

**A Guide to (Short)  
Documentary Filmmaking**  
Creating Artful Short Documentary Films

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Figure 3.10 Still image from *not even for a moment do things stand still*.

### Case Study: *Styx* by Jan Krawitz



Figure 3.11 Filmmaker Jan Krawitz recording location sound on her documentary feature *Perfect Strangers* (2013).

### Filmmaker Bio

Jan Krawitz is Professor Emerita in the Stanford University MFA Program in Documentary Film and Video. Her work has been exhibited at film festivals in the United States and abroad, including Sundance, the New York Film Festival, Visions du Réel, Edinburgh, AFI SilverDocs, London, Sydney, Full Frame, SXSW, and the Flaherty Film Seminar. Jan's films reflect her interest in overlooked aspects of American culture. Her most recent film, *Nice Girls Don't Ask*, completes her trilogy of short films about themes related to

women. Her documentary feature, *Perfect Strangers*, follows an altruistic kidney donor on an unpredictable four-year quest to give away her kidney. The film was broadcast on national PBS. Krawitz's previous documentary, *Big Enough*, was broadcast on the PBS series POV, internationally in eighteen countries, and on Netflix. Her films, *Mirror Mirror*, *In Harm's Way*, *Little People*, and *Drive-in Blues* were also shown on national PBS and her short film *Styx* is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. *Little People* was nominated for a national Emmy Award and was featured on NPR's *All Things Considered*. Krawitz has had one-woman retrospectives of her films at venues including the Portland Art Museum, Hood Museum of Art, Rice Media Center, the Austin Film Society, and the Ann Arbor Film Festival.

### Styx Logline

*Styx* affords an impressionistic view of the subterranean world of a metropolitan subway system. Joining an anonymous mass of commuters, the camera embarks on a journey across a decaying cityscape.

*Jamie Meltzer:* What was the genesis of the project?

*Jan Krawitz:* I was commuting daily on the subway from my downtown apartment to the North Philadelphia location of Temple University where I was an MFA student. I became fascinated by the travelers' passive acceptance of the sensory overload (auditory, olfactory, and visual assaults) and other oppressive aspects of the environment. The non-verbal behavior of the passengers revealed how they insulated and isolated themselves. It was a de facto asocial environment that precluded human interaction. I was also attracted to the idea of the subway as a microcosm of the decaying city above ground. Graffiti-covered walls and shattered glass station signs were an accepted part of the environment. One night, I saw an unstable man menacing people on the platform. None of us interacted and we were alone with our fears. That experience informed the sequence in which we see travelers framed behind bars—representing the abrogation of their freedom while in the subway. It was only in the 11th hour that I landed on *Styx* as the title. I was leafing through a book of terms in search of a title and *Styx* spoke to me. It encapsulated the film's depiction of the environment and the "Stygian" journey of its travelers—a reference to the River Styx in Greek mythology that separates the world of the living

from Hades. The passengers in my film have surrendered to an unknown fate.

*Jamie Meltzer:* I understand you storyboarded and planned all the shots in advance. Can you take me through the process of how you imagined and visualized the film in pre-production and any shifts that happened while in production—or even discoveries that caused you to shift gears in the edit phase?

*Jan Krawitz:* The film grew out of a Documentary Writing course that I took in my first semester of graduate school. We were asked to begin with a “big noun”—a person, place, or event—essentially anything that could be fodder for a nonfiction film. I chose the subway because of the visual possibilities of the environment and the behavior of its travelers. The next step was to actively observe and “collect” images that spoke to the themes I hoped to depict. I have always been attracted to documentary film rather than fiction because it allows me to react to real people and situations rather than imagine them. My research involves immersion in a topic before I determine what my approach will be. I find the story of the film in an extant situation. After distilling all that I have observed and experienced, I impose my “voice” (in form and content) on the subject matter. The next step was to become an *active* passenger—looking for shots that could populate the film and represent the themes I hoped to explore. When I wrote the script, it was initially a theoretical exercise to fulfill an assignment. I assumed I would never get permission to film in the subway—having been stopped by a policeman a year earlier for taking still photos in the New York subway. It was only after the professor wrote, “This would make an interesting film,” and I was able to get permission from SEPTA (Southeast Pennsylvania Transit Authority) that the film became a reality. I worked with another MFA student as the cinematographer and an undergrad sound recordist.

Since the film was non-verbal, I chose to do a “split-page” script in which I described images on one side of the page and outlined the sound design opposite. I was already thinking about structure in the script stage and anticipated that I would vacillate between the “reality” sequences and

the “dream” sequences in which the rider has extricated herself from the external environment and moved into a more (metaphorically) interior space. However, once I started editing the film, it became clear that the hypnotic sequence should be sustained and continuous once it begins. That was the major structural shift in the editing stage. But otherwise the film is remarkably aligned with the written script. The biggest departure is that the images of the desecrated environment played a much larger part in the script than in the film.

*Jamie Meltzer:* How did you think about POV in the film? At times, we seem to align with one person’s gaze, and other times we adopt the perspective of the train itself. Was this a progression that helped you structure individual scenes and the overall flow of the film?

