

The Docu Doctor's Clinic

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photo by
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Story Strategies • Debunking The Myths of Storytelling Myth #6: “Don’t worry about light or sound, we fix it in post!” Or “All that matters is the story!” Which is it?

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The Myth in All Its Glory

Two opposing myths: the first is the self-assured cry of the virtuoso or technophile, the second the sneering remark of the dilettante or technophobe. Surprisingly, both protagonists utter the same opening statements, but with different endings. “Blown out images? Deafening background noise? Oh, details, details!” they may say in unison; while one responds to the challenge with a confident “We’ll fix it in post!”, the other will retort with disdain, “All that matters is the story, anyway.”

Can it be really fixed in post? And if it can’t be fixed, or the filmmaker doesn’t care to fix it, can a story be appreciated and understood through the technical mishaps? Stories may be king, but kings rule through their imposing presence.

The wave of post-production gadgets, which promise to fix it all, has reached such heights that many live under the illusion that mastering the tools for storytelling is a mere nuisance that can be dealt with later—much later. “We’ll fix it in post” or not bothering to fix it all because “all that matters is the story” are dangerous myths that reveal their consequences when the budget doesn’t balance or the audience walks out. Let these myths be unmasked so the story will come out loud and clear and without the extra charge.

Possible Origin of the Myth

The dilemma of content and form, of the message and the technology that carries it, of sheer creativity vs. sheer craft, is not new. Each era has gone through stages of glorifying one or the other in an unfounded mutually exclusive opposition. We should remember that just as the story shapes the medium and delivery technology, the medium and its delivery technology shape the story; in the famous words of Marshall McLuhan, “The medium is the message.”

Still, from the moment the caveman (or maybe it was a cavewoman) grabbed a stone and drew the beast he or she wanted to hunt on the walls of the cave, some other cave dweller questioned everything from the genius of that first proto-artist to the meaning and quality of the drawing. And so on throughout history. It’s probably human nature to question and create dualities.

Today, the argument might be old, but the amount of technology available and our fascination with it renews the discussion with fierce intensity.

Some truth to it

In documentaries, it used to be that the truthful depiction of reality superseded technological perfection. Those days might be over. Since in post many things can be fixed, from color to sound, from erasing undesirable logos to enhancing almost inaudible dialogue, viewers are more demanding than they used to be. So are distributors and everybody else in the industry.

At the same time, there is a limit to what can be done in post, and, more importantly, there is both a material and a creative cost to the storyteller.

The real deal

Underneath the many real and apparent benefits of taking care of things in post, there is the issue of whether ultimately a story is well served with the many layers of postproduction intervention.

In art there is a distance between the hand of the artist and the object of art. A painter may have just a brush between her hand and the canvas. A writer has a mere keyboard between the ten fingers (or two indexes) and the white screen.

Documentarians have a huge distance between themselves and the finished film on the screen, and the process in itself may be as long as writing a novel; yet the amount of tools needed and people involved, even when minimal, most often outweighs the requirements for other artistic expressions. This thick separation has been made thicker with the advent of gadgets, and like all tools they can be used for good or sheer evil.

The consequences of this wide separation for the storyteller is that some filmmakers fear the vast distance ahead of them and dismiss it altogether, hurting the chances for the story to be as enthralling as it could be. Or else such a gap becomes an excuse to relinquish control and ease creative anxiety: “We’ll fix it later.”

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending where each filmmaker stands, the story is indeed of great importance; but the quality of the media used to tell it is not a distant second but equally important.

What to do

While some filmmakers professing to care about characters or interviewees leave them in half-light and un-miked, others may adjust that corner light obsessively, forgetting that an incredible moment is just passing by unrecorded. As so often, the solution is not in the extremes but in a healthy middle path.

In practical terms, turning off the fan that creates background noise takes one minute and costs nothing. Dimming that same sound in post, if doable at all, can take both several hours and a hefty fee for the person performing this task. So why not make a checklist of minimum requirements for image and sound? Room tone, anybody?

As for helping the technophobes bridge the gap, why not schedule a chat with some postproduction people to learn the basics of what can be done, just in case? Preparation is key, whichever myth you're susceptible to.

The ultimate task of the storyteller is ... well, to tell a story. In documentaries, the events unfold uncontrolled by the filmmakers, and capturing them is the most important task. Doing it well is part of the job. Imagine Van Gogh not caring about the tone of yellow he's using? Would it be a Van Gogh even if they're still sunflowers?

Postproduction magic is a safety net, not the destination. And a safety net is a welcoming place for both geeks and technophobes.

To think further

In a calendar where there are as many holidays as release dates for software, may filmmakers choose to put the tools at the service of their story, and may they upgrade their post-toys as often as they question the stories they're telling.

Doctor's Credentials: Internationally renowned speaker, author and story consultant **Fernanda Rossi** has doctored over 300 documentaries, scripts, and fundraising trailers including the 2009 Academy Award® nominated **The Garden** by Scott Hamilton Kennedy and the 2007 Academy Award® nominated **Recycled Life** by Leslie Iwerks. In addition to private consultations, lectures, and seminars worldwide, she has served as festival juror and grant panelist. Ms. Rossi shares her knowledge and research of story structure and the creative process in columns and articles in trade publications. She is also the author of the book **Trailer Mechanics: A Guide to Making your Documentary Fundraising Trailer**.

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