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The Starting Place: From Conception to Creation

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Abstract

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Over the last decade the Atlanta arts community has expanded tremendously. WonderRoot is a community arts center located in Atlanta that strives to create an artist-friendly city through offering affordable access to art facilities and professional development opportunities to Atlantans. Despite WonderRoot's efforts to help its artists monetize their work, many still struggle to support themselves. To further understand this struggle I filmed three WonderRoot artists over the period of seven months. This document serves to explicate the process of making the documentary, *The Starting Place*, and details the experiences of the film's three subjects.

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That Thursday started like any other in the WonderRoot office. Three hours into my shift I had helped a band set up their equipment in the recording studio, given a tour of the facilities to a couple of new Atlanta residents, and prepared the ceramics studio for the class I was teaching that evening, when Stanley barged into the office.

“Who the hell is that girl?” he demanded. Stanley had been a WonderRoot member since before my internship had started that June, and as far as I was concerned, he had never caused any problems with other frequenters of the community center. “That girl just told us to ‘shut up.’ Who the hell is she?” Quickly I realized that Stanley was referring to Kristy, another intern teaching the monthly Final Cut Pro class. Before I could respond, she was in the office too.

“I don’t know who this guy is, but he has been interrupting my class.” She turned to Stanley, “What, you don’t think I can hear you talking about me?” Standing at five feet flat, Kristy’s authoritative tone and palpable anger gave her the appearance of towering over 6’4” Stanley. My internship training had not prepared me for the fusillade of insults that fired between them. *She was condescending. He was an asshole.* And then there it was, the remark that I had silently been praying would not be uttered: *She’s a racist.*

Kristy left the center in tears that day. Stanley stopped coming by as much. Over my next few shifts, I repeated the story to my bosses at least five times. The argument had been a flagrant misunderstanding, I explained. Working at a place like WonderRoot, an Atlanta-based community center that draws a diverse crowd, I figured that it was only a matter of time before the race issue arose. Instead of sweeping it under the rug, the WonderRoot staff addressed the situation head on by sitting down with Kristy and

Stanley and talking through the fight. What had triggered it? How could it have been avoided? And was it really about race?

The incident, which has since been resolved, got me thinking about how WonderRoot as an organization deals with and overcomes issues of race. I was taken by the diplomatic manner that WonderRoot handled the fight. I wanted to document my experiences at this place, to tell the story of WonderRoot, what it is, how it started. So I decided that my Honors Thesis would take the form of a documentary film about WonderRoot. That summer I began my search for a topic that would allow me to delve deeper into this organization that fascinated me.

On February 1, 2008, Chris Appleton, Alex West, and Whit Wisebram signed the lease on run-down house on Memorial Drive in Reynoldstown. By that May, the three Atlanta natives and a handful of dedicated volunteers transformed the shabby space into the physical manifestation of the non-profit arts organization they had started two years earlier with the acquisition of a 501(c) 3, a government issued acknowledgement of non-profit standing. The center includes a music venue, ceramics room, recording studio, darkroom, gallery space and digital media lab, all of which are available to the public for a monthly membership fee of ten dollars. Beyond the art facilities, WonderRoot has additional programming that encourages artists to improve and monetize their work. One example is the Mostly Local Filmmakers Night, which WonderRoot puts on every two months in collaboration with the Plaza Theater. The winners get their films screened at the Plaza and receive free entry into larger scale film festivals.

Nearly four years after opening, the community center and its associated programming have experienced monumental growth. But despite its rapid expansion, the

organization has not lost sight of its founding goals and mission statement: “WonderRoot is an Atlanta-based non-profit arts organization committed to uniting artists and community to inspire positive social change”(Wonderroot.org). While the concept of WonderRoot was still in its earliest phases, the founders knew they wanted to “make a more just Atlanta” but did not know that they wanted it to be associated with art. In 2002 their early efforts consisted of winter nights spent driving through the city passing out sandwiches and blankets to the homeless, Appleton knew that to make real difference they would have to be proactive, and the arts seemed like an appropriate vehicle to do so. “We were noticing that Atlanta-born artists were all leaving the city to enter already established art communities like New York or Chicago” (Appleton). And thus WonderRoot was born.

