

Once you have made a recording, take it away and just *listen*. Sometimes an interesting and likeable person simply does not record well. His voice may be flat or uncongenial, or he does not construct verbal pictures in a logical, communicative way. For some reason, this is hard to see until you are out of the person's presence and can listen with relative objectivity. Recognizing what does or does not work at this early stage will save time, money, and heartache later. Often, of course, a recording simply augments what you already knew: This person is a delight to hear, and you are sure you want to use him.

Your priorities have emerged by now, and the key participants—each representing different and probably opposed aspects in your underlying framework—have become a fairly easy choice.

## DEVELOPING THE FILM'S THEMATIC STRUCTURE

Let us suppose for argument's sake you become convinced that the band is really a viable analogue for an aspect of your country's political structure with its charismatic father figure at the helm. This analogy is by no means farfetched. *Hearts and Minds* repeatedly uses scenes of American sports and the competitive team spirit atmosphere they engender as a parallel to the values expressed by proponents of the Vietnam War. The makers were advocating the idea, through the implied comparison, that a sports mentality can condition men to think of an international ideological conflict in the tragically misleading terms of "our team" and "their team." Only later did the young GIs begin to question what "playing for the team" really meant. By such conditioning and metaphors, the film implies, do we prepare ourselves to send our sons to suffer and die. Finding metaphors so alive and vibrant is the job of the documentarian who wants to draw attention to the underlying and invisible structures in society.

## DOUBLE CHECKING ONE'S FINDINGS

During research, it is important to talk to as many people as possible and to collect as many relevant viewpoints as you can. One's initial judgments are often based upon brief and sometimes unrepresentative exposure, so testing one's assumptions against the impressions of people whose lives make them expert witnesses is a way of sifting out as much reliable information as possible.

It is fascinating to realize how people, especially highly visible people, are frequently perceived quite differently according to who you question. Partisan viewpoints and biases are inevitable, but you need to know what they are based upon. Cross checking people's impressions of your major "characters" enables you to avoid superficial judgments and allows you to build into your film the richness and diversity underlying the web of tensions binding any group of people.

By this time, you have become almost overwhelmingly knowledgeable about the people and practices that surround the school's marching band. You must first withdraw to decide your priorities, for if you were to shoot now, you would have no clear direction.

## DEVELOPING THE WORKING HYPOTHESIS

Whatever your initial motives were for looking into the marching band, they must now be reviewed in the light of your much more extended exposure. My earlier comments about documentary make it apparent, I think, that, *if a film is to qualify as a documentary, it must imply a critical attitude toward some aspect of society*. It has been aptly said in Richardson's *Literature and Film* that "literature has the problem of making the significant somehow visible, while film often finds itself trying to make the visible significant." This is overwhelmingly true of documentary where there is often an oversupply of verisimilitude and a shortage of interesting underlying meanings. It is not enough to merely *show* something: we must also ensure that its *significance is implied*. How is this achieved?

Most of what we find significant in issues as well as in individuals lies in the fact that there is some kind of conflict at work. The conflict may be between people of different opinions, different convictions, or different ambitions. It may, like *Nanook's*, be between the individual and his surroundings, or it may be between the parts of an individual torn internally between classes or generations of people, between races or nations. It may even be between the parts of an individual torn internally between conflicting desires.

Jean-Luc Godard once said, while he was rejecting psychological formulas as a means of creating screen characters, that in real life we never gain possession of some magic psychological key to another's thoughts and feelings. Everything we learn is suggestive and fragmentary and is pieced together from that person's external behavior alone. Godard's chosen method to reveal personality was, he said, to concentrate on a person's contradictions because these showed most clearly what was unresolved and therefore most active in a person's inner life.

In the same way, if an honest documentary is to show the ambiguities and contradictions of its characters and situations, it must zero in on "unfinished business" and on those aspects of its subject truly in flux.

In our example, we have imagined going in to research an alarmingly militaristic high school band. But now a snag crops up. You find that, though the bandmaster is an authoritarian of the worst kind, a lot of the kids like him. Even more confounding to your principles is that, in spite of disagreeing with all his ideas, you find yourself liking him too.

