The Interview.

Interviews are a main staple in most documentary films and we utilize them to communicate vital information about the story. Through the interviews the protagonists of our films have the opportunity to tell their experiences directly to the audience. They are testimonies that provide a strong sense of authenticity to our films. In many cases the interview is a powerful alternative to a more impersonal narration.

The moment we decide to film an interview we are confronted with a number of choices that will strongly impact the style and the nature of our documentary.

First, an interview can be **formal** or **informal**.

1. **Formal Interviews.** The interviewee is seated or stands at a specific location for the entire duration of the interview. The background is carefully chosen to put the interviewee at ease and to provide a context for the story. For example, we will interview a famous chef in a kitchen or a soldier in front of a tank and not the other way around, unless we are really trying to create an awkward or strident image and say something special. In a formal setup we can often control lighting with reflectors, screens and lights. A specific lighting style can define the entire mood of the interview and therefore we need to be aware of all its possible implications.

   The main advantage of a formal interview is that we can control the environment from a stylistic and technical point of view and it also allows us to interview our subjects for and extended period of time. On the other hand, relying on formal interviews we sometimes run the risk of creating a static and less dynamic documentary based on "talking heads".

2. **Informal**. The interviewee may move around freely while performing normal daily tasks. For example you can interview your subject while she is driving, drawing, fishing, rowing, even boxing! In many cases we have limited or no control over lighting, and the interviewee may not always look into the same direction, therefore sound recording can be very challenging. The result however can be very dynamic and engaging.

There are several subsets to the **formal** and **informal interview**. One the main question we need to ask ourselves is: which role does the director/interviewer want to play? During a formal interview should we hear the questions? Do we want to hear them occasionally as a distant voice off camera or should we see the interviewer in "60 Minutes" style? If that is the case we need to add a second camera and provide the interviewer with a good microphone.

If, on the other hand, we already know that the questions will be edited out in the finished film and our documentary will include only fragments (sound bytes) of the interview, we need to inform the interviewee that the audience will hear only the answers but not the questions and the final interview will be edited.

When we are planning an **informal interview** it is better to decide in advance if the director/interviewer will enter the frame, interact with the interviewee and be part of the action? This is a decision that can have a major impact on the style and content of the film you are making. Also, let's not forget that if the interviewer is often working with another camera. The two need to discuss and practice the shooting style in advance and they need to be able to anticipate each other moves. It is very common in a two person crew that the interviewer is also doing sound. In that case conducting an informal interview can really become a dance.

These are decisions which require a considerable degree of planning and an awareness of the type of film we want to produce. It may seem strange, but to a certain degree we must be able to pre-visualize the look and style of our documentary. There is a misconception among beginners that in documentary filmmaking you should not plan or pre-visualize anything. You just walk into the world with your camera and you start shooting. Nothing could be farther form the reality of documentary filmmaking. We need to set ground rules before we begin shooting. Even if we are not aware of it, we make decisions every time we point our camera and press the record button. All these technical, directorial and stylistic decisions have a cumulative effect that impacts the structure and ultimately even the content of our films.

The Formal Interview.

As we approach our **formal interview** it can be useful to break down the process into to two sets of challenges. The first is more technical in nature and it involves a series of decisions about location/background**,** lighting, sound and framing. The second set of challenges deals with research, choice of questions and an overall strategy on how to approach our subject from a personal and human point of view.

For now let's assume that we are going to conduct a formal interview in which our questions will be edited out and in the finished film our audience will see and hear only the interviewees.

Choosing a location.

Finding the right location and setting up an interview sometimes can be a real puzzle because we are trying to satisfy numerous technical requirements all at once: background, lighting conditions, acoustics. And of course, when all these requirements are satisfied we need to make sure we have **access** to our ideal location for the necessary amount of time.

Background. As we mentioned it before, we need to find a place where the interviewee feels at ease, but we also need a background that somehow tells a story.

The background is important but at the same time it must not be overwhelming. Hey, it is the background after all! If the details call for too much attention they become an enormous distraction. If I am interviewing a famous university professor in a studio office with piles of books it could be really annoying to have a very visible book cover with a distracting picture placed right behind her. If you cannot find the perfect background it is much better to choose something more neutral. A confortable room in the interviewee's home will probably do it.

Lighting. The main reason to bring lights and control the environment is because natural light is constantly changing. As rule of thumb if you are planning a long interview that can last more than half hour or even several hours you don't want to be at the mercy of the elements. A cloud or the sun moving behind a building can completely change you lighting environment and ruin an interview.

Acoustics. As the saying goes, sound is half of the picture. I would add that in same cases audio can be all we need. Sound field recording is a serious craft and we cannot go into too much technical detail but as a producer/directors we need to be able to at least ask the right questions.
Is there an eco in the room? Do we need extra gear and bring some stands and hang blankets to absorb the reverberations of the sound. A location may seem quiet but are there any noises that can kick in at any moment like a neighbor practicing his trumpet or construction works just outside the building? Can the AC system be switched off temporarily? Well you get the idea! Usually a good sound person is going to ask all these questions. Also let's not forget that what may seem a distant sound to the associate producer's hears, it can be picked up as very annoying buzz by the microphone and make you interview less effective or simply unusable. So, when you are scouting a location try to think as a sound person and not like a print journalist.

In most cases we do not always have the luxury of choosing or scouting the location in advance and our subject has a limited time for the interview. We arrive on location and we have just a few minutes to make all these decisions. Experience is of course the answer but for the non-veteran filmmakers there is only a way out: check lists. We must avoid at all cost to try to think about all these issues at random. The best advice here is to be methodical and try to go through the same list always in the same order. Like an airline pilot ready to take off.