

CHAPTER 10

PROJECTS: RECOGNIZING YOUR ARTISTIC IDENTITY

This chapter covers

- Questions to ask yourself as you seek to define your goals
- A project to take inventory of the marks you carry, the themes they suggest, and the kind of people with whom you empathize
- Your closest issues, finding their equivalencies, and displacing them outward into the world
- A project to locate your other selves
- A project to make use of your dreams and dream imagery
- A project to take stock of your artistic goals
- Sketching out your future path
- Losing and recovering your way, progress, and the artistic process
- Privacy, competition, and hostile environments

By nature, human beings are seekers. For those attracted to the world of the arts, the quest is to find meanings in life—a fundamental and noble human drive if ever there was one. Documentaries are a superb vehicle for this work, and making them will make you feel fully alive, not least because of all the good people you encounter on the road. First, some important questions for you to ponder:

- How should you use your developing skills in the world?
- What kind of subjects should you tackle?
- What are you avid to learn about?
- Do you already have an artistic identity, and can you articulate it aloud?

Right now you need to establish what matters to you most, so you can do your best work. Actually, the key to this is already inside you and close at hand. It will reveal itself if—candidly and in private—you make the provisional self-profiles in the projects that follow. Some people will find confirmation of what they expected; others will be surprised (as I was) to discover that for years they have been overlooking the obvious.

FIND YOUR LIFE ISSUES

Finding your central issues begins with discarding everything outside a few strong emotional and psychological concerns. Whatever unfailingly arouses you to these strongly partisan feelings comes from a mark you've absorbed. The marks you carry, and the issues they bring, will be few and personal. Exploring them sincerely and intelligently through your films will deeply touch your audience and keep you busy for life. Unfortunately, filmmakers often seem willing to settle for a superficial understanding of these matters—far more so than writers or painters, for instance. Here are a few projects to help you begin the process of introspection.

PROJECTS

PROJECT 10-1: THE SELF-INVENTORY

To discover your issues and themes, and thus what you can give to others, start with a non-judgmental inventory of your most moving experiences. This should be straightforward, because the human memory retains only what it finds significant. If you already have a good handle on your underlying issues, take the inventory anyway—you may be surprised. Honestly undertaken, this project reveals life events that are key in your formation. Acknowledging them will urge you to work at exploring the underlying issues.

Here's what to do:

1. Go somewhere private and write rapid, short notations just as they come to mind of major experiences in which you were deeply moved (to joy, to rage, to panic, to fear, to disgust, to anguish, to love, etc.). Keep going until you have ten or a dozen.
2. Stand back and organize them into two or three groups. Name each group and define any relationship or hierarchy you can see between them. Some moving experiences will be positive (with feelings of joy, relief, discovery, laughter), but most will still have disturbing emotions attached to them, such as embarrassment, shame, or anger. Make no distinction, for there is no such thing as a negative or positive truth. To discriminate is to censor, which is just another way to prolong the endless and wasteful search for acceptability. Truth is *truth*—period!
3. Examine what you've written as though looking objectively at a fictional character's backstory. By seeing your formation a little objectively, you should find trends, even a certain vision of the world, attaching naturally to these experiences. Be bold and freely imaginative in developing this character's world

view, just as if you were developing a fictional character. Your object is not to psychoanalyze yourself or to find ultimate truth (those would be impossible): it is to fashion a temporary authorial role that you can play with all your heart. Because it's a role, not a straitjacket, you can change it, evolve it, and improve it as you go.

Now write notes that, without disclosing anything too private, will enable you to describe objectively and aloud to a group or class:

- A. The *main marks your life has left on you* during formative experiences. Keep your description of the experiences to a minimum and concentrate on their effects, not their causes.

Example:

"Growing up in an area at war, I had an early fear and loathing of uniforms and uniformity. When my father came home after the war, my mother became less accessible, and my father was closer to my older brother, so I came to believe I must do things alone."

- B. Two or three *themes* that emerge from the marks you carry

Examples:

"Separation breeds self-sufficiency."

