



MUTUAL Inspiration

Documentary Filmmaking and the Museum Industry

Shannon Bettles

“When a filmmaker starts a movie they have seconds to get people to suspend their disbelief, to lose touch with where they are sitting – as they are now living in a new existence. Great filmmakers never jar the audience back to their reality. They are master craftsmen and storytellers who understand that depth and substance is more engaging than the superficial.” - Paul Ferguson & Casey Williams

These words come from a conversation between Paul Ferguson, Producer, and Academy Award Winner® Casey Williams, President and CEO of Paradigm Motion Picture Co., who have been collaborating on a number of projects together, including **Pipes of War: Unparalleled Valour: the Story of James Richardson, VC**, a documentary film about a “young boy from British Columbia who was swept into the maelstrom of the Great War” (Paradigm Motion Picture Co, 2010).

This article explores what museum, gallery and archive professionals can learn from filmmakers. I interviewed a former colleague, Paul Ferguson, to see if he could provide insight into the world of filmmaking, allowing us a glimpse into a world where magic happens.

Mutual Inspiration

“When learning how to play guitar, one must quickly learn not to be scared to play with people who are better than you, for something is going to rub off.” - Paul Ferguson

Listen well, is the advice Ferguson imparts when trying something new. “Be willing to learn, be willing to share, accept your abilities and accept that you have much to learn.” Staying open to possibilities by thinking big is a concept that Ferguson believes in, and one that sparked his relationship with Paradigm Motion Picture Co. years ago.

Acknowledging that he has learned more by participating than by saying no, Ferguson has found that in the world of filmmaking, anything is possible.

Ferguson contends that the film industry is open for partnerships: documentary film makers don't always know where to get their historic information or who to use to find content. Thankfully, museums, galleries and archives are full of content! As an industry, museums, galleries and archives can help documentary filmmakers by putting con-

Above: Paul Ferguson and Casey Williams filming at the Chilliwack Archives.
Photo credit: Shannon Bettles

tent together in order to make connections and tell stories. Documentary filmmakers work by taking their subject with all its components, and carving it down to an exhibit of moving images presented on film.

“They start with a lot of content and have to take the large story and continually peel away” - Paul Ferguson

The goal is “to deepen and not broaden” a viewer’s understanding of a topic, something Ferguson passionately believes the best museum exhibits do as well.

Whittling down massive amounts of content in a succinct and impactful way is not easy, as any curator or editor knows. As it takes 40 gallons of sap to make one bottle of maple syrup, it takes 40 hours of footage to create one hour of magic in a film (Burns, 2012). So what do filmmakers appreciate about museums and archives? Ferguson believes one aspect filmmakers appreciate is that museums

and archives respond quickly to research questions. Advice for museums working with filmmakers? Contracts should be holistic and both partners should benefit. Museum, gallery and archive professionals should ask themselves. “What can be gained by working with filmmakers?”

Telling Stories with Living Pictures

“When I go to an exhibit, I look at how it has been put together. How are all these things assembled? What has the curator associated with this object – this subject?” - Paul Ferguson

In the **Big Think Interview** with Ken Burns (2012), Burns speaks to the role of a director and storyteller in documentary filmmaking. Ferguson recommends the Big Think interview as inspiration for museum workers. In the interview, Burns talks about visiting archives. While he admits that he is not a historian, Burns finds a way to marry his eye as a filmmaker



Above: Film Director Casey Williams.
Photo credit: Casey Williams



Above: Casey Williams films at the Chilliwack Archives.
Photo credit: Shannon Bettles

with the knowledge of the historian, curator or archivist. The result? Historic photographs are taken apart dynamically and put back together again. In doing so, images are contextualized and brought to life.

Viewers of Burns' documentaries, even if just for a second, are made to feel what it was actually like to be part of history.

