

CHAPTER 2

DEFINING YOUR ARTISTIC IDENTITY

QUEST

By nature human beings are seekers, and the quest for those in the arts is to find meanings in life—a fundamental and noble drive if ever there was one. Documentaries are a superb vehicle for this work. Here are some questions for you to ponder:

- How should you use your developing skills in the world?
- What kind of subjects should you tackle?
- How will you earn a living?
- What are you avid to learn about?
- Do you already have an artistic identity and can you articulate it aloud?

Do the work in this chapter, and even if you've never done anything artistic before, you'll find you already have an artistic identity. That is, you have an inner drive to create order and emotional meaning in connection with particular issues. You probably know intuitively that you have this, but it's tempting to set it aside as too grandiose, too pretentious for now. So most people take worthy subjects and put all their effort into the technical side of capturing them with the equipment. If you, too, do this, something will be missing. You. You will be missing in action from the beginning.



Your artistic identity is your inner drive to create order and emotional meaning in relation to your own particular issues in life.

Every project, no matter how short or simple, is an opportunity to say something from the heart. “The only work really worth doing—the only work you *can* do convincingly—is the work that focuses on the things you care about. To not focus on those issues is to deny the constants in your life,” say the authors of *Art & Fear*.¹ The respected actor and directing teacher Marketa Kimbrell adds, “To put up a tall building you must first dig a very deep hole.” A fine work is always rooted, she believes, in a strong foundation of self-knowledge.

To make a name for yourself in documentary you are going to need strong, positive ideas. These won’t appear when you need them: you will have to take a series of small steps. First you will need to look nonjudgmentally at whatever tensions, passions, and compulsions you carry, without labeling them “positive” or “negative,” since that would be self-censorship. As an appetizer, try this modest quiz:

PROJECT 2-1: VALUES QUIZ

This is a private self-examination. With complete honesty, rate how true the following statements are for you:

	Not True (0 points)	Fairly True (1 point)	Very True (2 points)
I avoid imposing my values on other people’s lives.			
I never pass judgment on friends and family.			
I have taken more knocks than I have delivered.			
I seldom see any need for confrontation.			
I need people to think well of me.			

Total.....

If you scored:

- Above 5, read what follows carefully.
- Near 10, read what follows *very* carefully.
- Below 5, read what follows anyway, in case you’re simply good at passing tests.

The quiz is meant to reveal how active and intrusive you feel in relation to your surroundings. It tests self-knowledge as it affects directing. Most people feel they know themselves intimately, but anyone who teaches screenwriting will tell you otherwise. Were this true, beginner’s writing would never have the universal problem of the passive central character.

¹Bayles, David and Ted Orland, *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* (Saint Paul, MN: Image Continuum Press, 1993), p. 116.

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE

Why do we think of central characters in documentary as people *to whom things happen*? The explanation is, I think, that as the hero of our own story we mostly notice how people act on us, *not* how we act on others. This might be a survival mechanism or a mindset left over from the vulnerability of childhood. Passivity when directing documentaries blinds you to the many ways that participants actively make their own destiny. Instead, we see people as victims. Maybe this is why so many documentaries enshrine the “tradition of the victim.”²

To begin seeing yourself (and those with whom you identify) as assertive may require changing the habits of a lifetime.



Passive self-images disable storytellers because the central characters they depict emerge as passive, too.

“CHARACTER IS FATE”

Try applying the saying “character is fate”³ to people you know well. Consider two or three people in your parents’ generation: how have their characters steered their destinies? Seeing people as authors of their destiny is extremely helpful when you make character-driven films. Not everyone is a helpless victim. Most people do plenty to influence the direction of their lives.

CREATIVITY

You become creative in the arts, as in life, when you generate active, sustained inquiry, both inward and outward. Acquiring self-knowledge will forever be a work in progress, and each film will be a stage (in both senses of the word) of your development. Your documentaries will not touch people unless you are reaching for something that touches your own well-being.



In the arts, you become creative when you generate an active, sustained inquiry that travels both inward and outward. To the degree that this touches you, it touches others through your work.

SELECTING SUBJECTS

Anyone marked by dramatic experience (say, of being an immigrant, living in the streets, or of family turmoil) has an easier time selecting subjects because

²See “The Tradition of the Victim in Griersonian Documentary,” by Brian Winston, in Rosenthal, Alan, Ed., *New Challenges for Documentary* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

³Heraclitus, c. 540–480 BC.

they seldom doubt where their work must go. But for those of us whose lives are less obviously dramatic, comprehending what motivates our sense of mission can be baffling. It's a conundrum; you can't make art without a sense of identity, yet identity is what you seek through making art.

Some choose the arts to express themselves, but this is usually seeking the therapy of self-affirmation. Therapy exists to help you acquire a sense of normality and well-being. It is self-directed and there's nothing wrong with that, but making art is other-directed. It's about needing to do useful work—in and for the world.

Documentary is a branch of drama, and for your dramas to be original and authentic you will need to develop a dialogue—with yourself and between yourself and your audience—through the stories you choose to tell. This will start happening as soon as you recognize your hot issues. Each will offer endless variations.

