

On embracing mistakes



Filmmaker and writer Amanda Hanna-McLeer discusses being kinder to your creative self, finding ways to unplug, and the value of spotlighting process.

October 2, 2024 -

As told to Greta Rainbow, 3107 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Identity](#).

You're at work on a documentary about teens rejecting technology to form IRL connections, specifically the Luddite Club that formed at a New York City high school. How did you get involved with the project and assume the role of director?

I have been called a luddite for years because I've ruined so many dinner parties saying, "We're all anxious, depressed. We all have ADHD because we are constantly connected to our devices." I was so excited when I came across a bunch of young kids who felt exactly the same way.

I went to Edward R. Murrow High School and the reason why I got into RISD with a scholarship was my teachers there. I always wanted to pay it forward at some point. The pandemic hit, I was exhausted working 12- to 14-hour days in the film industry, and my old teacher happened to reach out to ask if I was looking for a career change. When I started teaching in 2021, I was fed up with social media. I got rid of my smartphone, all my social media accounts. I had seen fliers around the school saying, "Join the Luddite Club." Then one day my student V, who I'd gotten close with, ran into my room like, "Ms. McLeer, Ms. McLeer, I'm in the *New York Times*!" A part of me wanted to break that story and I felt [disappointed]. I had a connection with it and I wanted to represent it. But I thought, "This is the kids' thing, let me not jump in." Then V and I were talking, and she told me, "We want to do a doc but we don't want to do it with these other people." And I was like, "I want to do it, if you'll have me."

What is your approach to collaborating with high school students?

The kids are amazing. It's funny—whenever I say kids, people say, "Don't say kids, they're young adults." But they are kids, in the best way. Kids' perspectives are so fresh and they're able to criticize things in a way that adults can't because we're too jaded.

At the beginning I asked V, "Who do you want to be on this film? Do you want to be co-directors? You're 17, you might not know what the credits mean, so will you do your research and ask me questions?" I don't want to clout chase. I told [club co-founder] Logan that it's super important to me that it doesn't seem that way or look that way or feel that way. V came back and decided on being a producer, and is being paid for that and for her role as camera operator. She has this incredible camcorder footage that's so painterly, and she coordinated the outreach to the Luddite Club on my behalf. She basically said, 'She's cool, let her in,' and without that access, there is no film.

What have the kids taught you about the creative process?

I feel like I went back to school to learn everything that I didn't learn the first time around. When you're teaching, you make mistakes constantly. The kids taught me it's okay to make mistakes and that I should lean into

them.

I had a bit of an existential crisis when I started teaching: "Am I 18? Or am I 28? What has changed? What should I work on that hasn't changed?" I was in the same classroom where I fell in love with analog photography. It was a black and white film photography studio when I was in high school in 2007 or 2008... It truly was magic, this amazing, tactile thing. Fast forward to 2021, it still smells like developer in the room and I'm freaking out. I'm also freaking out because, in typical DOE fashion, I get told over the phone that I'm actually going to be teaching film, graphic design, and Intro to Art, freshman through seniors. I got off the phone and cried.

The kids felt so disconnected. A lot of teachers feel that at first: you've got the spotlight on you, you're basically a performer all day. But I couldn't see three quarters of their faces. I had to learn their names by just seeing their eyes. I thought I was going to be the cool teacher—I've literally sat in the seats they were in!—and that the dialogue was going to be great. But it was dead silent.

I've always struggled with perfectionism. My whole life I felt like everything had to line up perfectly for me to gain access to institutions like RISD. I thought I had to devote my life to this thing and it has to be very controlled. That was a big struggle for me in college, especially with a medium like film. Everything is so collaborative but my life up until that point had been a singular creative process where I had full ownership and control. With film, it's just not possible. When you try and do that, you can fall apart.

How did you apply the lesson of rejecting perfectionism to the film?

I want the film to feel like a high school sketchbook: you hate your best friend one day, then you love them again. You might scratch off their face and then put hearts on it and it's all okay. You amend things, you burn pages, you staple things onto it. It's like a living thing, which is the complete opposite of social media, where everything is polished and curated. The sketchbook is private but malleable.

I want to create the antithesis of social media where everything can be edited and you lose sight of any mistakes. Let's put a spotlight on mistakes.

Why is it important to make mistakes as an artist?

