On taking time to figure out your path

Filmmaker Marina Katz on the skills involved in film editing, what documentaries can tell us about being human, and why it's OK to embody more than one creative identity.

When working on editing a film like *MATANGI / MAYA / M.I.A.*, in which you are dealing with a mountain of material and thousands of hours of footage, how do you find the narrative thread? I imagine the footage could've been transformed in any number of ways to tell a different kind of story.

You want to tell the actual truth about a person, so you're not trying to create propaganda. Obviously human beings are complex, and there's parts that are likable about all of us, and parts that are less likable. The goal of a good documentary profile is that when you're spending an hour and a half with this person, you want to get a sense for who they are as a human being, and that means including *all* of it. That means not shying away from complexity, which I think can sometimes scare people, both filmmakers and the documentary subject.

That was not true in the case of M.I.A., but just in general, you worry about showing your character in a really bad light, or if it's a person you're not supposed to like, you're worried about making them too likable. How do you do that? I don't have a clear answer, other than to say that I feel like I just honestly have a good intuition when it comes to that. I'm interested in *all* the layers of people, so that tends to come out in the work I do.

It's something I think about, too, as a person who does a lot of interviews. It's easy to take something out of context and make someone look terrible. You have to be careful and thoughtful about that.

Yeah. That's what happens in the media all the time. We live in a world of soundbites. I think that's what is great about the documentary format, especially when approaching a person who's in the media eye anyway. It is a chance to actually show a more well-rounded version of them, and correctly contextualize why they say certain things or why they act certain ways. It's an opportunity to see them as actual human beings.

Something that fiction writers often talk about is the tyranny of likability—this idea that people now reject certain characters for not being likable enough, or that a work of art isn't successful unless you can relate to it personally somehow, or that a viewer won't devote thought and attention to a character unless they like them. This is particularly true for female characters.

Oh yes, totally. Obviously that happens with women, more so than with men. For something like the M.I.A. film, this was a complicated thing. At a base level, I really like her, and if it were otherwise, I wouldn't be the right person to make that film. I like her even when she's not always likable. I like her even when she fucks up, because she's a human and I can relate to that. I think that in the end the film is a positive portrayal of her, which is a good thing, but that wasn't necessarily the goal. It wasn't a situation like, "Let's revitalize her career," which is what most celebrity documentaries are. Most of them are basically propaganda pieces created by the celebrity. The goal was simply to make an honest, compelling film.

The issue of likability is part of what makes M.I.A. fascinating, and what makes her career so polarizing. She seems like someone who is not overly concerned—or concerned at all—with being liked.

I think it affects her, you know? She feels it. But her concern about likability is not greater than her desire to say what she wants and make the art she wants. It is not greater than her desire to do what she wants. And it shouldn't be. That's what I respect so much, because it's not that it doesn't get to her— that kind of negative attention would get to *anybody*—but it doesn't stop her.

Bad press and having people not understand you, that is hard. But it doesn't get to her so much that it prevents her from actually saying what she wants to say and I find that inspiring. That way of being represents a path forward—to really just make stuff that you can get behind. For me that means existing in a situation and working with people where I don't have to bow to the pressures of conventionality in terms of what a film should look like and what characters should be like. To work with people where they really care about doing something that's deep and interesting, and actually means something. So much stuff is made that means nothing. I can't imagine spending months on a project—and as a documentary editor you

spend months and months on projects—and for it to be something you don't actually care about. That would be so horrible.

You jumped into the M.I.A. film in the middle of things, after other people had already worked on editing it. This was also the biggest project you've ever been involved with. Now that it's finally done and out in the world, what has been your takeaway, both personally and professionally?

I'm still figuring it out, to be honest. I think it's really important to go for things that are difficult, to just dive in, but also to understand that sometimes when you stretch that much, it's gonna be a very rocky process. Ultimately, I think it's worth it to do those really big stretch moves, and to go for big things, because you get to see what you can actually do. It tests your capabilities and expands them. And then it does open up doors, as well.

