

On steamrolling bold visions into existence and healing along the way



Filmmaker Penelope Spheeris on striking a balance between making underground documentaries and Hollywood blockbusters, being a steamroller when it comes to your work, and learning how to use your trauma to your creative advantage.

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As told to Mark "Frosty" McNeill, 2737 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Adversity](#), [Success](#).

Throughout your career you've straddled overground and underground worlds. Has that been important, striking a balance as an artist?

I feel very fortunate that I was able to do studio movies, independent movies, and documentaries in my career. A lot of people, especially women, get stuck in one category. Well, I got stuck in the studio system—in the comedy category. But I have to be honest with you, the reason I did that is because I just took whatever job I could get.

I did a movie called the *Hollywood Vice Squad* and gave Robin Wright her first job in a film, and gave Carrie Fisher her first job out of rehab. It was a terrible movie mind you, but I learned how to roll a car and blow up a bullet squib and make somebody look dead. It's not like I would do those kinds of movies anymore, but I learned a lot. My agent said, "Where else are you going to make \$50,000, Penelope?" And I went, "Oh, yeah, you're right. Let's go."

You picked up skills and employed a team you loved, but it's also the alchemy of taking funds and transferring them into passion projects.

That was a very satisfying thing when all of a sudden I became paid these ridiculous amounts of money to do the studio movies. Having been very poor all my life, I just saved the money. I didn't spend it. I never knew how to spend money. And I didn't make *Wayne's World* until I was 45 years old. So by that time my personality was established, and my spending was established. I wasn't going to change after that. So I was able to put the money away and use it to make other films I wanted to make. Like, *The Decline of Western Civilization Part III*, I totally financed myself. So that was good. I'm addicted to making movies, and so I have to nurture that habit.

When you're controlling a film, funding it and self-producing it, is there something you like to do to create an ideal internal ecosystem for the project?

Let's take *The Decline Part III*, for example, which started out about the new punk movement that I noticed in the late '90s, but took me down a different path, because I noticed the people I was dealing with were squatter punks. They were homeless kids, and that movie turned out to be about homelessness. In the beginning, I never

thought that would happen, but you have to just let a documentary take you down the road that's most important.

How do you find the thread—the thing that's going to pull you along?

That's the trick right there, is to find that thread, and I always say you got to just watch the signs in the road. Give me a good D.P. and a good editor, and I'm going to find that movie.

Is it hard to keep the clarity of the thread when there are other voices in the room?

When I did *The Decline of Western Civilization* and started shooting in 1979, I was laughed at, literally, by my contemporaries. I was working with Albert Brooks and knew Rob Reiner, and Penny Marshall, and Jim Brooks and all those people. And when I told them I was going to go do a movie about punk rock, they made fun of me. "What, are you stupid? Go to Warner Brothers, do this movie with Goldie Hawn." And I'm like, "No, I'm going to do this punk rock movie." And I did it. And the first time it was screened, the first comment from a woman in the audience was, "How dare you glorify these heathens?" Recently, *The Decline of Western Civilization* was inducted into the Library of Congress National Film Library. So I mean, you just got to stick by your guns. I knew I was doing the right thing, but sure was criticized a lot back then for it.

Usually, the projects that have the most uproar are the ones that last the longest, but in the moment it is hard to keep your shield up.

Most artists are sensitive. It just comes along with creativity. I've spent many years working in this business just feeling like shit—like I haven't really accomplished anything, and I still feel that way to a degree. You know?

What emboldens you and silences those doubts?

I think the single most encouraging thing for me is when I hear a person say, "Your movie changed my life." Dave Grohl tells the story about how he went to visit his cousin and all of a sudden she's a lesbian, wearing combat boots, got her head shaved, and she's got a *Decline* VHS. It was like contraband, and it changed his life, even Dave Grohl, you know? So that's just gratifying. I hear this from kids a lot.

A lot of films just put popcorn in tummies but when you can change somebody's life... Documentaries often have that power because they're dealing in truth, or at least hopefully. What is important about objectivity within a documentary?

