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# On activism, filmmaking, and maintaining balance

Filmmaker, educator, and DJ Ephraim Asili on his history as an activist, understanding the demands of being a filmmaker and making it work, and how to strike the right balance between being a creator and a teacher.

## How did you begin filmmaking?

Well, it wasn't something that I would say I grew up wanting to do. I actually remember the moment when, almost out of the blue, I made a personal commitment to myself. I was literally walking down the street one day and I said, "You know what, I'm going to learn filmmaking and I'm going to study it and I'm sticking to it. I've made up my mind and that's what I'm going to do." At that time, I was 25 and I had been in and out of college. I had already been married, and I was going through a divorce with a child involved. I was in this process of moving from this collective I lived in, into my own room in a house. I was doing a lot of soul searching, asking myself questions like, "What am I going to do moving forward, what's going to be my livelihood?"

Something about the process of filmmaking really appealed to me. In retrospect, I think it was that deep in my heart, if I could do anything, I would have been a musician. The amount of time it takes to master an instrument just didn't seem plausible in the way that I wanted to exist. It occurred to me that filmmaking is something that people sometimes take on when they're a little older.

The technological part of it is a big part of it, but the apparatus isn't as complicated as playing trumpet or saxophone or even guitar. It's a simpler medium in a lot of ways. I went to school and immediately fell in love, and no looking back. You know?

## Can you tell me more about the collective you were involved with?

It's kind of complicated, but the general collective was called The Life Center Association, which sounds like some weird religious organization. It's not. I believe that that organization developed from another organization that came prior to that, and this is, I think, going back to the late '60s and early '70s. It was called something like Movement for a New Society.

Long story short, they used to own a lot of property in West Philadelphia and then they would use these properties for different meetings and living in and whatnot. At that time I was already married, and my wife and I were awaiting our son who was going to be born. I think she was probably about three or four months pregnant, and we'd been doing a lot of activist work in West Philly where these houses are. We proposed a house to provide affordable living for activists of color to be able to spend less time working and more time on activism. We called it The Treehouse, because our son is named Yabisi, and that word translates to tree. He was the first child to be born into that house, into that collective, and so we dedicated the house to him.

## How did you find that group of people?

I dropped out of college when I was 19. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life and I was just bumming around Philly, where I'm from. Someone suggested that I sign up for AmeriCorps and volunteer and make some money and help out with stuff.

MOVE, the MOVE organization, was in West Philly and I was also, and still am, very close with them. MOVE is an organization started by someone named John Africa, and they're a sort of back-to-nature organization that was formed in Philly. They're unfortunately most famous for being the group that had the bomb dropped on them in 1985, when a lot of them were killed, and an entire city block destroyed. That's MOVE.

The remaining MOVE members who didn't die in the bombing, and the one member who survived, Ramona Africa, were also in West Philly. This is all happening around three years prior to my revelation about film. At that time there was never a moment, it never crossed my mind, that I would make a movie. It was kind of this beautiful window of time where MOVE was two blocks away, and then you're around all this great anarchist activity. We had a smaller network. We were all black, Puerto Rican, people of color who also identified as anarchists. There were not a lot of us, maybe 10 in a small neighborhood, but it was just this melting pot of radical folks from all different backgrounds. That stuff was very much happening and I just fell right into it.

#### **How do you think that activism is connected to filmmaking?**

There was a documentary being made about MOVE, and when the filmmakers came (I think they were grad students at the time) and because I was close with MOVE, MOVE would invite me over, and we would watch edits. (Howard Zinn ended up narrating this particular documentary.)

That was the first time that I saw a film being made. They finished the film, and I distinctly remember feeling like I liked the edits more than I liked the actual movie. Beyond all of that, the movie had a life and it raised a lot of awareness. It got the word out about MOVE.

The idea that you could create media content and it would just spread very quickly—that started to click in a really interesting way. Because at that time when we were doing activist work if we were having a rally to free Mumia Abu-Jamal, for instance, we would spend the week prior in some sort of Kinko's Copy Center making fliers and scheduling time to go into different neighborhoods and hand these fliers out. From that activity, maybe you get 10 or 15 people. It's just a lot of work and a lot of resources to spread the word about something. The activism and the filmmaking: it's a way to spread information very quickly.

#### **How do you start a project?**

You know, that's an interesting question. I'm in a weird place in my practice where I'm finishing up three projects at once. They all work in an associative way. When I'm finished with them, I haven't committed to what I'm going to do next. I don't know that I've had the feeling of knowing what it feels like to be at the genesis of a project in a long time. Because I've always been in a whirlwind of already knowing what I'm doing next.

