopold II made Congo his personal colony. People were tortured, mutilated and executed to get them to collect rubber. The population of Congo decreased from twenty million to ten million in 40 years because of the terror. It is one of the biggest genocides in the history of mankind. The film tells us how Akseli changed during these long years from an innocent bystander to an active member of the colonial and racist society, by using the whip and violence to keep black workers in a row. At the same time he was an intelligent and most sympathetic person. The film is based on archive materials.

Both films were independent productions, made outside television and supported by a national film foundation, in this case the Finnish Film Foundation. A public service television company, the Finnish broadcasting company Yle, was a co-producer. *A Man from the Congo River* also got some funding from Belgium.

Script versus reality

Concerning a script in general, both fiction and documentary, the status and role of screenplay in the film-making process has varied historically. In the classical Hollywood studio era, the screenplay was the basis for storytelling, and then The French New Wave and similar movements all over the world in the 1960s revolutionized the film-making process and wanted to subvert the

status of screenplay. Now in the 2010s, the dramaturgy and idea of screenplay is seen more holistically, as dramaturgical thinking runs through the entire film-making process.

Traditionally, the fiction screenplay was considered a model or blueprint for the final film. This approach, in which each element is planned precisely on paper prior to production, has a lot of benefits. The entire production chain is easier to organize and control, and of course it is also a way to save on expenses. Still in most cases, a well-written, formal screenplay is made, and it is considered a fundamental phase of the whole filmmaking process. Everything, both artistically and production-wise, is based on it. The rest of the filmmaking process is often described as an interpretation of the original screenplay (for instance, Koivumäki 2010). However, there have also been theoreticians and filmmakers who have crusaded against the importance of the screenplay. For instance, in the late 1940s, Alexander Astruc presented his idea about the film camera being a pen. The filmmaker writes with the camera like a writer writes with a pen; so directing is writing and thinking with film. This means that director and scriptwriter cannot be separated (Astruc 1969: 70). The French New Wave was enthusiastic about Astruc's ideas. According to Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut, cinema must not be subordinated by written text, literature or script. Cinema is not interpretation of text, it is a 'text' by itself, and the director is the real author, 'auteur', of the film. We can also see several cases where feature-length fiction films have been made without a formal or any kind of screenplay. An interesting case is, for instance, Aki Kaurismäki's cult movie *Calamari Union* (1985), where the only pre-production plan was a one-page drawing about the structure of the film (Talvio 2014: 86). The form and structure was realized in the shooting and especially in the editing process.

In previous decades, an increasing number of screenwriters and researchers have opposed and criticized the traditional metaphor of screenplay as blueprint (for instance by Maras 2009, Price 2013 and Millard 2014). The blueprint idea is often considered mechanical and limited. Kathryn

Millard suggests instead jazz as metaphor for screenwriting, because in jazz the division between planning and execution is challenged. It also gives the possibility for improvisation (2014: 85).

There have been alternative models, where separation between screenwriting and actual production is not so strict. Several director-screenwriters, for instance Michael Winterbottom, Wong Kar-wai, Wim Wenders and Chantal Akerman, have renewed traditional form with a more open approach. They work with both words and images, shifting fluently from writing to production (Millard 2014: 29–30). Screenwriting and production are coming closer to each other. Millard sees this largely as a result of the digital era and the new possibilities it offers for filmmakers (2014: 41).

In the case of documentary film, the relationship between scriptwriting and film-making is even more complicated, connected to the ontological questions about documentary film as the art form related to real events, people and the world. Several documentary filmmakers have opposed the idea of documentary script. For instance, Dziga Vertov was strongly against any kind of scriptwriting, not only concerning documentaries, but all cinema. In one of his manifestos, he proclaims: ‘The scenario is a fairy tale invented for us by a writer [...] Down with the bourgeois fairy-tale script! Long live life as it is!’ (Vertov 1984: 71). Famous ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch echoes this, stating that ‘I have never written anything before starting a film, and when for administrative or financial reasons I’ve been obligated to compose a scenario, some continuity plans or a synopsis, I have never ended up making the corresponding film’ (2003: 266).