Well, my goal when I do a documentary is to follow the example Frederick Wiseman set. He would place his camera in a very unexpected situation—like an insane asylum, a bootcamp, or a high school. He would put the camera there and just let it roll. What I learned from watching his movies is that it's my job as a filmmaker to show you what I see and try to be objective and not sway the viewer one way or the other, or say that what the subject is doing is right or wrong. Who am I to judge that?

How can creativity serve as a positive outlet for anger?

I didn't realize it when I was making documentaries about music, but I believe what I was doing was working through my own personal demons and using film to get through that. I mean, when I first saw punk rock, I was right at home, because my upbringing was total chaos. There were fights every week—somebody was bloody every week. I had seven stepfathers. I didn't speak to one of them for like two years. How do you live in the same 1,200-square-foot house and not speak to somebody for two years? I did it because he was an asshole. When I found punk rock, I'm like, "Oh, chaos, expressing your anger, tearing down tradition, trying to change the world? I'm down." So that's what was inspiring to me about it. Everybody's got a monkey on their back, those traumatic things that have made us who we are. And to get through them is so important, you know?

The thing that formed me, I believe, was the murder of my father when I was seven years old and the loss of the

carnival that I lived on at that time. So whenever anything happens to me that reminds me of that on a subconscious level, if somebody is trying to steal *The Decline*, that means they're stealing the carnival. You know? Whenever those things get to me, I have to deal with them, because it's really a visceral anger, a visceral fear, because I was a child when that happened and I didn't handle the logic as an adult would. And so, I have to just identify those kind of things that might set me off. I mean, some days I don't even want to open my email, I don't want to have one of those things set me off. One thing that often very creative people have in common is a traumatic childhood event.

Trauma can be a weight, but acknowledging it is important as opposed to bottling it up.

Yeah, that's no bueno. That's cancer. The minute you shove the bad stuff under the carpet, you're in trouble. You have to bring it out and deal with it. You've got to face it. The French have a phrase that is, "If you fear something, take a bath in it." And when I first heard it, I thought, "What the hell does that mean?" And what it means is, if something scares you, hurts you, or if you're afraid of it, embrace it, go for it, eat it up. It's the only way to get rid of it.

I think I'm resigned to the fact that it never goes away completely. I've had so many traumas in my life that I don't think I'll ever be a normal person. I mean, my brother got killed on a motorcycle, and my daughter's father OD'd from heroin, and my mom died, my dad died. I mean, it's really hard to deal with those things, you know? But I have my own religion going. I don't go to church and all that. But I heard someone say, "god doesn't give you anything you can't handle." He must think I'm really strong, because he gave me a lot.

You've had traumas but you've been able to transform them into things that can change somebody's life.

Well, I always say I should have been dead or in jail, because when you have these things happen to you, you can get really pissed and act in ways that are extremely negative and hurt people, or you can turn it into something creative and help people. And I don't know, I guess my mom probably taught me to stay on the positive side. She was bipolar, but she was adorable when she was on the upside of the bipolar.

Do you feel like over the course of life you've picked up little mantras that keep you going and focused?

Yeah. I feel like the minute I start to get real down or depressed or negative, I got to kick myself in the ass and just stop it, because life ain't that long. I got a choice, I can live happy, or I can live bummed out. That's what I didn't like about grunge music—it was so bummed out. All they were doing was whining and complaining and turning all the anger in. And that used to bug me. I was never a fan of grunge, but god bless Kurt.

Is there better catharsis in chaos than in moping?

Oh, yeah. I cannot mope. I don't even know how. I'll go and tear weeds out of the garden just to get the anger out, but I won't mope, no way. I find that pathetic.

Humans have this funny relationship with time. There are moments you want to speed up and moments you want to slow down. The sweet moments, you want to last longer.

And we have absolutely no control over any of that.

How do you appreciate the moment itself?