For example, my last few films are all part of a series called *The Diaspora Suite*. I said, "Okay, I'm going to stop it at five films so that I have a clean break, and then I can start fresh with other things." At that time I had already thought, "Well, the film I really want to make is actually something related to the time I lived in the collective." I was aware of that while I was still making *The Diaspora Suite*. That's sort of what's going on in my head.

Then, before I even finished the fifth and final film in *The Suite*, a commissioned film is requested from the Calder Foundation, and then a few months after that another commission comes in for this Basquiat film. So by the time I finish *The Suite*, I'm already working on two commissions, and I'm already thinking, "When I've done these commissions I'm going to make my feature." Everything is very much about rhythms and seeing what comes out of making them.

I like to get into a playful state of mind, in my home studio. To spend time tinkering and looking through stuff. I have a lot of objects in my life that inspire me, in general, like books, records, synthesizers, and cameras. I like to mess around with them and get into a headspace where I can say, "Okay, I'm going to make music for two hours, and then I'm going to write for two hours." I'm excited to be in a place where that doesn't have to be directed toward anything too specific, for the sake of doing it and seeing where I'm at right now.

#### **For the kind of work that you do, what are the most valuable resources?**

I mean, when you're a filmmaker you're kidding yourself if you don't say money, and I hate that that's the case. I probably resisted making films because, as someone who especially shoots on film, it's literally impossible without the resource of money. No camera, no film; and when I say "no film" I mean, no camera, no film stock: no film. Period. They're all expensive things, and so that's a must.

Beyond that, it's the space between boredom and childlike imagination. To be able to slip into this space where I'm pseudo-detached from what I'm doing, but at the same time, I'm just seeing things fresh. The detachment or the sense of boredom, it's almost like I don't want to truly understand, or I'm not paying attention.

I feel like after a window of time I start to slip into the environment, and I'm also at the point where it's like an afternoon just feels like this big expanse of time, because you're pseudo-bored. It's in that moment where I have the camera and I'm kind of bored because time seems to expand from staying put. Then all of a sudden this thing just hits and it's like, "Oh man." Just like, "I've stared at this statue a million times, but on this next time looking at it, it just looks almost abstract." I feel like that's

something, that's the moment when I'm like, "Roll the camera. Go." The second most important thing is the emotional, mental state of mind that I have. Again, that's after I'm financially comfortable in the way that I have everything I need. Most of what I do is just managing feelings, emotions, and thoughts, which is more about rhythms as opposed to any particular objective skill set or something like that.

#### **How did you learn how to do that?**

Well, I think I'm learning. I think watching, and just in terms of the context of film making and art, really watching a lot of work. Also finding the right people to associate with and learn from in terms of work. One of the things I've always loved about the experimental 16 millimeter film world is that people are relatively accessible.

When you see a film that you really like by a living filmmaker, it's likely that you could encounter them and have an interaction and get a feel for who they are as people as well as artists. I've always been interested in the threads that link the artists I admire. One of those qualities is that there's always some sense, whether it's serious or not, of play in the work. To stay youthful past a certain age requires a certain amount of integrity. People who have the integrity to keep their minds nimble. The work comes out of that as opposed to the opposite.

Then outside of film I think it's also just trying to keep certain kinds of practices around mindfulness so that I'm able to analyze my thinking. It's also experience. I've been shooting films the way I've been doing it for 10 years, and I'm grateful for that. I know what works for me, what doesn't work for me, and when I'm at my best. I've seen enough of my own footage to be able to say to myself, "Oh man, when you're under duress this thing doesn't work so well. When you're relaxed, it works much better. When you're almost disinterested, it could work even better sometimes." You know, that sort of thing. It's just experience.

**Do you have a day job, and if so, how do you balance it with your creative work?** Yes, I have a day job. I'm a college professor. I teach film production and film studies at Bard College. I, for better or worse, don't really separate my day job from my art practice. I prefer not to compartmentalize my life. I prefer to think of what I do as an artist, my livelihood as a filmmaker, as "that's my livelihood." I'm a filmmaker and that's what I do. I'm fortunate enough to be able to share my experience and my interest in film making with students who are interested in learning the medium.

That's a continuum. As I learn more, I'm able to share more of my experience with people who want to learn this stuff. It also brings clarity to my practice, to be able to say, "Well, this is what I've tried and this worked and that didn't work." You establish a practice of studying yourself as well, and that is one of the things about teaching that I really love. Also, I'm fortunate enough to teach what I would like to teach. If something that I'm researching interests me, then I can work that into my job.