In summer of 2011 I got the opportunity to work as an intern at WonderRoot through Emory’s Ethics and Servant Leaders Internship program, a paid internship that places Emory students with fulltime summer positions at Atlanta-based nonprofits. My position afforded me unlimited access to the facilities and the chance to interact with the community center’s member base. For a weekend this summer the WonderRoot interns and staff went on a retreat to one of the intern’s houses in Florida. On the drive back I rode with Appleton. He told me stories about his past struggles with substance abuse and how funneling his energy into WonderRoot helped him combat those addictions. At that point I came up with my first film idea: my documentary would tell Appleton’s story, highlighting how WonderRoot grew from his struggle. But when I approached him about my idea a month later, he was, thankfully, brutally honest. He told me that I could make

the film but did not want it screened for large audiences. It was back to the drawing board.

My next idea emerged from a conversation I had with WonderRoot's Programming Director, Kwajelyn Jackson. In an interview, she described her interest in understanding the racial make up of the community that WonderRoot serves. She also raised questions about racial participation in the arts on a larger scale, why some art events are attended primarily by people of the same race, and what WonderRoot could do to bridge these gaps (Jackson). An idea dawned on me: race and segregation in the Atlanta art scene, and it grew like kudzu. My film would delve, not only into segregation of the arts, but would explore the history of segregation in the city—the state—the world! Looking back on the concept now, it seems blatantly overambitious. But I didn't realize this until my first official interview with Appleton, which appears in the opening of my film, *The Starting Place*. I figured that Appleton be able to give me the low down on my new topic; he, more than anyone else I knew, had his hands in the arts scene. To my dismay he quickly shot down my idea. He did not think that I could turn it into a story, and questioned my ability to take on such an enormous topic in only seven months. As the interview wound to a close, I couldn't help but feel like my project was never going to find direction. I was about to turn off my camera, when Chris spoke candidly and admitted that in its four years of existence WonderRoot may not have done anything to change segregation, it had, however, impacted many individuals (Appleton). Suddenly it occurred to me, I needed to narrow my scope, to look at the people who had been touched by WonderRoot.

Over the subsequent weeks, I filmed incessantly at the community center. I didn't know who I was going to focus on and when they would stumble into my life or, more accurately, in front of my camera. I managed to hang onto the idea though, because as September was winding to a close, it was crunch time. If I gave up, there simply would be no thesis. I held on because of moments like the one with Kristy and Stanley, excited by the possibility of making a film that could capture WonderRoot through looking at individuals. After my paid internship had ended in August, I remained working there two days a week throughout the school year. My problem wasn't so much a lack of possible subjects; rather there were too many interesting characters to choose from. By the end of September I had found three WonderRoot artists with concrete goals that they hoped to achieve within the seven months I would be filming. The first was a graphic designer/illustrator named Gina Kirlaw who interned with me on Fridays. Ingrid Sibley, my second subject, was a compiling an anthology of stories from Atlanta-based artists that she would call The Art of Storytelling. Finally, there was Sean Foster, a nineteen-year-old rapper who used the recording studio at WonderRoot.

In its earliest stages my project took on the form of an observational documentary. I planned to look into the lives of my three subjects while attempting to avoid their direct interaction with the camera. The faculty I consulted encouraged me to experiment with this style and recommended that I watch some pieces by its pioneers, such as the Maysles brothers. I also turned to ethnographic films for inspiration because they often use the observational style. Although as my project unfolded a departure from the observational mode took place and my film shifted toward the conventions of the participatory mode.

The resulting film embodies my journey in discovering how to express my own voice as a filmmaker.

