The Art and Technique of the Interview

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What goes into an interview?

It's easy to think that all you do for an interview is plop someone down in a chair, set up the camera (maybe in the opposite order), do a little lighting, get the sound ready, have your questions set and fire when ready. Well, it's not quite that simple. There are an enormous number of decisions that are either made by the filmmaker or left to luck.

I'm often asked how to set up a shot for an interview or how to light one. There are far too many variables to be able to have a single encompassing answer. Every decision, from the type of shot and lighting to the location and length of time to set up, depends on money (or time) and the visualization choices of the director (the style of the film). Money buys more time to set up and shoot. It buys a bigger crew and more lights or different kinds. It may also buy a scout. If the director envisions a "run and gun" approach (think Michael Moore), then the set up will be far different from a formal interview approach (also highly stylized, think Errol Morris).

I tend to do what I call "touch" lighting, trying to use existing light and simply touch it up a bit. The more time it takes to set lights and the scene, the less time we have to film. I like to use smaller lights for video and more eco-friendly ones at that. LED lights and small Chinese lanterns with LED bulbs that can be dimmed use less electricity, don't heat up a space too much, and are easier to handle in the field. Quite often I'll just use a collapsible reflector or two to bounce light or create "negative fill" (taking away or flagging light). I also take what I'm given, be it a window for a key light or practicals (existing lights in the shot).

I also find that we have to remember that the location may be very important to what we come to know about the person being interviewed and what attitude we may take toward him or her. Sometimes, in this day and age, interviews are done against a green screen and the background dropped in later. Sometimes the decision is made to have a "limbo" set, a neutral or "blank" background. (I've done this when we've had a series of experts commenting on a situation or topic but who are not directly involved in the scene, and whom we will not film so-called B-roll of them. The limbo set separated them from the other "active" subjects of the film. This was also a technique used in the feature film *Red*.) More often than not, though, the location of the interview gives the director additional elements to help communicate his or her point of view toward the character or help define the subject in more detail and effectively.

To successfully film an interview (or to do something more than just mimic broadcast journalism), and create a scene that carries some weight to it, a lot of thought has to go into the pre-production and production decisions. Sometimes, of course, reality raises its ugly head and bites you; so you yelp and adapt to the new situation. But having a clear plan or intention always helps prepare you for adaptation and serendipity.

First off, the filmmaker should have a visualization scheme or style plan for the film. Are colors important and controllable? What kind of shooting is planned – all hand held or all locked down? No wide angles? Only CUs? Is the framing going to be neutral or aggressive (Level or Dutch angle [canted]? Unbalanced or symmetrical to the frame-line? Is the film itself observational or constructed?) The look of the film is therefore the first element that goes into making decisions. Of course this itself is dependent on topic, characters, the filmmaker's point-of-view toward them, and his or her cinematic sensibilities.

Also, just what constitutes an interview and why is so much attention paid to it rather than the reality from which the person comes or is related to? The answer usually has to do with convention and money.

A-roll versus B-roll

Sadly the current convention has the most important element of the documentary or nonfiction film as the interview (or narration) while the material that come from the real world is considered the "coverage," the stuff that illustrates points made verbally and allows sound editing. Even when I'm doing a narrated and/or interview-based film, I still invert this so-called "rule." Compelling cinema comes more often than not from what's happening (or perhaps that has happened as with archival material), from the real moment(s) in a person's life, not them talking about it.

Sometimes, though, the talking head is the critical thing; again think about Errol Morris' brilliant work ("Thin Blue Line", "Fog of War"). Nevertheless, I always think about constructing scenes that are commented on or bridged, elucidated by the subject. Further I look at narration first and foremost as an aid to transitioning from one thought to another. This forces me to shoot scenes out in the world, not collect a series of shots – at least that's my goal.

