Zia Anger on why moving images are more important than words

October 19, 2016 - In Zia Anger's 2015 short film, "My Last Film," Mac DeMarco plays a character who runs over Kelly Rohrbach, who'd already been shot in the heart with an arrow. DeMarco has no lines. The film also features Rosanna Arquette, who has a lot of lines. And, if you've seen Jenny Hval perform in the past year, or so, you've likely seen Anger, her main collaborator, on stage with her. She's directed videos for Hval, Angel Olsen, Julianna Barwick, and Mitski, and recently directed the video for Maggie Rogers' "Alaska."

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3073 words.

Tags: Film, Culture, Technology, Politics, Identity, Inspiration, Anxiety.

I was doing a free two-day workshop for children in Hudson, which is a town full of artists. There are a lot of educational opportunities there if you have money, or if you come from privilege. Of course, it's children of artists who are like "We're not privileged." But it's obvious. Just like it's obvious there are a ton of kids with no privilege. There's a public school system there that's literally the worst in the state.

My friend Shaneka, who lives there, set up a workshop. These were eight year olds. I gave them instructions saying, "This is your script, you can be whatever character you want to be." Two of the kids wanted to be cops. The workshop was half white kids and half black kids, and it was interesting how the black kids—this was when some of the shootings were going on—wanted their characters to be police. I was thinking about the experience of being an eight year old, and having a vague understanding of what's going on in the news. They must have some idea that "police" means life or death, right?

It's like police are God, the highest power. It's probably higher than what they know God to be. If they're religious, they probably have somebody saying, "You're religious and you love God," but they have no sign of that. They do, though, have a serious sign of this "God," the police. Of course, that's what they want to be. That's who lives.

I was thinking about the experience of growing up and the difference between personal experience versus hearing something as a buzzword and trying to integrate that into your practice. It got me. For a lot of people, their first experience is physically experiencing something. For me and most of my peers, succeeding in film in the way that I'm succeeding, our experiences have been similar. I look at these kids, and their experiences are vastly different.

I've been thinking about how it's important for them to have access to the things I have access to; it's probably much more important than what me or my peers have to say. I'm from this generation, the beginning of the millennials, that's really fucking boring. My peers and I are afraid of people who're up and coming, and who have experiences that are more real. They're seeing so much more than we did.

I think it's because of access to everything. With the internet, you can see everything. That's why I think moving images are so important. For me, it wasn't that important growing up. It was this escapist thing. Now it's like the written word. Not knowing how to write at this point is not a big deal, but not knowing how to use your phone and how to make videos is a big deal. To be able to understand moving images is a big deal. More so than writing.

Young people are communicating with each other that way. That's the thing: they're communicating! To understand the nuances of what putting two shots next to each other means is important. To understand that there are these rules that are broken when it comes to montage. To be able, as a young person, to understand how people use moving images to manipulate things. To be able to look at something and be like, "I know what they're trying to say to me." Like, "They're not being honest about it. They're actually saying something really bad," or, "They're saying something really good. How do I tell everybody what I'm thinking?"

It's this basic thing that, to me, is like the written word. If you don't know how to do it, it's a kind of illiteracy. Which is not fair. It's beyond not fair. It's like End Times. It's how people are going to survive or not survive.

Over the last 10 years, when I've been making films and not making money on them, my parents would say to me: "Why don't you do this kind of image making thing?" Whether it be a commercial making thing or a cheesy car commercial, they're like, "There's ton of people that probably want that, you could do that." It's like somebody saying, "I write novels," versus, "I write poetry." Your mom being like, "People don't read poetry. Why don't you go write a novel?"

It's not like not knowing how because you weren't taught. I'm not talking about it that way. I'm just saying there are so many different types of moving images and places that we see these things. It's post-language. There are many different ways of doing it and techniques and all that shit, but ultimately, there is an alphabet.

It's an alphabet that I hate. Most of my work is denying the alphabet, denying the tradition of it. But at least I learned the tradition. I can look at the stupid commercial on the phone, the Red Lobster one that literally always comes on whenever I watch something on YouTube, and I understand what it's trying to tell me. There's a power in that.