My initial aim in using the observational mode is described by Bill Nichols. “The scenes tend, like fiction, to reveal aspects of character and individuality. We make inferences and come to conclusions on the basis of behavior we observe or overhear” (174). I wanted to expose my subjects to the audience by portraying them in their ordinary lives trying to make it as artists. This genre of documentary is also known as “direct cinema,” or “cinéma vérité” in French. It corresponded with the invention of handheld cameras and portable audio equipment in the 1950s, and was formed in opposition to standard documentary marked by a narrative arc. These films “regarded authentic drama to be superior to the manufactured story lines of earlier documentaries. They chose topics of general interest, but their films lacked any preconceived plots; nothing in the films was rehearsed... they avoided telling an audience how it ought to feel about what it was watching” (Vogels 1). In its abandonment of narration, interviews, and plotline, direct cinema allowed the subjects’ subtle nuances to shine through. Despite a lack of “any preconceived plots,” films showing a subject’s everyday life often focused on capturing them in crisis situations; this way the film would naturally come to dramatic tension (Vogel 2).

Yet not all direct cinema sought to achieve dramatic tension through filming subjects in tense moments. D.A. Pennebaker’s *Don’t Look Back* (1967) follows American legend Bob Dylan on his 1965 British Concert Tour. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Pennebaker did not attempt to capture Dylan’s “true essence” by showing him in a vulnerable situation. Pennebaker simply did not need to do this to accurately portray

Dylan's character because the presence of the camera neither threatened Dylan, nor represented the hope of salvation. Pennebaker's opposition to the crisis structure is indicative of both filmmaker and subject being comfortable with themselves and each other, embracing the idea that "human beings are capable of changing, are incapable of not changing, are changing at every moment" (Rothman 148). In other words, a subject does not necessarily have to be placed in a moment of high stress to do something interesting in front of the camera; rather, human nature is inherently volatile and fascinating insights into a person's psyche appear constantly. My initial interest in making an observational film stemmed from this concept that watching people being themselves could make for an interesting film.

Brothers David and Albert Maysles were pioneers in the field of direct cinema because their films revealed the "essential humanity" of their characters, and allowed their audiences to really feel what their subjects felt (Vogel 6). One of their wildly successful films, *Grey Gardens* (1975) portrays the daily lives of an eccentric mother and daughter, who were the aunt and first cousin of Jacqueline Kennedy. The duo cohabited a dilapidated mansion in the Hamptons and both shunned and were shunned by their community. "The Maysles brothers in particular used direct cinema to reassert the sanctity of the individual in a world increasingly prone to identify people as parts of a large, often opposing groups," (Vogel 7). This concept resonated with me. The focus of my film steered away from looking at the community as a whole, making no claims to show an entire group of people, instead showing similarities and differences between three individual subjects. Though I found *Grey Gardens* highly entertaining, it forced me to question the ethics of observational cinema. Watching the film made me feel like a

voyeur examining two lunatics without their knowledge. While on one hand watching Edith and Edie Bouvier's absurd interactions made for a great film, I have to wonder if the Maysles brothers considered what ramifications *Grey Gardens* would have the women.

Of course, not all observational filmmakers have seemingly so little regard for how they portray their subjects. Filmmakers David and Judith MacDougall utilize observational cinema to illuminate the *how* and *why* of the cultural behaviors exhibited in their films (Grimshaw 122-123). Their work tends to appeal more to the audience's intellect as opposed to their emotions by showing their subjects more objectively, thus provoking viewers to use their own perspectives to understand the characters of the films. *To Live with Herds: A Dry Season Among the Jie* (1974) was among the first of the MacDougall films. In an extended shot in one of the opening scenes Logoth, a male member of the Jie tribe, rhetorically maps his peoples' land, situating it in the context of surrounding countries and tribes. Arguably this single shot sets the tone for the remainder of the film. Throughout *To Live with Herds* the extended shot appears frequently, a filmic device that lets the audience observe the nuances of everyday life for the Jie. Colin Young states, "the details of [MacDougall] films must be a substitute for dramatic tension, and the film's authenticity must be a substitute for artificial excitement" (108). This film reiterated the principle brought to light by Pennebaker's film, that the subject does not necessarily have to be shown in a moment of crisis for it to be effective. In one of the early cuts of *The Starting Place* I used a similar extended shot in order to give the viewer a more accurate conception of the duration of actual event. This involved showing almost an entire "write in" session with Sibley and her storytellers. I was attached to this

scene because it portrayed her idiosyncrasies that surface only when she interacts with other people, but in the end I had to part with it. While interesting to me, this scene told relatively little of Ingrid's story, and with three unrelated subjects it would have been impossible to allot equal attention to each person with this method. In realizing the extended shot would not fit as a motif in *The Starting Place*, I tried experimenting with shorter, more dynamic shots.

