CHAPTER 3

DEVELOPING YOUR STORY IDEAS

IDEATION

This chapter continues the work of ideation (choosing and developing ideas) by making use of all the story resources at hand. You never need to wait for inspiration, since potential film ideas are all around you. The aim is to experiment while finding and developing a strong film idea. Here, making documentary and writing fiction have something in common. Writers wear several hats, but the two they wear the most use quite different parts of the mind:

- *Story discovery*—You use play, imagination, and intuition to look for the subject or topic that brings you a "shock of recognition."
- *Story development and editing*—Here, you logically analyze, test, and structure the material you've generated, aiming to shape and improve the tale it yields for the screen.

As a writer you wear different hats and use different parts of your mind. You generate story materials by freeing your mind to make associations, but story development and editing take logic, analysis, and order.

Writer's block sets in when the logical mind at its most negative keeps barging into the play area, censoring and belittling what's on paper. Many people had writing ruined earlier in life by overly prescriptive teaching that made them start with an outline. The insistence on order at such an early stage blocks the heart and imagination, which needs to be free to play during the ideation stage of any project. Logic, intellect, order, and control will have plenty to contribute later.

Let's see where to look for ideas for documentaries.

COLLECTING RAW MATERIALS

You may already be using some of what I'm about to describe—ways of collecting and sifting material for a story, *the* story, you need to tell next. Examine your collection diligently, and you will actually see the outlines of the collector, the shadowy self that is implacably assembling what it needs to represent its preoccupations. Nowhere is this more evident than in your journal.

JOURNALS

Keep a journal and note down anything that strikes you, no matter what its nature (Figure 3-1). This means always carrying a notebook and being willing to use it publicly and often. Copy incidents into a simple database in your computer. The act of copying gives you time to think, consider the incidents, and to group and rearrange your observations. Invent thematic or other keys so 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 as well as experiment with different structures. Also, of course, things somehow detach from you and look better in print.

Reading over your journal notes becomes a repeatable journey through your most intense ideas and associations. The more you note what catches your eye,

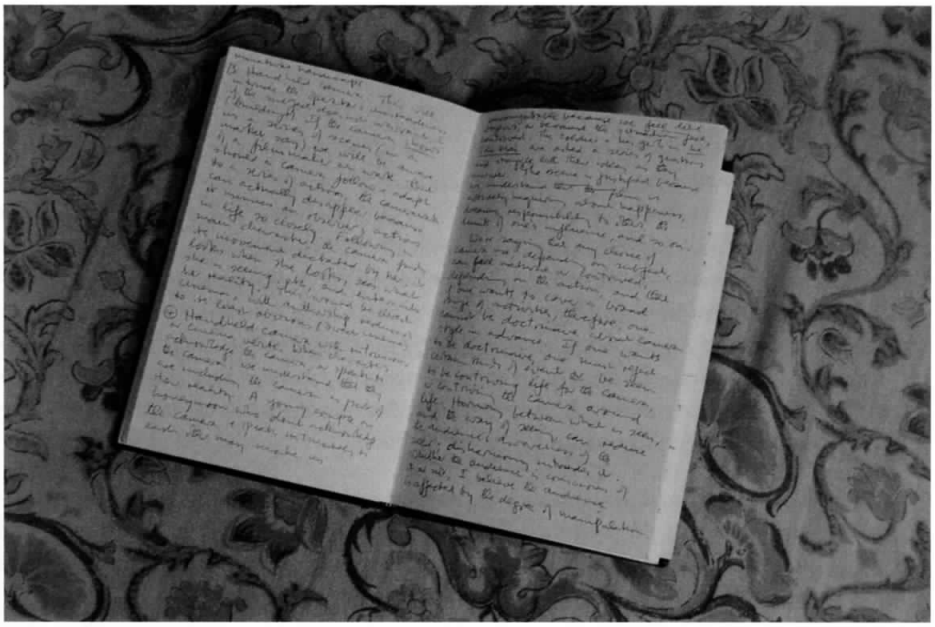

FIGURE 3-1

A journal is a log of everything you find significant. Later, by clustering the material in groupings, you find underlying patterns in your preoccupations. (Author photo.)

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 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 the underlying structures in your life and 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 a meaning to be found.