In my doctoral thesis (Aaltonen 2006), I noticed that many documentary filmmakers found scriptwriting quite incompatible with the idea of the documentary film.¹ According to them, the script cannot be written, because you cannot know beforehand what is going to happen. There was a kind of resistance against financiers and producers who demanded precise scripts. Documentary film-makers seemed to yearn for an open film-making process and were afraid that too much planning and scriptwriting could disturb their openness, artistic integrity and independence.

Although it is not said aloud, a script can also be a tool for control, which partially explains why demand for a precise script can seem so problematic for some filmmakers. For instance, a well-known documentarist, Professor emerita Kanerva Cederström, argues that the essence of a documentary is in the new and unique things that coincidence and life itself bring into the film. She thinks that the forms and expectations transferred from the fiction scriptwriting tradition harmfully restrict documentary filmmaking. According to Cederström, the fiction type of writing process and screenplay is a straitjacket for documentary film (Aaltonen 2006: 127–128).

Further to this, there seems to be a misunderstanding that scriptlessness would be some kind of guarantee of documentary film's authenticity and legitimacy, especially concerning observational and direct cinema tradition (Winston 2015: 288–89). A documentary script is considered not only unnecessary but even harmful. The idea is that it somehow restricts the film-maker's perception or openness to 'reality'. However, in practice, it can be extremely difficult, or impossible, to get funding and make a professional documentary film without a beforehand written script.

The form of a documentary script

There are several reasons why the script is a useful and positive tool for the documentary filmmaker. Creatively, a documentarian sketches and tests ideas by writing. Also, a script is also needed for project development, budgeting, production planning and for communicating inside and outside the crew. And a well-written documentary script is of course an extremely important tool for convincing financiers, commissioning editors and buyers – as it was also in the case of my two examples, *Kusum* and *A Man from the Congo River*.

In fiction, the format script used across the industry is very precise; historically it was developed in Hollywood and is now a universal standard worldwide. Several textbooks present exact models for this international common format (for instance, Lusey: 1996: 273–84), and using an alternative format is even considered unprofessional. In the documentary field the situation is

quite different. There are several ways of expressing plans and ideas for a documentary, and the content, form and size of these papers and presentations vary. Sometimes documentary scripts have one column, sometimes two separating visuals on the left side of the page and audio on the right side, and sometimes even three columns (narration, visuals, sound). Occasionally, they have mainly text and a few pictures, sometimes little text but a lot of pictures, and in some cases they resemble letters to financiers. Nowadays, they can even be demonstrations or presentations. Many different forms can be regarded as a documentary script, and the work practices that produce them can differ a great deal. For instance, documentary film-maker and media artist Janet Merewether looks for alternative ways for conventional script formats. She gives examples of modular and visual forms of scripts. For her, writing a documentary occurs throughout the film-making process (2015: 93). The synopsis, treatment or script is the working draft that has to be open and flexible (Merewether 2015: 95). So, the screenwriting process could be called ‘*screenresearching*’ or ‘*screensketching*’ (Merewether 2015: 101). Documentary filmmaker Errol Morris has also described his working method as an investigation. He is not making an investigation for the film; the film is an investigation in and of itself (Millard 2014: 66). Writing, for him, is the process of layering and adding new material, not planning everything beforehand (Millard 2014: 75).

To sum up various possibilities and practices we can list some basic documentary script forms or formats used in documentary film production:

1. Synopsis or proposal

- Short presentation of the topic, story and idea
- Sometimes, but very seldom, a short synopsis is enough to go into production.

2. Treatment

- Maybe the most commonly used form in documentaries

- Suits documentaries well for not being so precise
- Often used in follow-up or observational documentaries in which you do not know what is going to happen, but you can try to predict events.

3. Traditional fiction format

- Sometimes used, not very often
- Possible with films in which the material is known beforehand – for instance, in historical and essay documentaries
- Also in reconstructions and documentaries using fictional (set up) scenes or sequences.

4. Television formats

- Television companies use their own formats for television documentaries, current affairs programmes, reality television, etc.
- The approach and tradition is often journalistic.