A distinguishing element of direct cinema arises from the filmmakers' acknowledgement that although he or she does not interact with the subjects he or she does exist behind the camera. Before this movement most documentaries mimicked fictional films by "placing the spectator more in the role of superhuman observer than in a position that actually reflects the optical position (or even subjective) position of the filmmaker at the time of filming," (Barbash et al. 371) thus establishing a relationship between the cameraperson and the subjects being filmed. I found this idea of the filmmaker being present, yet invisible, problematic. If the Maysles brothers truly had a relationship with their subjects, hiding this interaction seemed dishonest to the viewer. Once I started filming regularly, it became increasingly clear that being a genuinely "unobtrusive" observer was farfetched. At least the MacDougalls acknowledged their relationships with the subjects of their films. *A Wife Among Wives* (1982), for instance, opens with voiceover of Judith MacDougall explaining the couple's initial difficulty in determining what to make their film about. She goes on to say that their Turkana friends were instrumental in the decision to examine the roles and relationships among Turkana wives. The influence of direct cinema is apparent in the MacDougall's frequent use of observational footage; however, unlike the Maysles brothers, the MacDougalls frequently

narrate or use intertitles in their films, a departure from the original definition of observational cinema.

When I began filming my own project I was self-conscious about toting a camera with me at all times, yet as I spent more and more time filming my subjects, they grew accustomed to the presence of lens in their face and at times I did feel like a fly on the wall. Over the course of the project, I found that my strongest observational footage arose when people forgot that the camera was rolling. Once, while filming b roll at WonderRoot, I captured one of the elusive observational “gems.” I was filming a member working on storyboards for a film project when he asked Kirlew for artistic advice. This moment plays two important roles in my film. For one, it validates Gina as an artist, whereas the majority of the film focuses on her eccentric personality. Secondly, it illustrates her problem procrastinating by busying herself with other peoples’ projects. Although I used this observational moment in the film, it felt unnatural to hide my interactions with the three people who were rapidly becoming my friends.

As the project progressed, I found that the majority of my footage was riddled by my disembodied voice, constantly engaging my subjects in conversation from behind the camera. My immediate thought was that I had ruined almost everything that I had shot. But looking through what I had filmed, I discovered that most of my on camera interactions with my subjects were informal interviews, placing me in the role of participant, rather than unobtrusive observer. Some research outside of observational cinema showed me that I had unknowingly followed many of the conventions of the participatory mode, leading me to films like *Familiar Places*, *The Women’s Olamal*, *Sherman’s March*, *Hoop Dreams* and *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control*. In this mode the

filmmaker actively engages with his/her subjects on camera, thus relying heavily on interactions in the form of interviews. “What happens in front of the camera becomes an index of the nature of the interaction between filmmaker and subject” (Nichols 179). In other words, the participatory mode allows the person behind the camera to establish him or herself as another subject in the film. The realization that I could own my presence in *The Starting Place* was the ultimate tipping point that led me to primarily use the participatory mode.

