

The Docu Doctor's Clinic

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photo by
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Story Strategies • Debunking The Myths of Storytelling

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Myth #4: “If the structure doesn’t work, put yourself in the film.” And everything will magically work? Not quite.

The myth in all its glory

When you’re desperate to solve some structural issues, your eager-to-help colleague blurts out, “How about *YOU*? Make it *YOUR* story!” You might cringe because you had mixed feelings about this approach. Or maybe you wanted to do this all along but felt shy or modest about it.

Granted that for scattered docs, whether due to entangled storylines or too broad a topic, a grounding element is always welcome. Yet there are many story devices that can be used to unify the structure of your film. Using *YOU* as a character or narrator is only one of them, and it’s not always the most suitable or efficient option from a story perspective.

The myth of you having to become the star of your film to save its structure is a much-touted magic solution that rarely lives up to its expectations.

Possible origin of the myth

The two most common ways a filmmaker can be in the film are: a) when it’s his story, the personal doc; b) when the filmmaker is the searcher/inquisitor, sometimes only as narrator but often on camera, interacting with characters, interviewees, etc. The filmmaker as searcher-after-truth is different in intention from the journalist or host in a documentary, who has no personal investment in the search except for doing a good job.

The personal documentary, where the camera turns inwards, reached its apex in the ’90s. In this American Belle Époque, with a relatively stable social climate and a generous economy, film non-profits and grants blossomed, and the artist could indulge in some self-reflection. Personal films existed before and still do, but they reached momentum at about that time.

Then history took a turn in three successive strikes: Bush, 9/11, Michael Moore. That is to say: the economy shrank—read, less federal funding for the arts; the social climate got troublesome; and a filmmaker succeeded (at the box office) in being personal-but-outwards, rather than -inwards.

So the filmmaker-in-film formula carries two strong decades of critical and financial validation. It's no surprise then that when a story doesn't work, everyone chants in a trance of unquestioned conviction, "Put yourself in the film!"

Some truth to it

There are great examples of filmmakers who embraced the personal doc. From Doug Block to Alan Berliner, they mastered the genre and we can't imagine their films without their active presence. Can anybody picture *51 Birch Street* by Doug Block as an investigative report done by somebody else? Or as a doc narrated by an actor? Certain films are meant to be personal or there is no film.

There are also great examples of filmmakers on a personal quest, diving with passion into pretty much any topic, from guns to burgers. These films are more likely than the others to have worked without the filmmakers in them, but their presence added that *je ne sais quoi* that makes their documentaries what they are.

However, just because it worked for them in those circumstances doesn't mean it will work for everybody, or even for them the next time around.

The real deal

Both the personal doc and the filmmaker-in-the-doc are genres—not band-aids to apply when things don't go as expected. As such, they present their own structural challenges. If being in the film can be a solution, or if it was always in the cards but didn't materialize because of the filmmaker's doubts, then much needs to be considered before taking that step.

What to do

Before considering *being* in the film at any stage of production, fix the structure separately from the option of adding yourself. Are all storyline arcs working like clockwork? Is there missing information? Is there repetition when there should be reinforcement? *Then* ask, does adding yourself enhance the film in a way that nothing else can?

After that and only after, it's time to ask yourself, do you *want* to be in the film? If yes or no, why? Eagerness or reluctance speaks volumes. It might seem an obvious question, but few take the time to think about it thoroughly. And when they do, their reasons are plagued by the same misconceptions and prejudices held by those offering such advice.

No matter whether it started as a yes or was a no that became a yes, a filmmaker has to be judged for her role as character as any other character would. Can this person sustain the story? Is she engaging? What does she bring to the film?

If having the filmmaker in the film was always a no and remains a no after thoughtful consideration, there can be a compromise in having the filmmaker narrate instead of appearing in full body.

As usual, the decision has to be intrinsic to the storytelling and not an imposition from outside. For everyone who thinks that adding the filmmaker is a benefit that makes the doc more personable, there is someone in the industry rolling his eyes and approaching the film with reservations. When it comes to prejudices, there are plenty to go around in both camps.

And if fearing that not being in the film will make it less your work, remember the thoughts of French semiotician Roland Barthes, who believed all fiction is autobiographical and all autobiographies are fiction. The same can be applied, to some extent, to documentaries, as to any artistic work. When there is a person creating, her hand can be seen no matter the format. Now, does that hand need to be seen literally?

To think further

Maybe we need to expand our vocabulary to go beyond the personal doc description, like in-person doc, or point-of-view doc. And at all times we have to distinguish between the personal as a matter of genre or as a story device.

May all filmmakers *be* in their films; not always in the flesh, but always in spirit.

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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