

Alex Ross Perry on making due with what you have



December 6, 2016 - Alex Ross Perry is an NYC-based filmmaker, screenwriter, and actor who has been working on movies of various shapes and sizes for the better part of a decade. He is best known for his two most-recent efforts as a director—2014's *Listen Up Philip* and 2015's *Queen of Earth*. He wrote and directed his new film, *Golden Exits*, which stars Emily Browning, Ad-Rock, Mary Louise Parker, Jason Schwartzman, Chloë Sevigny, and Analeigh Tipton. It will premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in early 2017.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3520 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Anxiety](#), [Independence](#).

Why make a movie?

I don't know. I don't really know what drives people other than myself and the people I'm very close to. I'm sure to some extent people are trying to make things they think other people want to see.

I imagine the struggle between "What do I want to make" and "What do other people want me to make" is complicated, especially when a lot of money is involved.

It's a hard thing to get around. I would imagine that it's augmented radically for people depending on what kind of success has come to them already. Something that I think about in terms of people I know, people I'm friends with, or people I'm parallel to but don't know, is what level of encouragement or drive people need in order to move on.

For me it's kind of like this: none of the movies I've made has had any financial success whatsoever for me or for anyone who paid for them or made them. What they do have is a certain amount of respect and acclaim from peers and the film culture in general, so that's my validation. That gives me something to work with. Perhaps if the movies made a ton of money, what I did with that motivation might be very different.

I don't know what it feels like to be encouraged to make something new because the last thing you did made money. I only know what it's like to feel encouraged to make something new because people liked it. People who make movies that are well-received but financially unsuccessful might say, "I need to do something that is financially successful," rather than, "I need to make sure that if eight out of 10 people liked my last movie, I need to make sure nine out of 10 people like the next one,"—so it's not that it makes money, but that it reaches more people instead of fewer.

I really don't know, but thinking about what, if anything, encourages people to proceed is very curious to me, because it's got to be something different for everybody. I imagine it feels really good to make a lot of money. I imagine that gives you a feeling that is very special and unique that I myself have no awareness of whatsoever, but when I do feel that—if it ever happens—it will probably set me off on the next journey towards something very different just because I want to see what that feels like. I think that what I'm getting at is that I don't always understand why people make things.

It's something that Sean Williams, my Director of Photography, talks about a lot. He says he can't accept an offer to be involved with a project if he doesn't understand why the director is making it, and for him, that's probably two thirds of the things he talks to people about. He reads the scripts or looks at the scripts and he says, "I can't imagine why anyone would make this, and I asked them that and they couldn't answer, so I couldn't possibly imagine being involved with it." I think there's something to that.

Making another movie is really beside the point of what I care about in my life, specifically because I've never had financial validation. Two well-regarded and financially unsuccessful movies into my career, the only reason I would make a movie now would be for fun. There's no reason to do it other than because I want to. Not because I need to, not because I need to show people that there's this other thing I can do or because I need to create something that positions me as commercially relevant. The only reason that I would take a month off from my current screenwriting gigs—which is how I make money—would be because something feels urgently interesting. If it doesn't, I cannot do that for a year (or two or three) while I have other work I could be doing. If it feels like I have to do it, then I can put all my stuff on hold and do it.

Again, I'm doing it for the fun. It just depends on the project and the circumstances. A well-known actor doing an independent movie—depending on the SAG quantified budget level—is doing it for either under two or under four hundred dollars a day. They're not doing it for money. They're doing it for, essentially, an irrelevant amount of money compared to what they usually make. I'm sort of in the same position. I wasn't when I made *Listen Up Phillip* and the 10 thousand dollars I got paid to make that movie carried me for several months. Now, I wouldn't take 10 thousand dollars out of a budget of a movie because I don't need it. I'd rather give a thousand dollars extra to 10 crew members who work for a living on independent movies and have chosen to block out a month of their schedule to work on mine. I'd rather give them a thousand dollar raise rather than take an amount of money that for me, even though it would be great, isn't necessary. I have other things I can do to make money.

People want to convince you that there's this one way of doing things, or this one trajectory you need to be on if you're a filmmaker. I don't believe that. People are desperate to be making movies, and I suppose I am as well. Being asked to make a "bigger" type of movie would be a totally different kind of job for me. As long as I'm trying to make things at this level, which as far as I can tell, is basically the only level at which things can comfortably and simply be made, I have to think about why I'm doing it. I'm not doing it because I think anyone should get rich off this. I'm not doing it because I think it's a good business decision. I'm doing it because it's something that creatively feels urgent and necessary for me and then for the other people involved with it, which is a good way to feel.

