Bette Gordon on dealing with the realities of filmmaking

June 7, 2017 - Bette Gordon is an American filmmaker and a professor at Columbia University School of the Arts who has been making movies since the mid 1970s. Her debut feature, 1983's *Variety*, remains a hallmark of American independent cinema and established many of the themes that would show up again later in Gordon's work. "For better or worse, I tend to be drawn to things that are maybe not easy to make, but you can't really forget them," she says. "I think all of my films are kind of haunting in some way, and if you can't get them out of your head it means that I couldn't get them out of my head either." Her most recent film, *The Drowning*, opened earlier this year.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2566 words.

Tags: <u>Film</u>, <u>Beginnings</u>, <u>Process</u>, <u>Production</u>, <u>Inspiration</u>, <u>Adversity</u>, <u>Collaboration</u>, <u>Independence</u>.

You are a filmmaker who also teaches filmmaking. What are some of the of the specific challenges involved with learning how to make films, as opposed to, say, learning how to paint or take photographs?

They are so different. I talk with my students about this. As a filmmaker I feel like you don't get enough opportunities to practice. You can't exactly practice making a feature film. You usually learn by actually making one. The thing that a painter or sculptor can do is go into a studio and muck around. You can make a lot of bad paintings and throw them out or start over. It's not so easy with film. Sometimes I tell my students that while you're working on this big project, you have to do other things related to it. Go grab a shitty camera, not a nice one, and get outside and start finding things that you're attracted to, images, locations, whatever. Go to some neighborhood and find the thing that your eye goes to, the sidewalk, the sides of buildings, people, I don't know. Shoot things. Photograph things. Make small things.

Artists in studios, writers, musicians—they have a lot of room to experiment. We, as filmmakers, often don't get to do that enough. You can do it in a screenplay, but the screenplay format is so regulated by the structure. And writing a screenplay isn't the same as actually shooting a film. And unless you are someone like, say, Almodóvar or Scorsese, most filmmakers still have to jump through all of these hoops and clear all of these complicated hurdles in order to make our films. Very few people have the freedom to truly make whatever they want. You have to sustain yourself in other ways.

Still from *Variety*, shot by Nan Goldin

How do you do that? When this is your medium and there are these gaps of time between projects—where you're writing, gathering resources, trying to get funding, etc—how do you sustain yourself creatively?

I started off as a filmmaker. When I say that I studied film, I really studied film—not digital—so I still have a Bolex camera that I can still get film for. I often go back to that. I've always been a kind of visual explorer. My dad was an amateur photographer, so for me, photography is a comfortable thing to work with. I'm always gathering images, things I might not know what I'm going to do with. I'm always collecting. I have a ton of art
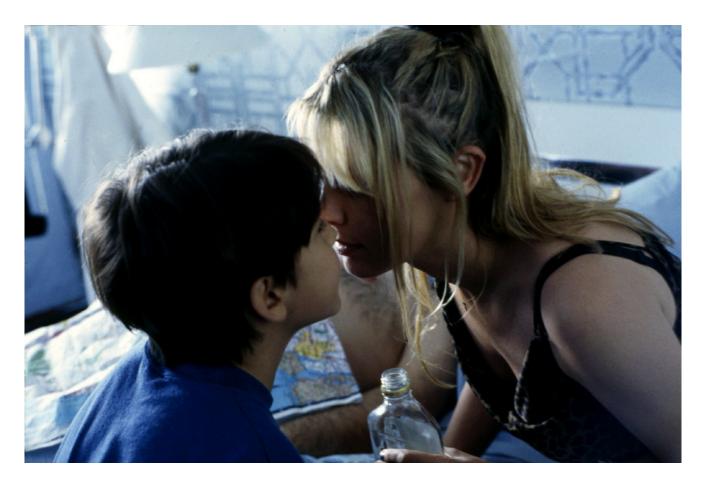
books that I pull out if I'm feeling frustrated. I love color xeroxing. I'll often pull a lot of images that way and then save them.

I just start to build folders and files, but not on the computer. I hate the way the computer prints things. I like physical objects. I like the texture. I'll make books out of the stuff that I print or just throw them in a big file and later, when I'm looking at how to design something or how to shoot something specific, I go back to them. Also, I think teaching has been good for me. Engagement with other people's projects is really inspiring, and I like being able to use my creative and visual problem solving skills to help other people with their work. It sharpens you.