If we consider the most important element to be the interview, we may miss the story, or at least the life of the story. One of my students recently coined my inversion of A and B roll to be "life-roll." Thus approaching a film from a narrative framework, not an informational one, directs one to focus on the life of the subject, their experiences, engagements, action. This framework also me to look to what I call "scene building," which in some ways is the opposite of coverage. As with any narrative I focus on story structure and look to build scenes with begins, middles and ends. I look for ways in production and post to escalate action, engage the viewer in the story and its emotional base. As a result, I find that the strongest

works in documentary engage primarily and at first through emotion, then information.

In the early 1990s there was a revolt in the industry against the talking head. We were instructed by the usual suspects that we could have no more that 5-10 percent talking heads, namely subjects on screen talking. Part of the rational was that as the broadcasters and cable operators were creating more international co-productions, costs could be reduced by limiting the number of voices in a film that needed to be translated. For a while and continuing in some cases to today, lower-budgeted programs have only the narrator as a voice, making translating and voicing in another language particularly inexpensive.

However, if you think about your experience watching fiction films (on any screen), you'll notice that you're actually watching a lot of talking heads (except perhaps in an action/adventure film, but even here the action figures do a heck of a lot of dialogue). The visual information that comes to us nonverbally from the human faces adds dimensions of nuance and meaning that we don't get when that face is offscreen and we're listening solely to voice. Research suggests that more than 50% of a message comes from seeing the person speaking. As noted above just watch a scene from one of Errol Morris' films to make this point.

Static Shot
Hand held
Even with a "sit-down" you have a choice on tripod or hand held. The advantage to hand held is that it may better match the rest of your film's look and therefore may allow the editor easier cutting. On the other hand, if you want to clearly separate elements then doing the opposite may be the right choice. I sometimes prefer hand held if I find that the character is really animated, using the hands and/or props to help answer questions. That way I can flow more easily with the person. In these circumstances I have also suggested that the person stand or sit on the edge of the desk and feel free to move around (office, lab, etc.)

Tripod
Locked
Some people like to lock the tripod off and keep the frame rock solid. This sometimes forces the cinematographer to open the frame a bit to allow for the subject to move within that static shot. There is a certain formality and "soberness" to this kind of framing.

Fluid (correcting)
Most often, even on a tripod the camera is fluid so that the camera operator may pan or tilt slightly depending on what the subject is doing. The camera is a bit more dynamic with this "correcting" framing method. But you have to be careful not to be too aggressive or quick with your moves as this may become distracting.

Production Design, Architecture, and Color Space

Before tampering with the existing reality and moving things around take several digital pictures so that you can restore the location to its previous look. Note where chairs are placed, flowerpots, curtains, etc. Remember you are essentially invading someone else's location and you must respect it and them. I never put gear on tabletops unless I ask and put something underneath such as a table cloth, or piece of rubber matting.

The level to which you change space, essentially applying production design techniques to your filming, depends on several criteria. If you are working on a strict observational film (direct cinema or cinema verité), or if you are working on a journalistic project that does not allow the manipulation of space beyond lighting, then you will likely not pursue too much here. However, there are some basic elements of which you should be aware. Remember that sometimes leaving all choices to the subjects or characters, or to "nature" may mean that the results will be more editorialized than had you made some small suggestions or choices.

Background
While attention is meant to be on the subject of the conversation, attending to the location and the space of the conversation before and beyond the subject is critically important to a successful conversation. From fiction filmmaking, we know that a DP (director of photography) can't successful film without working hand-in-hand with a production designer. The production designer is responsible for the set or location, the space in which actors live and perform. Color space, architecture, furniture, props, wardrobe, etc. are all part of the PD's domain.

The DP is responsible for creating the appropriate light environment, color temperature to that lighting, selecting lenses (perspective) and executing the storyboard or shot list, as well as directing any camera movement.

When I'm setting up for a conversation, I pay close attention to the details of the location. I work with my sound recordist to find the best point of view or background to minimize any extraneous noise (say street noise coming through a window). (I'll try to film with the camera and directional mic aiming away from that window.)

