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On discovering new ways to see

Cinematographer and filmmaker Kirsten Johnson on establishing a relationship with your audience, the late-in-life epiphanies that come with making personal work, and why you should seek out sharing the stories that only you can tell.
There are aspects of creative pursuits that go beyond technical skills. You could be a great journalist, photographer, or cinematographer, but if you don't have the kind of skills that allow you to make people comfortable, or to properly gauge a room, it sort of doesn't matter. It's much more complicated than being able to turn on a tape recorder, or ask a list of questions, or take nice images.

For me, it is a relationship. It may be a relationship with a whole room and knowing that if you go and film from the front of the room, then you have the mistrust of the whole room. Everyone is looking at you. But if you move in certain kinds of ways, you gain trust slowly. This is a relationship. So for me, that's always the thing. I'm entering into relationships, and they may only last for 45 minutes, but the skills that we have of being able to read and feel and pick up on how people are responding—What do you need from me? Why do you think it's interesting to talk to me? All of that is what's so fun about the work, it's very alive in a moment-to-moment kind of way.

With a little bit of hindsight, did the experience of making your own personal film, *Cameraperson*, change the way you thought about the cinematography work you were doing? Or the kind of work you wanted to do going forward?

I'm curious why you asked that.

As a cinematographer, you're often working hard in service of realizing someone else's vision, or to tell someone else's story. You may very well have the most important job of anyone, but it's the kind of work that can often be almost invisible. I wondered if when you have the experience of putting something together that really is explicitly about *your* experience, if that maybe opened a world that you didn't know was ready to be opened.

Absolutely. On so many levels. It surprises me that I needed to make *Cameraperson* to know this. I was amazed by the extent to which you can trust the people across from you—in this case, the people who are watching the film—to be *with* you, even if you are actually speaking from the place of your greatest need. We worked to create a film that would allow you, the viewer, to enter it and then understand that it was building on itself in ways that you could bring your own stuff to.

I made *Cameraperson* out of need—a deep human need I had after 20 years of filming. My attitude was, "I'm not leaving any of my questions out of this movie." I am racked by questions after 20 years of doing this. The contradictions and the dilemmas and the euphoria of doing this work—I'm not leaving any of it out. I wanted to show that it is possible, that if I keep staying inside this core thread and I give you just enough information to know part of who I am, then we can keep moving forward together with all these questions.

People are not fools. They know how to listen, they know how to feel, they know what's going on in the world. So that's all the baseline. We can lock in at the level of our most challenging places. That feels like the idea that is guiding my next project, which feels equally scary to me in different ways, but it's just like, "Okay. Full trust." You need to trust in the audience's human experience. They're alive, they're living, they know what this is.

The world into which I was born and the world in which I was raised, Seventh-day Adventism, and the very

hermetic structures of belief and the very rule-bound community in which my mind was formed as a child…
It's stunning to me how many years it has taken me to release myself from those constructs. I think we
each share some version of that. Some of them are horrible, of course. People who've experienced violence
early in life, or extreme poverty, it has informed all that they know. To rebuild the world and punch
through the construct of what you thought the world actually was is a really slow process. *Cameraperson*
was my way of doing that. I broke through.

What were your fears about creating such personal work?

I had a lot of fear about not being perceived as a good person. Everything I was raised to be was about
being a good person. So, to simply acknowledge that that concept doesn't really work for humans, that was
a huge journey for me. Really, up until the eleventh hour in editing *Cameraperson*, there was a scene in
the film that the editor kept asking me about, "Why is this in the movie?" I came up with all kinds of
reasons and it needed to stay in the movie. Finally, he was just like, "You actually need to tell me why
this needs to be in the movie." And I said, "You know why? Because I want to make it clear to everyone
that I'm a white person who thinks about racism." And he's like, "The movie doesn't need that. If *you* need
that, you can leave it in." And I was like, "Okay. Ouch. Pulling it out." But the fear around how I would
be perceived, coming out of where I came out of… it was very hard for me.

As determined as I was to leave all my questions in, and have all my questions be addressed in the film, I
realized that wasn't possible. I really thought I could get everything in. The big *everything*. Eventually
I had the realization of how necessary it was that the film be partial and fragmented and full of gaps and
spaces and not know the answers. That was liberating. It was fun to finally get to that place.

**I spoke to someone recently who had just finished writing a memoir. They said that it was hard for them to
come to the understanding that not *everything* needed to be in there. Maybe you have a ton of great ideas,
but you don't need to use all of them. Some of those ideas can go other places later.**

Yes. Did you read Caetano Veloso's memoir? You should. That was actually something that influenced me in
making *Cameraperson*. Every chapter addresses a different thing. So one chapter is about one song, one
chapter is the dictatorship, one chapter is his relationship with tropicalistas, one chapter is a love
story, and that's it. It's so good and it made me think, "Oh, okay, you don't have to go through the
entire chronology of your life, especially if you want anyone to actually read that memoir or watch that
movie. My film was very much about me, but it is me as a camera person. It is not *all* of me.