Every once in a while, a short project will come up. I did a music video, a little film, for Jill Sobule. I love jazz and there's a woman named René Marie who's just a beautiful jazz singer that somebody had introduced me to. I did a nice video for her called "The Sound of Red", which followed this really fun concept. I don't get enough of those. I would like to do more. It's not like anybody pays me, you know, *actual* money, but it's not really about that. Often times I'll just say, "Okay, I'll find the people around me who can help, and I'll just make this thing."

I always made my own stuff, you know? I think I came from a time where market driven art didn't exist in film. Maybe in the art world, because there were, like, 10 great galleries in SoHo when I moved here. It was such a small world. Julian Schnabel was on the rise, and abstract expressionism had happened, so that stuff was market driven, but the filmmakers of the time, we were just mucking around, kind of just making films for each other.

I kind of still have that spirit, but as I get older and the longer it takes to get a project off the ground, it's like—how do you stay active during that time? Part of it is visual thinking and finding creative stuff to do for yourself. The other part of it is making a movie in your head. I think the most creative time for a filmmaker is the three to five years in between projects, because you can start to dream and imagine, and you basically make the most perfect version of the movie in your mind. I think all films are made in your head before you make them, before all the limitations come in. Those years of dreaming are so great, because you don't yet have boundaries.

Still from *Luminous Motion*, shot by Nan Goldin

And how do you deal with those boundaries once they start to present themselves?

Then it just becomes one problem after another that needs to be solved. "Well, the budget is not going to be what we wanted." "You wrote this to be shot in Connecticut, but we can't afford to move the entire cast and crew there, so what are you going to do?"—the latter being something that happened with my last film. I kind of like those creative limitations as well, even though they are annoying. So much of it is thinking on your feet, figuring out a way around all of these barriers that are constantly popping up in front of you.

The money raising part of filmmaking is the hardest part. You have to hold onto your passion for making your movie in the face of a hundred people telling you no. Somehow, your belief in what you're doing has to be so strong that you keep thinking that you can go on, that there's always a "yes" out there somewhere. Trying to make movies is like being a gambler. It's like going to a casino and putting your money on the red and hoping that this time you might win. You're basically addicted to this thing. You keep thinking, "Well, if I could just play a *little* longer, I might hit the jackpot." It's this almost irrational belief in something. It's also luck, to be honest. You've got to have talent, but you really need luck. You can have luck with no talent, and that's bad—and you see that a *lot*—but all the talent in the world doesn't matter without a little bit of luck.

Your first film, *Variety*, feels very much like the the product of a creative community. <u>Kathy Acker</u> wrote the script, <u>Nan Goldin</u> shot stills, all of these downtown NYC people pop up. Given the collaborative nature of filmmaking, is having a reliable community around you still key to being able to do this kind of work?

I think so. I keep looking for that community, even now. When I was starting I felt like I was part of a group of filmmakers that really supported each other, but it was largely because there were so few of us. It's different now. Back then making movies still felt like such a new art, but now filmmaking is taught in every school and

often even in high schools. I moved to New York in 1979 and the community felt much smaller. At that time, wherever you went, you'd bump into people. We were like these electrons bumping into each other, crashing into one another, and out of that came all of these really fertile ideas.

And now it's like every conversation about filmmaking immediately turns to money.

It's depressing. When I did *Variety* it wasn't money driven at all. We got money from German TV, which a lot of people did. Charlie Ahearn did *Wild Style* around that time and Jim Jarmusch did *Stranger Than Paradise*. German TV was interested in this whole independent film world happening in NYC. I think we got $40,000 to make *Variety*. That was nothing in terms of money, but it meant the world to us. You just start asking your friends to jump in. I met Luis Guzmán in the street. Somebody introduced me to him and I said, "Wow, you've got such a great face. Will you be in my movie?" He said, "Yeah, sure." It wasn't because I was going to pay him. I didn't, you know? It was all done out of the fun of it. I miss that kind of spirit. How did we lose that? Is that still going on somewhere?

Still from *Variety*, shot by Nan Goldin

I think so. Especially given the accessibility of digital technology, there are lots of kids just out there making stuff. People trying to circumvent the system, which can also be a good thing.

I think they're two very clear paths. On the one hand, those who just do it—who grab a camera and make things with their friends—make work that may never see the light of day, because they miss out on what they need to be doing in order to have their work seen. But then occasionally one of them will break through and become this shining of example of what you can do on your own with only your ingenuity to guide you.

