



The Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University

VISUAL STORYTELLING

The Digital Video Documentary

by Nancy Kalow

.



Visual Storytelling: The Digital Video Documentary

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Visual Storytelling

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Designed by Bonnie Campbell

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE

Shooting

CHAPTER 4

Telling Someone Else's Story

CHAPTER 5

Finishing and Sharing the Story

CHAPTER TWO

Listening

CHAPTER THREE

Finding the Story

APPENDIX

Links and Resources

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



INTRODUCTION

Visual Storytelling: The Digital Video Documentary

independence and control over the project. You, the filmmaker,

editing process. In the pages that follow, you'll find technical guidance, fieldwork how-to's, and practical advice from my ten years of teaching low- and no-budget filmmaking.

hundreds of films submitted each year for the Full Frame Documentation of documentary filmmaking and wanted to pass on what

Indeed, the documentary arts are flourishing in Durham and

4

Rise of the Digital Documentary

of simplifying shooting and editing. Digital filmmaking has been

ularity of consumer camcorders. Documentary films, which had been heavily scripted and shot with cumbersome film cameras,

used compact and relatively lightweight 16mm film cameras, and smaller crews. They filmed events observationally rather than fol

ing with high footage-to-final-running-time ratios. Craig Gilbert's *An American Family* (1972), *Real World* and other reality TV series) and the films made by small crews, 16mm film, and many hours of footage taken over



From *Weather Diary I* by George Kuchar.



From *Sadobabies* by Nancy Kalow.

guishable from journalism by the filmmakers' artistic ambitions and the investment of time devoted to fieldwork.

Ross McElwee's first-person documentaries, such as his popular 1985 film *Sherman's March*, have been a major force in video making. McElwee shot the film with a 16mm camera while

Dogme 95 and *Manifesto*, which reject

non-naturalistic techniques in feature films. Their ideas mesh per-

fectly with the desire to use video to depict communities off the beaten track. Louis Hock's *The Mexican Tapes: A Chronicle of Life Outside the Law* (1992) and *Sadobabies* (1993) are

examples of the work of independent filmmakers who focus on ordinary citizens, as well as issue-driven documentary filmmakers. Popular

The Documentary Approach

I love the masterworks of nonfiction film, and find much to admire

in the work of the solo videomaker to get started on a short film without waiting for a professional production company. *Visual Storytelling*

Closeness

not be thinking about consent while watching the film, but they



Alonzo Felder

The camera picks up better detail when positioned near the subject.

Showing rather than telling

doing

talking

As François Truffaut said, “A filmmaker isn’t supposed to *say* *show*”

Shooting to edit

tion in the field can’t be recreated later to fill in the gaps. Shooting

in the field.

Visual Storytelling,

CHAPTER 1 SHOOTING

characters. A documentary film may appear to be a faithful record

The filmmaker makes the decisions, such as how to frame a shot,

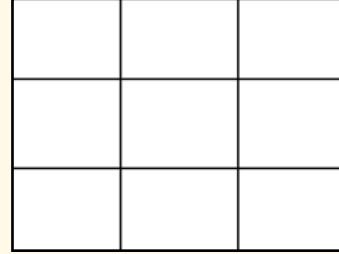
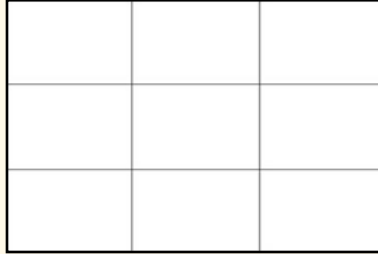
Listening

filmmaker will need to make decisions to create what his or her

ing, camera movements, and shooting in the field.

Framing

LEFT TO RIGHT: The frame for high definition (16 x 9 aspect ratio) video; the frame for standard definition (4 x 3) video.



Angie Lee



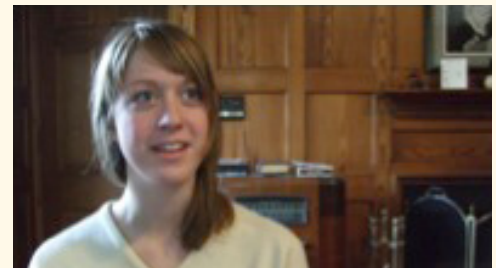
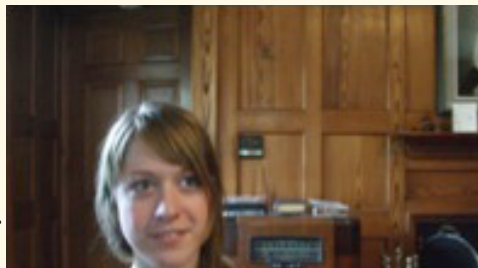
Use the “rule of thirds” to frame subjects.