I try also to minimize distractions in the frame. I always ask permission, but I want to act as a production designer first, taking what control I have with the location to make the background less distracting and more related to the subject and their story. Of course, if the production is more observational, or there is a reluctance on the part of the subject or filmmaking team to tamper with that reality, we change

our perspective and work to use composition and lighting only to effect a strong, compelling background.

Wardrobe
Red is tough, even in HD. Avoid small and complicated patterns: two problems, one is aliasing/moiré-ing, the other distracting. I also avoid logos whenever I can. People read first then watch. (That's another reason to pull subjects away from walls and bookcases. Viewers will look at the book titles on shelves, not at your subject. Avoid these kinds of distractions by remembering to move subjects away from walls and shooting on diagonals, not parallels.) White and black sometimes don't do well depending on the color of the person being filmed.

Ask when you can for characters to wear natural fabrics–less clothing noise when using lavalier mics. Tight fits make it sometimes difficult to hide mics on the body under clothing. Looser fits make sound recordists happier.

Also, many distributors don't want to see any clothing or hats with logos. Sometimes this has to do with product placement issues or advertising sponsorship.

Try to avoid "formal" dress unless you really want it. On the other hand, you should be aware of who the person is and how he or she will be "seen" or perceived based on wardrobe choice. You may want to help "support" the person by recommending certain attire that sends a more direct message to the viewer (doctor with stethoscope, for instance).

Composition & Sight- lines/Angle on the Subject:

Off-screen or Direct Address
Run and Gun or Interviewing in situ
Classically, or conventionally, in documentary, most interviews are done with the subject looking off-camera, not directly into the lens. The single most significant exception comes from the brilliant filmmaker and philosopher Errol Morris, who ever since *Thin Blue Line* has had his subjects look directly into camera (more on this and Morris later).

However, don't assume that direct address – looking right into the camera – is somehow "wrong" or a "mistake." It may be exactly what you want to do in terms of creating a different relationship between the subject and audience. It may be a way to better engage the audience into paying more attention to the story, or become more emotionally connected to the story and subject. Don't assume that a convention is a rule. In fact there have been times where I have mixed off-screen and direct address in a single film. Often that comes about because I'm doing my own shooting and people will naturally "find" me in the lens. Or it may come about if the character is more a host than subject.

The convention of subjects looking off-lens comes to us through journalism (news) in which a correspondent interviews his or her subject. In the case of broadcast journalism, it is clear that there is a reporter/interviewer and they appear on camera regularly in a repartee between the two. Often the conversation is filmed with a two, three or four camera setup. In documentary (in most but not all cases), the interviewer is unseen, and therefore implied. More and more, productions are having subjects who are not hosts speak directly to camera. Personally I like this, especially in the new world of the social media and the Web.

However, there are alternatives to the formal sit-down interview. For instance, sometimes I'll be over the subject's shoulder or to the side as they goes about work and I'll throw a question such as, "What are you thinking about now? What's going to happen next do you think?" And the person will continue working but come over the shoulder back to camera to answer. Now I usually do this only after I've gained trust and have been filming the scene for a while. I like to get the subject comfortable with my presence and the activity (interference) of filmmaking, so I tend to just start shooting and let the person do what comes naturally for the scene.

I try to keep a mental note as to what other shots I may need to make the scene work, the pieces the editor will need to build a scene, compress time, and create tension. I don't like to do a lot of starting and stopping early on as it has a tendency to make the filmmaking more like a fiction piece than non-fiction. Only when I think that I've gotten a good fix on the scene and feel comfortable breaking the "reality" of the moment will I first step in and get the fragments or pieces that I need for compressing the action, and only after that (usually) I may throw questions to the subject.