INTERNET

Here is a fount of possibility. By using the community Web site www.craigslist.com and going to my own locality, I found these samples. The writers being local, I could approach any of them to propose I do a film with them. I have removed names to protect their identities:

- Peace Corps: My Daughter just informed me that she has been accepted, Medical and FBI part left to do. For god's sake how safe is it really? She wants to go to Africa and work on AIDS/HIV education. Seriously, why do I feel like my child is going off to war? Is this a normal reaction? Don't get me wrong . . . I am very proud of her but scared as well.
- Documentary Filmmakers Wanted: "InnerViews" is a series of short films being created at L—— Geriatric Centre in S—— to document the life stories of our residents. Each of these films will chronicle the life of a resident from infancy to childhood to adulthood and through his or her senior years. The only prerequisites to volunteering for this project are computer literacy and an interest in documentaries and filmmaking.
- Stop smoking/volunteer to be hypnotized: Hypnotists in training seeking volunteers to be hypnotized. You can have a free session! Contact instructor L—— W—— to schedule your session! Indicate the issue you are seeking help with when calling or emailing.

The first might lead to a film about an anxious mother/daughter relationship, the second to a film about (probably very amateur) filmmaking with old people, and the third could be about desperate smokers seeking help. Any of these could be full of humor.

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 wish to interpret, mark, and persuade. History is all about point of view—which is why they say that historians find what they look for.

Every area has its local history department and its enthusiasts researching the past. You might make a film about amateur historians or about some feature in your locality that has stories attached to it. You may find people reenacting history; that is, playing parts in some drama that took place in a particular place or landscape. There are thriving societies that put on shows in which they fight battles in authentic costumes and according to the best of their knowledge.

You may find the pursuits of archeology fascinating—detective work aimed at reconstructing the past. There is even a television series called *The History Detectives* that shows this kind of work (www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives). The show often takes an artifact or piece of information handed down in a family and researches its significance or authenticity. Here are three "teasers" from their Web site:

Bonnie & Clyde Bullets

Could five .45 caliber bullets owned by a woman in a small Wisconsin town be responsible for the demise of the notorious Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow?

Movie Palace

Is it possible that a theater in the small town of Baraboo, Wisconsin, could have been the country's first great movie palace?

Sears Home

Might an Ohio couple's residence be a long-forgotten Sears home?

If history excites you, maybe your job is to disinter stories that have force and meaning for you. Do it well, and you will move people and even persuade them to act a little differently.

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Legend is inauthentic history; by taking a real figure and examining the actuality of that person in relation to the legend built around him or her, you can see how humankind refashions the actual in order to catch public imagination. This is the subject of Mark Rappoport's hybrid production, *From the Journals of Jean Seberg* (1995, United States; Figure 3-2), which uses a look-alike actress to play the part of a hypothetical Jean Seberg. Rappoport's film, instead of allowing her to die at 40, makes her look back questioningly over 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 find enduringly insoluble and which we must therefore accommodate. The human truths in Greek mythology (for instance) do not lead to easy or happy resolution, but instead 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, United States; Figure 3-3), for instance, we meet the intriguing young German

FIGURE 3-2

The iconic actress Jean Seberg, around whose roles and life Mark Rappoport wove an improvised fiction film. (Photo courtesy of The Kobal Collection/Columbia Pictures.)

theologian who worked his way around to justifying an assassination attempt on Hitler, and who was then horribly executed when the attempt failed. At this remove in time his courage as a pacifist, weighing one evil against a larger one, makes him a mythical figure, a David who loses the battle against Goliath.

FAMILY STORIES

All families have favorite stories that define special members. My grandmothers seem like two figures from fiction. My family said of Granny Bird that she "found things before people had lost them." Conventional in most ways, she had mild kleptomania, especially where fruit and flowers 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.

Granny Rabiger began life as a rebel in an English village. She married an alcoholic German printer who beat her and abandoned her in France, where she

FIGURE 3-3

Martin Doblmeier shooting *Bonhoeffer* in the Berlin jail where the dissident pastor was once imprisoned. (Photo courtesy of Journey Films.)

stayed the rest of her life. Her life and those of her three children are too fantastic to be credible in fiction but would make an interesting documentary if any of the primary witnesses were still alive. Family tales can be heroic or they can be very dark, but as oral history they are always vivid or they don't survive.