With the career thing, I spent so many years trying to figure myself out. I didn't know exactly *what* I wanted to do, but I was motivated by wanting to find something that really felt right, and that I could really love. So it was a process of rejection for a while, before eventually falling into film. Originally I wanted to make a project about where my mom grew up, and that got me interested in documentary filmmaking, but then I decided I didn't want to do that project. It was still a good thing to try, though, because during that process I learned about what editing was, and I didn't really understand what editing was before.

The M.I.A. film has obviously been this huge thing which is kind of pushing me forward, but even before then, when I was first starting, I was always trying to do this balancing act with how I chose things. It was like, "Okay, I'll do these shorter projects for money, or to make connections, but then I'm also always gonna make sure I'm editing something else and working with people where it feels really good." Because of that, even some of the early stuff I made, I still really love, even though it's my first stuff and I wasn't yet super skilled. Because I picked things that really excited me, and that allowed me to develop my senses as an editor, which was super important.

It's important to invest time in figuring out what you actually like, and also to remember that your passions are allowed to change over time. The idea that you choose a career path when you are 19 and that it never changes—that you are somehow locked into it forever—can be a recipe for misery.

I think it's so good to invest in trying things earlier on in life. I grew up in a small town. I didn't know anybody who worked in film. Even when I started making film, I *still* barely knew anybody who worked in film. It just is not my world. And it's not something I ever allowed myself to really even dream about. I didn't let myself go there. Ultimately I was kind of pushed there, because I was rejecting all this *other* stuff. I knew enough to reject the stuff I didn't like, but for a long time I couldn't figure out, "Well, what is the thing I *do* like?" And then I kind of fell into it.

Even now, while I love editing, I'm also letting myself start to dream about, "What would be the film that I would want to make?" I'm thinking about a fiction film that I would want to write and direct. It's scary to start to actually envision things. I got a lot of confidence from working on the M.I.A. film. It actually gave me the confidence to try and do some of my own projects. The learning curve was so high.

I still don't totally feel like I've settled into a set creative identity. I think a lot of artists can relate to this. I'm not like, "Okay, now I'm gonna be an editor, and that's gonna be my identity, and that's what I'm gonna do." I have a lot of ideas for other things. I still feel like I'm engaged in this ongoing process, and still trying to work a bunch of shit out. I just feel like I'm trying to do it now from a pretty optimistic place. For so long I felt like I was always trying to catch up to something. I was in such a huge rush to figure it out, and just do *the thing*, and somehow have my identity solved. I was in such a huge rush for it. Now I'm finally just, "Oh right, maybe I'll actually never know. Maybe I'm never gonna totally know… and that's fine." But it's very liberating, because then you're just like, "Okay, I guess I'll just figure it out on the way."

You worked on the M.I.A. project for a long time. Over a year?

A year and a half, yeah.

The nature of that kind of editing work would appear to be meticulous, detail-oriented, and, at least to my mind, very tedious. When you're over a year deep into this kind of project, sorting through tons of material, how do you remain objective about the thing you are making? How do you keep from going crazy?

Well, first of all, it's so funny that you listed those particular things, because I feel like I'm actually *not* a meticulous person. I am in some ways, but I think what's so great about documentary editing, at least as far as my process is concerned, is that I'm just trying to understand the point of what we're watching. "What is the point? What is the essence?" And when you have an idea of that, then it's about asking, "What are the moments that we need in order to make that come across? What moments are the most interesting?"

Then how do you make all of that stuff into a movie and not just a pile of interesting stuff? That is way more difficult. That's when I can start to go crazy. When I've gone from all of these hundreds of hours of footage down to just a couple hours of stuff; when I finally feel like, "Ok, this is it. Out of all these hundreds of hours that exist, *this* is it." That's hard to do. Finding the movie in all of that stuff is extremely difficult.