What do you do? Give up? Surely you have stumbled upon a truly interesting subject, all the more so because you yourself have contradictory, ambivalent feelings toward him and toward the situation that he has projected around himself.

For your own clarity, you now need to define the focus, the underlying and implicit concept of your film. This definition should almost certainly not be shared with anyone outside your crew, but it is absolutely vital in determining any shooting to come.

A helpful example comes to mind from a feature film. You may have seen *Orchestra Rehearsal*, a ribald Fellini movie about an orchestra that rebels against its conductor and slides into anarchy. The film is on the surface a comedy, but it uses the orchestra as a metaphor for our complex, interdependent, and of necessity highly disciplined society. The conductor functions as the leader, but his role only works to everyone's advantage when all the instrumentalists co-

operate and accept his authority. When a number of individuals begin to assert their autonomy, the music becomes first flawed and discordant and then completely chaotic. Even the opera house, under attack by unseen enemies, begins to fall down. Eventually out of sheer discomfort the orchestra reforms itself and returns to fulfilling its best potential.

The film demonstrates how an allegory can be implied by a group of musicians, and helps us see that a band with its bandmaster might be a rather potent metaphor for a political unit like a tribe or a nation. In fact, our band movie in dealing with charisma and authority could quite easily be turned into a parable about power and prevailing ideology.

Some people whose persuasions are perhaps toward the social sciences will undoubtedly feel uneasy here, and say, "But that's manipulation!" To them I would answer that the documentary does not exist just as a tool of social science, postulating the existence of such-and-such a phenomenon and reinforcing its arguments with a table of facts and figures. Rather its purpose is artistic, to share a way of seeing. The documentary is at its most effective when it gives us a heightened, subtly argued vision of something formerly banal and unmeaningful, now revealed as charged with significance.

An example is Fred Wiseman's *Hospital*, referred to earlier, where we see some patients who will be saved and some who will be damned, but there will never be an end to the distressed who enter the hospital's doors and never, seemingly, enough medical heroism to staunch the flow. This is an unforgettable film not only because of its subject matter, but also because it releases the power of an archetype that all of us unconsciously carry with us.

So what meaning, what thematic structure are we finding in our band situation? Let us imagine that you have unwittingly discovered what you never believed existed: that there is such a thing as a benevolent despot and that he is valued and valuable even though all his "subjects" see themselves in stereotyped terms of rugged individualism. Here then is a wonderful allegory for a "free" society that consents to march in lockstep in order to achieve supremacy and that enthusiastically submits to a form of leadership the very antithesis of its democratic and individualist ideals.

Let us say this is the kernel of your idea, the paradox you have discovered below the surface, what you "see." Now all your sequences, your activities, your interviews, and the discussions you ask the kids to have between themselves for the camera must create the contradictory parts of this central vision. It is a complex vision, and ultimately a nonjudgmental one that sensitively reflects not what you expected to find but what was actually there, existing in the face of all logic and belief.

Although I invented this example, I have myself experienced a very similar kind of conversion while making a film many years ago on a lordly estate in England. My film (*A Remnant of a Feudal Society*, BBC "Yesterday's Witness" series) does, I am told, reflect my inability to reconcile the contradictory nature of the estate, which operated in a quite feudal way down until modern times. For some of the survivors the estate was remembered nostalgically as a place of security and order—plenty of hard work but a great spirit of community. For others the regime was to some degree imprisoning, demeaning, and over-demanding. Not one person had clear, simple feelings, for all of them had differing

experiences and had come to tentative, qualified conclusions if they had come to conclusions at all. The only predictable element was that the people in the upper part of the social scale remembered the old days more pleasurably than did those at the bottom though all valued the sense of safety and continuity the place formerly had.

Before going to the estate, I had expected people who served a feudal master to be united in their condemnation, for this was the rather monolithic course of history described in my schoolbooks. The real thing turned out to be much more human, much more complex and interesting, and showed me why my history books even then seemed simplistic and dull.