*Jan Krawitz:* From the outset, I wanted the viewer to viscerally experience the journey along with the travelers. Since the camera perspective is primarily objective, that intention may or may not be realized depending on what the viewer brings to the film. The tunnel shots were necessary to remind the viewer of the journey undertaken by these travelers. Once the music sequence begins, the train never stops. It barrels through stations in the “objective” shots and meanders through dark tunnels in the subjective shots. The viewer understands something that the passenger is not privy to.

*Jamie Meltzer:* I understand you filmed MOS [without synchronous sound] and constructed the sound design later. Did you want to create something naturalistic or something more stylized and suggestive?

*Jan Krawitz:* My intention was to film with sync sound. However, because of the public nature of the environment, we were much too visible as a three-person crew. People assumed we were a television news crew and what I called “bands of roving youth” were unrelenting in their desire to be filmed for TV. It was impossible to film discreetly. After a few preliminary shoots during which we filmed hardly anything, I downsized the camera from an Eclair ACL with 400-foot magazines (10-minute rolls of film) to 200-foot magazines with a running time of five minutes per roll. The smaller camera size made us a bit more inconspicuous. Additional adjustments were to use a two-person crew (director

and cinematographer) and shoot only at rush hour. At crowded times, commuters were much less conscious of our presence. We became one more element added to the sensory overload. The unanticipated benefit of working MOS was that I had much more creative control over which sounds to record and use. I gave the sound person a list and often a directive as to where to record particular sounds. All of the audio (aside from the music) was recorded in the environment, and I could select from multiple turnstile recordings, echoing voices, and other authentic elements

I knew, from the outset, that there would be no verbiage in the film. The echoing voices in the opening shots are not intelligible and were recorded in one particular location at a downtown station. They are authentic mutations of normal human interaction.

*Jamie Meltzer:* The “natural” sounds of the first part of the film make way for an extended musical sequence in the second part of the film. Can you describe your approach to working with music for the film, and whether you had envisioned this piece of music? Or was there just a specific mood you wanted to elicit with the music?

*Jan Krawitz:* Halfway through the film, at 5:20, the “natural” or diegetic sound of the subway platform and cars yields to the music. The score enhances the sequence in which riders appear to be catatonic and insulated from their surroundings. The musical composition that is used in the film was written into the script. It amplifies the imagery, rather than re-iterating the visuals. The piece was from a 1973 album by Mother Mallard’s Portable Masterpiece Company—an early user of the mini-Moog synthesizer that was invented in 1970. I was fortunately able to procure rights to the song for free. The decision as to how to transition into the music sequence was critical.

The most challenging aspect of shooting the film was the ephemerality of gestures and actions. Many moments could not be captured because they were over in seconds. A telling example is the shot that serves as a transition into the “dream”/music sequence. The train pulls into the station, the doors open onto a graffiti-adorned pillar, and no one gets on or off the car. I “saw” the shot, but it was

so brief that we were not in a position to film it. I realized that it could serve as a useful transition, so we attempted to capture it the second time around. We stayed on the car, riding north to the end of the line, south to the end of the line, and then north again until we reached the same spot (90 minutes later). The camera was set up for the shot and, fortunately, the train stopped in the exact spot, no one entered or exited, and we were able to get the shot in a single take. This strategy was used often. The movement of light in the cracked window is another example. That particular pattern occurred only in one small section of the line, so it required another 90-minute journey to capture it. Other shots were more readily available—for example, the swinging strap handles which are described in the script.

*Jamie Meltzer:* When you consider whether an idea you are interested in is best suited for a short film or a feature film, what are the factors you consider?

*Jan Krawitz:* In my films, regardless of length, I hope to cause a shift in worldview or perspective for the viewer. It may not be overt as in an advocacy film, but something more subtle that results in a new-found awareness or a new way of seeing. This outcome can be as effectively achieved in a short as in a feature-length documentary. My intention with *Stryx* was to create an artful, impressionistic “filmic” journey that offers an altered perspective from that of the prosaic experience of a typical commuter. While I was making the film, I was acutely aware that the proffered experience was uniquely filmic. It could not have been approximated in a written essay, still photographs, painting, or any other medium. The parameters of the short film fully supported this expression. I think many topics can be successfully treated in a short film. Features lend themselves to longitudinal stories that unfold over time or films that are populated by a number of participants and narratives. If the director of a short film outlines realistic parameters at the outset, the film can have greater impact than a meandering, hydra-headed feature. In my career, I have directed three feature-length and six short documentaries. The shorts have been quite successful in festivals and non-theatrical distribution.

When I embark on a film project, I typically don't have a pre-ordained length in mind. As editor of my own films, I employ a nimble yet ruthless approach to the footage. That tactic allows the film to find its optimal length. A goal is to leave the viewer satiated but wanting more. The shooting ratio for *Styx* was 6:1 but the time spent on location was significantly greater. There were sometimes full days when we were "shooting" but never turned on the camera because there were no shots to capture that day. 16mm film was the prevailing documentary medium when I was a student, so I was trained to work within strict limits. I have tried to exercise that same restraint in my directorial approach even when working in digital video.