5. Project presentation (Tine 2001)

- Consists of modules: starting points, film-maker's personal relationship to the topic, motivation, access, etc.
- Developed in Europe in connection with the concept 'creative documentary' (for instance, the Sources programme)
- Artistic ideology: a documentary film is creative, personal, self-expressive
- Emphasizes the director's vision, 'auteur policy'
- Alternative to traditional script forms, which are considered unsuitable for documentaries.

6. Audio-visual presentations or demonstrations

- Audio-visual sketching
- Can include a slide show, PowerPoint presentation, trailer or other materials
- Digital technology
- Effective in creating an impression about the style and feeling of the film.

Shooting script or editing script?

Textbooks for documentary filmmaking deal surprisingly briefly with scriptwriting, emphasizing both the pre-production research and development phase, and the post-production editing phase. For instance, Michael Rabiger writes with very little detail about a proposal in his influential book *Directing the Documentary* (2009: 58–59). It is important to develop a working hypothesis for the documentary film, but for Rabiger it is done for pitching or writing a proposal, not for scriptwriting (2009: 52–55). Typically for these textbooks, Rabiger gives a lot of advice for writing voice-overs for documentary films (Rabiger 2009: 492–99). The voice-over is of course only one minor part when dealing with the problems of scriptwriting and dramaturgy of a documentary film. Many textbook writers and filmmakers suggest that because of the process of documentary film-making, there are actually two different types of documentary script: the shooting script (pre-shoot script) and the editing script (post-shoot script). According to Marino Colmano, the first script formulates the intention and probable development of events, and the second one is made after the shootings and based on the material shot. The map is a common metaphor for the shooting script. For example, Trisha Das writes about documentary filmmaking and the script:

You may stumble across many unseen barriers or unexpected surprises. You may discover wonderful, uncharted areas off the beaten track. You may decide to go in one direction or the next or perhaps even a third. A map helps you on your way and prevents you from getting lost. (2007: 3)

For Trisha Das, the shooting script is ‘conceptual in nature; descriptive, but leaving room for interpretation’. The post-shoot script is for Das the final version of the shooting script. It combines

all the elements and information gathered during the shooting period and ‘weaves it all together into a cinematic story, which is used by the filmmaker to edit the documentary’ (Das 2007: 4).

The post-shoot or editing script is often considered the ‘real’ script for the documentary film. Michael Rabiger believes that the script is primarily a tool at the editing phase. For him, the documentary script is basically the same as the so-called ‘paper edit’, the editing plan based on the existing material (Rabiger 2009: 485–91). This plan may include lists of visuals, transcribed interviews, voice-over text on paper and technical data such as time codes. This kind of script is the final blueprint for the editing of the film. The paper edit is an effective tool if you are in a hurry, but quite a few creative documentary film-makers and editors find it too restrictive. The paper edit is considered more like a technical aid and not a real documentary film script.

Documentary scriptwriting in practice: a man from Congo and a girl in India

I did a great deal of research work and scriptwriting for both of my cases (*A Man from Congo River* and *Kusum*). It was completed beforehand, so they were both pre-shoot scripts, but otherwise the cases were quite different. I wrote the script for *A Man from the Congo River* together with historian Seppo Sivonen, as he had found an interesting unknown historical detail that most of the engineers who worked on the river boats in the colonial Congo were Finns. The Belgian government recruited labour effectively from Northern Europe to rule an enormous area of Congo. We did extensive research in archives in Helsinki, Stockholm and Brussels to collect information and material for the film. The first synopsis was based on the idea that the film would utilize a voice-over detailing this historical phenomenon on a more general level. But then we found a collection of diaries, letters, photos and also some personal items of Akseli Leppänen in the Finnish Institute of Migration. He had made his career on river boats and kept a diary for several decades describing events and life in Congo. Now we had a main character, point of view and the story.

In our script, we used a wide variety of audio-visual elements to tell the story and visualize Akseli's experience. There were, besides his personal diaries, photos and objects (passports, medals, etc.), as well as general photos of the era and archive film about riverboats. We decided to film general shots in museums and archives and their objects (whips, knives, cameras, etc.) and even planned few modest re-enactment scenes (a man writing in his diary, the main character's shadow, etc.). We also included in the script some scenes of the present-day Congo, of places where our main character had lived almost 100 years earlier (Aaltonen and Kortti 2015: 5).