I shot a movie earlier this year, which was made under these circumstances. Very cheap, very small, three week shoot, all around Brooklyn. There was only one day that it was not justifiably walking distance from my house. It's not a big movie, it's not made to sell for three million dollars in a competitive bidding war. I've made movies that were incredibly well received and I still couldn't get that. These movies, they're very well liked, but they're not commercial. No one's going to lay down seven figures for them. I feel like knowing that, I can now make movies without even thinking that that might happen, which is oddly liberating.

Certainly, for *Listen Up Phillip* I thought that might happen because that's what happens in my mind. I know now that that won't happen, which means I can make movies that are much more idiosyncratic, knowing as I'm writing them that no one's going to spend a lot of money to buy them. It will not turn out better when it's "developed" by a studio because ultimately we'll then have fewer resources and less time and it's just a less narratively and visually ambitious movie by virtue of the fact that we're not going to have as much money and as much time. Knowing that it's going to be a smaller more modest endeavor, I know that it also just won't be as risky, but it also won't have the same high of a totally energetic payoff. It'll just be very good. I know that because I have faith in everyone making it. I also know that no matter how good it is, even if it's as good as *Listen Up Phillip*, no one's going to spend a lot of money on it and not a lot of people are going to see it. I feel now, fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me.

This is my third time making a movie in three years. I don't believe, no matter how amazing this movie turns out, and no matter what festival premieres it, and no matter how good the reviews are, and no matter how vehemently the actors support it, when it comes out, I just know that there's not going to be this huge world of people who are going to see it. Knowing that when I'm writing the movie means that I can just make the movie entirely my own thing. Rather than having any inclination to create something that would work in that marketplace, which makes for very peculiar and strange movies. It's made with the resources of someone who has accomplished enough to get good actors and works with crafts people in their movies that are all working at the top of their game. It's also a movie that... well, no one would make this movie if they thought that millions of people were going to see it.

If an actor has a steady gig on a TV show, that's real money. If they're coming to do this movie for two or three weeks, maybe they're getting two thousand, three thousand dollars, they're doing it for one reason—that they really want to work with me and they really like this role. I have to be doing it for equally pure reasons—because I really want to do it and I really like the idea of this movie. Then we just have a tiny new movie that we've made together, rather than living in what would now be my third year of agonizing over trying to get a five million dollar movie made, which I am also still doing. I'm always doing it via email and phone calls, but I'm doing it while making other movies and writing for Disney and other jobs, as well. I have that foundation, which makes the actual creation of the movies that I will direct slightly different than I think most people get to have perspective on. I feel very lucky about that.

Otherwise, there's no option I feel good about. With a million dollar movie, the director's not going to get paid. If they're trying to carve out a chunk of the budget for their salary

that in any way represents what is fair for the amount of time they'll spend working on this, that'll be the first thing that gets cut out of the budget if suddenly you just need to shoot for another two days or something else come up unexpectedly. It should be, anyway. I'm sure there are directors that don't make that decision and they say, "No. I wrote this, I'm directing it. I need a hundred thousand dollars of this million dollar budget." I'm sure those movies get made sometimes, but for me, every chance I have to help. It's funny, I don't want it. I'm making this not for that reason and that feels very pure and that makes making small movies feel like its own thing.

Obviously, it would be great if one only had to be responsible for writing and directing great movies on their own that get financed at the right level and reach a good audience, but that's not the way it is at all for anyone of my generation. In my experience, you make do with what you have. This the world that I live in, so my opportunities are severely limited compared to that of forebears of independent film. I'm lucky enough to have my cake and eat it, too, in some regards, which means the opportunity for sustained creative output is fairly liberated, knowing that maybe this five-million dollar movie doesn't happen for another year or two, but I've got a couple other movies that are conceived of as being small enough or achievable. No one has to weigh in on them. We can just do it. We can just make another thing just for the sake of making it, just as the pursuit of something interesting and fun.

Alex Ross Perry recommends:

[*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes*](#)

Franzen's essay "[Why Rother?](#)", aka "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels"

[*The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*](#) (books and films)

Vincent Gallo's only-released-in-Japan director's commentary for [*The Brown Bunny*](#)

The Criterion Collection [*The Adventures of Antoine Doineau*](#) box set

Then it becomes about something different. If the conversation isn't like, "How do I get another movie made?" The conversation is, "What will I do when I make another movie that will be different and challenging?" then we all just get to focus on strange things that I would never have thought about if I didn't have that attitude. Fun little restrictions to give myself and every other repeat collaborator so that we all know we're doing something different. I would never think of that if I was only making a movie every three or four years, each one being an agonizing eventuality that when it came, it was like, "Thank God this is finally happening!" Now it's like, "What are we going to do this time? What's going to make this worth everyone's while?" That becomes a much more fun way to think about something. The risks are much lower and the potential yield is much lower, but the experience is essentially identical.