"Someone taking what you value can motivate you to fight for your rights."

"Good work often starts out on the wrong foot."

- C. Several *different characters for which you feel unusual empathy*. These can be people you know, types of people, or people who exist and whom you could contact.

Examples:

A friend from an orphanage who had to overcome difficulty with intimacy

A friend who vents his anger through anti-globalization protests

An older woman who fought to regain the job that her boss gave to someone younger

- D. Two or three *provisional film topics*. Make them different but all focused on your central concerns. Displacing concerns into other areas of life avoids autobiography and lets you explore new worlds with authority. Choose worlds that reflect the concerns to which you are already committed.

Examples:

Anyone whose existence is complicated by having to keep their his or her secret (such as a gay person in the military)

Someone overcoming a situation where he or she is made to feel unacceptably different

Anyone forced into a lesser role and who finds ways to assert that he or she still has value

PROJECT 10–2: USING DREAMS TO FIND YOUR PREOCCUPATIONS

Keep a log of your dreams, because it is here the mind expresses itself unguardedly and in surreal and symbolic imagery. Unless you have a period of intense dream activity, you may have to keep a record over many months before common denominators and motifs begin showing up. Keep a notebook next to your bed, and awake gently so that you hold onto the dream long enough to write it down. When you get really interested in this work, you will automatically awake after a good dream in order to write it down. Needless to say, this will not be popular with a bedroom partner.

Dreams often project a series of forceful and disturbing images. By keeping track of the dream rather than going straight to an interpretation, you can return and reinterpret as you amass more material. Recurring images are often a key to your deepest thematic concerns.

PROJECT 10–3: ALTER EGOS

Some people believe we each have a single true self, others that we are made of multiple personalities, each evoked by particular circumstances. True or not, the latter view is convenient for storytelling, which is what documentary really is. In this exercise you uncover those characters or situations to which you resonate and supplement what you did in the previous project with an additional and different self-characterization.

1. List six or eight *fictional characters* from literature or film with which you have a special affinity. This becomes more interesting when you respond to darker and less tangible qualities. Rank the characters by their importance to you.
2. Do the same thing for any *public figures* important to you, such as actors, politicians, sports figures, etc.
3. Make a list of influential *friends or family*, people who exerted a strong influence on you at some time. Leave out immediate family (often too complicated because they are too close).
4. Taking the top two or three in each list, write briefly about any *dilemma or predicament they have in common*, and what *mythical or archetypal qualities* you can see they represent.
5. From what you discover from points 1 to 4, *develop an ideal authorial role* that you can describe to the group or class. To direct is to play a role, always. Develop one from your own qualities, but make the role more defined, passionate, and courageous. Don't hesitate to imaginatively intensify the role. The aim is to build a provocative and active role that you can try to uphold as you direct.
6. Describe either in the group or on paper *what kind of work this person should be doing*.

PROJECT 10–4: WHAT IS THE FAMILY DRAMA?

Prepare notes so that you can speak for around 4 minutes on

1. The *main drama in your family*. If there are several, pick the one that affected you most (examples: the impact of the family business going bankrupt, discovering that Uncle Wilfred is a cross-dresser, or the effect on your mother of her father wanting all his children to become musicians).
2. *What you learned* as a result of the way the family drama played out
3. What kind of *subjects you now feel qualified to tackle* as a result

PROJECT 10–5: PITCHING A SUBJECT

Funding agencies and commissioning editors who put support behind some film projects rather than others are extremely influenced by a good *pitch* (oral presentation) because they know how difficult it is to have all your thinking together. Prepare your ideas so that you can make a 4-minute *pitch* of a documentary idea to the group or class. Your words should be colorful and your enthusiasm should convey a clear, almost pictorial, sense of what the film will be like and why it should be made. Rehearse in front of a mirror so that you can make an appealing presentation that includes the following:

1. Outline of the
 - A. Background to the topic
 - B. Character(s) and what makes him or her (them) special
 - C. Problem or situation that puts the main character(s) under revealing pressure
 - D. Style of the coverage and the editing
2. Description of any changes or growth you expect during the filming
3. Statement of why it's important to make this film and why you are motivated to make it

Now listen to your audience's comments, take notes, and keep completely quiet! Your film has had its chance to communicate; now study its effect so that you can reconfigure it. This is the first chance to "show" a possible film to an audience and to get a first response.

