

November 7, 2018 -

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3971 words.

Tags: Film, First attempts, Collaboration, Money.



On learning how to make a film as you make it

Filmmakers Amelia Trask & Sasha Hecht discuss the process behind making their first feature-length documentary
When you, two writers, first had the idea of making a film, how did you get started?

Sasha Hecht: We decided to make a film because the way we wanted to tell the story, and the depth and the richness of the actual visuals of the culture and of the universe, lent itself to a film. Something we've been talking about lately is that documentary is the new journalism. It's the perfect way to marry journalism and art, and I think you need that art component in order for people to really be affected by a story.

When we started, it was about finding the story and putting together a narrative. We dug into whatever research we could about the band by finding what we could online. Of course, everything was in Swedish, so we had to translate all that. The more we looked into it, the more we saw inconsistencies in the stories, and things that didn't make sense. We realized we would have to scrap everything and go back to square one.

Amelia Trask: The way we made the movie was Googling stuff, starting with, "What do I need to do to make a movie?" We sent emails to people that worked in video and anything connected to film. We asked, "What are the components of this?" The first year of making the film was a lot of cold emails and asking questions. Everyone's available to you if you find the email address and ask a direct question. We didn't even know what a DP was when we started making this. You send emails. You look up production companies, camera rentals, and email them. Don't be afraid of asking questions, and be honest about your knowledge, so they can meet you halfway.

We wanted to hire people from the beginning to do this. We wanted to be the writers, because we're writers, and that's what we have our background in—but the way things shook out, it ended up that we did everything except get the sound and actually hold the camera. We did everything else. We watched YouTube tutorials. We learned how to edit video, with no experience in editing video.

Sasha: Another aspect of this is the way technology is changing how films are made. We made the film in this interesting time, where there's no right way to make a film. All of the resources are more accessible. YouTube tutorials, like Amelia said, and pirating Adobe Premiere from the internet. You have all the resources, and there's not that same barrier to entry there used to be where it's like, "OK, I'm going to need to spend a million dollars hiring a crew and gaffers and all of this stuff." You can keep things low budget, and if you're willing to put in the work and learn how to do it yourself with a lot of trial and error, it's totally possible.

Amelia: One of the biggest things we learned about putting together a budget happened during our test shoot. We used a certain camera that required lighting and a gaffer. Then we realized with these Red Cameras that are available we didn't need lighting or a gaffer. It was more expensive, but we ended up cutting so many other costs—like transport—because there's a lot you need for lighting. We were figuring those things out as we went along.

Sasha: We've been talking about how we're coining a new genre, the "bedroom film." The same way that the bedroom album changed the landscape for independent music, because anyone was able to make an album in their bedroom by themselves, and it would be treated with the same level of legitimacy as a major release. We literally made this film in a windowless room in our apartment, totally by ourselves, and I don't think that would have been possible, even five years ago when we started this.



Did you find early on when you were seeking out funding it was hard because you'd never made a film and people didn't trust you?

Amelia: We had a specific experience. The first year we applied to all the U.S. grants. That's where we started. Through our research, people were telling us that Sweden was a better country in general to provide grant money for film. We realized we needed a production company there to do that. That derailed us for two years, because we didn't realize how politically complicated this film was, and we got in bed with the wrong people, and they misled us for two years.

When we realized that approach wasn't getting us anywhere, we took it back to the U.S., and we started working with investors, which we got quick turnaround for, but unfortunately we lost another year and a half due to legal battles from the Swedish side that continued to obstruct us. There are lots of opportunities for different ways you can fundraise a film, and in our experience, we went through almost every opportunity possible.

Amelia: If we'd given up control earlier on, we would have had money and we would have been more comfortable, but who knows what would have had to change, or what we would have been fighting, and that's what we learned this whole time. No money comes free; there's always strings attached. It could really alter the artistic vision of your film for lots of reasons, not just because someone doesn't like the images that you're putting up, or they don't agree with the artistic vision. There's a lot more that goes into it than that.

