

# On learning to trust your intuition



Filmmaker Zia Anger discusses the material barriers to making art, the importance of a good script, and the value of communal creativity.

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As told to Arielle Gordon, 3126 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#), [Education](#), [Collaboration](#), [Money](#), [Inspiration](#).

## **How has your formal film education impacted your creative approach?**

I went to undergrad for film and theater. I didn't walk into undergrad saying, "I want to do film." I didn't know anything about film, but I took a film course second semester with a great teacher named [Cathy Crane](#), and I would say that the film department at that time was on the more experimental side of things. We were exposed to a lot of great experimental films. We were taught about cameras, and sound, and all this great technical stuff, but in terms of what a film is supposed to be, that was a more open-ended question. That idea has stuck with me: not what a film is, but what a film could be.

Then I went to grad school and got my MFA, and I was in a film department that was interested in expanded cinema and video art. I didn't think that it was all that helpful. It wasn't an actual film school, it was more like an art program. I had gotten a full scholarship, so I didn't leave with a lot of debt, but I left with this big feeling that it's just a bad practice to take that much money from people and then tell them to go out into the world and make it as a filmmaker or make it as an artist.

I don't think there's a lot of programs that exist like the one that I was at in undergrad. We're so dominated now by Hollywood and what you are supposed to do with your career, so I'm grateful that I got to do that in undergrad. That's how I started making films.

## **From what I know from *My First Film*, a lot of people who worked on your first movie *Always All Ways*, Anne Marie were friends from film school. How did having your friends also be your main collaborators impact the filmmaking process?**

I want to make films for a lot of people, and because of that I don't want to make them in a vacuum. I want to make them in dialogue with other people so that someone can say, "Hey, that's not a good idea." Or, "Hey, this would be a better idea." Or, "Hey, oh, this is a great idea."

Working with good friends is challenging, but it's also the greatest, because I don't think a complete stranger would tell me if I was out of line, or if my ideas were bad. I mean, maybe if they had a huge amount of money invested in me and some sort of seniority. But for the most part, I think young artists need feedback, and need to be open to feedback. Having real, true friends around you to give you that feedback, to be that first line, is important to making things that resonate with people that you want it to resonate with.

## **When you were making *My First Film*, how much effort was there to replicate as closely as possible the conditions and the costuming of the *Always All Ways* period?**

When it came to casting, we weren't looking necessarily for people who were one-to-one with their real-life counterparts, but who embodied the essence of whoever that character was. But when it came to the actual art, the *mise en scene*, everything that you're seeing in the frame, I worked with a great costume designer and great production designer, both of whom are my age.

The costume designer, Rachel Dainer-Best, and the production designer, Stephen Phelps, had been working in films back then, too. We gathered up all of the photos we had from back then, and went over them to find touch points from that time, whether it be the camera equipment or the exact lighting kit that we were using. I remember looking at these pictures with Rachel and saying, "Man, we all had that one \$7 pashmina from Chinatown that somehow we'd all wrap around our necks a million times."

We got really into the details of the time period. It was this moment right before smartphones just took over everything. There were still a lot of markers that defined that as this actual place in time rather than where we are now, where time exists all at once because the phone is in our hands. We got incredibly specific. What's so amazing about working with production designers or costume designers is the good ones are going to be that specific. They're going to say, "Okay, we're in 2012. Which characters would have a smartphone, which characters would have a flip phone?" I was just honestly totally blown away that we could be that specific and make it feel exactly like that time.

**I think 2010 is such an interesting time to represent because it was this time of, as you say in the film, micro-budget filmmaking. It made me think about the material conditions of filmmaking: how crowdfunding, being able to rent a RED camera, and the other particulars of making a movie changes the final product.**

I wanted to shoot on a RED camera, but I wanted to shoot with these anamorphic vintage lenses; I think they were Russian and from the 50s. That combination of tools was burdensome. We knew somebody who owned a RED, and Ashley [Connor, the film's cinematographer] knew that they had kids and said, "Hey, I'll babysit for you in exchange for this camera package." The lenses were one of a kind, and we thought it was so special that we were getting them, and they were very expensive, so we had to buy a lot of insurance for them. They were, in fact, one of a kind, but the reason why they were available is that they were incredibly cumbersome. They were enormous. They were hard to use.