4. Several days later, pitch your film again, taking into account all the critique that you found useful.
5. Pitch it a third time and see what your audience thought of the latest version. Even if the idea hasn't improved, your delivery of it probably has. Make a habit of pitching a new idea every week to anyone who will listen and respond. You will be amazed at how many good ideas you can come up with and how much you learn from doing this. You will only be afraid of having your ideas stolen if you have too few.

PROJECT 10–6: GOALS SUMMARY

To summarize your goals, finish the following prompts:

1. The *theme or themes* that arise from my self-studies are . . .
2. The *changes* for which I want to work are . . .
3. The *kinds of subject* for which I feel most passionately are . . .
4. *Other important goals* I have in mind are . . .

FINDING YOUR WORK'S PATH

The self-profiles with which you have been experimenting should bring you closer to an inner self that is searching for its own artistic path. Your life has given you special understanding of certain forces and the way they work in the world, and this inner force wants you to commit yourself to showing these forces at work and to express what you feel about them.

IF YOU LOSE YOUR WAY

Filmmaking has risks that arise from its social nature. To some degree we all depend on the approval of those we like and respect, so you can lose your own point of view in the face of the orthodoxies and criticisms coming from those around you. Because film is made and viewed collectively, you will need a strong sense of purpose if you are to hold on to the meaning of your own work. Never, ever alter more than small details of your work after criticism until you have had considerable time to reflect.

PROGRESS AND THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

When you engage in work, the work's process will release fresh dimensions of understanding. This is the creative process, something that is cyclical and endlessly fascinating, and brings us closer to others. In documentary the learning process is lengthy and demanding. At the beginning you get clues, clues lead to discoveries, discoveries lead to movement in your work, and movement leads to new clues and a new piece of work in which to evolve them. Work—whether a piece of writing, a painting, a short story, a film script, or a documentary—is therefore both the evidence of movement and an inspiration to continue.

Our work becomes both the trail and the vehicle for our own evolution. We get help at this in mysterious ways. Goethe said, "The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred." His wake-up call to the procrastinator is delightfully pithy: "Art is long, life short; judgment difficult, opportunity transient."

Finding and acting on the self-discovery material in this chapter means taking chances and trusting that it will lead somewhere. If you work closely with other people (as I hope you do), you will need to take chances, because having people listen and react to your story is vital to discovering and accepting it yourself.

PRIVACY AND COMPETITION ISSUES

The person who chooses to take the bull by the horns and work in the arts cannot logically remain private. In any group you'll see how the people of courage, even when they are shy by nature, go out on a limb while others who make a show of self-assurance are actually too afraid to show themselves. Telling your story to creative partners is important, for we cannot urge liberation on others unless we also work to liberate ourselves.

HOSTILE ENVIRONMENTS

The best school and work situations are nurturing yet demanding, and in them you see people flower and evolve over time. Some, however, do not support the kind of self-exposure I have been advocating. The personal chemistry is wrong, or the environment is dominated by intensely competitive personalities—usually because perquisites, patronage, or other advantages are being held out to favorites. These distortions are a common fact of life, deplorable but something you must find ways to circumvent. You cannot await ideal circumstances before getting down to what's important. Choose your work partners very, very carefully. With a good partner you can handle just about anything.

If you feel you are not making good progress as a film author, don't despair. Do production work for other people. It will keep you in situations of change and growth. Having something to say, and being ready to say it, more often emerges from times of conflict and struggle than it does from comfort and contentment. Overcoming dilemmas and hard times is vital to one's learning and development, something that for the active mind continues from film to film, relationship to relationship, role to role, and cradle to grave.

