

A Shift in Focus

Hassett Sanchez delivered the Annual MPJI Spring Lecture before a screening of her documentary film “*More Art Upstairs*.”

You might not know this but many people who direct documentaries secretly or not so secretly want to direct feature films.

I am not one of them. I hope to spend the rest of my days directing documentaries. There really aren't that many differences between documentary and feature filmmaking. Other than the actors paid to read the scripts, the stupendous sets, the ace sound effects and the dozens of curious job titles that appear in the closing credits.

Of course, their budgets do have several more zeros at the end. The amount spent on promoting an independent feature film could fund three or four documentaries.

There is one other big difference between feature film and narrative documentaries,

“I am accountable to the people who open up their lives to my film crew and allow us to take their stories into an edit room and shape them into a film.”

one I think about quite often:

“In feature films, the director is God; in documentary films, God is the director.” Can you guess who said that? It was Alfred Hitchcock.

I must tell you, this Hitchcock quote has sustained me on many a film shoot when my character forget to show up or when we set up at four a.m. to capture the perfect sunrise shot and encountered a field full of noisy birds that refused to leave.

To be clear, when I say “character” I am not talking about actors reading scripts. I'm referring to real people who graciously allow us to follow them with our cameras as they do what they would be doing anyway, even if we were not there.

Before assuming the director's chair – I actually don't think I've ever had a real director's chair but will put that in my next contract – I labored in the trenches of the network news business. I left my position as ABC's religion, culture and education producer when my airtime for a significant story on *Nightline* was truncated from 12 minutes to 8 minutes to less than five minutes. The time allotted for stories on *ABC World News Tonight* was getting even shorter.

ACCOUNTABILITY

I realize that a five-minute television news story sounds like an eternity in 2018, particularly on the cables such as *CNN* where I began my career. It was there that I came to recognize the extraordinary privilege and responsibility that comes with telling others' stories. For several years, I worked on a program called *CNN World Report*. The show had an unusual concept. We partnered with journalists and broadcasters around the world who would send us a report on the top story in their country each week. We were able to create a global forum for journalists in more than 150 countries and a truly international broadcast.

Why do I mention this? Because that program represented a radical departure from the typical practice of the US journalist “parachuting” in to report on a breaking news story then flying right out. So often, western journalists drop in and out of stories, disconnected from the communities and the countries where we're reporting. The best local voices might not be truly represented in the story. There also can be a diminished sense of accountability because that journalist isn't likely to see those people again, unlike the local reporter who regularly runs into her readers or viewers at the grocery store or post office.

My documentaries rest somewhere on the continuum between journalism and art but the same principles apply. I am accountable to the people who open up their lives to my film crew and allow us to take their stories into an edit room and

JODY HASSETT SANCHEZ



Jody Hassett Sanchez is president of PointyShoe Productions, a documentary and long-form TV production company. Her latest documentary, *More Art Upstairs*, had its world premiere at Hot Docs, the largest documentary film festival in North America. The film was just selected to be part of the State Department's American Film Showcase, so Jody will be screening the film around the world as a cultural ambassador for the US next fall.

She covered religion, culture, and education for ABC's *World News Tonight* and filed stories for *Nightline*. Prior to joining ABC News, Hassett Sanchez traveled the globe as CNN's State Department producer, reporting on everything from democratic elections in Mongolia to refugee resettlement in Macedonia.

She served as a senior producer of CNN's *Cold War Postscript*, a 24-part weekly program examining connections between the history of the Cold War and global affairs today. She was part of the CNN team that won a national Emmy award for breaking news coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing and the ABC team that won a national Emmy for 9/11 coverage.

A graduate of Smith College, Jody lives in the Washington, DC area with her husband George, a journalist and fine arts photographer and their son Sebastian Beck who was born in Kazakhstan.



Screening of *More Art Upstairs* at The King's College



Melissa Harrison, Paul Glader, Jody Hassett Sanchez and Bill Newcott

shape them into a film. Twenty years after working at *CNN World Report*, I started the Africa Film Project with the help of The Media Project. We lead hands-on workshops in Africa for emerging filmmakers, teaching them how to craft short documentaries about the important stories of their countries.

NUANCE

While I was working in the news business, people frequently would ask me, “What’s your story about on tonight’s broadcast” or “Tell me about the series you’re working on?” It was easy to answer their questions because there was always a “who, what, where why and when” to my reporting.

Now people want to know, “What kind of documentaries do you make?” or “What is your film about?” Rarely can I come up with a short or simple answer because the films I create are character and story driven, rather than organized around a single concept or idea.

Perhaps the best way to respond is that I’m interested in stories at the intersection and occasional collision of faith and culture.

One of the nastier digs you can make to a film writer or director is to call his or her work “on the nose” because the real power in film is in the subtext.

Documentaries are akin to feature films in that the most powerful ones anchor themselves in character and story rather than message.

I am thankful that I’m now able to explore so much more than the “who, what, where, why and when” questions in my work. The biggest change is that as a documentarian, I can and occasionally must bring my own perspective to projects in a way that I could not and would not as a journalist.

This became apparent when we were recording the scratch track for *SOLD: Fighting the New Global Slave Trade*, my documentary about three modern day abolitionists – a Hindu, a Muslim and a Christian.

I had asked a radio reporter friend to record the scratch track, which is the narration you use to edit the rough cut. Quick sidebar: hers is

“the real power in film is in the subtext.”

not the voice you'll hear when you see the film. We had director Mira Nair narrate the final version.