With the RED, how far you have to stand away from the camera was much further than I wanted the camera to be from the action. You probably needed a good four-person camera team, minimum, to make something really special on these because it was just so burdensome. But we didn't have four people, we had two people. In a lot of ways, this equipment that I wanted and needed became the burden of the film, and it became the reason why making the film was so tense, and why I didn't have enough footage to use when I cut.

In the same way that I thought that crowdfunding and making a certain amount of money to make this film was my key to making this film work, it actually was just a sign of how difficult it is to make films in this day and age. Of course, it was never going to be that easy. Making films is hard. I don't know any time before my time, so I don't know what it was like to make films in the 80s or 90s, but I can assume that it's always been difficult to make films, and there's always been either equipment or financing schemes that make it seem like it's an easier thing to do than it is. If you go and you type in "my first film" on either Reddit or on Twitter, what comes up is a bunch of people in the YouTube era posting the first film that they just made and posted to YouTube.

We live in a very individualistic time, and moving images are this perfect place for us to say, "Me, me, me, I, I, I." I made a film about myself, and it's called *My First Film*. I totally get the irony there, and I don't think anybody should stop making films at all. I think that everybody should be making films all the time, and there's amazing stuff on TikTok, there's amazing stuff on YouTube.

I was talking to a college class the other day and I said to them, "I know you're going to watch my film and you're going to say, 'Oh my gosh, I'm going to go out and I'm going to make my film. And I'm graduating, and this is going to be amazing. She got to do it.'" I tried to emphasize that actually, it took me nearly 15 years to do, and I had many lucky opportunities to be able to do that. There was a huge amount of development behind this and

a huge amount of money behind this. If you do anything when you graduate, it should be trying something else besides moving images. Because unless you really want to do this, it's not worth it.

**Do you see *My First Film* as a cautionary tale about filmmaking?**

No. I definitely think that people could see it in a lot of different ways, and in one way it's a cautionary tale. In another way, it's a story of, if at first you don't succeed, try and try again. Neither of those things were how I intended the film to be read, but I can't control that. I see *My First Film* as a story about moving from seeing yourself as the center of the universe to understanding that every single person around you holds the same amount of importance, and it is only through a communal effort that anything can get made.

**Did you keep a diary or a journal when you were making *Always All Ways*? How did you recall the specific emotional tenor of that time?**

We were lucky that we had an email back then. A huge amount of this was in emails to people. My enthusiasm, my total naïveté was just in every single email I put out there into the world. There would be these emails that I would send to the entire eight-person crew. "Hey guys, I've just had a radical idea. What if we all get together one weekend and edit the film together?" Which is not possible to do. The greatest part was that nobody would respond to me, except for maybe Ashley, who was the cinematographer back then and is the cinematographer now, and was the character Alexis was based on. She would just write back, "I love that idea. Can you tell by the look on my face?" And then she'd send a photo booth selfie where she's making a totally ridiculous face in a totally ridiculous felted hat. That alone is the energy of what this film is supposed to be. It's just people just being incredibly naïve, but also incredibly sincere.

**I was wondering about the casting. Obviously it's not supposed to be exact, as you said, but casting somebody to play yourself must be a very intimate thing. What were you looking for? Were you aiming for somebody who could remind you of yourself at that age?**

Odessa Young, who plays the character of Vita, is a fantastic actor. She's in her 20s, she is Australian, but in every single role that she plays, she does not remind you that she is an Australian in her 20s whose name is Odessa Young. She is just that character. When I cast her, I knew that she was able to shapeshift into characters. Then the challenge was for her not to do "me," but find whoever this character was. That was not for me to decide, nor did I ever say, "Hey, you should do a version of me." I just gave her access to whatever she needed access to, whether it was my old emails, old photos, a lot of old journal entries.

We spent a ton of time together. I think from the very beginning, I knew that it was going to work because not only is she just incredibly talented, but the story of *My First Film* resonated with her. I think what I understood was that she had had a number of disappointing experiences making films, and she was constantly questioning whether or not making films was something that she actually wanted to do, in the same way that I was questioning it. Her experiences were super different than mine, but we found this mirror about what we wanted filmmaking to be.