Films made in this mode tend to be mutually beneficial for filmmaker and subject alike. Sometimes this takes the form of a compromise between parties. Another MacDougall film, *Familiar Places* (1980), depicts linguist Peter Sutton working in conjunction with an Aboriginal man, Angus, in mapping their territories in the Australian bush. In one scene Sutton and Angus talk after a tiring day of mapping. Sutton is planning to leave the camp that night to restock some supplies, but Angus, impatient to return to mapping, pleads with Sutton to stay for an extra day. With some distress, Sutton concedes and decides to head back to camp the following day. To me, this scene indicates a level of camaraderie that comes from collaboration typified in the participatory mode. Likewise, my friendships with the subjects of my film have made making the film much easier, but importantly these relationships are symbiotic. As an aspiring rapper one of the key ways that Sean will gain notoriety is through expanding his fan base. A role in my documentary offers him an opportunity to be heard by an audience that would otherwise have no exposure to him. I believe that Sean has the potential to make it in the hip-hop industry, and if does, he can use this film to show his struggles as a teenager.

One prominent difference between the observational and participatory modes is that the observational mode aims to give the viewer an idea of what it is like to *be* the subject, whereas the participatory mode shows what it is like to *be with* the subjects, and how this acknowledged interaction alters the situation being recorded (Nichols 181). I saw this principle play out in *The Starting Place* because the pressure of being filmed pushed all of my subjects to perform at their best. Although Ingrid did not end up releasing The Art of Storytelling as planned, knowing that I was going to film the “write in” sessions pushed her to stick to the schedule when she would have otherwise cancelled meetings.

The participatory mode was also appealing to me because it recognizes the interview as a legitimate method of collecting information. Many of the early proponents of direct cinema, such as Richard Leacock, opposed the use of interviews entirely. “ ‘I want to discover something about people. When you interview with someone they tell you what they want you to know about them,’ ” said Leacock (Young 99). I agree wholeheartedly with this sentiment, however, I think a film succeeds when it captures the disparity between what is said and what is actually done. This discrepancy comes through as early as the first scene in Melissa Llewelyn-Davies’ *The Women’s Olamal* (1985). In one of the opening shots a Maasai woman named Kisaru explains women’s limited power in her society. “A woman has her cow-hides... her scouring-stick... her axe... that's all. Your husband gives you cattle to look after... but they're not really yours—or only in a way. Your husband can't reallocate them to his other wives... but he can give them all away to another man. You can't stop him. He's the owner” (Llewelyn-Davies). After seeing the opening scene one may expect the remainder of the film to defend the

argument that Maasai women are powerless, yet by depicting the women's Olamal group asserting persuasive power over the men of Loita, Llewelyn-Davies manages to disprove the audience's expectations.

In filming *The Starting Place* I encountered several instances of this discrepancy that I would not have captured if only using the observational mode. Kirlew, for instance, told me that she planned to launch her web comic, Scandal Bags, during the period of my filming. Of course, doing so requires copious numbers of completed comics and, therefore, hours of drawing. Whenever we discussed her work though, Kirlew provided constant excuses for not having done any, even going as far as to blame her lack of productivity on black magic spells that a visiting relative cast on her. Although Gina's story did not render the outcome that I had expected because she never actually launched Scandal Bags, *The Starting Place* still manages to capture her essence through her failure to complete that goal.

In 1986 filmmaker Ross McElwee accomplished a similar feat with his film *Sherman's March*. McElwee received a grant to make a documentary on the lingering effects of the Civil War on the present day South. The film was never meant to be a typical historical documentary; rather it aimed to focus on the impact of the Civil War on racial relations in the modern South ("Ross McElwee | Sherman's March"). The resulting film did anything but. Despite a recurring theme of the Civil War, his documentary turned into an autobiographical catalogue of his quest to find love. An important scene from the film documents the filmmaker's relationship with Pat Rendleman and displays a duality of modes, as McElwee integrates the observational and participatory techniques seamlessly. This scene starts with Pat bidding her parents farewell before she leaves

home for a commercial audition in Atlanta, Georgia. The remainder of the scene takes place in as she prepares for the audition with an actress friend, Leigh. It closes with McElwee's self-reflection after Pat's permanent departure for Los Angeles. The opening uses the observational mode in an extended shot of Pat hugging her parents in their driveway. In this shot Sherman has little, if any, interaction with the subjects, and it appears that he has captured a snapshot of their everyday lives and emotions unobtrusively. A trademark of the observational mode of documentary cinema arises from its lack of typical talking head interviews, so in that capacity *Sherman's March* exemplifies this mode. Despite the absence of official interviews, the audience gains a full understanding of the film's subjects through their interactions with one another and through direct addresses to the camera. For example, the participatory mode is visible in the very next shot as Pat explains her relationship with her parents while driving.