Shoot an interview as in **Project 4-SP-10 Basic Interview** but make the subject a family story or a story from childhood. Preinterview so you find a story that holds a strong meaning for the interviewee. If illustrative material—photos, family film, or video—is available, use it.

CHILDHOOD STORIES

Everyone emerges from childhood as from a war zone. If you did the creative identity exercises in the previous chapter, you surely wrote down traumatic events from your childhood that have become thematic keys to your subsequent life.

One that springs to mind as I write this is when, at the age of seventeen, 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 commentator. 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 the way the privileged exploit the poor moves you, you can find excellent studies of farm, factory, domestic, and other workers. Each will contain a bibliography listing what other studies exist. The more modern your source, the bigger the bibliography. Some 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 disciplined chroniclers and interpreters; their work can inform you because they usually work from a large and carefully considered knowledge base. You can also draw on their work to confirm whether your feelings and instincts have support.

FICTION

Just because you are working with actuality, don't discard fiction. Novels and short stories are often superbly observed and give inspiring guidance in a highly concentrated form. Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* is not only an excellent novel that reinterprets *King Lear* in a rural Midwest setting, but it is also 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 agribusiness swallows up family farms is to find reminders at every level of what a documentary maker should seek.

TESTING A SUBJECT

SELF-QUESTIONING

Testing the power of a subject idea takes research (to find out what is really there) and some self-questioning (to make sure it's for you). Most important is to ask at the outset, "Do I *really* want to make a film about this?" Silly question? Beginners often attach themselves to subjects for which they have no knowledge or emotional investment. Making a documentary is a long, slow process, and initial enthusiasms easily dim over the long haul. To avoid this, see how you answer these questions:

- In what area am I most knowledgeable and even opinionated?
- Is there an aspect of it that I could cover well?
- Do I feel a strong and emotional connection to doing it—more so than to any other?
- Can I do justice to the subject?
- Do I have a drive to learn more about this subject?

Answered honestly, these questions will flush out your level of commitment. Commitment low? Keep searching, and you'll eventually hit on a subject or idea that feels really right. The best sign that your interest and energy will stay high is when you feel a strong desire to learn more.

NARROWING AND INTENSIFYING

Everyone initially bites off more than they can chew. 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 arises when you choose an institution as your subject. Some make fascinating film topics, but filming 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 suspicion. Most institutions have nothing to gain from letting you in, because for all they know you might dig up (or manufacture) sensational and damaging evidence in their disfavor. Other institutions are unremarkable; a film merely confirms what commonsense would expect. And what use is that?

Narrow your sights, pick a manageable subject area, 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 have no access to combat or archival footage, you might find that a local plumber is a military veteran with a fascinating and representative experience. He has a network of friends with snapshots, home movies, and mementos. Now you can tell your tale about Everyman who goes to war in the belief that he's defending freedom.

Initial ideas that one has are usually those that anyone would have, so prepare to reject the obvious. This is an important habit if you are to refine subjects so they become compelling. Try asking yourself:

- What is this subject's underlying significance to me?
- What do most people already know, and what don't they know?
- What would I—and most people—really like to 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* (as opposed to narrate)?

Discovering the personal connection of a subject, rather than trying to see it from an imagined audience perspective, usually takes you into new and exciting areas. Clarify—on paper, if you can—what you want to show and what you really want to avoid.

Let's say you want to make a film about inner-city life. 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. Any number of good films exist within a mile of where you live. Most people do not think of exploiting their own turf.

Think small, local, and *short*. Developing your skills on fragments allows you to inquire in depth and avoids the discouragement that comes from overload.

LOCATING THE STORY PRESSURES AND RAISING THE STAKES

Consider analyzing a film that raises the stakes using **Project 1-AP-6 Analyze Editing and Content.**

In every story, something is 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—the travelers have less to carry but less margin for delay or accidents.
- Seeing rain beginning to fall on mountain climbers.
- A stock market plunge for a business that is in danger of going broke.
- An emotional setback for somebody taking an important exam.
- The snowstorm for Nanook.

Interesting characters are always trying to do, get, or accomplish. Once you know what someone is trying to get, think about what is at stake and how to show this at its most extreme.