Off-Screen Sightline

Avoid the "correspondent" angle that works for journalism but is too "off-camera" for documentary (30º or more). We usually have the interviewer sit right next to the camera with his or her eyes about the same height as the camera lens (nearly 0º to 5º off-axis). This forces the director and cinematographer to pay closer attention to "eye-flicker," where the subject looks from the interviewer to the lens (or the sound person, or other crew-member, which is one reason why I always try to make sure that only camera and interviewer are within the fovial view of the subject and the rest of the crew, including sound, remains at the periphery. Sometimes I even make sure to tell the sound recordist to keep looking at the mixer and not look at the subject!

Of course, if you are acting as a reporter or are in the film and your questions will be part of the film, and you intend to shoot at least with two cameras (one on yourself), then a more off-camera sightline may be better.

Also, sometimes you may want to do a profile or new angle, especially if you're shooting with more than one camera or if you feel that your production design warrants it.

Further, glasses complicate things. If the reflections are heavy then you may want to move the camera a bit away from that more "head-on" angle. This leads me to suggest that all crew where dark, neutral clothing – this minimizes distractions both in terms of reflections and subject attention. (I always try to get enough light into the eyes to see the pupils, even when the person is wearing glasses. More on exterior issues vis a vis the sun elsewhere.)

Balance and Screen Direction

Usually the direction of the sightline determines which side of the screen the subject is placed. If the person is looking off-screen right, then the typical framing would have him or her set on the left side of the frame, thus giving the line some "breathing room" or movement. However there are times when the director chooses to push the subject to the edge of that vector or frame. This creates a visual tension to the interview or scene. It is a bit more aggressive visually.

Which side of the screen should characters be framed? Always a good question with no easy answers. Most Western cultures read text left to right. This is how we usually scan an image. Thus we start in the upper left corner of the frame and move to the lower right. The most stable image reflects this; putting the person on the left side of the frame (applying the rule of thirds generally) looking off-screen right is more settled, familiar than the opposite. If there are two "opposing" sides to your project, then you may have all of one side look one direction, and the other, opposite. (The same tends to hold true for movement.)

Height

The height of the camera as it relates to the subject (seated, standing, lying down) is another choice point. According to filmmaker and theorist Stefan Sharff in *Elements of Cinema,* eye-level shooting in fiction is usually not common in masterworks. Normally filmmakers use the matching of slight high-angle and low-angle alternations to help "glue" a series of shots in a scene together. This holds true in documentary as well as in fiction films. Variation or change, and therefore *opposition,* helps viewers recognize patterns and make connections among shots and points. Typically this occurs more obviously with the sightline of the character. In a typical magazine format show such as *60 Minutes* the producers will have the "good guys" framed left looking off-screen right and the "bad guys" or opponents framed right looking off-screen left. While there are aesthetic and psychological reasons that may contribute to these choices sometimes there are also technical reasons that drive height, sightlines, etc.

Facial features have an impact on height choices as well. Usually, it is a bit more pleasing to frame slightly high on people – you avoid double chins, etc. But

sometimes the forehead and cheeks suggest that a lower angle may be better. Also, if the person is a hand-waver and animated I usually frame from a lower angle so that even when I'm on a CU the hands just come into frame. (There are times where I will also ask the person to raise his or her hands off the crotch and up to the chest – for obvious reasons in wider shots). (The shape of the face also will have an influence on your lighting design.) The lower angle also has a tendency to drop shadows in the background out of frame, not a bad deal if you can't separate the subject enough from the background.

Further, there is some value to considering the psychological impact of the height of the shot. The conventional approach suggests that high-angles down on subjects diminish their stature or power (vis a vis other subject shot from low-angle placements and the audience itself), while low-angle shots shooting up on the subject elevate status and power.