Sasha: A huge part of the learning experience of this film was working with people and finding out that they were not the people we should have been working with. We were in a vulnerable position because we're first-time filmmakers and were totally green to this, and really like, "Can you guys help us out? Do you have any advice?" Plus, we were in a foreign country.

The entertainment industry is full of untrustworthy people. It's been a process of finding people who are genuinely excited about the project for what the project is and not trying to take advantage of our greenness or co-opt the project and the subject matter and take it away from us and do what they want to do with it. It's been a lot of protecting ourselves, protecting our assets, and protecting the sensitivity of everything. Also, our relationships with the subjects—a huge part of what makes this film what it is is how close and how intimate and how trusting our relationships are with everyone in the film.

The big struggle for us, as far as grants and funding institutions, is that they're looking for a very specific type of project, which is more politically active and social-justice facing. They all fit whatever message the institution is trying to send. It's hard to get an art film funded.



You were making a documentary about Broder Daniel, a band that a lot of people outside of Sweden don't know about. I imagine that made it complicated, too.

Sasha: Most people have never heard of the band. Every non-Swede. What's been cool about showing the film to people is how much it seems to affect them—days later. People see the film, and they'll be like, "It's great, it's so interesting," and then I'll get an email a few days later, being like, "You know, I was really thinking about what Henrik said..."

[Broder Daniel frontman] Henrik [Berggren], as an artist, has value for an outside audience that hasn't heard his music. I hear feedback from other people saying that they've never seen an artist speak with so much clarity and intention about what goes into their art. I've totally heard from people that they're super into the music, too. They say, "I can't believe I've never heard of this before."

But the thing that really seems to stick with people the most is what Henrik sets up in his opening speech, and what the film answers, which is that it seems like all of this culture that's being created nowadays is just empty. It's just advertising. Where is the artist who's really trying to say something and do something with intention? That seems to really resonate with people.

The film is meant to open a discussion and to start a dialogue about how we see and treat artists, how the industry treats artists, and what our relationship is with a public figure who we also have a personal, intimate relationship with that they don't even know about. Just to get people thinking about that, to get people to reconsider these public figures and celebrities and musicians as being real people who go through a lot to produce the thing that we all consume and get so much joy out of.

Amelia: The reason we entered the story wasn't just because we loved the music. It was the videos we saw of all the fans and how they looked: emo scene people from the 2000s mixed with fans of '80s post-punk mixed with '60s mod. It was all familiar, but I'd never quite seen it before. They were all crying. 50,000 people crying. Then to find out that bands like The Knife, The Tough Alliance, JJ, and Iceage knew them. This lineage of music that we grew up with, going back to the early 2000s, when we were in high school. All of those artists either came from Broder Daniel's scene, or they cite him as their major influence.

We're music nerds, and those were bands that we grew up loving. It felt like a piece of music history was missing. We didn't want to lead with that, because when we started talking to people, we realized it was more complicated. It wasn't what we were saying. But journalistically, it's interesting. I don't want to be so bold as to say it's the missing link. I want other people to look into it and see what they think. You can find it if you Google these bands. Broder Daniel is hidden, throughout all the stuff we've all read. In this time, when it feels like we could never find anything new, we found something new.

Sasha: The thing that turned us onto it in the first place was that clip of all these thousands and thousands of people, multi generations, bawling their eyes out. Where do you see that? Remember when people used to care about art? Remember when people used to be moved by the experience of music? You don't see that anymore. We dug into it trying to understand what was going on that was affecting people in this way.

It took four years to make the film. You taught yourselves how to do everything while you were making it. Do you think this is a more valuable approach than taking four years to go to film school?

Sasha: We never wanted to make films. I never ever thought I would be a filmmaker. I never cared about

films. Film school is valuable, I think, if you're learning a certain skill, or a technical skill. I can't imagine going to film school not knowing what film I wanted to make, though. To me, the idea should come, then you're compelled to make something, and then you figure out how to make it. If I'd gone into this with some kind of formulaic understanding of how it was supposed to go, I would've been totally fucked, because I wouldn't have had the nimbleness and the flexibility to be able to say, "I don't know anything, I'm just going to figure this out as I go along, and work with what I have as it comes."