**Documentary filmmaking is complicated, particularly when it comes to issues around objectivity and
subjectivity. That gets more complicated when you are your own subject. It's hard to try and be objective,
or view things from an outside perspective.**

What was very fascinating was that making the movie taught me things about myself I didn't know. I did not
expect it to do that. And one of those things I learned is that I really do have a way of seeing.
Honestly, I've worked for a lot of different directors and I thought I was doing the thing I was supposed
to do, which is adapting to whatever their film needs and shooting in radically different ways. But, you
know, when I started going back through all the footage, it's like, "Oh, I have things that I always do
and ways that I always do them."

Also, it would never have occurred to me how preoccupied I am by women, and by viewing women in many
stages of life. My self-conception has always been that I've been mostly preoccupied by racism and
questions of how race is constructed. I felt like that is what I was usually paying attention to. When I'm
on a shoot in Rwanda, I'm thinking about race and colonial history and I'm thinking about my own
whiteness. I'm thinking about all these things. Then to look at the footage and be like, "Oh, I was really
interested in what it was to be a pregnant woman in that place at that time. That's where my focus
actually was."

I feel like that is interesting in terms of identity. It's like we have many identities and we understand
the world from the positions of those many identities. Still, it's fascinating to me the way I had erased—
at least to myself—how much I was implicated in what it is to be female in the world. And especially if
you're going to places in the world where it can be even more punishing to be female, though that's
basically everywhere in the world. That had not occurred to me until we strung the footage together and I
could see that it is everywhere. No matter what the project was, I was also always looking at these women
during different phases of life. It's people falling in love, it's children, it's mothers, it's old
ladies, but I'm really looking at them.

So you got a sort of objective glimpse of how you are really "seeing" the world.

I was so un-self-aware of that, which is fascinating to me. I think it makes a strong argument for why we
need not just one type of people to be making films. But beyond that, how can we discover the way we "see"
that is not just a mimicking of what has come before? Because that's how we're trained. As a
cinematographer you're trained, "Oh, you should shoot this with this light because that will be
beautiful," right? So many of our ways of seeing are so deeply embedded and it's hard to step outside of
that.

**Having had this very self-reflective experience making your film, how does that change the way you work
moving forward?**

One of the things that I came to some place of ownership around was the fact that you can't succeed at representing other people accurately. That is an impossible task and yet… what can you do? Do you continue to make work that misrepresents people? No, you don't actively do that. But you realize that even while seeking to do work that is connected, that is meaningful, that will last, it is going to be a little bit messy. You're going to make some terrible mistakes. You're going to hurt people. Sometimes you're going to be foolish and arrogant and embarrassing and wrong. And then you own it and try to do better. Also, maybe asking for forgiveness is not appropriate, maybe it's just finding a different way to do it and acknowledging that occasionally you blew it and talking about why. You have to also realize that it's not always about trying to make yourself look good. And the truth is I feel like I've been trying to do that for a long time, that's what I've been trying to do for 20 years.

Now I think—How I can get as close as I can to the space where I'm the only person who could tell this story? I'm only going to work on projects where it feels like I am truly needed because I'm the only one who can do it. That's a very peculiar thing, right? And what it means to me is there might be a situation where American people might want me to come and shoot a film in Sudan and I'm like, "No, there's a Sudanese camera person who can do that work. Even then there are complications around insider-ness and outsider-ness, right?" I respect those complications. But moving forward from *Cameraperson*, I wanna push the form.

I want to be challenged on all of my deepest and highest levels. And I wanna be brave and I wanna do the work that is terrifying for me to do. *Cameraperson* was terrifying to me and the next project is terrifying, too, in the most euphoric ways. So that's what I'm trying to do. Those are the choices I'm trying to make.

You teach at NYU. I'm curious, are there things about making documentaries and cinematography that can't be taught? Things that you can only learn by doing the work for a long time? For example, can you teach someone to be a good listener? Or what it means to be empathetic?

I think what you can share—and what I love sharing—are just ways of interacting. One of the things that I do when I'm teaching or giving a talk is that I move out into the audience. I discover things in real time. I might say to someone in the audience, "I'm noticing your foot's moving. And now that I'm looking at it, you're not moving anymore… or you're deciding in your mind, "Do I keep moving so that shows I'm not self-conscious about the fact that you're looking at me?," for instance.

I'll do that because that is what a camera person does. They don't stand at the front of the room and speak from a podium for an entire scene. They go up to the top, they sit down next to someone, they move around. I'll go into the audience, I'll sit next to people, I'll talk to people and learn something from them. It never fails. For example, I walked out into this audience of a Q&A I was doing and there was a woman who was writing down notes, but she was writing with her hand curled up into a fang, almost. And so I went from behind and filmed her writing and then I came and sat next to her and she immediately opened her hand.