CHAPTER 11

DEVELOPING YOUR STORY IDEAS

This chapter covers

- Observing and sorting what takes place around you
- Traditional stories as a source of inspiration
- Oral history as another fund of family stories
- The social sciences and fiction that is developed from actuality
- Testing your own investment in an idea
- Making best use of the medium and intensifying the story you choose

This chapter continues the work of idea development by examining the resources at hand so that you never have to wait for inspiration. In documentary, you can begin research almost anywhere and then confirm and amplify the idea you are developing. Making documentary and writing fiction have something in common. The first step is to find and develop an idea. Writers habitually change hats, and the two they wear most often are “story discovery” and “story development and editing.” These modes use quite different parts of your mind. In one mode, you are looking for the subject or topic that will bring a “shock of recognition,” and this means freely using imagination and intuition. In the other mode you take what you have initially written and subject it to analysis, testing, and structuring to see how it can be made into the best possible tale for the screen.

Let’s first examine where documentary ideas are waiting to be found.

COLLECTING RAW MATERIALS

The seeker is the person committed to searching for meaning among the many baffling clues, hints, and details in life. If you are one, you are probably using

some of what I'm about to describe—ways of collecting and sifting material for a story, *the* story you need to tell. When you examine your collection diligently, you will actually see the outlines of the collector, the shadowy Self that is implacably assembling what it needs to represent its own preoccupations, and nowhere more so than in a journal.

JOURNAL

Keep a journal and note anything that strikes you, no matter what its nature. This means always carrying a notebook and being willing to use it publicly and often. If you have a computer, try copying incidents into a simple database under a variety of thematic or other keys so that you can call up material by particular priorities or groupings. A computer isn't inherently better than, say, index cards, except that it lets you juggle and print your collection and experiment with different structures.

Rereading your journal becomes a journey through your most intense ideas and associations. The more you note what catches your eye, the nearer you move to your current themes and underlying preoccupations. You may think you know them all, but you don't.

NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES

Real life is where you find the really outlandish true tales. Keep clippings or transcribe anything that catches your interest and classify them in a system of your own. Categorizing things is creative busywork because it helps you discover underlying structures, both in life and in your fascinations.

Newspapers are a cornucopia of the human condition at every level, from the trivial to the global. Local papers are particularly useful because the landscape and characters are accessible and reflect local economy, local conditions, and local idiosyncrasies. The agony columns, the personals, even the ads for lost animals, can all suggest subjects and characters. With every source, you have possible characters, situations, plots, and meanings to be found.

HISTORY

History doesn't happen, it gets written. Look at *why* someone makes a record or *why* someone writes a historical overview, and you see not objective truth but someone's interpretation and wish to mark or persuade. History is all about point of view—that's why they say that historians find what they look for.

The past is full of great and small figures that have participated in the dramas that interest you. In 1961 the playwright John Osborne explored in *Luther* the predicament of the anti-establishment rebel through the historical cleric Martin Luther. Alan Bennett in *The Madness of King George* (1994) investigated paternal authority as it veers over the brink of insanity. In 1993 Steven Spielberg brought Oskar Schindler alive in *Schindler's List* so that he could explore being Jewish in Nazi-dominated Europe. History is the full canvas of human drama, full of repetitions and thus full of analogs to contemporary situations. Around you there are millions of wonderful stories waiting to be told.

If history excites you, maybe your job is to tell the stories that have force and meaning for you. Do it well and you will move and persuade others to act a little differently (“those who forget history are condemned to relive it”).

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Legend is inauthentic history. By taking a real figure and examining the actuality of that person in relation to the legend, you can discover what humankind fashions out of the figures that catch public imagination. This is the subject of Mark Rappaport’s *From the Journals of Jean Seberg* (1995), which uses a look-alike actress to play the part of a hypothetical Jean Seberg, who, instead of dying at 40, looks back questioningly at the parts she played through her life.