### THE WORKING HYPOTHESIS AS A NECESSITY

It is axiomatic that one cannot start any kind of journey without first choosing a direction and having a purpose. In documentary making, it is my opinion that at the outset any kind of hypothetical explanation, even a prejudice, provides a better starting point than does the emotional vacuity that accompanies opinionlessness. Had I not begun my feudal estate film with strongly felt opinions, I doubt whether my vision of the place would ever have developed as it did. Instead the film could have been a tedious little exercise in nostalgia in which old retainers remember the old days.

Always write out *the minimum your film must express* so you can ensure this at the very least is fulfilled during shooting. When this hypothesis, this underlying message, has been defined and when the supporting facts to be elicited from participants have also been defined, you are freed during shooting from the gremlin whispering in your ear, "Do you really have a film here?" In fact with thorough and focused preparation, the basic film is sure, barring accidents.

It is from this kind of solid base that you can find yourself able to see further and able to supplement or modify your original vision. Even with the pressures of shooting, it is quite straightforward to keep the hypothesis in mind as the measurement of everything you film. Indeed when one is committed to a working hypothesis, it is invariably extended and enriched during the shooting into something far beyond the original minimum requirement for an interesting film.

One gruesome fact about research must be stated emphatically: If you do not decide in advance what your film's hypothesis is to be, you will not find it during shooting. *A documentary only becomes a true inquiry when it starts from having something to say.* If you go shooting in the expectation of finding that "something to say" during the shoot, all your energies will be burnt up keeping the crew busy and trying to deceive everyone that you know why you are there. When you arrive in the editing room, the material will have no focus and therefore no vision. All this emphasizes how vital it is to crystallize research down into specific, practical, concrete resolutions. For this reason, it is a dead giveaway each time one reads a vague documentary proposal beginning, "This film will be an enquiry into . . ." I read on with the sinking feeling that I am being asked to support acrobats who think one can improvise a first performance.

## THE NEED FOR DEVELOPMENT, CONFLICT, AND ENSURING CONFRONTATION

\* One ingredient essential to any documentary is the evidence of growth or change. Many documentaries fail by dwelling on what is essentially a static situation. One way to avoid this, if logistics permit, is to film over a period of time so that change is built in. One film that capitalizes magnificently on the passage of time is Michael Apted's *28 Up* (1986), which revisits a group of children at 7-year intervals from the age of 7 to 28. Because so many eerily fulfill their 7-year-old ideas about education, career, and marriage, the film is haunting and raises important questions about how and when people make the choices that so deeply affect personal destiny.

Unfortunately most documentaries have to be shot in a restricted period, and many leave the viewer with the disgruntled sense of having wasted time over something that never developed.

The best way to ensure development in your film is to search out where change is happening. This may be *physical movement* (for example, new house, new job, journey) or *movement in time* (change of season for farmer, growth in child, retrospective of painter's work), or it may be *psychological development* (ex-prisoner adjusts to freedom, teenager gets first paying job, adult illiterate learns to read).

Another way to give your film a feeling of development is to make sure that it deals with conflict in one form or another and that the conflict is followed through sufficient stages to achieve a sense of movement. This conflict might be within one character (a mother takes her child for his first day at school), between two characters (two social scientists have conflicting theories of criminality), between a character and the environment (an African farmer survives a drought from day to day), or thousands of other combinations.

As much as anything, achieving this is a matter of sensitivity to people and their issues. When you demand of yourself the questions, what is this person trying to *do*? what does he *want*? you are already defining that person in terms of movement and will. Because there is no movement without opposition, you are also led to the next question, what or who is keeping this person from getting what he wants? The elements of struggle, contest, and will are at the heart of drama in every medium including documentary. A documentary without some struggle for movement is likely to be just a catalogue of episodes.

In your marching band film you might build in several sorts of development. One might be to follow the development of a young contender from among those who audition to enter the band. Another might be to make sure the shooting period covers some big competitive event that puts everyone under special stress. Yet another might be after graduation when a senior goes from being a big man at school to a nobody in search of a job. Metaphorically speaking, you have encompassed a cycle of birth, life, and death in the band's ongoing existence.