Fast, Cheap and Out of Control (1997) follows the conventions of the participatory mode in chronicling the activities of four eccentric professionals: a topiary gardener, a naked mole rat expert, a circus animal trainer, and a robot builder. Like *Sherman's March*, *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control* combines the participatory and observational modes. The scene that I will examine opens with a formal interview with the robot designer, Rodney Brooks, explaining the recent progress of robotics. Unlike McElwee, whose interviews go only as far as informal conversations between him and the subjects, Morris establishes the participatory mode through a unique method of interviewing called interrotron. Interrotron is a mechanism used in interviews that allows subjects to appear to make direct eye contact with the viewer. "When someone watches my films, it is as though the characters are talking to directly to them... There is no third

party,” said Morris in an interview (“Errol Morris: Eye Contact”). Bill Nichols describes how this represents a departure from the expository or observational modes. “It inflects the ‘I speak about them to you’ formulation into something that is often closer to ‘I speak with them for us (me and you)’...[and] has come to embrace the spectator as participant as well” (Nichols 180). In other words, in the participatory mode the filmmaker acts a liaison between the subject and audience. By achieving direct eye contact between the subjects and the viewer, Morris enacts the concept of “I speak with them for us,” but essentially excludes himself as a subject.

On the other hand, *Hoop Dreams* manages both to assert the presence of the filmmaker and to foster a connection between its subjects and the audience. From the outset, the viewer is made to feel attached to subjects, William Gates and Arthur Agee. Both Gates and Agee hail from the ghettos of New York City, aspire to become professional basketball players and are recruited to the same elite private school, St. Joseph’s High, which serves as a catalyst for achieving their dreams of making it to the NBA. Unlike *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control* or *Sherman’s March*, *Hoop Dreams* uses interviews with foil characters to explicate its subjects. In one of the very first scenes, for example, Agee’s father, Bo Agee, addresses the camera about his son. “I don’t even think about it—him not making it. I’m just so focused on him making it, I know he’ll make it” (James). Likewise, my film hinges many of the same techniques.

The Starting Place opens with a similar sequence of introductions to the three subjects. I aimed for it to give WonderRoot a role parallel to that of St. Joseph’s in *Hoop Dreams*, however, as the film progressed, it meandered further from the idea of what WonderRoot does to help its artists achieve their goals, lingering on what life does to

hinder those goals. My film also uses interviews with friends and family to illuminate my subjects. An interview with Foster's mentor, Jon Lebeau, for instance, helped me understand Foster's motivation for moving back to Atlanta. Lebeau explained that Foster had gotten into trouble with the law in Pittsburg, and following the advice of his father, moved back to Atlanta to eschew arrest. "You know that's terrible advice, to just leave like that. He might not be able to get a job with that on his record," (Lebeau). I used this part of the interview to foreshadow Foster's actual arrest, which takes place in the final scene.

I learned the most about Foster through an interview, while observational footage of Sibley said the most about her. I document her playful interactions with her daughter, Ilana, and juxtapose these scenes with those of her explaining her tight financial situation to illustrate her many layers as a person. I found that showing Ingrid's subtle complexities was the most challenging in editing because unlike Foster or Kirlew, nothing dramatic happens to her. Still, by getting a new job and home Ingrid grows throughout my filming. Even though The Art of Storytelling was not released when it was supposed to be, I wanted to show her progress in other ways. So I arranged her story to highlight the positive transitions that she made. For example, in her first segment she is shown in her old apartment musing about places she would like to live. In one of her final sections, Ingrid is happily living in her new and improved home and shown working at Richards Variety Store. I realized that the only way to illustrate her journey was to use my own voice to explain it, thus the challenge of portraying Ingrid's growth was what led me to the decision to use narration.