**How did you process the failures that you expressed in the film—*Always All Ways* was rejected from every film festival you submitted it to. You continued making films after that. How did you move on from those disappointments?**

I often process things through energy. For a long time I was angry, and I just started to make a lot of really angry work. Angry music videos, angry short films. That was something that I did for a long time. When I started to do the performance [that would become *My First Film*], it was really biting. At a certain point, that energy of anger turned into realizing that when I am speaking, I am speaking to a lot of people, and it might be more interesting if I was to find a more interesting emotion than anger.

Not the opposite of anger, I'm not talking about being hopeful. But something that's just more nuanced, that encapsulates how complicated and how difficult the human experience in general is.

Then, my work started to move into this direction that was more interested in having a dialogue with people, more interested in putting something out into the world and it resonating with people in different ways. I don't do well when I'm not making something. I have to be putting stuff out into the world. And that stuff that I'm putting out in the world is ultimately to have a dialogue with people, and not just to barf my emotions all over.

**How do you think about balancing humor and darkness in your work?**

One thing that I've learned to be aware of is that I am funny. Not all the time, but I have a sense of humor, and one of the reasons that people like my films is because they're funny. But I've also learned that I can't *think* that I'm funny. I can't sit there and say, "I'm going to tell a joke."

I have to be sincere in what I do, and sometimes that's funny and sometimes it's tragic, but if I'm *trying* to do any of those things it's not going to work. With [*My First Film*] co-writer, Billy Feldman, who I think is hilarious, we would write these scenes and we would read them back to each other. And if he would laugh, or I would laugh, or he would cry, or I would cry, I would say, "Let's go with that."

Understanding those steps to my process was important to it being very hilarious, and also very tragic. But those never were the goals. It was just to embrace that we should be making sure people are having those feelings when they're reading or performing it, or when they're ultimately watching it.

**In the film's description of *Always All Ways*, there's not a lot of dialogue written, and the actors are guided by a broader treatment. It sounds like there was more dialogue for *My First Film*. How do you balance using conventional scripts with more general guidelines? What works for the creative process?**

I hate scripts, and I also think that they are incredibly valuable for your collaborators. I don't feel like I'm doing anybody a service when I give them a small amount of information. I'd rather give somebody too much information and have them say, "Stop right there. I don't need that." Versus the opposite, where people are sitting there and saying, "I don't really know what to make of this." Writing a script out fully is probably one of the more painful parts of the process. But in terms of my process, it has become a very, very useful tool to get my collaborators to understand what I'm trying to do.

**You've made music videos for artists like Beach House, Jenny Hval, and Mitski. How does your creative process differ when you're working on a music video for another artist, versus a film for yourself?**

I feel like music videos are really there as commercials for the artists, and I was not interested in doing that anymore, because you can make a huge music video and it's never going to help you get to make a film. People just don't jump from one to the other very easily.

The music videos that I did made me aware of and made me interested in developing the intuition I have about whether something is working or not. The first time I ever felt glee making a video was the first Mitski video I ever did, with these Coachella-people kissing, and then the camera pans over to Mitski and she's there playing her guitar. I just remember being filled with glee laughing, thinking, okay, this is a really interesting image. If you go and look at YouTube comments—and it's very hard to look at YouTube comments—people are saying that the image is what works. The thing that I felt when I was watching it does work.

That little intuition I got to build up doing these music videos was important to my sense of knowing if something works or not when I'm making it. I think that's probably the most generous I could be about my thoughts about music videos.

They made me immune to the idea of knowing that a zillion people will see something, and a huge amount of people will not like what they see. I have read all the YouTube comments. I have looked at all the shit-talking, and I have come to the conclusion both about music videos and about films that opinions are amazing. I am totally fine that a lot of people hate stuff that I've put out into the world. Usually if I'm making something that people love or hate, it's doing something I really wanted it to do. It's creating an intense enough emotion that

somebody is going to post about it, whether they love it or they hate it.

**Zia Anger Recommends:**

Spending time with people much older and much younger than you

*Sex Goblin* - Lauren Cook

Tending a garden and making bouquets for your friends

*The Birth Partner* - Penny Simkin with Katie Rohs, 5th Edition (This is a book about supporting people who are giving literal birth, but I found there to be some great ideas about communication and care)

*Motherhood* - Sheila Heti

*Transcendental Style in Film* [(new edition) - Paul Schrader

Name

Zia Anger

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