Once you have defined a conflict, it will remain an abstract concept unless you take care to show it in action on screen. Be sure, therefore, that you orchestrate a *confrontation* between the opposing elements in your movie. If an instrumentalist has to pass a stringent test, be sure to shoot its key elements. If

a young man must find a job, be sure to shoot him interviewing for one. It is always better to show struggle than to talk about it.

In many circumstances you may have to ensure that “the confrontation” happens; you might, for instance, arrange for two players with opposing views of the band to slug it out verbally in front of the camera. If the key issue in a film about a shelter for the homeless is whether such strict adherence to the rules by inmates is necessary, be sure to film clashes between inmates and those in charge. It may be necessary to ask either staff or inmates to initiate a typical episode if none happen spontaneously. Here you are using a degree of artifice in order to do justice to the spirit of your subject. This is a good example of the catalyst function that a *cinéma vérité* director would employ and a direct cinema exponent would abhor.

### THE DRAMATIC CURVE

What documentary materials will be is not easy to foresee. Applying the traditional dramatic curve (Figure 3–1) to one’s ideas, however, is useful during research and outstandingly useful as an analytic tool during editing, which is really a second chance to direct.

The dramatic curve concept postulates that a story develops through conflict to an apex or “crisis” after which there is change and resolution—not, let me say quickly, necessarily a peaceful one. In Broomfield’s and Churchill’s *Soldier*

