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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2748 words.

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On how to follow through on your vision

Filmmaker Natalia Almada discusses the complicated structures of the film business, and the importance of trusting your instincts when starting something new.

As a filmmaker, why do you think it's important to develop a triangular relationship between the filmmaker, the camera, and the subject?

It's important because the alternative is when you only focus on your subject matter. You think, "I'm gonna make a film about this person or these people. And I don't exist." In my opinion, it's a rather presumptuous position to say, "My way of seeing everything is objective." Imagine how much better the world would be if people watched the news recognizing that it was made by somebody with creative responsibility. And knowing that they have an ideology, a value system, and a culture through which they're choosing to portray the news. We'd live in a much better place if audiences were aware of that.

How does this relationship develop? How can you build trust with your subjects?

I think it's different for different filmmakers and projects. Some filmmakers like to spend a lot of time researching without a camera, whether it's in an interview situation or just spending time with a subject. I've never felt comfortable with that. For me, the relationship with my subjects has always been through the camera. We start shooting, or I start filming from the very beginning. It's complicated. I wonder, if you asked the people in my films if they trusted me, what they would say. I don't know that it's something they would have thought about necessarily.

You're both a citizen of the United States and Mexico. How does this influence your work and creative process?

The way that we approach our films formally is formed by who we are. People make things that reflect where they come from, their socioeconomic situation, their gender, their sexuality, etc. Not just, "Oh, I'm interested in this thing. But this is how I would make a film about this thing." Structurally, formally, all these decisions actually come from who we are.

I think that's a great thing. The problem is that we live in a world in which that's not recognized very often and there are certain modes and formal considerations which are not valuable for others. That is not because we have universal values about what we like to look at. It's because there are certain people with more power who get to make the decisions about what gets made and how it's made.

In your films you mix personal stories within a more complex political and sociological situation. What inspires you the most, the personal story or the political background?

It's one thing to make autobiographical films, or films about your family. It's another thing to make films that are personal, because it's an individual story or experience. I'm more driven by concept than by story. For example, in The Night Watchman, the film has a character: the night watchman. But the film was much more determined by my interest in looking at violence. That's what got me to the film—my interest in the subject matter came first over my interest in that person. I think I'm more driven by the issue. But I would say the issue is personal for me, in one way or another.

You mention that you're driven more by concept than by stories. Are there particular concepts that are constantly swirling around in your mind or something that you're always going back to?

Well the story right now is like the buzz word. People will even say, "Oh, we're not filmmakers we're storytellers." And for me it's a difficult one, because when we talk about stories, we imply certain things. It usually means it's character-driven and that it has a certain kind of narrative arc that has three acts. And it climaxes. So what bothers me is that film funders would say, "We're looking for innovative stories, or we're looking for a strong storytelling narrative." I feel that hidden in there are a lot of concepts about what a story is supposed to be. And I'm not driven by story most of the time. It's more that I'm interested in violence. Sometimes I want to play secretary and look at violence in that place. And yes, of course, in some ways the result is a kind of story. For example, in *The Night Watchman* and *Everything Else*, the principles that guided my editing decisions were much more about rhythm, repetition, and time than they were about traditional ideas of stories.

In terms of my process, I'm not saying that stories are non-existent. When people talk about narratives, we work in a linear medium, so it's very hard to not have a narrative. Narrative becomes that kind of default, because of the medium itself controlling time.

There are industry initiatives that want to support filmmakers, but they're looking for specific things in films. Do you think that becomes a problem when you're trying to tell a story that is based on a concept, or a story that is not necessarily linear?

I think it's challenging. It's easy to criticize, right? How could they phrase it in a way that makes space for all the different kinds of people making films? That is actually a very difficult question to answer.

What happens is there's a value system held by the mainstream. It's not just about content. It's also about form. Then you can pry with the different fads that have happened over the years, like maybe we're fizzling out of an era in which it was so important to make kind of activist-feeling films that had an advocacy intention. Maybe that's starting to change. I feel like there was a time where that's what it had to be. You had to have a message, a measurable outcome, and a mission for the people who watched your film of what they were going to do to solve the problem that you were addressing. And that translates formally, it reflects a value system.

When you were pitching your films, did you find a certain structure that worked, or were you following what you thought was going to be compelling and hoping for the best?

In terms of the grant writing and pitching, it's a game. And you have to learn to play it. One: you realize you have to play the game. Two: you realize who you're playing the game with and what you're up against. I've been able to understand the way power operates and how it's systemic. Then the process feels less about me, and less about my project. Understanding that helped me to realize, "Okay, if I'm getting grant rejection after grant rejection, maybe it's not because my project's not worth making, but because of other forces that are operating."

Therefore, one thing is how you play the game and how you get the money; and the other thing is how you make the film you want to make. I love the things I'm passionate about and that I care deeply about. You just have to trust your feeling about what that thing is, and that you can transmit it with passion. If you trust yourself and say, "Well, I really think that this is a fascinating issue," then I'm going to fascinate you. And I have to trust that I can fascinate you. The way I work is I try to find a formal approach to fascinating you, so we're making something that is very beautiful or very interesting formally, so I can kind of seduce you into caring about whatever that is.

I think this approach is common. If we look at great photographers, like Sebastiao Salgado and Dorothea Lange, they made us care about things we didn't care about, because they made images that were beautiful, and then they became interesting. But first, they got us with some visceral feeling. For example, the *Migrant Mother*, that's such a powerful image. Then you wonder, "Who is she, why is she in that situation, what is she feeling?"

In your process of learning how to pitch and finding out how you make the film you want to make, is there anything you wish somebody would have told you when you began to make art—something you would have wanted to know from the beginning?