Thanks to our thorough research we knew what kind of visual material was available. So, it was quite easy to imagine and plan how the film would look like and how the story could be told, and the script ended up being very precise, using quotations from diaries and letters. The main storyline is about change, how Akseli regressed during the years in the racist surroundings. From the diaries we picked scenes and comments relevant to this theme, as well as confrontations with the black workers and ethical ponderings. In addition, there were some sub-themes or subplots – for instance, Akseli's homesickness and the effort to travel to Finland to meet his old mother. We also selected situations and materials that made Akseli human and interesting. For me as a film-maker, it was extremely important that the audience could identify with Akseli. Constructing the script was very much like writing a fiction screenplay; only this time the elements were not invented but picked out from the large amount of existing materials. The scenes were written largely in a traditional screenplay format (number three in the list above), including the main character's voice being played by the well-known actor Hannu-Pekka Björkman, with a few other voices, and a female narrator's voice-over for delivering necessary historical and social context.

Altogether, we wrote seven versions of the script before getting it into production. The last versions also included photos, both taken by the main character, and general photos of the era and places. They visualized the text effectively. When I included the portrait of Akseli on the front page

of the script (Figure 1), it became easier for the reader to identify with the main character. The final version of the script has 36 pages, including photos, and the length of the film was going to be 58 minutes.

Before we started to edit I wrote an edit script for the editor. There were some new scenes marked with different colours, but also my own comments, ideas and hints for the editor. For me it was more a way to communicate ideas than having a restricting plan to edit. Even in this case – when having a precise script – the film changed during the filmmaking process. The shooting trip to Congo resulted in some extra material, which had not been planned – for instance, the different parallels between Akseli's era and our own time. Eventually some scenes were left out, some used to compensate for them, and some totally new ones were created. Also the order of the scenes changed. But altogether, the final film resembles the original script to a large extent.

In terms of developing *Kusum*, how would I deal with the issue of scriptwriting without an existing main character, events or plot? The script was written together with Antti Pakaslahti, an expert in multicultural psychiatry, after a research period in India. We knew how Bhagat worked, what the typical healing process for him was, how it started, continued and ended. We had followed his work for a long time and also met many of his patients. So we knew what kind the typical and probable patient was. Among the patients were several young housewives. Mental problems often occurred when a just-married young wife moved into her husband's house and tried to adapt to a new family situation. Typically, she is lowest in the family's social hierarchy until she gives birth to children. So the script was written as though we had such a main character. In the text, I described what we were looking for. In one of the later script versions I even gave a name for the protagonist: Asha. It was then easier to imagine what could happen to her.

The form of the script could be called treatment (number two in the list above). There is first quite a lot of text about the intentions of the director, the style and background information about

healing. After that comes a list of situations or scenes. There are three kinds of events: ones that are going to happen for sure (for instance, a Diwali celebration), those that are likely to happen (Bhagat taking a patient to the holy town of Menhdipur because he usually does), and those that are possibly going to happen (the main character getting cured). It was clearly expressed to the reader that the script is suggestive and scenes possible, and it mentioned that the main character (Asha) did not yet exist with a description of what kind of a person we were looking for. The final film could be something quite different. I wrote four versions of the script. The last one, only twelve pages long for 70 minutes of film, convinced the financiers, and I was able to travel to India to start filming.

When the filming period started in India, we still did not have a main character in the flesh, just a suggestion on paper. Bhagat, our healer, held an open house event the first Tuesday of every month in which people were welcome to enter and take part in the healing sessions. In one of these sessions I noticed a young, shy and introvert girl. There seemed to be something bothering her. She was Kusum, our main character to-be. Her life situation was very different from the script; also her story was to become much more serious than speculated in the script. During the shooting period we forgot what was written in the script; I was just trying to keep up with events going on and trying to understand what was happening around the main characters. The healing and things connected to it were very intense.