The work you have already done and the work you are going to do will form significant patterns, and these form part of the inner dialogue. Right now you need to establish what matters to you most, or you won't do your best work. The key to this is already inside you and close at hand. In the projects that follow, complete the provisional self-profiles—candidly and in private—and you'll begin to see your artistic identity. You may confirm what you expected, or you may be surprised (as I was) to discover what you have been overlooking for years.

HOW HAS YOUR LIFE MARKED YOU?

Finding your central issues begins by looking for your few strongly emotional concerns. Whatever unfailingly arouses you to strongly partisan feelings comes from the marks you carry left by the life that you've led. Finding and acting on the self-discovery material that follows means taking chances and trusting that it will lead somewhere. Most of us are shy and cautious, but film is an audience medium, and it's important to get accustomed to having people listen to you and reacting. Self-promotion is an unpalatable but necessary business. One way to minimize the discomfort is to become generous and supportive in your partnerships—in short, to promote mutual development in those around you. Then, what goes around, comes around.

The issues that mark you will be few and personal. Exploring them sincerely and intelligently through your films will deeply touch your audience and keep you busy for life. Here are some projects to help you begin digging.



Therapy is self-directed work that helps you find well-being. Art is other-directed work that you do in, and for, the world.



Whatever unfailingly arouses you to strongly partisan feelings comes from the incisions left by your life. Exploring these can deeply touch your audience.

PROJECT 2-2: THE SELF-INVENTORY

Discover your issues and themes (and thus what you are most qualified to give) by making a nonjudgmental inventory of your most moving experiences. This won't be difficult, since the human memory retains only what it finds significant. Think you already know them and don't need to do this? Make the inventory anyway—you may be surprised. Honestly undertaken, this project reveals the life events underlying your formation. There will only be a few, but acknowledging them will encourage you to explore the fundamental issues.

Here's what to do:

- **Note major experiences**—Go somewhere private where you can write rapid, short notations just as they come to mind. Name the major experiences in which you were deeply moved (to joy, rage, panic, fear, disgust, anguish, love, etc.). Keep going until you have ten or a dozen.
- **Arrange them in groupings**—Stand back and group them by type. (This, an important skill when making art, is called *clustering*.) Name each group and define any relationship or hierarchy you can find between the experiences. Some will seem “positive” (with feelings of joy, relief, discovery, laughter), but most will seem “negative”; that is, they have disturbing emotions attached to them such as embarrassment, shame, or anger. Make no hierarchy, for there is no such thing as negative or positive truth. To discriminate is to censor, which is just another way to prolong the endless and wasteful search for acceptability. Truth is *truth*—period!
- **Give yourself a role to play**—Examine what you've written as though looking at a fictional character's backstory. By objectifying your formation you should see trends, even a certain vision of the world, arising naturally from the experiences. Boldly develop this character's mission and push it to the point of caricature. Your job is not to psychoanalyze yourself or to find ultimate truth (which is impossible) but to fashion a role you can play with all your heart. Because it's only a role, not a straitjacket; it's temporary, and you can change it, evolve it, and improve it as you go.

Now without disclosing anything too private, write notes to help you make a presentation to a class or group:

- **Describe the main marks your life has left on you** as a result of formative experiences. Keep your description of the experiences to a minimum and concentrate on their effects, not their causes.

Example: “Growing up in an area at war, I had an early fear and loathing of uniforms and uniformity. When my father came home after the war, my mother became less accessible, and my father was closer to my older brother, so I came to believe I must do things alone.”

- **Describe two or three themes that emerge from the marks you carry.**

Examples:

- “Separation breeds self-sufficiency.”
- “Someone taking what you value can motivate you to fight for your rights.”
- “Good work often starts out on the wrong foot.”

➤ Describe several different characters for whom you feel special empathy. These can be people you know, types of people, or people who exist and whom you could contact.

Examples:

- A friend from an orphanage who had to overcome difficulty with intimacy
- A friend who vents his anger through antiglobalization protests
- An older woman who fought to regain the job that her boss gave to someone younger

➤ Invent two or three biographical topics. Make them different, but all reflecting your central themes. Displacing your concerns into other areas of life accomplishes two things: it avoids autobiography, and it lets you explore new worlds with authority. Be sure to choose worlds that reflect the concerns to which you are already committed.

Examples:

- Someone whose existence is complicated by having to keep their identity secret (such as a gay person in the military)
- Someone overcoming a situation where she has been made to feel unacceptably different
- Someone forced into a lesser role and who must find ways to assert they still have value

PROJECT 2-3: USING DREAMS TO FIND YOUR PREOCCUPATIONS

Keep a notebook next to your bed and make a log of your dreams. Here the mind expresses itself unguardedly and in surreal and symbolic imagery. Over a period, common denominators and motifs begin showing up. Awake gently so you can hold onto the dream long enough to write it down. If you really get interested in this work, a good dream will wake you automatically so you can write it down. Needless to say, this won't be popular with a bedroom partner.

Dreams often project a series of forceful and disturbing images. Make sure to write the dream down as it is. You can interpret and reinterpret as you amass material. Recurring images are often the best keys to your deepest thematic concerns.