Every culture, locality, community, or family has icons to reflect its sense of saints, fools, demons, and geniuses. When you can find them or resurrect them, they make powerfully emblematic film subjects. Myth is useful because it expresses particular conflicts that humans have found enduringly insoluble and which therefore must be accommodated. The human truths in Greek mythology (for instance) do not lead to easy or happy resolution; instead, they leave the bittersweet aftertaste of fate and prove to be unexpectedly uplifting. Yes, we think, *that’s* how it is! In Martin Doblmeier’s biography *Bonhoeffer* (2001), for instance, we meet the intriguing German theologian who worked his way around to justifying an assassination attempt on Hitler and then was martyred when the attempt failed. The courage to overcome his inherent pacifism, and to weigh one evil against a larger one, makes him a mythical figure at this remove in time.

Each era generates its own myths or regenerates old ones to serve its needs, making them frame contemporary characters and actions that are otherwise unresolvable. This quality of paradox and the unanswerable is peculiarly modern. Virtually every character of magnitude in a documentary is re-enacting one or more myths, so finding out what mythical roles your characters represent is a powerful part of discovering what thematic thrust lies dormant and is waiting to be released in your documentary.

FAMILY STORIES

All families have favorite stories that define special members. My grandmothers both seem like figures out of fiction. One grandmother was said to “find things before people lost them.” In all respects conventional, she had mild kleptomania, especially where flowers and fruit were concerned. At an advanced age, during breaks in long car journeys, she would hop over garden walls to borrow a few strawberries or liberate a fistful of chrysanthemums. How a family explains and accommodates such eccentricities is a tale in itself.

My other grandmother began life as a rebel in an English village, became an Edwardian hippie, and married an alcoholic German printer who beat her and abandoned her in France, where she stayed the rest of her life. Her life and those of her children are too fantastic to be credible in fiction, but they would make an interesting documentary. Family tales can be heroic or they can be very dark, but being oral history they are often vivid.

CHILDHOOD STORIES

Everyone emerges from childhood as from a war zone. If you did the creative identity exercise in the previous chapter, you surely wrote down several traumatic things that happened when you were a child and which have become thematic keys to your subsequent life.

One that springs to mind as I write this is when, at the age of 17, I overheard on the studio set a misogynistic comment about my editor. On returning to the cutting room, I naively repeated this to her as something absurd, but she flushed scarlet and sped out of the room to find the person who made the comment. I died several deaths waiting for what I felt sure would be murder and mayhem. What a lesson in the price of indiscretion.

The incident has rich thematic possibilities: we are sometimes spies, sometimes guardians, sometimes defenders, sometimes denunciators. When life hands us power, how should we use it? So many invisible influences direct our destiny. How far have you explored yours? What happened to blast you into a new consciousness?

SOCIAL SCIENCE AND SOCIAL HISTORY

Social science and social history are excellent resources for documentarians. If one of your themes happens to be the way the poor are exploited, you would find excellent studies of farm, factory, domestic, and other workers. With each will be a bibliography to tell you what other studies have been done. The more modern your source, the bigger the bibliography. Many books now contain filmographies too.

Case histories are a source of trenchant detail when you need to know what is typical or atypical. They usually include both observation and interpretation, so you can see how your interpretations compare with those of the writer. Social scientists are chroniclers and interpreters; their work can inform you because they usually are working from a large and carefully considered knowledge base. You can use their work also to tell whether your feelings and instincts in a particular area have support elsewhere.

FICTION

Don't separate and discard fiction because you are working with actuality. Works of fiction are often very well observed and can give inspiring guidance in a very concentrated form. Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* is not only an excellent novel that reinterprets *King Lear* in a rural Midwest setting, it is a superbly knowledgeable evocation of farmers and farming. To read it in association with an intended work on, say, the depopulation of the land as big agribusiness takes over family farms is to be reminded at every level of what a documentary maker should seek.

TESTING A SUBJECT

Testing the power of a subject takes research (to find out what is there) and some self-questioning (to find out if it's for you). Most important is to ask, "Do I *really*

want to make a film about this?” An absurd question? Look around and see how often beginners attach themselves to subjects for which they lack knowledge or any emotional investment.