Artists are so hard on themselves. We are so sensitive and we have to be in order to create art. You have to be open to seeing things that most of us pass by. Because we're so sensitive, we can give up on our work because we don't think it's ready for the public or because our standards are too high. A lot of great work is dismissed because of that and we don't see the process. I think you have to see the process in your work and in other artists' works. What did they want to throw in the trash but didn't?

The first Luddite Club I went to, I didn't have a microphone. I was a poor teacher—teachers do not make enough and are so broke all of the time—so the footage I have, there's this intense wind sound in the back. But it was the perfect first meeting. This guy showed up at the park who had been off the internet since 2012. Which is cool, but then the kids felt uncomfortable because who is this 40-year-old that's here right now? But he represents how we're starved for community. So I have to include the footage and I have to embrace this mistake. That's part of the story: I'm a broke teacher making this film alongside my students, and that's the context. You're going to see the seams. I want to see the seams.

How is the medium of film able to capture the essence of the Luddite Club in a way that maybe a news article can't?

We have these two perspectives that are playing alongside of each other, of my camera and V's camcorder. There are things that only she can capture because there are places I can't go and shouldn't go as a teacher and adult. I love Agnès Varda's school of filmmaking... she has this little documentary Uncle Yanko, where she films meeting this man for the first time and does, like, five different takes of it, but it's a documentary. She's bringing your awareness to the fact that film is a medium that you can manipulate. You can tell one story and there's a

different story within it. Whenever V and I are working, I'll film us setting up. I'll say, "Can you say that again?" And she'll say, "That's not authentic!" And I'm like, "I'm filming me telling you to say it again!" There's been criticism already of how I'm filming it, people asking why we're doing talking heads, why I'm not just living with the kids completely. Well, I can't. I don't want to, and they don't want me to. They should have moments to themselves. After the article was published, they had all these eyes on them... These kids that want to be off social media were essentially made into influencers against their will. That's really challenging and that's something I'm trying to protect.

What is your relationship to technology these days?

It goes all the way back to being a self-conscious 12-year-old, looking at my flip phone so I didn't have to look anybody in the eyes. There was nothing even on there, I was just scrolling through my contacts. I talked to my mom about it at the time because I sensed there was something weird happening. And it just progressed from there... I got an iPhone when I was in high school. I was on Facebook all the time. I was late to Instagram because I didn't want to be addicted to another thing, but then of course it happened. Instagram seems perfect for artists because we love to curate, we love to take pretty pictures. But I didn't like that it was hacking into the things I love. I tried making my phone black and white. I tried time limits on apps. I tried to leave my constant group chats. Nothing was working. I never felt like my brain was resting.

After I got rid of my smartphone and my social media accounts, suddenly I'm in the classroom looking at my kids who are so fully addicted and can't pry themselves away. All I did all day was say, 'Put your phones away.' So I go to my boss and ask, 'What can I do?' She said, "You just gotta live with it. You can't take the phones away. We're a school of 4,000, it's a liability for you." Finally, instead of telling them to put their phones away, I told them to take them out: "Tell me your screen time, because mine's really bad. Mine's four hours." They were like, "Get out of here, that's great." One student said hers was 20 hours over the Christmas break. It's a public health crisis.

You have so much empathy for these kids. How do you navigate the historically exploitative concept of a 'documentary subject'?

They're minors, so I'm eternally grateful to their parents giving permission. It also just took time for the kids to trust me. Once they gave me the initial green light, I felt like I had to be very careful. I didn't want them to get sick of me. I didn't want to interfere with their personal lives too much. There were some breakups [within the Luddite Group] and I didn't get releases for the boyfriends and I was like, 'Shit!' But the way we're handling it in the doc is if there's ever a boyfriend or girlfriend that wasn't cleared, we're going to make a symbol for them and put it over their face. It's in our film language of mixing live action and animation, but it also shows the difficulty of making an honest and non-exploitative doc.

At one point I realized that while I love teaching, I cannot make this film as a teacher, as a mandated reporter. As a DOE teacher, you are also contractually bound with what you can say about the Department of Education, and I want to make this an honest portrayal of teens and tech today. I want to talk about the pandemic and remote schooling and how it affected them. I'm not trying to trash talk – I myself am the product of public education – but I want to share what it was like and what I saw as a new teacher. So I had to leave.

How did the decision to leave your full-time job affect your creative life?