Filmmakers may recognize what Apple has coined, the “Ken Burns Effect”, a tool in Apple computers iMovie program, which allows users to zoom or pan on still photographs. When working with Steve Jobs on the concept, Burns wanted to provide a way for amateur filmmakers to get beyond the plasticity of imagery (Burns, 2012). Ferguson and Williams think along the same lines as Burns when it comes to bringing still images to life, and challenge museum professionals to “look at archival pictures and ask ‘What’s in the picture?’” For example, do you hear birds chirping in the background or a fire crackling? Ferguson reminds us that good storytelling is all in the details. “Tell a story, don’t dictate it” Ferguson suggests. “Good directors tell a story as a narrative, not as a lesson”.

Ferguson challenges curators to think about what they can learn about storytelling from filmmakers. “Filmmakers are really good at creating connections through narratives, good at editing, knowing when to change scenes, change focus or change direction.” What filmmaking techniques can the museum industry apply to exhibitions? Burns puts it well: “the cutting room floor is not filled with bad scenes, just scenes that didn’t fit”.

Are we making conscious decisions when we add or delete content from our exhibits? Through careful editing and framing, can we do better in telling our stories?

On this topic, Ferguson points out that filmmakers find ways to “rest your eyes” between subjects. They allow time for people to pause. He asks the basic question: how many museums allow for people to pause in their exhibits? Have we ever considered that visually and emotionally, visitors can get overloaded? Ferguson suggests we take the lead from filmmakers by giving exhibit visitors time to regroup. A great example of this was at the Imperial War Museum (IWM) in London, England. Over his many visits, Ferguson has noticed that the IWM provides an opportunity for people to reflect within their gallery spaces. The former IWM main galleries included an entrance way that contrasts 6-foot-tall images with short word captions. The oversized images, each with carefully chosen and succinct wording, affords visitors time to reflect as a build up for what they will see next - a technique often used in filmmaking as a way to evoke anticipation of the upcoming scene.

Another plot device that museums can borrow from the film industry is the concept of a MacGuffin. A MacGuffin is “Alfred Hitchcock’s term for the device or plot element (an item, object, goal, event, or piece of knowledge) that catches the viewer’s attention or drives the logic or action of the plot and appears extremely important to the film characters, but often turns out to be insignificant or is to be ignored after it has served its purpose” (AMC, 2015). Can museums use the concept of a MacGuffin to give our audiences something to anchor to? Ferguson speaks to a 2013 exhibit at the Chilliwack Museum and Archives where he used this concept in the healthcare exhibit entitled: *May Health, Peace and Contentment be Yours: The History of*

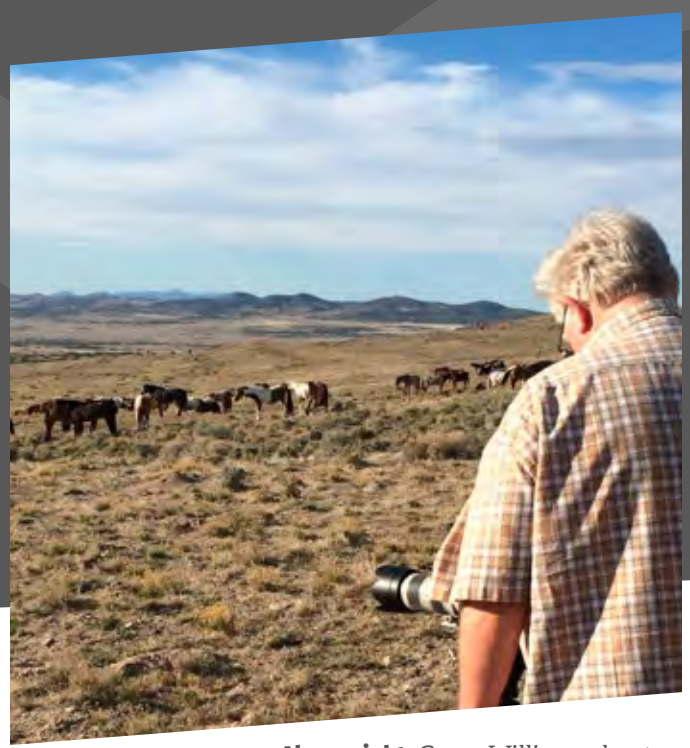


Healthcare in Chilliwack ([visit online](#)). For the exhibit, Ferguson chose a Hipwell Drugstore calendar as the MacGuffin. This one object, simple in form and depicting an adult with child, became the exhibit theme, representative of a wheel of life from birth through death. Ferguson comments that “the simple driving force of the item provided the opportunity to highlight our medical collection and create partnerships used to explore subject material ranging from quack medicine, prosthetics, birth control and embalming.”

