On structure, collaboration, and imagining a better possible future

Filmmaker Brett Story on rethinking the ways in which films get made, the value of imagining a better future for everyone, and never losing sight of why art speaks to you in the first place.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2688 words.

Tags: <u>Film</u>, <u>Process</u>, <u>Collaboration</u>, <u>Inspiration</u>, <u>Success</u>, <u>Business</u>, <u>Money</u>.

Your film, _The Prison in Twelve Landscapes_ is about exploring the US concept of imprisonment, and the many policies that govern it, while your film _The Hottest August_ is about climate change and how we experience it in an individual and collective way within different tribes. How did you feel after interviewing your subjects and characters?

I make political films about systems and structures and how people navigate trying to have agency in the world while still coming up against structures of oppression. So the interviews are really important to my films—I'm not searching just for information to deliver to an audience, I'm searching for the complex ways in which people inhabit the contradictions of actual existence. For example, how does a system like the prison system affect, not just people who are immediately imprisoned, but how is it integrated into the whole fabric of American life? The interviews with my subjects are very important because that's my chance to ask questions that will let people try and find language, usually inadequately, to describe how they both experience, and also resist, their existence in such a world. The interviews are in some ways the most satisfying part of making a film because they're the place where I get to learn the most. People are never what you expect them to be. They're never just there as experts to deliver information. They're there to have a conversation with, and to have an open-ended dialogue with.

I learn a lot about how someone is experiencing something, or making sense of a situation, and that informs the search that the film is going through. In some ways, I feel better about the world after I've done my interviews—people are so generous and so committed to understanding their experiences. People want freedom, so it's interesting to invite people to talk about what that looks like for them.

Your films are about big subjects, but they do not provide right or wrong answers or solutions. They're vague but, at the same time, very deep. How do you build structure and form to your work when the topics are so wide and the result is so uncertain?

The structure is always the hardest part of my films because I don't work with easy structural forms. There's something about the story structure that's a little bit too easy. There's a reason that it's the most satisfying form of the children's book, right? Because it's neat and it is tidy. It's like a math equation. And I'm interested in what's messy and contradictory about life, so the forms of my films end up imitating that.

I work not so much with the story arc as I do with the associative language of cinema, and part of what attracts

me to cinema is the editing. The edit itself is premised on the idea of making associations between two things. Two non-consecutive moments are placed together as if it's consecutive, through the magic of editing, and then the mind is invited to connect them in some way. They're not connected necessarily in time and space. They've been artificially imposed as connected. So the mind gets invited to do the work of trying to understand why these two things should be associated.

For me, that's really interesting politically as well as narratively, because it means that the mind is free from some of the oppressive parts of traditional structure, which relies again on digestible narratives. Mainstream media tends to rely on easy, digestible narratives, because fundamentally people are afraid of things that can't be boxed up and wrapped in a bow, like, "This is a good person. This is a bad person. This is a good country. This is a bad country."

Real life doesn't work like that. And if we're politically going to come out of the state of the world into something better, then we need to have art forms that invite us to think across the siloed stories or siloed issues. So in practical terms, I have to think in terms like, "Where should we begin? What do we need at the beginning so that we can get somewhere else by the end? And what needs to happen in the middle in order to allow for a deeper consciousness or a deeper understanding of the ideas being presented?" That's sort of how I begin thinking about structure.

I'm wondering if it is possible to create art or creative work without taking into consideration the power structures that rule our lives, or even thinking about how the artistic work will prevail and have an impact in the future. Is this something that you have thought about? In this moment of history, can we create something that really comes from a place of freedom?

Of course not. We can never assume that any idea, any work of any kind—not just art, but any work of text, any work of scholarship, any work of journalism—can emerge out of a vacuum. We're all embedded and invested in the existing power structures of the world, and we must grapple with them. But I also think it's important to not let that paralyze us. It's important to say that just because we exist within the real world, within the real power relationships and real inequalities, it doesn't mean that we can't also resist them. We can resist them in our daily lives. We can change them. We can transform them. They don't have to be this way. We can also think through the role of what we make both in terms of its responsibility, to be honest about the power structures that emerge from that.

We can make work that acknowledges where it comes from and also in its form, and in its language tries to resist and offer something in resistance to those power structures. A lot of people have this idea about the world as if the state of things is inevitable, and that nothing we make or do can ever change anything. And that's anti-historical. We are, as people on a planet making things, constantly asked to either reproduce the world as it is or try and chip away at it. The least we can do is try and make work that in some ways tries to challenge the world as it is, and especially the most unfair and unjust aspects of the world.

In your film *The Hottest August*, there is an astronaut character and you ask him, "What's the importance of being able to dream about yourself in the future?" He replies that when you think about yourself in the future, you make plans to change that future. But if you can't see yourself in it, you're not able to think about having opportunities, and your intention shifts to just surviving. I'm wondering if this also applies to creative people who are seeking a way to sustain themselves with their work. As creative people, is this lack of ability to see opportunity in the future an important issue? How can we overcome this?

I think those of us who are making work, especially right now, are dealing with this contradiction where we want to make work that changes the world or want to make work that enables new forms of political consciousness, but also want to pay the rent, and want to have a career, and want people to write nice things about our projects in the newspapers. So those things coexist. One does not negate the other. The best we can do is be honest about them, and also build infrastructure that tempers the worst consequences of the latter.