The one complicated aspect is time. I can't be shooting a film and teaching a class at the same exact time. That's a balance I'm still sorting out. One of the great things about being a filmmaker is that it doesn't require the amount of rigor as, say, playing the violin. You can do it for a while and then put it down for a while, and it works in different phases. When you're a filmmaker, there's pre-production, and then you're shooting the film with the camera, and then there's post-production, and there are often gaps in between. I think the workflow of film making works well with teaching in some ways. At the same time, it just takes longer to complete projects.

Anyway, it's very fluid, the life between my art practice and my work. In fact, increasingly I bring my students into my work. Several students acted in my last film. My assistant director was one of my students. I'm trying to own up to this vision that I have of how I would like to exist in the world. It's like, if I perceive this as my livelihood, and I perceive myself as someone who's not just a teacher because it's a paycheck, but because it's a responsibility, or a commitment, and an honor, to be honest; then, how can I make those things very fluid?

At the same time, it's not a charity. I can't just be like enlisting students and having them do these really intense jobs or not perform when I need them to in terms of hiring them. It's a delicate balance, but it's something that I'm trying to do. It's something that I'm exploring in the work.

#### **What do you like most about the process of making a film?**

When I'm making a film, there's a rush that I get that's comparable to when I played sports in high school, because it's forcing me physically and mentally to the edge. I have to give everything, and when I don't, it just doesn't work, and, generally, you don't get a second chance. You're in the moment and it just *has* to work.

The greatest is when you shoot, and everything seems to align, and then you get the footage back, and you're watching the footage, and the image pops up, and it's like, BAM! It all worked! The way you were feeling, the sun, the moon, and the stars: everything aligned and you got what you needed and it worked.

There's a thrill to that. Even if the movie as a whole doesn't work, even if it's just those flickers of moments. I can't really put into words what that feels like. It's just something that—whatever I go through to get the film made, it's worth it, just to have those flashes. It's not a simple experience to describe but it's the greatest thing, just like... that *jolt*.

Recommended by Ephraim Asili:

"Tell you what I'll do, I'll tell you about five records that I bought last weekend."

The soundtrack to a film called Trouble Man, which says it's by Marvin Gaye. Marvin Gaye only sings on two songs, but it's still amazing. It's a blaxploitation film directed by Ivan Dixon. I should add that the cover to this one has a flap that folds down to show Marvin Gaye lounging in a chair, and when it's flipped up, it's like the poster for the movie. It has this interesting fold, which relates to number two...

James Brown. The soundtrack to the film Black Caesar. It also has a folding cover, and it's one of his best albums. I was familiar with both of these albums. I just didn't have these particular pressings of them on vinyl, but they're both amazing blaxploitation film soundtracks. Black Caesar soundtrack, James Brown. Wonderful, wonderful stuff. Also, it has a lot of instrumentals and he's not always singing.

The next one is called The Blue Stars and the picture on the cover, it's like yellow and white, and it says "Blue Stars" in blue. They're standing on top of a globe, but each person has one foot on the ground and one foot in the air. It's a woman and then a man, and another woman. They're all holding hands. I believe it was recorded in Nairobi, Kenya in 1990. It's really fantastic. A vendor gave it to me for free. He was like, "Ah, you can just take those." Didn't like them. That was definitely a flea market come up.

Next we got, well, I was in Philly and it's my hometown, so I'd have to rep Philly International Records which is the label responsible for the classic Philly soul sound. One of the records I picked up was called War of the Gods by Billy Paul, which is a Philly soul classic and it has a beautiful album cover.

Oh, you know what I'm going to give you last, something a little different. My last pick is going to be History of the Grateful Dead, Vol. 1 (Bear's Choice) because the Grateful Dead are the shit, and I've always liked the Grateful Dead. This funny thing happened where lately Grateful Dead records are really valuable, but back in the day when I was first collecting records they were not because everyone knew you don't buy a studio album. It's like the live shows that are the *thing*. They've become collectible, but this guy put out a box of records when I first got to the flea market, and the first 10 or 12 of them were all these really great conditioned Grateful Dead records. He sold them to me for about \$5 each. The reason I picked this particular one is, number one, it's live, and so it's the best of both worlds in some ways. Number two, it has really great cover art on both sides. Apparently, I didn't realize this, it's the first album to feature the marching psychedelic bears on it. It's a great object, and it was made when their keyboard player whose name was like Pigpen or whatever, the first keyboard player died, and then all of the songs were songs that he liked to sing, or that were his favorite songs to play. It's like none of this is written on the album. It's all unofficial, but it's one of those things. If you're in the know about the Dead, it's a really interesting album. If not, then I don't know what to say.

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Vocation


Filmmaker, Educator, and DJ


Fact

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