Imagination, Technology & Innovation

“Film has the ability to use touch technology using iPads, tablets in front of display cases that will allow you to combine cinematic storytelling, augmented reality, and text. Imagine your audience watching characters with the artifacts that are cased before them come to life. These are experiences that are available – making the audience part of the historical moment – it brings more reality, more experience.” - Paul Ferguson & Casey Williams

Above left: *Hipwell Drugstore Calendar, 1926. Photo credit: Chilliwack Museum and Archives, 2008.026.003*



Above right: *Casey Williams shoots a documentary on location. Photo credit: Casey Williams*

Ferguson and Williams invite the museum industry to imagine a museum experience where people no longer look at an artifact with a caption, but rather hear the sounds, see the sites, and experience the emotion. “Museums should be a place where the audience wants, and is able to, experience living history.” They suggest that one way to do this is to work with filmmakers who know how to create these kinds of elements. Suggesting that the technology exists right now at our fingertips, they wonder who will drive in first? Imagine immersing museum visitors with an experience that is thrilling, rewarding and emotionally satisfying. *“Let’s not let our visitors leave empty. We all know when filmmakers have not provided the full experience. Take people through that magic window and into that world - the Holodeck is closer than we think. The experience does not have to last long, 30 seconds, perhaps a minute.” - Paul Ferguson & Casey Williams*

Some of the technologies Ferguson and Williams allude to are starting to be incorporated into museum exhibits. Have you been to an exhibit yet where moving images are projected onto display



Left: Casey Williams and Paul Ferguson review film footage.
Photo credit: Casey Williams

case glass? Have you watched actors weaving within archival images, stepping out from behind the photograph while narrating the story? Film is exploring technologies such as augmented reality and 3D imagery, as well as innovations in sound and lighting technologies. Museum exhibitions can also make use of such innovations.

Doing it Right

Ferguson has said it many times before in his career as a museum curator, “anything worth doing, is worth doing right”. In the film industry, Ferguson reminds us that “anything you do has to be good. Film is about quality, there can be no half-measures.” According to Ferguson, Casey Williams works at a gold standard in all of his projects. The Piper Richardson film was started 6+ years ago, and when it is completed, it will be of exceptional quality. Good things require patience as Ferguson reminds us that it took Geoffrey Rush 13 years to begin production on *The King’s Speech*. Ferguson comments on his film journey: “It is great fun to experience all the hurdles and pitfalls, it is a positive work environment that offers satisfaction through continual encouragement and appreciation. Communicate effectively, enjoy discussion and debate – visiting the hard to ask questions and discovering the answers together creates enduring satisfaction.”

“Brain swarming allows you to continually engage in the production of creative ideas, no matter how astonishing. Better to get the ideas out rather than to let them slide”

Advice for museum professionals embarking on their first film project? “Ask lots of questions, explore, learn the whole story, accept that there will be curves and segues on the road to development. Work towards the goal, and dream big.” - Paul Ferguson

Paul Ferguson is a curator, historian and a documentary film researcher and producer. He has travelled extensively since childhood and continues to visit new places to learn of their history and stories. His studies and experiences of these landscapes of interest are integral to his passion for holistic innovation and leadership. Since 1978, Ferguson has worked with museums and archives and is currently the Registrar with the Royal British Columbia Museum. Paul also worked on “Tricks on the Dead”, the story of the Chinese Labour Corps during the Great War.



Casey Williams is a noted screenwriter, director and is internationally respected as one of the top documentary filmmakers in the world. His advances in film editing theory are used worldwide. Williams is the recipient of numerous international awards including an Academy award.

Shannon Bettles is Archivist at the Chilliwack Museum and Archives and the designer of Roundup Magazine. Bettles and Ferguson worked together in Chilliwack for several years.