Dreams often project a series of forceful and disturbing images. Those that recur often hold the key to your deepest concerns.

PROJECT 2-4: ALTER EGOS

Some believe we have a single true self; others that we are made of multiple personalities, each evoked by particular circumstances. The latter view is convenient

for storytelling. In this exercise you uncover those characters or situations to which you resonate. This lets you supplement the previous project with additional and maybe new self-characterizations.

- List six or eight **fictional characters** from literature or film with whom you feel a special affinity. Welcome those with darker and less tangible qualities. Rank them by their importance to you.
- Do the same thing for **public figures**, such as actors, politicians, or sports figures.
- Make a list of **influential friends or family** who exerted a strong influence on you at some time. Leave out immediate family (often too complicated because they are too close).
- Take the strongest in your three lists above and note any **dilemma or predicament they have in common** and any **mythical or archetypal qualities** you can see they represent.
- Invent an **authorial role** for yourself and describe what kind of **documentaries this author should be making**. Don't be afraid to be brash and bold with your imagination here.



Authoring a story means choosing a particular storytelling role to play. This is something you take on, like an acting part, that heightens your storytelling style.

PROJECT 2-5: WHAT IS THE FAMILY DRAMA?

Prepare notes so that you can speak for around four minutes on:

- The **main drama in your family**. If there are several, pick the one that affected you most (*Examples*: The impact of the family business going bankrupt, discovering that Uncle Wilfred is a cross-dresser, or the effect on your mother of her father wanting all his children to become musicians).
- **What you learned** as a result of the way the family drama played out.
- **What kind of subjects** your family drama has qualified you to tackle as a result.



The family is the great crucible for drama—which is why the gods of Greek mythology were all related to each other.

Making a self-profile brings you closer to what's inside you that is trying to complete unfinished business. Your mission is to understand the marks you carry and express what they signify in terms that others will understand.

PROJECT 2-6: SUMMARIZING YOUR GOALS

If you've done more than one of the projects in this chapter, you have covered considerable ground. Summarize where you are now by finishing these prompts:

- The theme or themes that arise from my self-studies are . . .
- The changes for which I want to work are . . .
- The kinds of subject for which I feel most passionately are . . .
- Other important goals I have in mind are . . .



Bring a magnifying glass to someone's life by interviewing them using Project 4-SP-10 Basic Interview: Camera on a Tripod.



FINDING YOUR ARTISTIC IDENTITY

Your life, especially at its darkest, has equipped you to understand particular forces and the ways they work in the world. This is your artistic identity. It asks that you work to show those forces at work and to express your human feeling about them.

IF YOU LOSE YOUR WAY

Filmmaking has risks that arise from its social nature. You depend on the approval of those you like and respect, but you will sometimes lose sight of your point of view in the face of criticism. We make and view films collectively; to hold on to the purpose behind your work, you must develop a resilient sense of purpose. Never, ever alter more than small details of your work before spending considerable time in reflection.

You will lose your way—and find it again, over and over. This is the apprenticeship for learning to trust your innate instincts and intelligence.

PROGRESS AND THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

When you make documentary—or anything in the arts—the work's process releases fresh dimensions of understanding. This is the creative process at work, something cyclical and endlessly fascinating that brings us closer to other human hearts and minds. At the beginning you get clues, clues lead to discoveries, discoveries lead to movement in your work, and movement leads to new clues and a new piece of work in which to evolve them. Your work—whether a piece of writing, a painting, a short story, a film script, or a documentary—is therefore both the evidence of movement and the source of inspiration to continue. Help

in all this comes in mysterious ways. "Coincidences" occurred in my filmmaking career that were inexplicably lucky. Goethe said, "The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred." Luck favors the prepared mind.



The artistic process is like a cycle of nature— involvement leads to discovery, and discovery leads to further involvement and understanding that you want to share with others.

PRIVACY AND COMPETITION ISSUES

If you take the bull by the horns and decide to work in the arts, you cannot remain private. In any group you'll see how the people of courage, even though shy by nature, go out on a limb while others who make a show of self-assurance are actually too afraid to show themselves. Opening your deeper self to creative partners is important, for we cannot urge liberation on others without first freeing ourselves.

HOSTILE ENVIRONMENTS

The best study situations are nurturing yet demanding; they help people flower by challenging them to leave their comfort zone and evolve. Some educational environments, however, seem hostile. The personal chemistry is wrong, or competitive personalities dominate. Usually it's because someone in authority is holding out perquisites, operating a patronage system, or passing other advantages to favorites. Common and deplorable though this is, regard it as a challenge put there by destiny to test your mettle. Sooner or later you'll encounter it in the workaday world anyway.

Important work arises out of conflict, never from comfort and contentment. Don't wait for better circumstances. Bloom where you're planted. Choose work partners carefully; with good ones you can handle anyone and anything.

GOING FURTHER

Try my *Developing Story Ideas* (2006, Focal Press) or Anne Lamott's very enjoyable *Bird by Bird* (1995, Anchor Books). Both are about plumbing the depths for the stories that connect to the truths one carries within.