

The Docu Doctor's Clinic

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photo by
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Story Strategies • Debunking The Myths of Storytelling

October 2010

Myth #9: “This is a timely story, and it must be done now.” How soon is now?

The myth in all its glory

The One. A Judeo-Christian concept that many documentarians transfer to their filmmaking experience: *the* film, the only one, the never-before-told story that will guarantee both success in funding and distribution and unconditional commitment all the way from the filmmaker to the last viewer, because there is none other like... *The One.*

However, sooner or later, a twin separated at birth shows up at the door, to the dismay of the filmmaker and all his well-constructed scaffolding of uniqueness and singedom. Would that be the end of the film? How many is too many films on a single topic? Twins? Triplets? And how similar is really similar? Fraternal? Identical?

Industry professionals, from commissioning editors to funders, might chuckle at the very thought of a film on a subject that has “never been done before” or that is supposed to be the only film on such a topic or person at any given moment. But for filmmakers, having a one-of-a-kind story in their hands might be the only motivation to keep going.

The myth of the only-and-never-before-told story merits a DNA test.

Possible origin of the myth

A society that supports and encourages individuality would naturally favor original production. Gone are the pre-Renaissance days of communal art and craft, in which the individual as creator was lost among many hands and originality was more a sign of not belonging rather than a goal—the Hellenic Period being the obvious exception, given that the Renaissance derives from it.

The idea of “one and only” was not even reserved for the gods, as many cultures also embrace many deities that coexist happily, with some exceptions.

Therefore we can trace the longing to create a unique film, totally dissimilar from any brethren, all the way back to the Renaissance. Even though filmmaking wouldn't be invented for another 400 years, the spirit of *The One* oeuvre was born some sunny day in Florence in the 15th century.

Some truth to it

There is no doubt that telling a story on an interesting subject or topic for the first time ever gives the filmmaker an advantage; but this advantage is not as steep as many would like to think, since that distinction can change any moment. It's also true that this unique status is not the only condition enabling a filmmaker to fall in love with the demanding and often gruesome process of making a documentary.

The real deal

Affirming to the world that one has *The One* story can reveal denial, ignorance, or lack of forethought by the filmmaker.

Denial because filmmakers often don't research or even want to know what other films on their topic or person might exist, for fear that finding out will kill their enthusiasm for it. At times denial combines nicely with just plain ignorance or naïveté. But ignorance is not invulnerable: filmmakers can find out at the most inconvenient moments and places that there was indeed a similar documentary in the making. And even if there really aren't any other documentaries on a topic or person, that may not remain true for long: better prepare for that occasion if it should arise.

What to do

Having *The One* story is good; but having a distinctive vision and voice as a filmmaker is even better. There is no bigger compliment than when a funder, an investor, or even a lay audience want to consider how a certain director will approach a oft-told story. Therefore, the aim should be to fine tune the how rather than the what. After all, there is only one of you and that for sure can't be replicated.

Make sure you know how many and which films—even fiction films, dare I say— there are on the topic or person you plan to shoot, both finished and in the making. If there are none and you are profiling a specific person, secure exclusive rights when possible and appropriate. If it's a topic, copyright the treatment, though this doesn't preclude others from having the same idea for a story.

If there are other films finished or in the making, list them all and quantify precisely how yours is different. For example, since the last film on this topic was done 10 years ago, this is a new take on it that can benefit from new information or from the wisdom and perspective of time passed; or else, other films are factual or reportage and this is going to be a personal account. Funders, investors, and distributors need this information.

If you need to believe that yours is the only film in order to commit yourself, and with the realization of the existence of other films you sink in anguish, trust time and trust that success breeds more success. Only time will tell what will happen to you, your film, and the other documentary(ies). Some projects get diverted or completed in different schedules. Maybe it's a relief for you that the film is being made—by somebody else—and you will feel free to move on. As for success, that reportage or successful film might encourage funders to seek the next best thing. Funders and commissioning editors are happy to repeat a success.

So rather than avoid, embrace your twin. There is much to learn from knowing the documentaries being made. Contact the filmmaker for a friendly chat. See how to divide the waters; who knows, you might even find out you had nothing in common, or else realize you can create a combo or series or some other strategies that can complement each other's filmmaking and distribution. All of this is assuming that the work is of equal quality, level of experience, and, above all, ethics. If not, then you might want to part ways and let fate take its course.

To think further

If history repeats itself, as they say, can a filmmaker attempt to tell a never-before-told story? And if the storytelling is unique, does it matter what the story is?

May filmmakers find their unique vision and voice in a labyrinth of mirrored stories.

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**.

Story Strategies: Debunking the Myths of Storytelling

Myth #9: "This is the only film on this topic." Check again!

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published by Documentary Educational Resources, www.der.org • October 2010

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