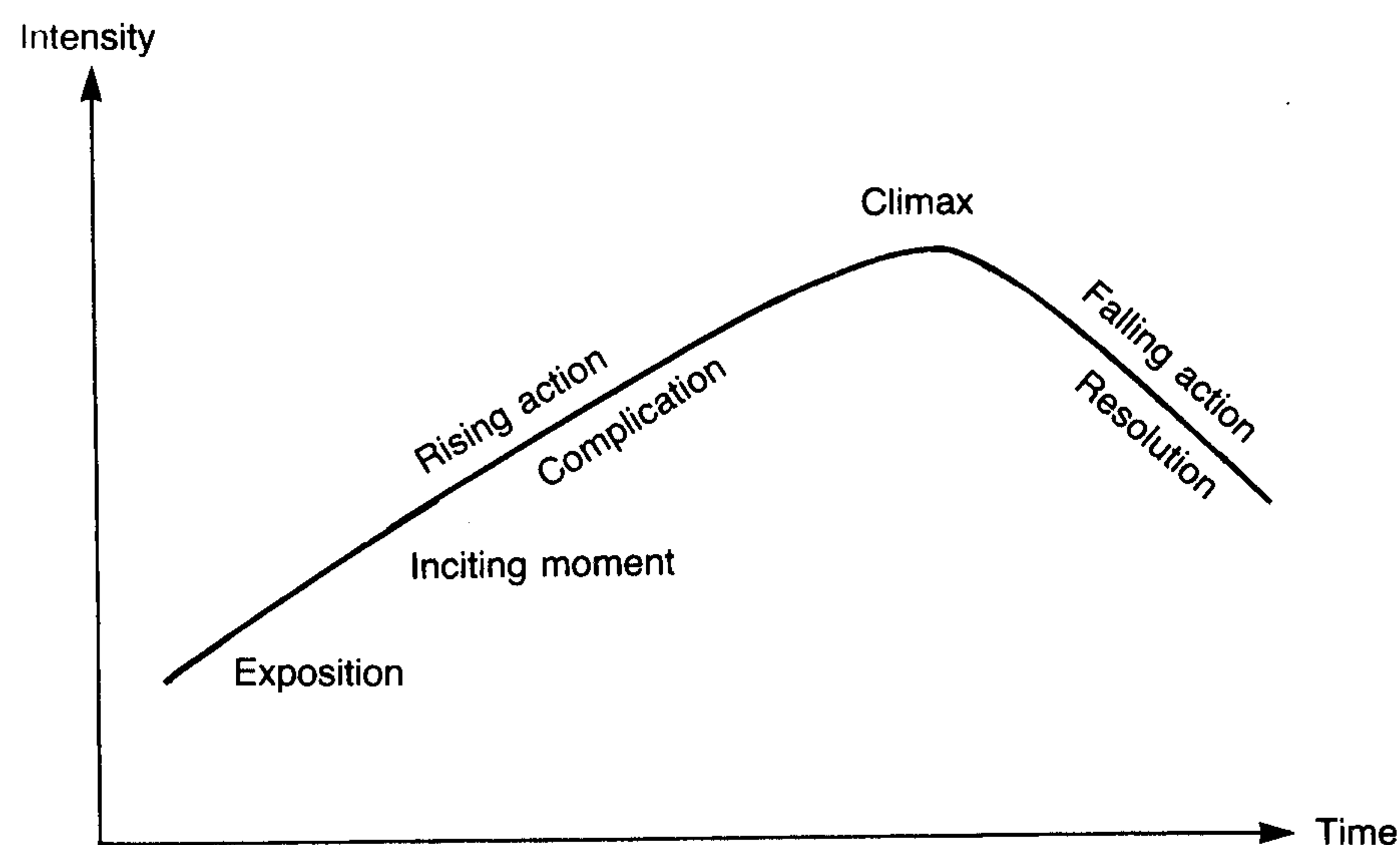


FIGURE 3–1

Dramatic curve. Variations of this apply to most narrative art, including documentary films. The same curve can also be useful in analyzing a single scene.

*Girls* (1981), the crisis is probably the point at which Private Johnson, after a series of increasingly stressful conflicts with authority, leaves the army dishonorably but in a spirit of relieved gaiety. The film's resolution after this major character leaves the stage is to examine in more detail what is required to train soldiers to survive battle conditions.

In the Maysles brothers' *Salesman* (1969), spectators usually point to the apex as being when the salesman, Paul Brennan, who has been falling steadily behind the pack like a wounded animal, inadvertently scuttles a colleague's sale. In the film's coda, one feels his partners distancing themselves as if they are deserting a dying man, and the film leaves Paul staring offscreen into a void.

If one understands the idea of the apex or crisis, the rest of the dramatic convention arranges itself naturally in stages before and after the peak of the curve:

1. The *introduction or exposition* lays out some of the characters and what their situation is and gives other necessary factual information about time, place, period, and so on. Since modern drama often lacks a captive audience, it cannot afford to delay major committing action, so the main conflict, or struggle between opposing forces, will probably be delineated early in what I think of as the documentarian's "contract." Signaling the scope and focus of the film to come, it aims at securing the audience's interest for the duration.
2. The *inciting moment* is whatever sets in motion the opposition of interests. In the army, basic training is a battle between the homogenizing goals of the army and the individualism of the recruit. The army aims to break down individual identity and replace it with a psyche trained to unthinkingly obey. In *Soldier Girls* the inciting moment is when Sergeant Abing sees Private Johnson smirking after he has rebuked her. This signals the onset of a long and unequal struggle between them. Because it is a white male imposing his will on a black female, there are disquieting overtones of slavery being reenacted.
3. *Rising action or complication* usually shows the basic conflicts repeatedly played out with variety, surprise, suspense, and escalating connotations. In *Soldier Girls*, the army's expression of will and the misfits' expression of cowed resistance are repeatedly raised a notch to a more serious and offensive level. Seeing protagonists and antagonists engaged in such a revealing struggle, we come to understand the motivations, goals, and background of each and may even be led to choose sides.
4. The *climax* or apex of the curve is where the final *confrontation* leads to irreversible change as was described earlier.
5. The *resolution or falling action* is what the piece establishes as a consequence afterward. This includes not only what happens to the characters but also what interpretation is suggested for the whole by the choice of last scene or scenes. In documentary as in other story forms, one can change the emphasis of a whole film depending on where and how the audience leaves the characters.