Then, on the other hand, I see a lot of really creative students who embrace the learning part of being in school and thrive there. They get access to a community. It's hard to find that creative community outside. Maybe you will amongst your fellow musicians or artist friends or something, but by having all of these like minded people who are going at this thing together, you get another possible way of being creative.

There are so many different paths, and one person's creative journey is never going to be the same as another. Sometimes you just have to take the bull by the horns and do it, or you get into a program that gives access to the energy and input of the people around you, many of whom will become your professional peers on down the road. It becomes a "Hey, I'll shoot your film now if later you'll come help me produce mine" kind of thing. You establish these relationships that often carry through the entire rest of your career.
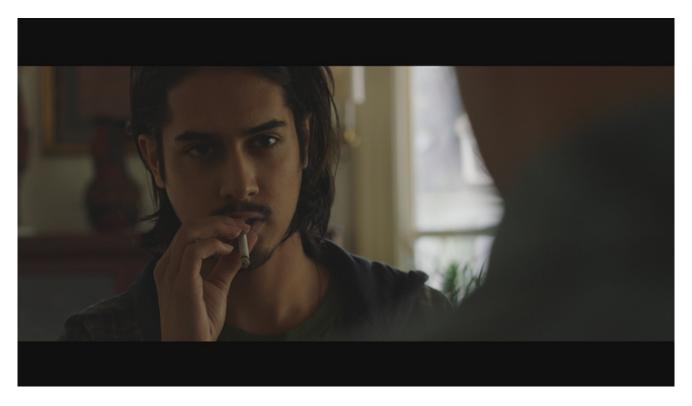
Given the relatively long gestation period involved with getting a film off the ground—and knowing that it might take several years before you actually get to shoot something—do you become more cautious when choosing material? How does that affect the kinds of things you choose to commit yourself to?

When I commit to an idea, I'm committed because I'm completely passionate about it. I can't *not* be, you now? For better or worse, I tend to be drawn to things that are maybe not easy to make, but you can't really forget them. I think all of my films are kind of haunting in some way, and if you can't get them out of your head it means that I couldn't get them out of my head either. Even when I think I'm doing something that is traditionally a little more mainstream—and I have thought that before about my work—I realize by the time I finish it that it's usually not all that mainstream at all.

I've always been a kind of subversive thinker, even as a kid. I can't help but think beneath the surface of things. Sometimes I can go so deep underneath the surface that I'm not sure people will go there with me. I'm not interested in making a "feel good everybody ends up happily ever after" kind of movie. I always will probably

gravitate to stuff that's more difficult. I'm not interested in characters that are easy or conventionally likable. In fact, that's something that drives me crazy about so much art now—the tyranny of likability. This idea that you must like every character or that you have to relate to them somehow. Who cares about that? I don't think you have to like the characters, but you should at least find them interesting.

For me a creative problem that needs to be solved is usually just, how to do I make people see something that they might not otherwise see? I mean, I grew up at a time at the end of the Vietnam war, and as a young person then so much of what I was feeling was about wanting people to open their eyes and see the truth. I think I'm always looking for an element of that in my stories and in my films.

Avan Jogia as Danny in *The Drowning*

Your most recent film, *The Drowning*, certainly does that. It takes on all of the various tropes of a standard psychological thriller and kind of upends them. It seems to be about trying to see people for who they truly are. The impossibility of that.

An interviewer recently said to me: "If *The Drowning* was made by a big Hollywood studio, if somebody else had written the script and the studio was looking for a director, they would never hire you, simply because they don't seem to think that women can direct these sort of muscular thrillers." She called it "muscular" directing, where you're really kind of pushing the edges and the extremes.

I certainly think part of me wanted to challenge that by making this movie. I wanted to be able to say, "I can be just as tough as you guy. I can do it too. Better." It's so strange that even now female directors are so often relegated to making stories about female characters. I've certainly made those kinds of movies and those stories are really important, but I never want to be relegated to making any one kind of thing. My main concern has always been simply doing what I want. My main interest is still just telling the kinds of stories that aren't usually told.

Bette Gordon recommends:

Top of the Lake directed by Jane Campion (Season 1 and 2)

Melvin and Howard by Jonathan Demme

Robert Longo show at Metro Pictures

Don Quixote by Kathy Acker

"Call on Me" (1967) sung by Janis Joplin (Big Brother and the Holding Co)

Berlin Alexanderplatz (13 episodes) by R.W. Fassbinder

The Spiral Jetty Robert Smithson

Name
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Vocation
Filmmaker

Fact

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