You have to know the business side of things, too. When my boyfriend, a white guy, gets asked to do a job he's always like, "Can I have this much?" He just names something that's super out there and they say yes to him. When I think about teaching people the craft of filmmaking, the business side of it was something I always rejected. It's made my career slower because I didn't care about that. It's also one of those things that has, so far when it comes to making things for other people or with other people's money, really fucked me up because nobody taught me that.

My boyfriend has a different education than me. From a young age, he was basically told to just ask for the most insane amount of money, and he's always known to do that. I didn't know to do that. I was just told, "You're really lucky," which I still feel like I'm so lucky to get to make all these things. Anybody that has a bad attitude on set, I'm always like, "Get out. We're lucky. We could be driving a bus or something like that." You could be doing this or you could go do a job that is really hard.

I had an auto-didactic education, and it was a painful 10 years to have to learn everything over. I wish somebody had been like, "No, no, no. When you go to the label, don't think that what they give you is a lot of money. Think that that's half of what they could be giving you." Because you're making music videos for people that are, hopefully, going to be making them a ton of money. They're keeping half of whatever this musician is making. I've learned a lot about stuff that I never wanted to learn by making music videos. It's also made me not want to do music videos.

There's this lack of transparency when it comes to older people talking to younger people about what they do to get inside. The past 10 years has been me ripping this information out of people and being like, "Why is this so precious to you?" I'm realizing that a lot of fucking people are afraid of losing the privilege they have. There's this lack of transparency so that people can stay where they are. I am so done with it. We all need this information. Everybody should know everything about everything and then we'll see actually who's making the best stuff.

Most of the stuff that I see now, I mean film, music, I am so sick of it. Then I hang out with an eight year old who's doing something incredible and I'm like, "I want to see what you're going to do in 20 years. How do we go from you being eight years old—and the only exposure you have to music or film is in this free camp that happens one weekend out of the year—to being 30 years old? If that's what you want to do, what has to happen in the interim to make it be what you get to do?"

Even if it does mean working day jobs forever. Having access to a certain amount of knowledge that's helpful rather than just allowing certain people to stay at the top of the food chain and a lot of other people to work for them.

If a young person wants to get into film, and is looking for advice, I always say don't talk to a filmmaker. Don't ask them for advice because no one's going to give you the correct advice—they're too fucking afraid of losing their space. I think that the first thing would be to really start to understand the hierarchy of filmmaking.

Also, if you want to do filmmaking like I make it or music videos, figure out what people really want. Nowadays, it's mostly corporations owning smaller companies that want branded content. Figure out these structures. That's always been my quest. I've been obsessed with traditional narratives, and I've been interested in breaking those. I think the thing that's gotten me to where I am now has been figuring out the structures that be and figuring out how to subversively navigate them. For any young filmmaker or musician or anything, that's probably the smartest thing to do.

I'm not necessarily saying make things that are tailored towards certain modes of making that are popular. I'm saying know what those are so that you're not heartbroken when you get rejected every time. That's what every great pop star's doing. They understand what's happening and then they make things that fit that narrow space. I'm not saying do that, but I am saying know that that exists and don't let that space ruin you.

Dealing with rejection is the big thing. To not let it get you. For me, the last 10 years have been a practice at being happy. Being like, "Okay, the step that I'm taking, literally one foot in front of the other, each time I put my foot down, is that happiness? Am I a little bit happier each time?" I'm 30 now. Most of my 20s I was extremely unhappy. You should be moving towards happiness regardless of what you hope your career to be.

I've been writing my feature-length film for over a year. I was doing the normal, subversive thing that I do, which is not sharing any information with anybody, not following any rules. Along the way I met or have been re-acquainted with some really good people. They're making movies that people actually see. I realized at a certain point, I was like, "You know what? I spent all this time really rejecting traditional modes of making," and at a certain point I realized that might mean people never see what I'm making, because they don't want to work with me. Maybe the subversive thing to do is to cede to certain traditional things and to make something that gets out there that is still non-traditional and in the spirit of what I actually want to do.

Which is make sure that my stuff is seen, not because I'm self-involved, but because I can get part of the larger picture of a lot of different people's work being seen and this leveling of the playing field. A movement, basically, of people making things so that the kids who are eight years old now, when they're 30, have a much easier time of putting out a story that is actually… You know, that there's actually a space for them when they arrive at the point that I've arrived at. There's not a single part of me that ever thinks, "Oh, what I'm doing is the most important and I am the next big thing." I have come to terms that this is not what I'm doing. I'm a part of a huge group of people that are moving towards… the end of capitalism. I hope that I'm on the right side of that.