Amelia: We did our whole movie punk style. "Let's just lay it down, throw it down, and see what happens. Don't overthink it, because no one is going to notice you changed that one thing, except you." The thought process I had was, "No one is going to notice it except you, but this isn't for you—you're making this for other people to see, so don't waste everyone's time by obsessing over something that's only important to you."

Knowing the difference between what's just important to you and what is actually pivotal to the film is so crucial. Some of my favorite scenes happened when we knew what needed to go there, and we would just throw it down, and then the magic would happen. You'd feel so good about it, because you'd think, "I didn't even try that hard to make it. I just set up such a beautiful platform for all of this, that it just flows together."

Sasha: The fact that we both come from a writing background was so invaluable and really the most important thing in creating this whole thing, because if you have a story and a narrative that works together and is engaging and relatable and moving in that way, you can have a film shot on a Motorola Razr, and it wouldn't really matter.

Amelia: We really mean narrative. What we did was take Henrik's life, from primary and secondary sources, and we created a cause and effect chain, from when he's a child to present day, of what happened and then what that precipitated. Then we literally found a beginning, middle, and end story in there, and we took that out, and we built a real narrative story about Henrik's life, based on his character motivations, and all the other character motivations, the way you would write a script. But it was fully based on fact.

Sasha: We did this before we did any of our interviews, which also allowed us to be more efficient when we actually did production. This was another huge thing that I think that most people don't do when they do documentaries, because you hear people say, "Oh, I followed this guy around, I shot for two years, and now I've got a thousand hours of footage and I'm just getting into editing." We came up with our entire story before we went to Sweden, and before we interviewed anybody. We came up with that flow, and our key plot points.

When we went into our interviews, we stuck to those key temporal plot points, but also allowed our characters to talk about whatever it was that they wanted to talk about. We already knew kind of how to guide them, because we'd gotten to know them so well over the course of a number of years. We only had 10 days of actual production and filming, but everything we got was gold, because we had our plan going into it. I'm amazed that the film, four years later, is what we set it out to be four years ago, before any of this started.

Amelia: It was such a conscious decision because we knew that the deeper we got into this community, our objective point of view was going to shift. It was important to us to stick to what we saw at the beginning, and it paid off. We got involved in so much intrigue in Sweden, getting so deep into this community. It could have been a completely different film if we hadn't stuck by that. It would have been a lot more subjective.



What are some things that you learned when making the film. Any huge mistakes first-time filmmakers should try to avoid?

Sasha: Get everything in writing or on the record. Tape every conversation. Save emails. I see a lot of people getting fucked over in creative industries because the lines are so much blurrier between professional and personal relationships—in creative culture, everyone is invested. It's personal to some extent for everyone. Just making sure that everything is really clear, as far as what's been agreed upon, what the expectations are, and what the boundaries are is going to save so much heartache and so much wasted energy of just trying to communicate with people who are supposed to be on your team.

Amelia: And, know your rights legally. It's really important to know legally what's going on. A lot of artists and creators don't like to deal with lawyers, but you don't want a lawyer coming at you. You want a lawyer on your team to make sure you're protected, and it's really not that complicated. Ask basic questions and protect yourself. A lot of heartache, trouble, and other problems can be avoided with simple contracts. Those are the two main things. Those two things will destroy you.

Sasha: I would also say, don't jump on something because you feel anxious. Don't do things out of desperation, especially if you're a first-time filmmaker, or if you're new or if you're in a vulnerable position. People are going to throw things at you that look nice, but they're really just fucking you over, knowing that you don't know any better. It's totally OK to wait, it's totally OK to refrain, it's totally OK to take the time and make sure everything is good on your side.

It's also totally OK to go back to someone, and say, "You know what, I'm not cool with this part, can we change this? I'm not cool with doing it this way, we're going to need to do it this way instead. Are you OK with that?" Don't make any concessions that you don't fully understand the consequences of. It's OK to take your time and wait.