The first thing to keep in mind is the “rule of thirds” of motion pic

When you look through your viewfinder to frame a scene, try

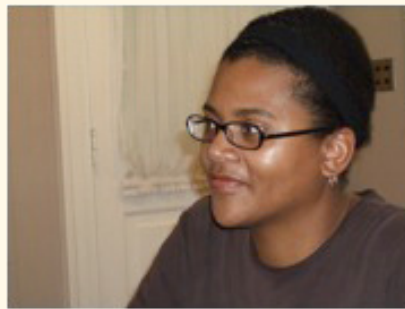
LEFT TO RIGHT: Too much headroom; better framing.

Nancy Kalow



LEFT TO RIGHT: Too little noseroom; corrected framing.

Nancy Kalow



when he or she appears in partial or full profile. You don't want the

which you should turn off because the autofocus mechanism con

Shooting Do's and Don'ts

8

visual information. Your eyes can naturally and effortlessly dart

hand, videographers are tempted to veer all around ("firehosing")

self to hold the camera still. Prevent firehosing to give your video

to settle on a shot for ten to fifteen seconds. If you shoot a lot of ac

Nancy Kalow



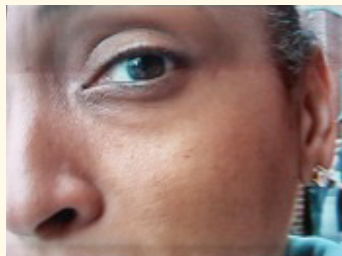
Try letting your subject move across the frame without panning the camera.

Camera Shots

fiction filmmakers plan their shots in advance, seeking emotional

Close-up

Extreme Close-up



TOP TO BOTTOM: Close-up shots from *Pack Strap Swallow* by Holly Paige Joyner; *49 Up* by Michael Apted; and *Final Marks: The Art of the Carved Letter* by Frank Muhly, Jr., and Peter O'Neill.

9

Medium Shot



LEFT TO RIGHT: Medium shots from *Buena Vista Social Club* by Wim Wenders; a student project by Terry Grunwald; and *Banished* by Marco Williams.

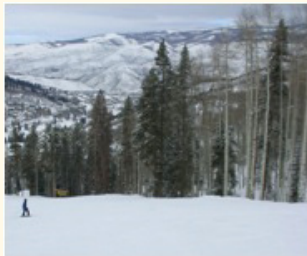
LEFT TO RIGHT: Wide shots from *My Architect* by Nathaniel Kahn; and from *Lady Kul El Arab* by Ibtisam Mara'ana.



Wide Shot

Establishing Shot

LEFT TO RIGHT: Establishing shots by Nancy Kalow; and from *The Cove* by Louie Psihoyos.



Camera Movements

10

composed shots—using a fluid-head tripod will help to make sure

Zoom

Pan

Tilt

The camera moves vertically during a tilt. This move can be effective

every tilt, and definitely use a tripod.

Tracking

Crane or Jib

Checklist of Standard Shots

11

- wide shot of the interior
- looking out the window of an interior
- sign or logo indicating location
- details of objects in a room
- photographs from albums
- art or photos on walls
- items on a refrigerator or bulletin board
- long shot of characters from far away
- unusual angle on characters
- group of characters seen from the back
- slow and steady pans from person to person, or from an object to a person
- reaction shots (people reacting to an event or comment)
- reverse shots (from behind the backs of people to show their points of view)
- observation of people doing their normal routine
- close-ups of faces
- visual of the source of a sound (such as showing a cuckoo clock or a passing train)

Interviewing Subjects: A Camera Checklist

Phoebe Brush



When framing a subject, position the camera close to eye level.

diminish the subject and can convey a sense of the filmmaker's

pected and unconventional, is usually less flattering than filming

give a sense of how he or she moves and fits into the space.

frame. The screen of a camera's viewfinder (and often your editing

a TV screen. While the viewfinder or your editing software may

will appear to be shot in profile if they have to look too far to the



For more visual interest, position the camera and subject to create a sense of depth, as in the top example. From *Winter Dreams* by DeWitt Sage (top); and by Nancy Kalow (bottom).

of depth. A camera flattens three dimensions into two. For more

if he briefly moves out of the frame.

setting, as if you were a fly on the wall. Allow events to unfold, ob

Troubleshooting Common Problems

are several other visual difficulties that you will experience while



Nancy Kalow

To ensure proper exposure, move your subject away from a window or bright background.