A documentary's voice is central to its success, but it is important to note that voice encompasses more than just narration or voiceover. Every decision a director makes, from length of shot, to use of sound, to choice of mode, all frame a film's voice. "Documentaries seek to persuade or convince us by the strength of view and the power of the voice" (Nichols 68). One of the most obvious factors that plays into voice is use of narration. In *The Ax Fight* (1972), filmmaker Tim Asch uses narration to address the issue of filmmaker bias by showing and explaining three different edits of the same footage of a controversy that took place in a Yanomami village in Venezuela. The first segment of the film shows an unedited version of what Asch and his co-worker Napoleon Chagnon saw during one lazy afternoon of fieldwork. In an interview conducted by Jay Ruby, Asch explains how he unexpectedly stumbled upon the subject matter for his film. He was resting in his hammock when he heard women crying nearby. Without time to set up his equipment, or for that matter determine the source of the commotion, Asch made the quick decision to start filming the ensuing incident. In the second section, Asch uses diagrams and narrates a play by play of the same footage to contextualize it to the audience. The final segment of the film shows the edited version, which stands in stark contrast of the previous two sections. By employing this tactic Asch illustrates the primacy of editing and narration in a film's voice.

While some critics suggest that the film leaves the audience with a lack of closure, his self-conscious narration showed me that it is acceptable for a narrator's voice to be something beside the didactic voice of God, a narration style that dominates the field of documentary film. Exposure to Asch's technique of showing and explaining three versions of the original footage also opened my eyes to the degree of creative license

afforded to the director through editing. However I cannot say I truly grasped this sentiment until I actually started editing *The Starting Place* and personally experienced this power. One way that I exercised this power was through a street signs motif. Placed in key moments, the signs are meant to subtly tell the audience what to think. In the final section, I placed a still image of a street sign directly before the subject's face appears on screen. Kirlew has a "Slow Children at Play" sign, Sibley has a curvy road ahead sign, and Sean's says "Wrong Way."

In *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control* the voiceover is taken directly from formal interviews with subjects and systematically overlaid with observational footage, the audience never hears Morris's voice. The scene that I examine opens with an interview with Brooks, the robotics expert. After several seconds of him speaking on screen, it cuts to footage of a robot in an old movie. As his explanation continues, we see black and white footage of Brooks walking into what appears to be a surprise party. Non-diegetic music—or music that is added from outside the story space—causes the emotional tension when he says, "when I think about it, I can almost see myself as being made up of thousands and thousands of little agents doing stuff almost independently [like robots], but at the same time I fall back into believing the things about humans that we all believe about humans and living life that way. Otherwise if you analyze it too much, life becomes almost meaningless." *The Starting Place* also uses music to achieve an emotional tone, but unlike Morris, supplements it with narration. For example, I placed slow, sad sounding music over Lebeau's interview scene to trigger an emotional response from the audience. In some of Kirlew's earlier segments I used light hearted, bouncy music to shape the audience's opinion of her.

In *Hoop Dreams*, director, Steve James, uses narration primarily to orient the viewer. For example, he frequently explains foil characters or arrival in new locations, but never inserts personal reflections. His scenes speak for themselves. The scene of Agee after he has been kicked out of St. Joseph's High School is a poignant example of his understated narration. Agee is shown playing basketball in a local park when his father (who has since left the family) stumbles by to say hello. As Mr. Agee leaves, he is shown conducting a transaction with an undisclosed man. Meanwhile, the voiceover explains, "Increasingly, this playground has become a place to buy and sell drugs." This single sentence of narration creates an emotional crescendo in Arthur Agee's story. Seeing how impactful this line was in *Hoop Dreams* inspired me to use similar understated narration. In Foster's final section my narration explains, "The day after Sean's performance he went to jail for pending charges in Pittsburg. I have not spoken to him since," over an image of his face fading into black.