Right now that feels sustainable. It was stressful to take a month off from, as I said, several job jobs to make a movie, but I could do that. To both be in a position where I can, essentially, take a month off from paid work is not something most people in entertainment or any profession can do. Then to be in that position, but also in a position where I can, with relative ease, raise the money and get a great cast for a very small movie. To have those two opportunities, it feels irresponsible to *not* disappear for a couple of weeks and then get a bunch of really great actors and just make something pure with them. If that opportunity's there and you don't take it, it feels like a waste of what you accomplished. I haven't accomplished enough to get a five million dollar movie made with ease. I just haven't.

It has nothing to do with how good my other movies are or how good that script is. It has everything to do with how little money I've made people. I have accomplished enough to have access to actors I really want to work with and think are interesting. That means I can get them to come make a small movie. I can get the crew because everyone that I've worked with likes working with me and we can make these things in a way that feels very efficient. It's a continuation of the last thing. Everyone's happy.

That sounds--dare I say it--like fun?

It's fun, yeah. It's fun. Shooting is really easy because, in the case of this movie I just made, it's a DP with his entire camera team, make up, wardrobe, production coordinator, producer. Almost every person on set I've worked with before. The process of making the movie is almost as easy as sitting at home and writing, in some ways, just because I don't have to learn this language of communicating with 40 new people. It's 15 people people on set and I've worked with all but three or four of them already. It just exists as the next thing.

On day one of this movie we finished two hours ahead of schedule. Generally, day one you make very light so you can be very slow and get used to everyone, but with this movie we finished hours ahead of schedule on day one and everyone was like, "This is not day one. It's more like day 50 of this ongoing idea that we're working together." On day one, usually, everyone doesn't know exactly how to talk to each other. The fact that you do has saved us half of a day, basically. It's kind of amazing. It's just a great way to be around people that are fun to be around and who's work I just like being in the front row to witness.

It's a pure little pursuit on the side that we just made for us. We made it for the right reasons; to challenge ourselves, to challenge everybody involved, because why not? It would be very weird not to do that. *Listen Up Phillip* is, except for three or four shots, 100% shot on hand-held cameras. The camera's always moving. If I hadn't made a movie since then, and I was making another one three years later--and I didn't think I'd be making another one for three years--I wouldn't feel comfortable saying, as I did on this movie, "Let's make an entire movie with not a single hand-held shot." If I were making this five million dollar bigger movie, I probably wouldn't be quite so cavalier in saying, "Hey, let's just try something that I don't know if either of us are good at." On this, it feels safe to say, "Let's just see if this works."

Do you feel like it works?

Yeah, it totally works. It's not like this is something no one has done. It's not like I'm attempting something radical. It's just something I didn't know if we could do. It works perfectly. People, after they watch it, I say, "What did you think about the fact that there's no hand-held?" They say, "There wasn't?" The camera is alive in many ways, but it's just always locked down on a tripod or a dolly or a zoom which is moving in different ways. Having the freedom to just say, "How about we just totally try this?" and having collaborators who say, "Okay. Interesting. Sure." That's a neat feeling to be in. That was on my mind when I was writing the script.

Another challenge I set for myself was to say, "What if in this movie, nobody argues with anybody else, says anything mean, or is outwardly hostile in any way?" I've done two movies where that is the driving force of the personality of several of the main characters. I wonder if I can write 100 pages without lapsing into that at all. I found myself accidentally doing it and deleting entire scenes. I was like, "Wait, this is an argument now. I can't do that." I got to 100 pages and I thought, "Okay. I guess I can write a script where characters don't argue or treat each other outwardly horribly in front of the audience." I didn't know that. Now, let's see if we can shoot it without hand-held cameras.

How does that change the tone of the movie?

The idea from the onset has to be that this movie's going to have a different tone. My idea was this was going to be a very mellow, very somber, downbeat movie with no confrontation, no jokes, no negative interactions, and that's going to have to be reflected in the style, so maybe we shoot this one in entirely no hand-held. That whole thing is just, let's just make a movie that feels like this and see if it works. I love movies like this. I love going to see Eric Rohmer movies where people are sitting perfectly still for 110 minutes having very calm but very introspective conversations. The camera doesn't really move and you just drop into these people's lives and then you drop back out. I love those movies. Everyone loves those movies, but not everyone loves them enough to think they'll make money making a movie that is inspired by that. Let's just see if there's a way to do this my way. It just makes a different movie. As similar and different from *The Queen of Earth* as *The Queen of Earth* was similar and different from *Phillip*. It's just a whole new thing--which is what I want every project to be. Something new. Something totally different.

Name

Alex Ross Perry

Vocation

Filmmaker, Screenwriter, Actor

Fact

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