All the stuff that I've done that is small has been self-financed. You can keep going in that way and making bigger and bigger and bigger: self-funded in a way where you are pulling from the people around you who are a part of you or a part of your family or whatever. Then, there's this unicorn thing every filmmaker I know, who is doing well, has gotten. They're like, "Yeah, this really rich person gave me money." You have to find the rich person.

There are grants, but as far as I'm concerned, that's a European thing. That's incredible, but it's government funded and in this country, there are corporations, which is essentially what the government is. In this country taking money from a corporation is essentially getting a really big government or institutional grant in another country. For me, I'm interested in ways to make things that cost less money. Using a lot of money, but knowing that you don't actually need that.

Zia Anger Recommends:

Southland Tales (film)

a hairbrush to stimulate scalp (keep the blood flowing!)

macrobiotic cooking

The Argonauts by Maggie Nelson

"I Love Kanye" by Kanye West

Brecht's *Lehrstücke*

You could just make it with your cell phone if you had to. For me, I'm always like, "How would you do something like that but, without all of that other stuff?" How can you express those ideas without all that other stuff? All that other stuff but the budget version, where you go to the store and you get a face mask for 99 cents and you put that on. Can that be just as powerful as a $5,000 mask that somebody was supposed to wear? I don't know. The financing thing is really difficult because I'm trying to do things for no money but then, you kind of want a lot of money.

You know, the news we see everyday is really, really important, and a lot of those things are made with one cell phone. Nobody's sitting there saying, "No, no, no. It didn't cost any money to make." You know, you don't need the 40 guys with their bellies hanging out waiting to carry one piece of equipment in. I love the grips, but you don't need all of those people to help you make what you need to make.

Everyone sits here and they're nostalgic for film and the cameras and all that type of stuff and blah, blah, blah. I'm like, "No." It's not like cameras ever went away. Actually, more and more people have access to cameras and making films in their own phone. It's problematic because you have put it on Instagram and that's owned by Facebook and Facebook owns all of your fucking material but, it is still exercising the equivalent of the written word.

Kids understand, even when they're tiny, they understand what excessive things are. They understand that whoever's doing that has a huge amount of power. I think it's important to be like, "You can also make a movie. You can." I really didn't watch much TV or movies growing up, but we did have a video camera. There was this sense that you can make a movie. Now more than ever, everybody can. I guess there's probably a fair amount of people that don't have phones with cameras on them, and I know that that's a privileged idea, to be like, "I'm sure most people do."

But every kid that I worked with this last weekend knew how to download apps and they knew how to surf Instagram and they were under 10 years old. Right now, in this whole paradigm shift, moving images are the great equalizer.

All that said, there's too much out there. I think it's important to understand the way moving images work when you're young. They're getting everything. It takes a huge amount of energy to sift through things. To have a critical point of view from a very early age is essential.

It's absolutely insane that that's how little people are learning that they can make their own things. Even if there's no money for art at school, their parents or a friend of the family is carrying around a phone with a video camera on it. But a kid goes walking down the street and they see a film shoot and ask: "What is that?" Someone's like, "That's a movie. You couldn't make that." They get this idea that they couldn't make it. It's insane because they can!

Just like a kid 30 years ago would see a poem and they'd be like, "What is that?" Someone would be like, "A poem, but you can't do that." They have a pencil and a piece of paper right there and they could do that—and some kids did do that.

I think the difference between the written word and film, is that there's this illusion that you need a lot of money with film. You need a lot of equipment. It's not true. I want to make filmmaking something that's easy and a part of everyday life.

<u>Name</u>
Zia Anger

<u>Vocation</u>
Filmmaker, Videomaker, Teacher, Jenny Hval Collaborator

<u>Fact</u>

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film also features Rosanna Arquette, who has a lot of lines. And, if you've seen Jenny Hval perform in the past year, or so, you've likely seen Anger, her main collaborator, on stage with her. She's directed videos for Hval, Angel Olsen, Julianna Barwick, and Mitski, and recently directed the video for Maggie Rogers' "Alaska."