You get the idea. "Raising the stakes" is a screenwriters' expression derived from gambling, and it means considering (and sometimes contriving) what would make things more challenging for your characters in struggle. A skilled storyteller looks for *what would make the central characters play for higher stakes.* The more there is at stake, the more the players care about succeeding, and the more compelling and important the game becomes for all concerned. The source of tension for the striking coalminers in Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, USA* (1976, United States; Figure 3-4) is over establishing the right to a union and bargaining for more humane conditions. The stakes rise when company thugs snipe at the crew in the dark, eventually killing one of the dissident miners.

New circumstances provide greater pressure, more hazards, more tests that the hero in folk stories must always face while he or she undertakes the epic journey.

FIGURE 3-4

Harlan County, USA: real-life violence in the making. (Photo courtesy of Krypton International Corp.)

As you plan a film, ask what might legitimately raise the stakes for your central characters before our very eyes. Consider:

- What obstacles your protagonist(s) might face
- Whether this will happen spontaneously or whether you must assist
- Whether you can legitimately arrange things to optimize your chances
- How to get your camera in the right place at the right time
- How to film appropriately and with the greatest credibility

Contriving to make things happen can get you into trouble. In John Schlesinger's lyrical *Terminus* (1961, United Kingdom)—a "city symphony" documentary about the events and rhythms in a great London train station—a small boy's mother fails to return as he waits with his suitcase. This is every child's nightmare, and his fright and misery are palpable as a policeman leads him to the stationmaster's office to await his mother. But Schlesinger had contrived the situation with the mother's agreement, and later when this emerged, he was condemned for improving his film at the cost of a child's misery (Figure 3-5). Coincidentally, *Terminus*' camera assistant Nick Hale met the boy again as an adult. He said the experience had done him no harm and was amused that people had worried on his behalf.

To raise the dramatic temperature and make your audience care about your characters:

- Be sure to establish all pressures the central characters experience
- Anticipate your audience's questions and shoot whatever will answer them
- When important situations fail to develop or resolve, be ready to help things happen by contriving events or confrontations, *but only if it's ethical*

FIGURE 3-5

Rigged moment at a train station: a small boy discovers he has lost his mother in *Terminus* (frame from film).

- ➢ Raise the stakes only when (a) you have the permission of those involved, or (b) you can obtain their agreement afterwards that your intercession was legitimate
- ➢ Don't risk alienating participants or the audience by injecting what is false. There may be no way back into favor
- ➢ Set ethical lines that you won't cross, but don't forgo all experimention. Political correctness should not prevent the occasional gamble. You don't have to show everything you shoot. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

USING THE MEDIUM TO STIR FEELINGS

THE SHOCK OF RECOGNITION

My late BBC producer Stephen Peet asserted that the best documentaries deliver an emotional shock. This might peak in a single memorable scene or become the sum of a whole film, as in Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005, United States; Figure 3-6). His study of Timothy Treadwell is a biography of someone literally consumed by his interests. An animal rights advocate, he identified with grizzly bears and, wishing to protect them, convinced himself that they loved him as much as he loved them. Herzog draws on the 100 hours of video footage Treadwell left behind to plumb his notion of what animals feel and to warn against sentimentalizing the forces of Nature. Like all Herzog's work, the film transcends facts and opinions, delivers an emotional impact, and illuminates ideas about the human condition.

FIGURE 3-6

Grizzly Man is a cautionary tale about a man who thinks that bears reciprocate his feelings for them. (Photo courtesy of The Kobal Collection/Discovery Docs.)

PRIMARY EVIDENCE

"What can I show?" is the key issue because the screen isn't like other forms of communication. Film persuades when it shows people and situations in action, so we want primary evidence, things seen in motion. Doing and feeling is more interesting, more inherently credible, than talk about doing or feeling.

Can you position yourself to collect primary evidence? Can you get feelings from your participants and not just information? Can you film material and tell a story with minimal narrating speech?

B-ROLL BLUES

Documentary units often go out to "collect B-roll" footage. This means shooting a supply of cutaways as illustrative material. Frankly, I detest the whole idea of B-roll. By presuming that images exist to enhance words, the B-roll idea is alien to screen art and belongs in the lecture hall, hack TV show, and government agency. Besides, slotting words and pictures together is show and tell, and instinctively we distrust any technique so readily manipulated.