I feel like I didn't appreciate the time that I was on top of the world making movies. When I did *Wayne's World*, it was like nobody expected it to be so successful, and then they gave me millions of dollars to do *Little Rascals* and *Beverly Hillsbillies* and *Black Sheep*. I feel like I didn't appreciate the time as much as I should have. I always felt like, "Well, I'm going to do more, and it'll keep going and I'll be able to make whatever movies I want after this." But I wasn't able to, so I feel mad at myself that I didn't appreciate that time more.

If you look back objectively now, is that time sweeter, or was it when you were with Darby Crash, cooking eggs?

Those moments are very special but in different ways. I feel fortunate that films have allowed me to have so many different kinds of experiences. I feel like I'm probably done making movies now. I mean, I might do a couple more, but I really like building houses better. I don't know... I wish I could have done that stack of scripts I wanted to do over the years but could never do because I did *Wayne's World*. After that I could only get a comedy made. I could've made a whole bunch of movies like *Suburbia*, because I've got them in a box in my vault. But those days are gone. I'm just thankful for the times I did have.

Do you have practices when you're in the midst of a project to have a daily positive check in?

No. If I'm working on a project, I'm a steamroller. I won't ever stop and do anything. I'm so focused that I just go like all hell. And then, like when we finished *Wayne's World* and they told me I couldn't do *Wayne's World 2*, because I wouldn't make the editing changes that people wanted for the first one, I pulled all the phones out of my wall. That's when they were attached to the wall—1991, or something. I sat there on the floor in my living room and cried for two weeks. But while I was working on the movie, I didn't cry. I was so focused and into it. I know it sounds like I was moping a little bit, but I didn't let anybody see me.

What is important about giving a voice to the underrepresented, whether they be documentary subjects or characters within scripted projects?

My brother got killed by a drunk driver in 1984. My brother was gay-

He was a musician, right?

Yes, a really good musician. He used to open for ELO. He and Jackson Browne were really good friends, and Joni Mitchell. He was on the road to being a superstar, and then he just got taken out by this asshole drunk driver. But the reason I bring it up is because I had to shoot a scene in *The Boys Next Door* where Charlie Sheen and Max Caulfield are serial killers, and they pick up this gay guy in a bar. And they go back to his apartment and kill him. And it was literally months after my brother got killed, and it was so hard for me. I remember having to walk off the set and cry sometimes. It was really difficult.

But nobody saw.

Nobody saw me cry, no, and I got it over with real quick, and then I got back to kicking ass.

Is there an important emotional side to show people?

I don't think so, but that's my own private shit. But as far as kindness and consideration, I think many times directors have reputations for being egomaniacs and rude to people—yelling and screaming, especially the guy directors. As a woman, you can't do any yelling and screaming, and I don't really want to anyway. It doesn't accomplish anything. I try to eliminate the ego out of things. I remember being at the Director's Guild one time—just imagine 40 of the biggest directors you can imagine sitting in the boardroom. And this old guy, he must've been 90, walks in—he was late, and everybody's just silenced. And they look at him, and he goes, "Well, how does it feel to be in a room full of assholes?"

For young filmmakers who are coming up, is there encouragement for them to be able to share the stories that are really important?

If I had to say anything to young filmmakers now, it's to do what I did, and take whatever gig you can get. I did that out of a sense of survival to make money. I mean, before I was a film director I was a waitress. I had one boyfriend who called me the waitress that got lucky. Could you imagine he said that? He's not my boyfriend anymore.

As a waitress, you probably picked up skills for dealing with humans.

I worked the counter like I'd work a movie—I was a steamroller. The receipt books—I went through three a day. That's 300 people, and that's why they wanted me on the counter. I was bam, bam, bam, bam. It keeps my mind off the shit in my head, you know?

Slinging pie to make someone happy.

Lemon meringue, baby.

Penelope Spheeris Recommends:

Zen meditation music

Four albums of Jimmie Spheeris

Mario's Peruvian & Seafood

Willis Earl Beal, musician and poet

Building houses

Name

Penelope Spheeris

Vocation

Director, Producer, Screenwriter

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