Focal Length

Scale or image size is determined by camera-subject distance, focal length and aperture (not iris or f:stop, but the "cut-out" in film or chip in video). There is a big psychological difference between a shot that uses a short focal length (wide angle) and is close in to the subject for a close-up versus a similar image size (close-up) set by using a long focal length and increasing the distance between the camera and subject. The latter is more a "portraiture" shot and feels more like fiction, has a tendency to diminish emphasis on the background through compression and a shorter depth of field. It will also tend to emphasize facial features, the subject him- or herself. The former (wide and close) will have a greater depth of field and therefore emphasize the character in the space. It will feel in some ways more "documentary" or real-world. Perhaps the way to think of focal length and corresponding image size is that the longer lens will emphasize the "figure" while the shorter will emphasize the "ground" in a figure-ground design sense.

Depth of Field

The f:stop is one of several controls we have over exposure (brightness of the image). But it is also critical to the apparent sharpness of the image before and beyond the critical plane of focus (distance between camera and character). When the background is soft focus, it's the DoF and camera subject distance that usually creates that effect. The shorter the distance between camera and subject also reduces sharpness.

With larger chips in many cameras today it is easier to have shallow depth of field, as the larger the chip the less depth of field for any cam-sub distance and f-stop. However, when it comes to smartphones, we have a challenge in that the chips are super small. Smartphones that have dual lenses help with shallow DoF when you switch to the tele mode (longer focal length, smaller field of view).

Using a shallow DoF helps keep distractions in the background less intrusive, and draws attention to the subject (figure/ground relationship). So effectively creating a shallow DoF is really important. However, a shallow depth of field can be a challenge. If it's too shallow a slight movement or adjustment in where the subject is sitting (say they lean forward to make a point) will through the focus off. It's therefore really important to maintain constant vigilance over the focus or increase the depth of field.

Note or remember: Depth of Field is not evenly set between the foreground and background. A 1/3rd of the apparent sharpness is before the subject toward the camera and 2/3rds of the DoF is beyond or behind the subject toward the background. There are a number of smartphone apps that calculate the DoF for any camera/chip.

Perspective

I usually avoid a flat frame, meaning that I try to create a sense of depth on a diagonal or try to find or light for a vanishing point deep in the frame. Therefore when I'm framing up a shot, I like to check out the location rather than the person first. To avoid flat frames where all the lines and shapes of the scene are symmetrically balanced with the frame-line of the camera, I try to position the camera to take advantage of a natural prominent line that draws my attention from deep background to foreground. Sometimes this is a table top, a series of windows, chairs, or such. Sometimes it is a series of props, such as plates, candles, lab equipment. In outdoor locations it may be a mountain ridge, trees, stream or road taking me from deep in the background to the foreground (even off-screen). What I do is to try to create a diagonal line or movement from object to object or along the main "line" or curve, that takes me either from deep frame right to strong foreground left, or vise versa.

On the other hand there are specific and intentional compositional choices to be made for a film or series that changes this general notion. MTC

Perspective leads sightline, subject framing and lighting scheme

This perspective will then dictate which screen direction I prefer the subject to look to, and the interviewer placed. For a deep right to foreground left, I'll usually place the subject screen right and have him or her look off screen left, thus following the perspective line of the overall scene. For a deep left to strong foreground right, I'll reverse the placement. The subject will be put on the left side of the screen and have the look go right, with the interviewer obviously being on the right side off the camera.

As I usually like shooting into shadow or fill rather than the highlight or key side of the face (see lighting and shadow section for more detail), perspective will have a determining factor in my lighting scheme as well. If I have the subject framed left looking off-screen right, then I'll put my key-light (main) off-screen right. I call the

relationship of the camera, interviewer and key-light my key-light sandwich, where I put the interviewer between the camera and the key-light. Easy to remember. (As I mention in the lighting section, I believe shooting into the shadow side of the face draws the viewer in; he or she effectively has to peer in to see the person better. Further, shooting into the shadow creates a stronger sense of three-dimensions to the human face. But I try always to make sure a little bit of key-light or a solid eye-light kicks into the shadow-side eye.)