LECTURING LACKS IMPACT

True, some subjects can only be talking heads. I made two films about World War I conscientious objectors. They were very brave men—preferring to be shot rather than shoot someone else. (Now think what *that* takes in moral courage!) So subversive were these gentle men to the war effort that the authorities allowed

no camera near them, so I had no stills or movie footage of them resisting, only photos of them as young men and photos of a prison or other facility. Now, under the right circumstances, a talking head film can be very dramatic, and these old gentlemen were quiet dynamite. But most topics are best explored when talking heads are kept to a minimum.

Why do we turn so readily to people talking instead of imagery and people in action? Probably because it's emotionally safe; the events are in the past and the speaker can safely go there and take you along. Or, maybe schooling and television indoctrinate us with show and tell; we begin from an abstraction ("It was really awful") and then reach for an illustration. Imagine Flaherty's seminal documentary, *Nanook of the North* (1922, United States), made as a talk show. A reporter would narrate a film based on interviews with B-roll of snow, dogs, and igloo shots. The real power of the cinema to show action and behavior would go unused.

Test any film idea by *imagining you must make it as a silent film.* What action, behavior, and imagery will you need?

TESTING FOR CINEMATIC QUALITIES

So, are you thinking like a journalist or like a filmmaker? Being the latter means trying to chronicle and narrate with imagery rather than with recorded speech. Show us behavior, action, and interaction, and then we'll think, feel, and make judgments. Whenever you are successful, the action of each shot scene will convey a clear, strong feeling and imply a foundation of ideas.

MOOD MATTERS

Good cinematography and strong action create a strong *mood.* Viewers enter your movie wholeheartedly and open their hearts to your film's thematic thrust. Free your film from the tyranny of the interview + B-roll approach, and it can become sensual, lyrical, and sensitive to atmospheres, lighting, and small but significant details. All of these build that strong aura of subjectivity that viewers recognize from personally felt experiences of their own.

LOCAL CAN BE LARGE

Aim not to parochially capture the attention of your peer group or locality but of people at large. Make films that are thematically large. You can do this by taking the most localized material and, through making your eye wise, finding the universal truths within. This is not easy. But if you push yourself and use those around you as sounding boards, there is always more to envision and further to go.

SUBJECT-DRIVEN VERSUS CHARACTER-DRIVEN FILMS

One way to avoid the didactic film, which lectures or illustrates concepts like a school text, is to avoid messages as a starting point and look instead for characters of spirit and energy who are trying to get or do something. Nathaniel Kahn's

pained search for the truth about his enigmatic and aloof father, *My Architect* (2003, United States), is dominated by the spirit of the great architect who, sadly, was far from being a great human being.

The essence of drama is effort expended against some kind of opposition. The lives and behavior of people with these qualities always suggest ideas and thematic meaning once you dig into what they are doing. Energetic characters, ones making waves, always come with strong issues attached. These may be connected with blood relations, regaining something, revenge, justice, redemption, letting go, taking back . . . anything. You have to uncover what the person's issues are and conceive a film that clarifies their nature, reveals them in action, and implies their significance. A whole, nicely structured film can come from the imperatives of character.

SUBJECTS TO AVOID

Many subjects that come easily to mind are current and being pumped up by the media. It's usually good to stay away from:

- Worlds you haven't experienced and cannot closely observe.
- Any ongoing, inhibiting problem in your own life (see a good therapist—you won't find solutions while trying to direct a film).
- Anything or anyone "typical" (nothing real is typical, so nothing typical will seem real).
- Preaching or moral instruction of any kind.
- Problems for which you already have the answer (so does your audience).

DISPLACE AND TRANSFORM

Every film I have ever made has been about trying to escape imprisonment, but it was years before I realized this. A colleague said that underlying all his films has been the search for a father (his own died when he was young). Each of us is marked in particular ways and each deeply moved and motivated by this. Direct autobiography is inhibiting, but it is liberating and fascinating to pursue situations that are analogous to one's own.

After careful inquiry and reflection, take your two or three best subjects and, even though they seem temporary and subject to change, assume they are viable. If you are working too closely from events and personalities in your own life, look for other people in similar situations. This permits you some distance, which:

- Frees you from self-consciousness.
- Lets you tell all the underlying truths, not just those palatable to friends and family.
- Allows you to concentrate on dramatic and thematic truths instead of getting tangled in issues of autobiographical accuracy.