Then I described to the audience what I had seen and I tried to show them what the hand looked like as she wrote. I said, "Would you be willing to show us what you can do? I bet there's a story behind why you write like that." She then told us a shattering, amazing story. For me, the way I think about teaching is you do it in the classroom, so you ask the students to listen to each other, to listen to you, in this really active way. And you keep being improvisatory, you keep throwing things at them that they don't see coming. They start to realize, "Oh, it's not *out there*—the work we're doing is now, right here." You're learning to do it now. You are learning to conduct an interview now. I am learning to respond to your questions now.

I did an exercise with my students about lighting an interview, and I was sensing that a lot of the students were having fears about their project that was due soon. One of my primary beliefs is that one of the biggest impediments to creative work is shame. So how do we identify the spaces of our shame and release ourselves from them? I had the students interview each other about their fears, which is a pretty standard thing. I thought it would be interesting if the person who'd been interviewed also cut the footage of the interview themselves. So there were two versions using the same footage—one version cut by the person who had done the interviewing and one version cut by the person who had been interviewed.

We watched them all together. They were short, just a few minutes long. Every person who edited themselves took out all emotion and made themselves look smart, while the people who were seeing the person from the outside had a much more compassionate look at the emotional range of the person. People often seemed almost ashamed of their own human complexity.

I love that about teaching. I'll be like, "Okay, I know they need to learn this, this, and this." Alright, let me set up a situation where they might learn some of those techniques or just learn the order in which you need to do things. And then, how do I throw in one of those really profound pieces around vulnerability, around duration, around discomfort. When I get that in there, then stuff really happens.

What makes you particularly well-suited to doing this kind of documentary work, as opposed to being a narrative filmmaker?

I have an urge to be a narrative filmmaker, too, of course. The project that I'm doing now is kind of a hybrid. I'm doing it with my father and the conceit of the film is that he must die in every scene of the movie—so it's documentary footage and then, with the help of stunt people, we are integrating the moment of fiction, the edge of what is not yet reality. He's not yet dead, right? So I have to imagine his death.

I'm trying to do what I think I do well, which is to be receptive and to be comfortable with whatever emotional thing is happening. My dad now has dementia and change is happening and I'm so angry about it because my mom also had dementia. I'm like, "I did not need to do this again, right?" So all of that feeling is in my camera work with him and the relationship is present in what we're doing. But then what I am really determined to do is make a hilarious film. Like, I really want it to be funny.

I know it's going to rip my heart out and hopefully it'll rip other people's hearts out, too. Confronting his death is so hard, which makes the territory of what has to be imagined here so interesting. You know, we have to plan it. We have to talk to stunt coordinators, we have to set it up, it has to be created… and there's a lot of control in that. And I'm really not interested in control. Generally, I'm really resistant to control. I am interested in constraints and being aware of constraints.

So I'm really trying to figure it out. I don't understand in many ways the difference between these two things. But this project is pushing a lot of buttons. We filmed a fake funeral for him and I wondered if maybe I thought that if we did the fake one, we'd never have to do a real one.

In documentaries you have these moments that are so deeply unexpected that you're just like, "I can't believe this is happening," which is also what death will do. Even if you know it's coming and someone has dementia or cancer, the way it happens, how it goes down, you do *not* see it coming. I've lived through enough deaths to know that. So how do I stay true to this observational work about death while I simultaneously try to make fiction? And what is it that compels me to make this? I'm trying to figure it out.

At this point, could you imagine shooting something else like *Citizenfour* or going back to shooting work for someone else?

Yes I can. For example, the relationship I have with Laura Poitras is one of the most interesting relationships I have with another human. And her approach, like the specific subjectivity of the way she tries to make a film, is that she's interested in gathering primary evidence from the people who are at the white-hot core of the biggest problems of our time. And she has the patience and intelligence and integrity to get to that spot and get you into that room in a way that nobody else can. So, yes, but I would say in some ways you have to be willing to give your life over to a thing like that.

With a filmmaker like Laura, it's just that you have no idea how long it's going to take or how long you're going to have to be gone into it. I think in some ways one of the choices that I'm making now has to do with the fact that it feels like I have some things I am really interested in exploring, and I want to dedicate my time to them as actively as I can. It's increasingly rare to find collaborations where I'm like, "Yeah, okay, this fits, this works and we get to explore this thing together." But there's absolutely no going back to working on a film that doesn't do something. We don't need anymore of the old stuff. We really don't.

Kirsten Johnson recommends:

The color orange

All These Sleepless Nights directed by Michal Marczak

Let Them Eat Chaos by Kate Tempest

Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the 19th Century's Most Photographed American

Nick Cave's Soundsuits

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