

The Docu Doctor's Clinic

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The Documentary Doctor

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photo by Tania Retchisky

Characteri-zed Part II

(Reading time: 5:05 minutes)

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Note to readers: This is part two of an analysis of three character-driven films. Read the previous issue as a reminder or introduction.

After analyzing the relationship between filmmaker and character, we can delve into the character's role and challenges within the documentary. Some might think that when making a character-driven film there isn't much to worry about. In today's market, character rules over topic; and in terms of structure, it's easy, we think: just follow the character in chronological order. True, sort of.

Nanette Thylan, who portrays the final months of her friend Charlene's life in *Never Enough Time*; had just a few interviews, very little vérité footage and some b-roll. Nanette couldn't break her promise to her friend; but can the story still be told?

Teresa Loong's *Everyday Is a Holiday*—about her father's hidden past as a British colonial POW of Chinese descent in Japan— featured a willing and available character. The limitations were more emotional and contextual than material. How to make his very particular story universal?

And finally, Jon Cofinas' *Committed* documents his heavily-medicated childhood friend's journey to China to meet his online love who promised him, "I'll be your medication", had 250 hours of footage and a 2:45 rough-cut. Limitation wasn't his problem, to say the least.

In Nanette's case we opted for an expansive view of what a documentary can be. Charlene wasn't among us any more, but the people and places she frequented were. We spotted all the missing links in the structure and brainstormed how to bring them to life. Subjective cameras walking up and down the hospitals of her daily routines, collages she made from her dreams, photos of her last healing

vacation—all these and more could enrich the story. When Nanette gave herself permission to leave vérité behind, a torrent of possibilities ensued.

Archival footage would be the answer for Theresa. We needed to understand better the historical events surrounding her father’s life. It seemed an obvious solution; but how much history could we add without turning a personal portrait into a textbook historical film? The secret was to build her father’s story first and only then intuitively spot where we were missing contextual information. We also reduced all historical information to telegraphic lines to guide us through the narrative. Not an exact science, but it was better than overwhelming the doc with data.

Jon Cofinas didn’t have to add a single thing. Or did he? In his thorough 2:45 cut we couldn’t assume we had what we needed. In the two days we spent doing a scene breakdown we discovered some missing plot points and some redundant moments. Knowing the objective of each scene allowed Jon to make some harsh decisions about what could –and needed to– stay and what could go without jeopardizing the balance of the story.

Still, these three cases are not staple solutions to apply systematically to every film that has a character. Each documentary has its own logic and calls for its own approach. Throw the cookie cutter away and ask yourself, Who is this person? How can I better serve his/her story?

Conclusion: A character can drive a film as long as the filmmaker is the GPS .

Next Issue: To be notified for future issues of “The Docu Doctor’s Clinic” e-mail questions@documentarydoctor.com or go to <http://der.org/community/doc-doctor.php>

The Doctor will see you now: The Doc will be lecturing in Israel and Europe in June and July. For details check www.documentarydoctor.com.

Doctor’s Credentials: Story consultant **Fernanda Rossi** has doctored over 150 documentaries, fiction scripts, and fundraising trailers including the 2007 Academy Award® nominated **Recycled Life** by Leslie Iwerks. In addition to private consultations, lectures, and seminars, she has served as a festival juror and grant panelist. Ms. Rossi also writes the bimonthly column **Ask the Doc Doctor** published by *Film Arts* magazine (formerly *Release Print*) and is the author of the book **Trailer Mechanics: A Guide to Making your Documentary Fundraising Trailer** (link to www.documentarydoctor.com/tmbook.html).

Character-ized Part II—Case Study: *Three Character-Based Films*.

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