I feel very lucky that I started making films in art school and not in a film program or some other context. In art school, we never talked about the money part of producing something. I've taught at different programs, and in some more traditional film-related programs students are writing proposals and thinking about budgets. Those are valuable skills, but learning to make films outside of that context allowed me to place the creative decisions and the theoretical thinking behind the project first, and not think in terms of money-related questions, like, "Who is my audience?" or "What can I do financially or production-wise?"

What I miss in the environment where I work today is that there're very few spaces in which to have that discussion, so it's hard to protect that creative part of the work. You go to Sundance and you meet with people, and it's all about, how are you going to raise money, and who do you need to network with to raise money. It's not like, who do you need to network with to have an interesting discussion about your ideas.

There are so many events and discussions that focus on how to build your audience, or how to start thinking about your social media strategy from the beginning. And that's challenging especially when you're a first-time filmmaker and you're just starting to figure things out.

Exactly. And with a lot of these grants and mentoring programs, all the information becomes about productions. So often someone will say to me, "I'm mentoring a couple of people through different programs, and the biggest challenge they're having is how to raise money. What should I do?" I'm happy to have that conversation, and that is a reality, but it's sad to me that if I only have a certain amount of time to mentor somebody, that's usually the focus.

It's as if your creative process is dictated by those kind of guidelines of where your project should go.

It totally is, and it's so hard for somebody to separate those two things—especially if you've never had the experience of making a film outside of that context. It's so hard for them to ask, "How do I play the game?" instead of, "Oh, how do I make my film so that people like it?" That's a horrible place to be working from. Who knows what people like!

That conditions you, and your work.

It totally does. That becomes a more severe issue when you're dealing with people who are from the periphery. If your ideas don't exactly fit, for whatever reason, then it's a real crisis where you think, "I have to make a film everybody's going to like, and that doesn't reflect who I am".

There is also a contradiction between wanting to promote and support diverse voices, but at the same time, putting them under these rules.

Exactly. How do these foundations open up to diversity in a real sense? It means you have to accept diverse kinds of projects. It's not that the problem is solved, but it has shifted, it's changed, and it's very hard to be willing to always change like that. Sundance's The Art of Nonfiction is really interesting, because they're changing and addressing that need to have a more open concept about what a documentary can be, through this program. It's more open-ended. It would be interesting to see if it attracted more diverse filmmakers.

How do you nurture your creative side when you're not working?

I'm never not working. But I'm not literally working in the way people think of work. I like to think of my creativity as something that is integrated into my life. So, it's not like, "Oh, now I'm cooking dinner, I'm not creative." But you can recognize that all moments, if you're perceptive and allow your senses to be awake, are influencing and feeding your creativity.

I envy people who are musicians, or people who can draw—people who have this tool that they can practice with, in a way. They don't have to be working on the masterpiece painting all the time. They can be doing some sketches, or just using a notebook with a pencil to draw whatever they want. They can spend the afternoon playing their instrument, not preparing for a big concert. I feel that in film, we're always preparing for the big concert, or painting that master painting.

Is it okay to abandon a project if it doesn't feel right?

I abandoned a collaboration I was doing with someone. In part, it got abandoned because it was a collaboration, and not because we didn't get along, but because it was too hard to kind of push through the uncertainty. When you have an idea and you start to pursue it, you're bound to come up against so much uncertainty, obstacles, and doubts before you can start that project. I think part of what can make a project interesting is that confrontation.

With *The Night Watchman*, I thought that it would be a film about one mausoleum and the group of people who were constructing that mausoleum. That was my concept the day I got there. Immediately, it was like, "Oh, that's not interesting. It's not a group of four people who build the whole mausoleum. It's this constant rotating set of workers with different skills. There's no cast of characters the way I imagined. On top of it, this is really boring. Construction is slow." So, I could've said, "Oh, whatever, this is not worth doing," because my concept didn't fit the reality. But if I go back to what my concept really was, which was working with violence and my fascination with this place, then it was a question of, "How do I get into it? What is here that is actually interesting?"

The formal structure of *The Night Watchman* comes directly out of that place. For me, it felt like that's the only film I could have made there. I didn't think from the beginning, "I'm going to make a film with no dialogue." It's was, "Oh, no, I'm in this place where nobody's talking to me, and whenever I get something that's somewhat of an interview, it's boring and canned and unreliable. So what does that tell me about this situation, and how do you make that part of the film?"

If you abandon the thing that you're passionate about at the moment you hit that first obstacle, you shouldn't be making films. You have to get through it to figure things out, and that's a very interesting aspect of the work itself. I find one of the most interesting parts of making a film how different it would be if you just had an idea and executed it. Even having made a fiction film where in some ways you have an idea and you execute it, I think it was still important to stay present to what the situation I had created was, and respond to it.

How do you know when your film is finished?

You just know. For me, it happens when I'm at peace with something I'm working on, and I stop. I don't go back and I don't look at my films and think, "I should've edited that differently." I'm not really left

with a feeling of needing to go back and change something. I have a very clear sense of, "Okay, this is finished, and it's not mine anymore." Then I start to relate to it very differently. For me, when I watch my film *To the Other Side*, it's more like looking at a family album or something. I go back and I remember the experience of making the film, and that's lovely. It's really nice to remember all the things I felt and thought. It's special.

Natalia Almada recommends:

Sans Soleil, Chris Marker

Nostalgia for the Light, Patricio Guzman

Postcards from the Cinema, Serge Daney

Louise Bourgeois

Lots of nature walks

Name

Natalia Almada

Vocation


Filmmaker, Photographer


Fact



Photo: Gene Pittman

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