Did you have any major disagreements or blowouts, where you really wanted something to go one way, and you wanted another, and you had to work through that?

Sasha: It's amazing how we've both had the same vision for the film since the beginning. We've been in sync for all of it. I think for the two of us, the big learning experience in working together is figuring out where our respective weaknesses are, and how to communicate that to the other person. Amelia comes from a PR background, and I come from an editorial background. For example, there are certain things, as far as messaging things or positioning things, that she has more experience with and is more attuned to than I am. It was interesting figuring out how our skill sets applied to making a film.

Can you imagine making a film alone, or do you think you'll always work as a team?

Sasha: I can't imagine making something like this alone, and I don't know why I would, at this point.

Amelia: Collaborating is the best. Something could be 99% yours, and just 1% a collaboration, and it would be awesome because there is someone outside of your brain who sees things slightly differently that could just bring it to life in a totally different way. We've been open to that way of working the whole time. And, seeing how important collaboration can be as a way to learn your boundaries, and find out where you're being anal and controlling, while also learning not to give in to other people because you're insecure, but instead, because you're like, "Oh, that might be a better idea."

Sasha: I think if we ever were to work on anything by ourselves, we'd end up asking for lots of help from each other anyway, so we might as well just put both of our names on it. Something that we've found in making this film is that you meet people who work on it because it's work, and you meet people who work on it because they get it and they care about it and they want to do something awesome. Sometimes people misrepresent themselves as being one way when they're actually the other, and that's an unfortunate thing to discover when it's too late. It's definitely also been a learning experience for us in figuring out where certain roles begin and end. For example, when working with an editor, knowing how much feedback to put in, and how much I need to let this person know what I want.

If this person is just taking us on because it's because it's a job, that's one thing. If this person is actually putting in creative input, that's another thing. Unfortunately, in our experience, we got a lot of people not willing to put in the creative work, which is why we ended up having to do a lot of stuff ourselves. Which ended up being fine. Because it's like, "If you're not going to put the time and attention into this, I'd rather just do it myself, even if it takes another nine months."



How did you stay healthy through all of this?

Amelia: We got up at 6AM every day. We made sure we had at least two full meals a day, because it's easy to forget to eat. We made sure that three days a week we worked out, or at least took a walk. Exercise is important, especially if you're hunched over computers all the time. Having a list at the beginning of the day of everything that needs to get done was helpful. Whiteboards. Notes everywhere. Keeping the apartment clean, keeping everything organized, because we were living and working and doing everything in a tiny space, with me, Sasha, my boyfriend, a cat and a dog.

You have to stay sane. You have to stay healthy. You have to know where everything is, from your groceries to your assets, images, and links. Everything needs to be organized because you don't have an intern to put a press release together for you, or a spreadsheet. You have to do everything. And there is never enough time in the day. How much time do people waste watching TV? How much time do you waste looking for something because you aren't organized?

Sasha: The efficiency lends itself to the art. You're going to make better art if you have the rest of your shit under control. A big thing that we did in making this film is we got on good terms with our families and our friends, and made our apartment nice and clean and kept our animals happy.

Amelia: Yeah, it was like, get up at 6AM every day, go to bed at 10PM every night. No excuses. When you're doing the work of practically 300 people, you have to be functioning every day. It's a marathon. And we did that every day. We accomplished this film because we out-worked everyone else.

5 books we read out loud to each other in our backyard while making this film:

The Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius

Dreaming The Beatles: The Love Story of One Band and the Whole World by Rob Sheffield

Thank You for Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln, and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us About the Art of Persuasion by Jay Heinrichs

The Art of War by Sun Tzu

Life Code: The New Rules for the Real World by Dr. Phil McGraw

5 things that influenced our film:

A Nightmare on Elm Street IV: The Dream Master Dir. by Renny Harlin

Rihanna's "Needed Me" video Dir. by Harmony Korine

"Ultralight Beam" by Kanye West

The Third Man Dir. by Carol Reed

MTV's Catfish

Name

Amelia Trask & Sasha Hecht


Vocation


Filmmakers, Writers

Fact



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