Direct sunlight casts unflattering shadows on faces. In *Grey Gardens*



Avoid direct sunlight, which casts unflattering shadows on faces (top). From *Grey Gardens* by Albert Maysles and David Maysles.

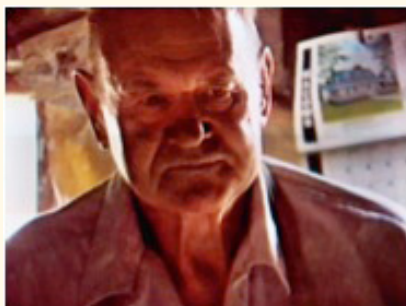


window gives flattering light without the harshness of direct sun



Close blinds when shooting indoors to create softer, more indirect light (bottom).

Basic lighting design for shooting film calls for a key light (primary light source), a fill light (secondary light source), and a light be don't need a lot of extra light. Be careful to avoid the "halo effect" ing set-ups. A use of excessive lighting can also lead to artificial-



LEFT TO RIGHT: A dimly lit subject will lack vibrant colors and sharpness (Nancy Kalow). When shooting indoors, seek out sources of natural light, such as a window (From *Crumb* by Terry Zwigoff). Inexpensive work lamps can be used for additional lighting indoors (Nancy Kalow).

use a simplified key-light and fill-light method. Bring a poster-sized white foam-core board, called a bounce board or reflector, to your shoot. Position the board to reflect the key light to create a fill

create a fill.

fine. Read your camera manual's section on white balance and

Choosing Engaging Storytelling over High-Tech Camera Features

ful in producing effective documentaries. Extra features and op
in your video that are difficult to control and edit. Digital zoom, for

effects and transitions can be added sparingly to your edit during

flashy technique. It is better to break the rules of “correct” compo

than attempt to achieve technical flawlessness. A video can be

Pack Strap Swallow, filmmaker Holly Paige Joyner



Nancy Kalow

One-sided lighting is sometimes used to create a dramatic effect (top). The same light source directed toward a bounce board placed on the other side will even out the lighting (bottom).



From *Pack Strap Swallow* by
Holly Paige Joyner.



From *Hands on a Hard Body*
by S. R. Bindler.

erratic, but the film is so honest and entertaining that we forgive

Hands on a Hard Body

CHAPTER 2 LISTENING

and

16

Personal stories make effective low-budget documentaries be

such as “Well, I first began to . . .” or “How we met was . . .” and

a documentary filmmaker will begin to see a larger story unfold.

Four Little Girls

The Two Towns of Jasper

Both films feature interwoven commentary from many people, al

The Times of Har-



From *The Times of Harvey Milk* by Rob Epstein.



From *Crumb* by Terry Zwigoff.

vey Milk by Rob Epstein, a film about the gay San Francisco politi
people offers an unforgettable portrait of a dead hero. The film’s

Zwigoff’s *Crumb*

Improving Your Listening Skills

did you first come to the United States?” which would give you a

tion. When the subject is finished answering a question, stay si
or she will launch into a second part of an answer, as if to fill the

the questions on the list can stifle the flow of words, and the pa

and off while the person in front of the camera tells a story. In

viewfinder now and then so that your subject is still framed cor

It is awkward and distracting to ask someone to first repeat

tion by saying, ‘Why did I join the army?’” This sort of artificial

the question. Some professional filmmakers, however, have a dif

When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts

general. On the other hand, sometimes people can be very differ

stiff and unproductive discussion. Simply asking, “Can I come again next week to find out some more about . . . ” can lead to



Katharine Reynolds

In this shoot, one person interviewed the subject while another operated the camera.

