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As told to Hannah Ziegler, 2707 words.

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On making the things you'd want to see

Music video director Sophie Muller discusses unplanned movie magic, the power of people-pleasing, and editing as a necessary pain.

You went to art and film school. I'm curious how you wound up in music videos, because it's a very specific medium.

I've been unbelievably lucky. In any other time of the world, I don't know how it would have worked out for me. I went to art school, and there wasn't a film course. I did graphics and I was absolutely useless at it, but I knew I was artistic. Eventually in that course, I ended up being in the film department. I was a complete film obsessive growing up. It was weird, because it never occurred to me to be a filmmaker—I guess that was because I didn't have any role models who were female film directors [at the time].

I started making these really weird films, which were not at all narrative-based. They were always to music; they were about atmosphere, kind of strange and artistic. Then I went to the Royal College of Art and did film. I carried on making these strange films that were to music but didn't really have a story or a narrative arc. When I was there, somebody said [I] should do music videos. I was horrified. I wanted to be an art filmmaker, so the idea of doing music videos was horrendous. I was such a snob.

Then I left with Royal College with my MA and I didn't know what to do. I couldn't get a job. I eventually started re-editing other people's videos because I didn't really fit in anywhere. [My films] were too out there for music videos. I had a few breaks editing other people's videos. I'd sort of shove a bit of my films in them. I guess basically desperation led me to it, because I couldn't get a job doing anything else.

You mentioned making abstract videos, or videos that don't necessarily have a mass appeal—quite the opposite of pop videos.

What I always try and do when I make music videos is figure out what kind of atmosphere I should be creating. Like should it be dark and moody, or should it be really bright and poppy? I figure out what the atmosphere is and then design all the music videos around that feeling. As a filmmaker, I'm not much of a storyteller in the true sense of the word. I've obviously made a lot of videos with stories, but they're not full stories. They're more like you drop into this world. I don't know what would've happened to me if music videos hadn't existed. I probably would have not made any film, ever.

Pop videos are an interesting, distinct type of music video, because it does seem like you have a lot of creative freedom. Despite the songs being made for mass consumption, the visuals can be really out there.

It's amazing. After I started making a few, I realized I can write an idea, say it's going to have to be filmed in Venice, and we go to Venice. Where else in the world have you got a job like that? You, as the filmmaker, have all the control of everything. You write it, you direct it, and you edit it. Sometimes you light it. If it's bad, you're off it in a week. I always feel sorry for these people who are doing 13-part series and it's terrible, and they're like, "Oh my god this has got to go on for another year." It's amazing how much freedom I've been allowed.

You've made hundreds of videos. I'm curious what draws you to a project, and how you choose which projects you take on.

Quite often some of my favorite videos, I didn't even like the track. I tend to be more about the artist. I like an artist who has an opinion. If the artist doesn't want to speak to me [on a call], I won't make the video. That's not the sort of artist I'd want to work with. I like artists to be really involved, really opinionated, and really care. A lot of people are just crossed off automatically, because they're not involved in the process. Then you get people who love it, and love the process. They're the best ones to work with, who want to be with you. I always say to them, "This is not my video, it's yours. You have to care what this video's going to be like because it represents you. It doesn't represent me. No one cares about me. It's you and how you look and how you sound." I've had a lot of luck with working with the same artists over and over again, and that's something I really like.

Collaboration is clearly a huge part of your work. I know you've had some really long-standing connections and working relationships with artists like Gwen Stefani, Sade, and Annie Lennox. How do you balance friendship and a working relationship?

I've never had a fight or anything. I've hardly even had any tension. I've probably had a little bit, but on the whole I tend to want to please the artist. It's not about them wanting to please me. I want to make something they love, so I'll do whatever I can to make that happen. Even if I know them really well, it's still the most important thing for me that they love it. I never say, "What is it about?" I always say, "What do you want people to think or feel when they watch the video?" It's more about the artist than the song, if that makes sense. It's more about the person in the video than the song. The song exists as itself. People listen to it without the music video. Obviously you want a song to go with it, but it's an opportunity for the artist to explain themselves, or show themselves to the world.

If a client wants you to make a music video for them, when you listen to the song do you already have a visualization of what you want it to look like?

No, never. That's why I always want to talk to the artist. Because... I don't have ideas that are in a drawer somewhere that I get. I don't listen to songs and have ideas, for some reason. Rather sad for me. What usually happens to me is I talk to the artist and when I speak to them they may say something random, it will inspire me ... and I'll suddenly get an idea. It's weird. I can't control it; sometimes I don't get one. But usually it'll be the way they say something.

It's not like I want the artist to come up with an idea. It's more like I just want the feeling that they want. I love artists who have ideas, but I don't intend to usually use their ideas in whole. I'll take a bit of it and then start that off.

When it comes to style, I think if someone's a fan of your work, they'll know that you've done something, but it's not like all your videos look the same. Is having a distinct style important to you?

I don't even know what my style is I started off in a pop diva world and then went into this indie and rock world, and then R&B. I know how manipulative film can be, and I try not to abuse that, but I change my filmmaking style to suit the music. I learned quite early on that there's a lot of style tropes. In the early '90s, when I started working with more indie bands in England, the indie rock and roll cliché [style] was a moving light. So if I got a light and waved it around, it would look pretty good. I was learning that you wouldn't use that for a big pop song. There's certain rules and clues that you follow for each genre of music... But within that, I have my own style. I tend to like certain colors and lighting.