We have a real problem right now for artists and people in general which is this sense of scarcity. There's just not enough to go around. So when you feel like there's not enough to go around, you become fixated on what you

need to do to have enough, or what you need to do to have more. So we're pitted in competition with each other, and we also make safe choices. I think we're seeing that in documentary right now where so many films emerge out of the landscape of competitive funding, where people compete with each other to offer the safest bets in cinema, in films for funders who are risk-averse. And the result is that we're making work that's less and less imaginative. The role of art in opening up the imagination is central to this question about how we fight for a different future.

This is what the astronaut says in my film. When you don't have the space to imagine yourself in the future, when you can't imagine beyond the world as it is right now, then you will do nothing to fight or to build anything other than what we have right now. And I think art is so essential to remind us that the world as it appears to us, it doesn't have to be this way, we should imagine something better so that we can make it better. And that requires imagination, not just in terms of what your films are about, or what you're saying, but also the cinematic language itself. It needs to be reinvented.

In the current funding model where everybody is in competition for these tiny little grants, it feels like our entire careers are in the balance of whether or not we can get this grant or get into that festival, which means that people do not take any kind of formal or aesthetic risks. And that creates a contradictory situation where even these films that are supposedly about political issues and social issues in some ways end up cementing the status quo, instead of opening up the space to imagine something better. There is a challenge for us in the documentary world to build better infrastructure so that all of us who are trying to make stuff don't feel like we're individuals competing for scarce resources, but instead have the space to collaborate and to take risks.

In terms of what success and failure are, everyone can relate to judging ourselves in terms of our choices as individuals, but also on how the collective system imposes certain limitations and challenges. As creative people, how can we identify when we are being too hard on ourselves?

The best thing we can do is to try and find structures that help us not feel so alone. We need as a community to be more honest about the lack of meritocracy in this field, the way in which festivals are not actually the great arbiter of what's good and what's bad in a film, that they have their own agendas that sometimes festivals take certain films because they're feeling pressured by broadcasters, or by other entities or that there's something arbitrary, or there's a political economy to who gets these resources, and how they're allocated. Because otherwise, if we don't have that transparency and if we can't see what's going on behind the curtain in some way, then we feel all of our failures as if they belong to us, rather than belonging to the system as a whole.

If we can be more honest about how the system itself operates as a system, then it'll relieve us of some of the burden of feeling like all of the rejection letters that stack up are somehow an indication of our own personal failings. We also need more structures that enable collaboration instead of competition as well. There needs to be more infrastructure that allows us as makers to work in collaboration and in fellowship as opposed to always in competition.

What kind of structures and infrastructures would foster collaboration?

We have to figure out what that looks like. Maybe it means to build cooperatives where some of the resources, like camera equipment and editing suites, are held in commons spaces. Maybe it means more skill sharing. So if you're making a project but don't have the money to hire an editor, then there are infrastructures where we can trade skills.

I think about this in terms of issues of diversity as well. We need to think about questions like why we don't see women filmmakers at festivals? Could it be that there's no childcare? Could it be that they're at home dealing with three-year-olds? What's the infrastructure that would allow people who are primary caregivers, either for children or for elderly parents, to still make work and still travel to festivals? I'm very interested in, not just issues of representation, but issues of building new forms, and creating the conditions that allow diverse people to make work, and also for diverse work to be made by lots of people.

You lived and started to make films in Montreal where the rent was so cheap that it allowed a community of

artists to create work from a place where you didn't have to worry too much about failing, as long as the work was interesting. What advice would you give to creative people that want to experiment and take risks, but also that live in an environment where failure can be so discouraging and also feel so absolute?

Keeping oneself free of the careerist mentality for as long as possible is really important. Once you start thinking too much or getting too invested in building a career, it can really be the death knell for imaginative work. In Montreal, I paid a $300 rent. You could work one day a week. This gave me time and time is essential. I could just play around. I didn't have to use every minute efficiently. Figuring out what are the conditions that would help me have time is really important.

In Montreal, people worked with a resistance to the marketplace of a city like Toronto. When you just care, when you remember why art is important, why you want to make it, what it has meant in your life, to connect to that part of you that encountered a poem, or a song, or a book for the first time, and felt liberated by it, felt seen by it, felt like the world opened up when you encounter it—that to me is the crux of why do the work that we're doing. And when I feel like I've gotten too wrapped up in questions like, "Do I have a career?," "Will people fund my next film?," "Will people admire me?" Those are the wrong ambitions and they distort my thinking on a project. We need to stay connected to the question of, "Why do we make this work?" Because it's not about us. It's not about the need to be famous. It should be about what art can do for the human spirit, what art can do for the community, and it's easy to lose track unless you're having encounters with artwork that makes you feel alive.

When do you know when a project is done?

I don't think I ever really know when a project is done because I make projects that could keep going on forever. For me it's a balancing act, feeling confident enough in the work and feeling like I've exhausted a sense of what else could be done with it. I usually get to a certain stage where I'm very, very tired and I'm not interested in it as much as I was. And that's a good time to end. Sometimes it's just about saying, "I'm tired. I've learned a lot. We've gone a long way, and now the film needs to leave me, and be in the world."

Brett Story Recommends:

Fish Story by Allan Sekula (book of photographs and essays)

"The Toad in the Garden" by Stuart Hall (essay)

Handsworth Songs by the Black Audio Film Collective (film)

O'er the Land by Deborah Stratman (film)

Picture of Light by Peter Mettler (film)

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