Recording Good Audio

ing. Train yourself to avoid normal conversational flow and to stifle audible acknowledgements, such as “uh-huh” and “oh, really?”

Laughter and conversational fillers (“sure,” “wow,” etc.) need to be silent. It is so difficult to edit when your voice is overlapping with

you leave. Politely ask to turn off a television or radio playing in



Wear headphones to monitor sound when recording.

and sound you don't want, such as traffic noise out the window or

tail party effect." When you are trying to record someone in a busy room, office, or restaurant, your microphone picks up all of the

first try, because "cocktail party" noise is next to impossible to fix

say in a stiff breeze, but many microphones can't. Try to monitor

nal microphones don't completely avoid the hissing and flapping

eras automatically even out sound, in effect amplifying a silent

CHAPTER 3 FINDING THE STORY

to the specific—a tightly focused topic highlighting individuals

22

At the start of a project, filmmakers often have a broad theme, documentary film, particularly those shot with camcorders, DSLRs, and

lina,” might be worthy of a book or a very long film. But a ten-to-fifteen-minute video documentary topic works much better when

Going from the general to the specific also helps your docu

of Mexican traditions influenced by American hip-hop, along with

subjects who have specific avocations and passions, such as a passion for service. A documentary can be an effective tool for out

and their zeal, rather than general facts and figures.

Suggestions for Narrowing in on the Story

ample, one documentary video portrayed a woman who modifies

Betty Hatch



Evangeline Weiss



Alonzo Felder



mentary about off-the-grid hippie survivalists showed the group

of the hair from start to finish, but also the personalities of the two



hearsals of a difficult passage of an avant-garde composition, for example, were documented in an effective way because the film



Kelly Martin

an auditorium; many parents film their child's ballet recitals and

Shoot in close proximity to your subjects. The filmmaker documented this string quartet by positioning the camera in the middle of the four players.

well be shown to best advantage. Shoot from the wings off-stage

It takes patience to find an engaging way to capture a motion

forgot about the camera because the filmmaker was also a waitress
audience because the three young women reeled off stories about

ment the conversation's flow and energy, rather than a distant shot

mentary footage and are sometimes best used to briefly indicate

rooms and offices make it hard to record audio there. A documen
tary about the runaway hubris of an affluent suburban homeown

audio interviews supplemented by photographs, fliers, documents,

film succeeded in enlivening what could have been yawn-inducing.
On the other hand, conflict and disagreement, such as at courtroom

low-budget documentary makers find opportunities exploring au
Sherman's

March My Architect Tarnation

to make an effective film that appeals to people who don't know

history through a personal filter, the digital documentary can move a visual approach offers a unique way to communicate that story. Keep in mind that showing inebriated people or street kids sniff their worst. A trickier issue arises when a filmmaker chooses to

Milosevic on Trial, by Michael Christoffersen, which shows the War Crimes

the general to the specific in telling a documentary story.

CHAPTER 4 TELLING SOMEONE ELSE'S STORY

of poor tenant farmers and refugees fleeing the Dust Bowl. Do the



Representing others respectfully has been a recurring question in documentary work.

A photograph like Dorothea Lange's, or a film that shows conflict or poverty, generates questions about how the people pictured

The Ethics of Documenting Others

All documentary films that demonstrate ethical depiction of their subjects require a significant investment of time in the project, a departure from

journalism. When we watch such a film, we're moved by the humanity

Time

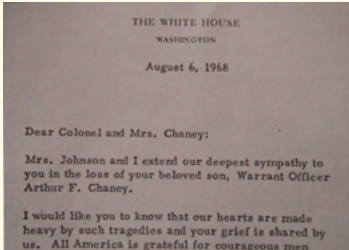
Effective documentary filmmaking always takes time for research, and a great deal of time is spent building relationships. One way or another, the filmmaker is committed. Spending time before, during, and after shooting differentiates the documentary approach from other video genres.

An American Family

American Family filmmakers spent seven months with the Louds, a family in Santa Barbara, filming events as they occurred.

series shows, the distancing and formalizing effect of the crew
ect, but the more the filming goes on, the less people “act” for the

Later, the filmmakers edited 300 hours of footage into twelve one-
accurately and fairly. “Our job was to put this film record together in



Searching by Vivian Bowman
Edwards is especially power-
ful because of the filmmaker’s
deep familiarity with her hus-
band’s memories of war.