The line in the script that I had asked my radio reporter friend to record read, "Fighting this colossal evil requires fortitude and faith."

She stopped, stepped out of the recording booth and told me that she wasn't "comfortable" calling something "evil." Now having spent a good bit of time with my primary characters in India, Pakistan and West Africa, I was and am persuaded that if you can't call the enslavement of children evil, than what is evil?

In my former world of network journalism, the world where my friend still labored, describing something as "evil" could accurately be considered editorializing. I am thankful to be working today in a different realm where I am able to introduce more nuance, reportage and layered meaning to the story.

CONFLICT AND COMPASSION

News stories about faith and religion frequently focus on external conflict – denominational disputes, legal battles over religious rights, or members of one faith group killing another.

Now that I am able to develop my own stories and give them as much time as they require, I can focus on the internal facets of faith. There is still likely to be a clash or tension since these are the classic elements of a great story. But in my documentaries, that conflict or tension is more likely to be occurring within a character's life.

When this conflict is portrayed well, viewers are able to experience an emotion other than compassion fatigue, which we all suffer from today. It's almost impossible to ignore that cable headline or phone alert about the latest disaster. It pains us for a minute, but then we go on with our day because what can we do about tragedies happening across the globe or the country?

So what kinds of stories do touch our hearts? Psychologists who study what motivates people to care and take action report the human conscience is rarely moved by tales of mass suffering or sweeping stories about entire cities or communities in crisis. It's just too much for us to take

in. Instead, we long for a well-crafted story about an individual or small group. Studies suggest that when we spend time watching someone else's experience, it can trigger "mirror neurons" and we experience in some small way what it is like to be that individual. This can be the first step towards empathy.

Pixar spends scads of time and money trying to move their audiences to feel the same thing that their cute character on screen is experiencing on the screen. If you are truly interested in this notion, read a smart little book by Yale's Elaine Scarry called "On Beauty and Being Just." She offers a nuanced philosophical argument for beauty in a classic sense of the word because it can take the viewer away from the center of our preoccupation with ourselves and refocus on others.

Scarry explains how this can bring us one step closer to thinking about justice and fairness. Of course that's a simplified synopsis. But her idea was one that guided me as I made my second feature documentary, which was not a social justice film per se, but about art and beauty.

RICH VISUALS

One of my favorite CDs in recent years has been *Abyssinian Mass* by Wynton Marsalis. There's a marvelous quote on the back of the CD – another reason to buy the old school CD or vinyl for the liner notes! The quote is from journalist and editor Leon Wieseltier who experienced his own fall from grace recently:

"Visual people need something to get us to the invisible."



The King's College Journalism students at the screening of *More Art Upstairs*.



Critic Bill Newcott interviews Hassett Sanchez about her filmmaking.

“Visual people need something to get us to the invisible.”

I can't think of a better explanation of why I find filmmaking so much more stimulating and nuanced than television news. I'm always trying to puzzle out – as a journalist and now as a filmmaker - how to visually capture faith in someone's life. How can I convey the ways that faith affects the choices they make, their motivations, and the evolution of their character?

You can't do this convincingly with the clichéd images we all know too well:

- The static shot of a stained glass window pierced by shards of bright light.
- Flickering votives with organ music playing in the distance.
- A weathered Buddha in a glorious garden as a light rain delicately falls.

None of these images convey what Flannery O'Connor and others have described as the “mystery of faith.” I'm not suggesting my films have accomplished this either, but it's a noble goal and I plan to keep working on it. My transition to documentaries might be personal corollary of another line from O'Connor:

“If I could do it in a sentence, why would I write a whole story?”

Now when I start preproduction on a new film, I'm able to spend time thinking deeply about how to create a fresh visual language for that film before we ever pick up a camera.

With *SOLD: Fighting the New Global Slave Trade* each of the three characters believe in the notion of a divine creator who made each of us and imbued us with dignity. This was central to these abolitionists' fight against the buying and selling of children. To reinforce this, I wove in imagery of different kinds of creation throughout the film.

With my new film *More Art Upstairs*, we were intentional about how we shot the artists' hands as they were making their work. We managed to capture one character's ink-stained fingers in repose evoking Michelangelo's depiction of Adam's hand on the Sistine Chapel.

Some suggest that today the fine arts no longer matter to Western culture other than in an honorary and irrelevant way. But for most of human history, works of visual arts were the direct expression of the society that made them.

However for at least a generation, the American public has been alienated from the life of the fine arts, while continuing to enjoy museums for the sake of spectacle ... much like people enjoyed going to the circus a century ago.

It troubles me that the public accepts that art has nothing important to say about who we are. While I would not call myself an

artist, I make documentaries because I care deeply about this notion and I am convinced that art and beauty can get us outside of ourselves and move us towards empathy and action and perhaps justice. I want to create films that have something to say about who we are and where we are going.

Thank you.



**The Reader is a publication of
The McCandlish Phillips
Journalism Institute**

The McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute (MPJI) is based at The King's College in New York City. MPJI provides education, training and professional development projects for journalists at the high school, undergraduate and professional levels. It is named after the late John McCandlish Phillips, a legendary reporter at The *New York Times*.

Editor: Paul Glader
Designer: Peter Freeby
Copy Editors: Clemente Lisi,
Terry Mattingly
**56 Broadway, 5th floor,
New York, NY 10004
@JMPjournalism
phillipsjournalism.org**