Why do people take on subjects and later lose interest? Television has so conditioned us that we tend to do what’s familiar by unthinking reflex. For Americans, “documentary” means those worthy, laudatory reports made to satisfy station licensing requirements that require some socially responsible programming. They often lack critical edge and present a closed, approving view that prevents the audience from making any judgments of their own. No matter how commendable the topic and the judgments, this is propaganda, not real documentary. Good documentaries go beyond factual exposition or celebration: they tackle areas of life that are complex, ambiguous, and morally taxing.

Making a documentary—I want to say this loud and clear—is a long, slow process. Be prepared for initial enthusiasms to dim over the long haul. You must wed yourself to more than a passing attraction. Try asking questions that dig into your own and the topic’s makeup, rather as if you were choosing a spouse or a new country of residence.

- Is there an area in which I am already knowledgeable and even opinionated?
- Do I feel a strong and emotional connection to it—more so than to any other practicable subject?
- Can I do justice to the subject?
- Do I have a drive to learn more about this subject?

Honestly answered, these questions flush out one’s level of commitment, and this is good, because if you search carefully enough there is a subject or idea that is just right, but you often have to search hard to find it. The drive to *learn* is a very good indicator that you will sustain interest and energy. Above all, do not bite off more than you can chew—a common impulse. Simple economics will keep you out of many topics because they are only open to large companies. For example, a biographical study of a movie actor would be impossible without corporate backing because the actor’s work is only visible in heavily copyrighted works.

Another kind of inaccessibility may arise when you choose an institution as your subject. To film the police or the army, for instance, would be insurmountably difficult without very high-level approval. Even a local animal shelter may be hedged around with politics and suspicions. Most institutions have nothing to gain from letting in filmmakers who might dig up, or manufacture, damaging evidence. Some institutions make fascinating topics for films, but many don’t because they are unremarkable. A film merely confirms what commonsense would expect, and what use is that?

Narrow your sights and pick a manageable subject area. You get no awards for failed good intentions, so treat yourself kindly and take on what matches your capabilities and budget. Not for a moment need this confine you to small or insignificant issues. If, for instance, you are fascinated by the roots of the war in Afghanistan but you have no access to combat or archival footage, there are always other approaches open to the inventive. You might find that the man who

sells newspapers on your street corner is a Gulf War veteran with a fascinating and representative experience. You may then find that he has a network of friends who have snapshots, home movies, and mementos. Now you can make your tale about how Everyman goes to war believing he's defending freedom.

Ingenuity and being ready to reject the obvious is the way to refine good subjects. Be aware that your first and immediate ideas for a subject are generally those everyone else has already had, so to avoid clichés ask yourself the following:

- What is this subject's underlying significance to me?
- What do most people—people like myself—already know?
- What would I—and most people—like to really discover?
- What is unusual and interesting about it?
- Where is its specialness really visible?
- How narrowly (and therefore how deeply) can I focus my film's attention?
- What can I *show*?

Confronting the personal impact of a subject, instead of trying to see everything from an omniscient or audience point of view, usually takes you into new and exciting directions. Trying to discover the unexpected or reveal the unusual is vital if you are to produce a fresh view, and this always seems to involve narrowly defining what you want to show and conversely what you really want to avoid.

You might, for the sake of argument, want to make a film about inner-city life. But trying to cover too many aspects will lead to lots of thinly supported generalizations, which any mature viewer will reject. On the other hand, profiling a particular café from dawn to midnight might reveal much, and in very specific terms.

Think small. Think local. There are many good films to be made within a mile or two of where you live. Most people do not think of exploiting their own "turf." *Think small and local, and think short.* Try your skills on fragments at first, or risk being overwhelmed and discouraged.

LOCATING THE STORY PRESSURES AND "RAISING THE STAKES"

In every story there is something at stake for the central character or characters, those folks who are trying to do, get, or accomplish something. Raising the stakes might mean

- Sending canoeists through the banks of a river narrows where the water runs faster and more dangerously
- Reducing the rations for a long journey so that the travelers have less to carry but less margin for delay or accidents
- Seeing rain beginning to fall on mountain climbers