It's really important for artists to be upfront about their finances. I was struggling as a teacher and I struggled way more when I left teaching. I was waitressing for a year and the whole time going, 'God, did I do the right thing?' But it's the only way I could make the film and have a flexible schedule to make the film. You can't stay out late on a weeknight at a punk show when you're a high school teacher.

It's been incredibly hard as a new filmmaker because nobody wants to take a chance on me. I've made all this promotional material by myself and when I talk to producers, I have the pitch deck, the trailer, the New York Times article to back it, and it's not enough. I thought this would be the first time that I didn't have to do a Kickstarter. Nope, not at all! It's funny because what they'll say to artists, especially young women of color,

is, 'We want to give you a voice.' I had a pitch meeting with a producer who said, 'This is a good moment for Latina filmmakers.' Is it? Okay, now it's marketable to be a Latina filmmaker, I guess. Not that they even gave me money after that! It can make you feel so invalidated. On top of that, being a waitress can be so demeaning. I was serving two older couples and when I went and asked how their food was, one of the guys said, 'I didn't enjoy that.' I said, 'I'm so sorry about that. Can you tell me why?' And he said, 'Why should I? You're just a cog in the machine.' The irony of being told I'm a cog in the machine while working on a documentary about luddites was really funny to me. I was pissed off... Someone else at the table said, 'What are your aspirations outside of this?' Should I say, 'My aspirations are serving you' or do I tell them what I'm doing and feed into that image of a struggling artist? Why do I have to justify myself to be seen as a human being? My ego got the better of me and I told them about the doc.

Why do you think creative people avoid talking about money?

If you're too honest, you'll see that nothing is really propping up the world that we live in. It's just your perception of it.

Are you afraid of what you might lose out on by being off social media?

Another reason why I'm off of social media is to ask if [making an independent documentary] is possible without it. I want to be a director. Can I do it without having a social media presence? I consider this whole thing like an experiment. I'm my own test subject.

Do you have any advice for creatives who want to extricate themselves from the cycle of posting but are afraid to?

I think people fear a loss of opportunity. But I've never gotten a job opportunity through Instagram. I got the opportunity to do this film through teaching and meeting people and having in-person experiences. For some people, I'm not going to deny that [social media] has made their careers, but I don't think it's the only way. Often, it doesn't work and then you get disappointed. You post something that you put your heart and soul into and it doesn't get the recognition you hoped for. It gets bottled down to likes and you feel as if the work doesn't mean anything, which isn't true.

I've done so much in my time off of social media. I made this whole film. I gained back my time. More often than I was sharing important work on there, I was posting bullshit on my Stories.

How does social media affect art-making?

When you're out in the world and you see something beautiful, your first instinct is to share it. Sharing is a great thing. But any time I saw something, I thought, 'post.' If you could see a scan of my brain, it would have been a hologram of my phone. I didn't like this feeling, as an artist. It felt like I couldn't experience things organically and I wanted to rediscover how to channel creative energy into my own work again, rather than to a Story. Artists need downtime to create. We need to be removed a little bit, to take a walk in nature or to go to a party. And we need to sit with the discomfort of doing nothing. When we were kids, sitting and staring at a wall and looking at a paint chip and seeing it transform into something – that's completely gone now. It's a weird sensation in your body when you're not reacting to tech stimuli. You go to the bathroom without bringing your phone, you force yourself to feel bored – it doesn't feel good but it also doesn't feel good being on that [she gestures to my iPhone recording on the table, lit up].

Sometimes what doesn't feel good in the moment is good for one's art practice in the long-term. I hate waking up early but more hours in the day means more time that I can dedicate to my own projects, not just the work that pays my rent.

And I promise it does ultimately feel good to take a step back, to try doing things differently. The last act of the film is an ode to artists. Murrow is an art school, a lot of the luddites are artists, and we talk about the

creative process a lot. That's the part where Jenny Odell comes in. Artists are less daunted by tradition and artist-philosophers can help lead us to a new way of living. There is a way to navigate this world and disconnect yourself from tech but not be anti-tech. Like the luddites say, to not be anti-technology but to be against the abuse of technology.

Amanda Hanna-McLeer Recommends:

5 films that inspired *The Luddite Club* documentary:

Modern Times - Charlie Chaplin

Uncle Yanco - Agnes Varda

Is the Man Who Is Tall Happy - Michel Gondry

Hypernormalization - Adam Curtis

C'mon C'mon - Mike Mills

Name

Amanda Hanna-McLeer

Vocation

filmmaker, writer, director, animator, educator

□