When the editing started, we watched the material carefully with editor Tuula Mehtonen. It was a mess. In *Kusum* we did not have an editing script, although we would have needed it more because of the structural and dramaturgical problems. Instead, we used cards, diagrams and other graphical methods. In a way, we started from the very beginning, thinking of the possible form of the film. Should we use a voice-over to make things clear? Or a reflexive element, filmmakers encountering a complex and strange reality? Should the film be more essayistic than dramatic? Through these ponderings we found in a way the ideas of the script again; we were convinced that

because the topic and the world of the film were very strange for the audience, it was best to have a form that was clear and familiar. We followed the dramaturgy, the arch already sketched out in the original script: a patient getting ill because of demons, her struggle with them and the result of these battles. The initial setting was classical: a protagonist with a goal (getting well), a hero (healer) helping her, and the antagonists (demons). First Bhagat had to figure out who the spirits were, then fight several battles with them, before the final encounter in which the spirits surrender and leave the family. Actually the structure of *Kusum* reminds a classical western film form. The name of the film changed (from *Bhagat and the Demons* to *Kusum*), the main character changed (from Asha to Kusum), and the storyline changed. It changed from typical or probable to peculiar and unique. But the basic idea of the script remained – or was found again.

Conclusion: The documentary idea

My own approach to scriptwriting for documentaries is pragmatic. One can and must write a script for a documentary, and it can be a useful tool in the documentary filmmaking process. But the nature of the documentary script is very different from fiction. It is a sketch or plan, not a definitive instruction for filmmaking. However, it is important to ponder the form, structure, story, characters and arguments beforehand on paper. But you have to be open to everything changing during the working process.

Quite a few screenwriting researchers concentrating on fiction strengthen the idea about dramaturgy as a holistic element of the film. For instance, Ian Macdonald writes about a screen idea, which describes the origin of the film better than referring directly to the screenplay (2004: 90, 2011: 112–16). Marja-Riitta Koivumäki sees filmmaking as a continuous process of dramaturgical choices. All decisions, even the smallest details, are dramaturgical, either done during the scriptwriting, shooting or editing (2010: 31). Margot Nash considers (fiction) scriptwriting as an unknown creative process, where gaps and spaces within a screenplay offer opportunities for

directors. Screenplay 'is a recipe where the results will vary according to the availability of ingredients and the inventiveness of the cook and those who work in the kitchen' (Nash 2013: 155). What she calls 'discovery-driven script development process' resembles substantially both documentary scriptwriting and documentary filmmaking by itself.

All these ideas fit very well together with the ideas of documentary scriptwriting. However, there is an essential difference between fiction and documentary. Several researchers writing about fiction consider filmmaking an interpretation of the original screenplay for performance, which is the final film (for instance, Koivumäki 2010). The documentary filmmaking process itself, including scriptwriting, is a continuous interpretation of reality, not interpretation of the script. Maybe we could talk about 'documentary idea' instead of a screen idea?

I consider the documentary script a hypothesis. Hypothesis is an assumption made for testing something empirically. In this case the filmmaker tests by making the film. The script is a hypothesis about the topic, theme, main character, style, events and the whole dramaturgical arch. Some of these elements are realized during the filmmaking process, some of the hypothesis can be 'verified', while some prove to be totally wrong. The documentary filmmaker has to be flexible and capable of changing the hypothesis during the process, maybe even several times. Sometimes the ideas of the script are abandoned during the shootings; sometimes they are found again in the editing phase, like in the case of *Kusum*. It is possible that the whole structure and dramaturgy of the film is formed late in the editing process. There are even cases where the editor has got the scriptwriting credit.

It is extremely important to recognize that documentary filmmaking is an open process and, similarly, documentary scriptwriting is an open process occurring throughout the entire film-making process. The form, structure and dramaturgy develop constantly in interaction with reality. This dialogue between the filmmaker and the world gives form to the script and the film; this form is

constantly in movement, and we have to accept it and be ready for it. All documentary filmmakers know that it is easier to change plans and react during the process when you have clear ideas and detailed plans. That *is* a documentary script.

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Note

¹ I researched Finnish documentary filmmakers, but because they are a typical part of the European documentary film culture and independent documentary production practices I think the results also have a wider relevance.