Balance and Symmetries

There always seems to be a tension in composition between a "balanced" and "dynamic" frame. Placing objects (including people) within the frame is actually critical to the success or apparent failure of the interview. Much can be gleaned non-verbally for the shot selection and its composition. You may use the camera to make a subtle or not-so subtle comment about the subject.

Think of what usually happens with a point and shoot camera. The center of the frame is where the focus dot or rectangle usually is, so we tend to frame the shot by putting the person's head right smack in the middle of the shot. Press the button and we have a photo, but not necessarily a very good one. Sure it's the person but it's not well composed. There is too much "head room" or empty space above the subject's head and he or she is cut off at the bottom of the frame either at the feet or gut. Also, the center of the frame is not necessarily the best or most appealing place to put the center of attention. In fact, quite the opposite. The center of the frame is the worst place, usually (and there are fortunately always good exceptions to any statement like this), to put the subject or the thing that the filmmaker wants us to concentrate on.

Framing and Zooming or Tracking

Since the mid to late 2000s an innovation came into the profession–the use of a second camera, usually a DSLR. This new perspective provided an easy editing tool to help compress the conversation. Using a smartphone is becoming more common for the second camera.

However, I've noticed that changing the frame size of the primary camera seems to be diminishing. It's important to change image size (not angle on the person) during the interview. Usually the easier questions and answers will be shot wider than tougher or more intimate topics. The reliance on the medium shot seems ubiquitous, at least among my students. It seems that there's a reluctance to move in close to a person, to show the face alone. I find the CU to be the most compelling image size for interviews. Not always, but mostly.

It's also important to pay attention as to when you zoom or move in to a CU or out to a MS (medium shot). You should never move unless it's really important or you can do it without ruining the moment during an answer. Wait for a beat, pause, or the end of the answer before changing image size. If you're good at hand held in and can change focus well moving into a CU by leaning forward in your chair or stepping forward, then give it a go. Otherwise, stay put.

The interview itself

Starting the interview

When you need to repeat or re-frame (in terms of response), blame yourself, technical issues and crew rather than the subject. Don't come out and say, "I have no idea what you're talking about so let's try it again." Also, don't ever say, "Could you tell me that again?" or "When we talked on the phone you said, 'Blah blah…' so would you just say that again on-camera?" All any of these statements or questions do is to put the character into a difficult place. He or she has to now memorize lines; this pulls him or her out of the immediacy and honesty of the moment as the character will now be concentrating on trying to remember what words to use or what exactly to say. Often this is easily seen on camera.

So instead, come up with other reasons to redo or revisit an answer. I usually say, "That was great, but I think that I may have made a slight mistake on focus. Do you mind if we stay with this for another minute or so? Thanks." Then I usually re-ask the question but with an acknowledgement of part of the previous answer. So instead of just repeating the question I'll say something like, "When you said that the Quark is a strange little piece of matter, what do you mean by that? How …" This is a strong directorial re-enforcement for the subject, making it clear that you, the director, have been listening to his or her answers to your questions. This moves the "interview" more toward a "conversation." Even when I go onto another question or section, I still acknowledge that I have paid attention to the response and I'm not simply running through a question list. I also sometimes give hand signals to my crew that indicates they should mention a possible sound or lighting glitch to me after an answer that wasn't so great so that I'll have to redo the question and answer – this technique just helps to make sure that the subject doesn't feel stressed about not providing a good answer.

There are times, and it really depends on the character and your relationship to him or her, when it is okay to tell him or her that the answer was too complicated, hard to follow or not full enough. People often go down long tangential roads; scientists and politicians often bring in far too many qualifiers and lose focus. I try to start off by acknowledging that the situation (when it's not a host or correspondent asking the question and therefore the questions won't be on-camera or on-screen) isn't normal. While I try to always call my interviews "conversations" because I think that

better reflects the relationship that should be aimed for, I also tell the character/subject that I can't say anything during the answer, I can only be non-verbal in my support. Further, I tell the character/subject to try to find a way to create a topic sentence out of my question (and I try not to ask yes/no questions). I give an example. If you've gained trust or you're dealing with a friend, or if the person has the right attitude and can take it, feel free to let him or her know that the answer just didn't work.