Gilbert. Because the filmmakers spent a generous amount of time
An American Family

An American Family

Searching

Searching

Openness to Possibilities

with questions and answers that fit a pre-fabricated and predict

tions of the people in the film. Minimize scripted narration that is

However, a well-scripted voice can be welcome as an efficient

ration is no substitute for finding relevant people who participate in the film and whose voices provide needed context and com

for your story's flow, to have a few words of narration rather than

Rocío Callejas Angeles



To retain a subject's original language and lend authenticity to your video, use subtitles rather than audio dubbing for translations.

les filmed her father singing traditional Mexican songs and asked

29

Breaking from preconceptions has other benefits. The small observational footage and improvising freely according to the field and watchability to many types of non-fiction videos, such as advocacy films, which investigate important contemporary issues or

Transparent Realness

The last key attribute of documentary filmmaking is choosing actuality over manipulation. Documentary filmmakers sometimes

other fiction film conventions. An edited documentary film is al

filmmakers must decide what constitutes credibility on a case-by-case

example, student Maria Hernandez filmed her son's middle school

edit out verbal hesitations and mistakes. It is a fine line as to what is appropriate intervention. Some filmmakers want to smooth out the

tificial cleaning up of "bad" grammar implies your value judgment

is part of important ethical choices of documentary. The filmmaker

words to bend the viewer's opinions. The higher road is for the film

derstanding of the people and community in the film. Soundtrack

or simply stuck into the film in an attempt to beef it up. It is more honest to use the music that the subjects depicted in the film re

than it solves; Peruvian highland flutes may not be suitable in a film about organic farming in the Midwest—unless the farmers

Obtaining Permissions

portant for documentary filmmakers to explain their intent at

Shooting without permission undermines a film's documentary

regardless of the film's length, your goals for it, or the audience

be signed, the filmmaker indicates that he or she has a serious in

cover a variety of outcomes. Your film may eventually be shown



Although signed release forms are not required, be sure to demonstrate sensitivity when recording crowds in public spaces.

the people in your video. Many documentary films identify people experiencing war, natural disaster, or poverty by their first names

fluent people are shown with full names and titles. Farm workers,

the beginning of the film indicating that names have been changed

32

people fleetingly depicted in your video shot in a public place do

of land, the filmmaker needs to ask the owner's permission as well as that of the performer or subject. It can be more difficult to get a

pendent filmmakers. It is also difficult to get permission from su

permarkets and other retail chains and it may be simpler to find

good idea to base a documentary film on infiltration and stealth.

from an individual. Participants may be shy at first but may be willing to be filmed later, after they have a chance to see what you are

mentary filmmaker's own discomfort with asking people to sign making a film about other people's lives, and to be sensitive to the

certain activist films employing hidden cameras by necessity.

Burma VJ



From *Burma VJ* by Anders Østergaard.

and the film's viewers will be the best judges. Both the documen

SAMPLE RELEASE FORM

I hereby give permission to [name of producer] to use my image, voice, words, and/or performance in all forms and media for the documentary project, [working title of your production]. I understand that he/she may edit, reproduce and exhibit the project.

Print Full Name:

Address:

Signature:

Date:

Addition for Minors:

I am the parent and/or guardian of the minor named above. I give my permission for his/her participation and agree with the terms in this release form.

Print Parent/Guardian's Full Name:

Signature:

Date:

Print Producer's Name, Address, and Phone number:

Signature:

Date:

CHAPTER 5 FINISHING AND SHARING THE STORY

story structure of fiction films. But all that is needed for a short digital documentary is a clear vision of what the story of your film

footage so that there is a definite beginning, middle, and end—but

Organizing Footage

to find it. Get to know your footage by using the logging feature in your editing program. Raw footage on the tape or digital file is a

a shot can be defined as each time the camera angle is changed, or each time the camera is turned on and off, or each time the action

35

cally. Each tape or file gets labeled with its own number, so that

file in sequence (2006:1, 2006:2, 2006:3, etc.), or group by subject

iar with the material you've shot, and you will find yourself better

finding the best material. Your response to visually striking, hu

Selecting, Capturing, and Sequencing Footage

in the final piece. List the best shots for telling your story and be

someone is doing, and give them the fun of finding out for them
defining moment in a subject's recollections. Perhaps you have an

along. Perhaps add a flashback or foreshadowing to this chronol
visual "last word" to end the film.