You need really good collaborators, and I think you need to screen things. People have very different philosophies around screening. I worked with a producer and I really liked her process. She liked to keep it tight and controlled. She'd only screen things for a couple of people, a couple of editors or friends. It was very thought-out, which I think is good. When you bring people into that process, you are so vulnerable. You're still trying to figure it out yourself, but you really need perspective.

As for how to keep yourself from going crazy? I don't know. I mean, I kind of did go crazy. I really did. I definitely learned that, in the future, you need to have boundaries. Straight up. Boundaries are important. You cannot, just for weeks and weeks, work extremely late hours and keep relentlessly pushing in that insane way, because you do lose objectivity and you do go crazy, both at the same time. Sometimes it's on you, especially as an editor, to create that boundary, because for the other people on the project it's very easy for them to think, "Oh, you're working 12 hours a day? That must just mean you love it and you're doing great." And you're like, "Actually, no, if I left a couple hours earlier, if I did a shorter day, and actually was a human for some hours of that day, it would actually help the project, as well as myself." You can definitely work yourself to the point of uselessness.

I would also say—and again, this is something I'm still learning—to just accept that you're going to have bad days, and bad weeks with the project, and that that's totally normal. I think what can be a really bad spiral is if you have a bad day, or you have a bad week, and then you start to truly freak out about it. You can easily get into such a high-anxiety place, and you do go crazy. Rather than being able to just be like, "Oh, this was a bad week, it's okay, next week will be different." I worked with another amazing editor, Gabe Rhodes, and he's been doing this for a long time. I learned a lot from him. One thing I learned is that I didn't necessarily know how to handle the stress the right way.

That's something I still struggle with, too. It seems like such a simple thing, but it's so good to remind yourself that you can have a bad day or a bad week and it's not the end of the world.

Right? In two days you're gonna forget that day. That's what's so funny—you literally could have a bad day, and a week later it's gone. I just wish I could always remember that when I'm in that bad moment —"This is gonna pass and it's gonna be okay."

The film world can appear to be this insular, rarefied universe onto itself. People assume that you have to go to film school for years, be born rich, or have some kind of "in" in order to make it in that world. It's nice to think that maybe that narrative is changing a little bit.

I didn't go to proper film school. As far the editing stuff goes, I took classes at an amazing place in Brooklyn called The Edit Center. That's where I learned to edit. I took a class there for six weeks and learned enough to start throwing myself out there. Working on good films, or big movies—whether it's documentary or fiction—it's still extremely difficult. It's not easy to get those big jobs. However, we live in a day and age where everybody wants a video made, and everybody's shooting stuff all the time. There is all kinds of stuff out in the world that needs to be edited, and lots of people are looking for editors.

For documentaries, the editor is a central figure. You are assembling everything. As an editor, you see how filmmaking works from the inside out. Editing is a craft and, while it's technology based, it's incredibly creative. Editing is where the film is actually created. Also, at least for me, it was a really interesting way to get into the film world. It's been a great road for me to explore the things I'm really interested in.

Marina Katz recommends:

Elena, a documentary by Petra Costa. One of my original inspirations for getting into documentary. She filmed hundreds of hours of interviews, but only ended up using one interview in the entire film. She translated everything she discovered in the interview process into a poetic and visceral film that pushed the boundaries of the form.

Madeline's Madeline, a feature film by Josephine Decker. My favorite film of 2018.

Amanda Knox, a documentary by Brian McGinn and Rod Blackhurst. I never actually followed the story when it was unfolding, but I love how elegantly the filmmakers present the Italian prosecutor (aka the villain of the story).

The War Show, a documentary by Obaidah Zytoon and Andreas Dalsgaard. A group of Syrian artists and friends turn their cameras to the streets at the beginning of the Arab spring. Obaidah, who was a DJ before the war, navigates us through her world.

Y Tu Mama También, directed by Alfonso Cuarón. I just rewatched this and it's still so great. Youth + road trip + a real lens into Mexico. I love a good coming-of-age story :)

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