How do you maintain your creative sensibilities when you're working with different clients who may have their own preferences?

I've never had an issue. I guess people come to me because they want a certain thing. I don't really like pure pop, so I don't think someone would come to me for that. I have a kind of slight darkness. I always talk about Hitchcock, because to me, he's someone whose subject matter is really dark and hideous, but it always looks amazing. It's the same in a lot of songwriting, where you have really sad songs and the music sounds quite joyous.

When working specifically on pop videos, how do you balance public expectations with trusting your own intuition?

I've been unbelievably lucky in that for some reason, people like what I do. I've never tried to make anything too much about what I like. I've always wanted to try and understand what they like and what the world likes, rather than it being about me and my unhappy childhood. I think that's what gave me longevity. I try to keep my ego small in regards to the project.

I read that you usually don't do storyboards for your videos. Has that always been your approach?

When I first started, the idea of making videos was really scary, to the point where I would not be able to sleep. I could never figure out whether the idea was right. Now, obviously that doesn't make sense, because what is right? But I would be tortured by that idea that I'd made the wrong choice... What I tended to do was write treatments that were really loose, so that you couldn't even know what it was about. On the day [of the shoot] when the artists [and crew] were there, I would know if it was right. It took me a really long time to feel confident that I made the right choice. That's why the idea of storyboarding is even worse, because I'm then saying, "On this bit you should be doing this, and on this bit you should be doing that." I hate doing that. I'm more reactive. I never see it as finished. I just have a feeling, and I have to wait for magic to occur in front of me.

I like this idea of unexpected or unplanned magic. It seems like you really embrace letting things happen. Is that always something you have felt comfortable with?

No. I read somewhere else that some other filmmaker said the same thing about waiting for magic. It might have been Orson Welles. Sometimes it's the performer—they're so magical and amazing, you don't need to do anything. I don't want to be distracted by annoying filmmaking, I just want to see them and how incredible they are.

I mean, it comes from fear. It doesn't come from confidence. I'm confident now, because I've learnt to trust myself. In the beginning it was terrifying, because I would wing it. And I'd be like, "Phew, got away with that." That's why I edit my own work. It was always so badly directed that I had to save it in the edit all the time.

There's something to be said about trusting yourself and trusting that things will go well. Can you talk more about your relationship between directing and editing?

Well, it leads on from your question of storyboarding. I have storyboarded, but I tend to basically start filming and hate what I storyboarded so I'll veer off, which usually makes the AD crazy. If I had an editor, it would also make them crazy, because they wouldn't understand what I was doing. Very often I would film something, and I'd be like, "Well if we have this shot here of this waving curtain, or this light flashing on and off, I can use that as an edit point to get me in and out of issues." I'm a kind of slow and late learner, but you learn when you're making videos that there are certain tricks. If you work with a band, for example, as long as you do a take of the drummer all the way through, you're going to be alright. It's something that nails it together, and you can always cut to it. In the same way, very often in a music video, you always have to do a close-up. It will always save you if there's a missing bit, or something that doesn't work. When I was first doing videos, I didn't know those golden rules. So I'd be like, "Oh no, this is a disaster, it doesn't work." I would try to mess around in the edit to save the video because I'd directed it so badly, and there were all these gaps. I was such an impatient person, so when I was working with an editor I'd always like sitting next to them and say, "No, no, no, one more frame that way, no, no, try that." I was kind of sitting on top of them. In the end, I just learnt how to do it myself because I just couldn't bear to sit and watch someone trying to do what I was trying to do. Now I feel that if I don't edit it, I haven't even made it. I just directed it. I don't feel that connection. It's really weird. It's like, that was too easy. You need to go through the pain of the edit.

How do you define success? Has that definition changed over the course of your career?

I honestly believed that I would probably work for about 10 years and then start doing something else. A lot of the time I haven't been the hottest director in the world and I've stayed quite consistent. I think if you're not the hottest director in the world, you're never going to be the coldest. So I like to swim in the lukewarm waters of doing a good job but not being the flavor of the minute. It's like a fashion thing. If you're really, really fashionable then you tend to become unfashionable. I kind of skirt around that and try not to be pigeonholed. It's not something that I planned or anything. Success means that you have work—that people still want to work with you. That you're in some way relevant enough that people will give you money and good artists want to work with you. I really didn't imagine I would be successful. I'm so amazed.

Do you have any advice for people who want to get into music video direction or production?

It's such a different world now from when I started. Everything was shot on film, and it was incredibly expensive and really difficult. People now are shooting film again, but at the same time, they can make amazing things on their iPhones or any kind of digital medium. I would say make something that you would want to see. Before I ever made a music video, I would think, what would a video that I make look like and what would make it different? What I have learnt is the reason you get employed is because you're indispensable and you're unique. There's hundreds of people out there—why would they pick you? You have to offer a service or something that people want. You have to then come up with some piece of imagery that you want to see. If you please yourself in that way, you're probably going to please someone else.

Sophie Muller Recommends:

Four Roads (Quattro Strade) 2021, 8 mins: Directed by Alice Rohrwacher. Haven't seen a film so inspiring and moving for a long time.

Patti Smith's Year of the Monkey - lots of pictures. Also her newsletter The reader is my notebook on Substack and "The Melting."

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild on Nintendo Switch

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