In *Sherman's March* narration is ubiquitous. McElwee uses it as a means of driving the story forward, transitioning between scenes, and orienting the viewer, and given McElwee's heavy use of observational footage and lack of structured interviews, it is vital to the film. At one point, during a shot of Pat swimming in the hotel pool, McElwee confides in the viewer, saying "I keep on thinking I should be filming Sherman's March, but I can't seem to stop filming Pat." In many ways this self-conscious tone lends itself to the overall feel of the movie as something closer to a video diary than a conventional documentary.

Our films are completely different, but still I feel a deep connection with McElwee as a filmmaker. Like *Sherman's March*, *The Starting Place* was meant to be a

film about race in the South; as both films unfold they take on a very different subject matter. However, in some capacities the idea of race never fully escaped either of us. After an early interview with WonderRoot's Executive Director, Chris Appleton, I decided to throw away my initial idea of making a documentary about racial segregation in the Atlanta arts community and made the conscious decision to instead follow three individual WonderRoot artists. While the resulting film makes no broad claims about race, the outcome each subject's story brings me back to the question, *was it really about race?* Does the fact that Foster, the young black male, ends up jail fulfill a stereotype? Yes. Does it mean this only happened because he is a young black male? No. Sean admits to breaking the law in Pittsburgh, but because I know and trust Sean that I do not completely blame him for the decisions that he made. As a privileged white woman it is easy to say I would never sell drugs, commit a robbery, or point a gun in someone's face. But I cannot say with confidence that these choices would be so clear if I had grown up in a different context.

Kirlew, also black, was brought up in an upper middle class family that supported her dreams of becoming an artist. She has a Masters degree in animation, is an excellent artist, and lives in a large house with her older brother, Dwight. Still, she cannot seem to make any progress on her web comic, Scandal Bags. Interestingly enough, it seems that the proposed content of Scandal Bags (her struggles as a black woman who relates more to white people), is exactly what is holding her back from actually completing the comic. It seems that Kirlew's struggle to accept her identity as a Jamaican-American woman has manifested itself as a self-fulfilled prophecy of failure, almost as though she rationalizes her lack of productivity with the thought process that if she never tries she will never fail.

On paper Ingrid fits the mold of a black single mother struggling to provide for her child, but it would be inaccurate to attribute these qualities to her being an African America. Just like for anyone else, I believe that a person's race plays a role in identity formation the same way upbringing, personal interests, and life experiences do. So in the end there is no simple answer to the question "is it about race?"

Walking away from this project, it is simple to categorize the mode of my film, to describe my voice as a filmmaker, to sum up what films inspired me—although none of these decisions were preconceived. When I first knew that I wanted to make a documentary about WonderRoot this summer, I had no concrete vision of how it would turn out. At that point all I knew was that I wanted to gain a more thorough understanding of how WonderRoot functioned and who it impacted. I had never operated a Canon t3i (the camera that I shot on), run sound and lighting single-handedly, or written a script, let alone created a documentary. I chose my subjects based on what they all had in common: artists who frequented WonderRoot and had specific goals that they wanted to accomplish within my timeframe. Sibley was going to publish a book, Kirlew would launch Scandal Bags, and Foster planned to compete in a rap battle with industry judges—it was perfect. Over the subsequent months, I focused primarily on content, following each of my subjects in anticipation of their big successes. Now, I see how naïve my vision really was. None of my subjects managed to accomplish their dream. Had I failed by choosing the wrong subjects? No. Each of them provided fascinating stories and have since become dear friends of mine. The respective unexpected outcomes turned into a metaphor for the unexpected outcome of my film. They anticipated that

their artistic endeavors would be met with success—I expected to create an observational documentary about race in the Atlanta arts scene.

If I could redo this project I would rearrange my priorities as a filmmaker, placing documentary form above predicted outcome. In other words, I would have gone into the process knowing what style of documentary I wanted to make and would have watched a number of similar documentaries before attempting to make one of my own. In the future, I will allot more time to making a documentary of this caliber to ensure that I get sufficient coverage of each subject. While I would have done many things differently, I feel that this project was an excellent culmination of the knowledge that I have acquired and an extremely valuable educational experience.

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