36

different method for importing footage. Follow your software's

and voice-overs, slow motion and other effects, and add music or

sound effects. Audio levels and audio glitches can be improved. All the time you spent in the field getting clean audio, putting the rietty shots of your subject from different angles will be rewarded

Characters

are more difficult to build a story around, but you can compensate

Interviews

shown briefly for context.

37

Activity

was artificially set up, use as much of this kind of material as you

In a documentary about the design of everyday objects, film



Humor

Super Size Me by Morgan Spurlock and the films of Mi



In addition to interviews, be sure to capture footage of subjects performing, interacting, or working to add visual interest. (Community Folklife Documentary Institute, North Carolina Arts Council)



Close-ups of objects or notes can also help narrate your story. From *Objectified* by Gary Hustwit.

tion, or other opportunities to find humor in your material when you are editing. Limit funny sounds, repetition, and effects, and

Putting It All Together: A Review of Documentary Elements of Editing

Observational footage

narrative, or otherwise be relevant to the film. Long scenes of trav

Transitions

film has ended, over and over. We may sigh when it fades up and

Narration

documentary, are built around first person narration.

Music

won't fit with your characters. Try to find local musicians who may be able to create original music for your film.

Music is not a “filler” for documentaries. Critic Adam Mars-

where in a film, audiences feel less rather than more.”

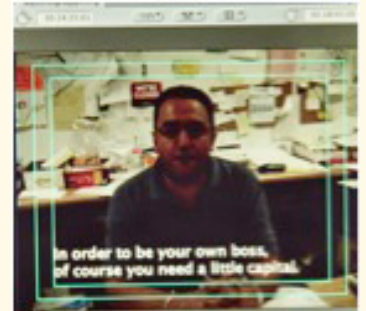
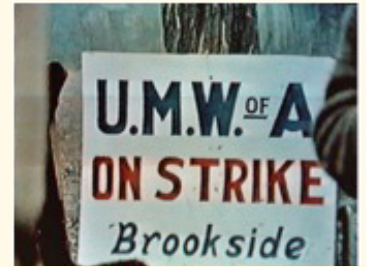
Text

Harlan County, USA

the filmmakers documented signs and other information during

titles offer translation for foreign language speakers or intelligi

your text don't get cut off when played back on a different screen.



Try to show rather than tell when adding explanatory text, but if subtitles are necessary, be sure to place text within the “TV-safe” lines indicated by your editing program. From *Harlan County U.S.A.* by Barbara Kopple (top); and by Antonia Monroy (bottom).

Photographs and Other Still Images



Documents, letters, and pictures add visual interest. Courtesy of the collection of Louise Moore (top); and from *Football Under Cover* by David Assman and Ayat Najafi (bottom).

Super-8 and Other Historical Moving Images

lects period historical, educational, and ephemera films. Beware

Screening Your Video

Showing your work is the happy result of all the effort involved in making a documentary video. It's an incentive to finish your

40

produced. Start by screening the film, even in a rough form, for

rors and ensure watchability. Ask people specific questions after

Some low-budget documentaries triumphantly find a much
loading some or all of the video to a website and submitting to film

And for Your Next Video . . .

Making your first documentary is a real accomplishment, and in videography, find other people who are interested in making and screening documentaries, attend documentary film festivals,

APPENDIX LINKS AND RESOURCES

Websites

Documentary Starts Here

Folkstreams: A wealth of documentary films and videos on

Get the Money and Shoot: The DRI Guide to Funding Documentary Films

<http://csac.buffalo.edu/gtms.html>

42

Video For Change

Books

Documentary Filmmaking: A Very Short Introduction.

Cross-Cultural Filmmaking.

Documentary Storytelling for Video and Filmmakers.

The Tape-Recorded Interview.

How to Photograph Your Life.

Documentary Filmmakers Speak.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy Kalow is a folklorist and filmmaker who began teaching at

Sadobabies

The Losers Club

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

and encouraged my interest in film. Many happy hours watching and discussing movies with the programming staff and the Selec

offered valuable, insightful, and helpful comments: Sally Jackson,

44

Visual Storytelling

and staff at CDS allowed me to test out the ideas in these pages,