Another point. Please don't talk to the crew, editor, executive producer and certainly the subject in terms of sound bites. This diminishes the potential of the interview/conversation. It puts a real damper on the moment and once again forces the person before the camera to think about what should be said rather than simply talking. It also sets a poor framework for the interview, putting the medium ahead of the content. However, the director must be able to rein the person in; so there's a bit of a balancing act here.

You as director must also carry the editor on location with you. I do this both when shooting and directing. You must be able to hear not just the conversation that is on-going but the edited piece as you go. What does this mean? Remember that no matter what, you will not be using the whole conversation, and certainly not in the order in which it was shot. (This is also why I make sure that my subjects never use, "As I said before," or "Like we talked about before." No such reference to time works for the reasons above.) You also have to keep your ears attuned to pacing; will your editor actually be able to cut at the end of a sentence or phrase? You may have little control during the interview to do much about this but it certainly should be something that you pay attention to during research when you're casting. Is the person serious but not complicated? Is there humor in there somewhere? Does he or she simply answer questions or tell you a story? Can he or she take direction? Does the individual hum and haw a lot? Also, I'm always listening for the moment in the answer to the question when it actually begins. How many endings does the one question have?

The flow of the interview
Depends on the type: Friend or Foe? In either case, be respectful (at least to start).

Usually begin easy and work your way to the hard stuff, then resolve with a mild finish. Something like a film with a set-up, escalation of action, and short resolution. I always have two standard end questions though: "What is your fondest hope for the future, or what's coming next?"; and "What is your worst fear?"

Further, I also ask crew then subject if there are things that seemed confusing, missing or in need of clarification. I do ask the subject if he or she would like to tell the audience something that we didn't hit on during the conversation.

Now if you're running an "ambush" interview or you know that the subject is antagonistic to you or your film, then you may want to get rather innocuous or lead-

up questions done first, including the hope and fear questions. Then you may have only one shot at the question that is most important. How you ask along with your tone may make all the difference as to how far the interview goes.

At the start of the interview, I always do this to build a bit more trust with the subject and provide proof that I'm listening. This helps validate the subject in the midst of pressure (from the moment, the apparatus). What is it that I do? Well in the first answer to the first question, I make sure that I pick two or three things (key words that I try to remember) that are said that I want to follow up on *before* going on to the next question. When the answer is over, I'll ask a question to help elaborate part of that answer. For example, if someone tells me that their from Providence, then I'll ask about what it was like growing up.

So be in the moment during the interview, throughout.

Paying attention and the pause

If you have a series of questions that you're going to go through pay attention first to the person not the questions. I've been in situations where, as the person is finishing an answer, the director looks down at their notes rather than keeping eye contact with the subject. This breaks a bond between the two and hurts the trust between them as well. It's a small gesture that makes a huge difference.

When you look down, in that circumstance, you're effectively dismissing the person, ignoring what they're saying. Further, instead of preparing for the next question, checking your notes, and possibly asking the next question, stay with eye contact as the person finishing answering and do nothing. Don't call for a cut, don't say great, don't ask that next question. Instead, wait. This gives the person time to think that maybe there's more to the answer, and you may end up with a little bit more, something that is more personal, intimate.

When to interview?

Some directors prefer doing the interview before shooting other elements with the character, or at least early in the process. That gives them the chance to pick up scenes and shots of specific material that was referenced (well) during the interview. Others prefer to shoot the interview after filming other material with the character (I'm generally in this camp). This timing allows the director to make sure to get the shots or scenes that are referred to well during the interview.

Further, just because you do the interview in some formal manner at a specific time does not preclude asking questions and continuing the conversation whiling filming other elements of your story.