

The Film is Written in the Edit: Discussions with Documentary Directors and Editors

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Introduction

It starts with a subtle heard off screen as storm clouds begin to bowl over a rolling pasture in rural Missouri. A faint streak of lightning on the edge of the frame, a booming clap of thunder, and then, comes a more prominent lightning strike. At the exact moment we are privy to the power of nature's fury, we hear a quick and understated, "Achoo".

This moment of cinematic beauty and real coincidence provides Kirsten Johnson's seminal film *Cameraperson* (2016) with its own internal logic. A translucent documentary memoir compiled from hundreds of hours of footage, Johnson's film shows us how documentary images are made and how reality-based storytellers bear the burden of telling real stories by real people. Before making *Cameraperson* (2016), Johnson spent nearly 25 years working as a documentary cinematographer in some of the toughest, most intense conditions as the titular "cameraperson." Her directorial debut is not only a visual diary, but it also takes on the immense challenge of questioning the role of the camera, the director, the editor, and the ethical implications inherent in the documentary filmmaking process. The sneeze is an edit, a piece of audio, tracked from another scene, layered underneath the gorgeously rendered image of a thunderstorm, and not the "pure moment" that it seems. This collaborative creative choice was

not made by director Johnson, but rather by editor Nels Bangerter to establish Johnson as the central character of the film.

Cameraperson (2016) is littered with moments where we are made acutely aware that there is someone behind the camera, living, breathing, sneezing, thinking. In one scene a hand enters the frame to pull out a piece of grass to get a cleaner shot. In another instance, we are privy to a conversation behind the camera about what kinds of landscape shots make the most sense to set the scene. In almost any other context, these types of clips would be left on the cutting room floor.

Void of any kind of voiceover narration, *Cameraperson* (2016) relies on the juxtaposition of images, globe spanning locations, and seemingly disparate subject matter to draw its own personal conclusions about the act of documentary storytelling. None of this is on the surface and instead, it is all buried beneath its images, scenes, and sequences, asking audiences to come to it, rather than it come to them. The only context we are given are brief title cards with a location displayed. It's an overwhelming feeling, encountering a film this way. Why did Johnson, and perhaps more importantly, her editor Nels Bangerter, decide to use so many images that would typically be cast aside as "unusable"? Why this scene, and why is it placed here? Is this just a romanticized outtake reel? And for God's sakes, what's with the sneeze?

In the essay *I am a Camera*, Michael Koresky (2016) postulates that one of the central themes of *Cameraperson* (2016), "is to make audiences aware of the internal thought processes that occur during the making of a documentary film" (para. 4). When Bangerter chooses to leave in a moment where we see Johnson reframing a shot to get a tighter angle, or to find the more interesting pocket of light, it is because in an essence Johnson's film is an outtake reel, albeit a raw, emotional, and revealing one.

Bangerter came on board the project after Johnson had already begun editing the film herself. In an interview with Colleen Kelsey (2016), Johnson describes her initial version of the film as being two and a half hours uncompromising violence that lingered on the tragic nature of Johnson's work (para. 24). This version also had voiceover, which helped to contextualize Johnson's presence in the film. She admits that watching what was dubbed "the trauma cut" was a shocking revelation of self that she did not understand because she had no idea how desensitized, she was to the tragedy she witnessed (para. 25). While it seems that "the trauma cut" did "convey a revelation of the inner world of the film's creator" (Koresky, para. 8), it was too heavy handed and needed Bangerter's perspective to recontextualize the material and to give it a new intentionality. Rather than Johnson's presence resonating through elongated images of unmitigated struggle, with voice over narration presumably, because few have seen this version, over-articulating meaning, as voice over can sometimes do, her presence exists on the edges of the frame. Bangerter's more minimalistic choices revel in the tiniest of moments that give us a glimpse into the psyche of "a woman whose perspective has been greatly affected by the things she's seen" (Koresky, para. 8). Johnson's character comes through as one not necessarily desensitized to tragedy, but rather one who holds a great deal of compassion, pride, and gratitude toward the people she is privileged to have these cinematic experiences with, both good and bad.

While many documentary directors edit their own films and find collaboration through other means during the filmmaking process, collaboration between director and editor is essential to the success of *Cameraperson* (2016). While this emotionally tender portrayal of an artist at work may appear to be the closest thing to raw observational footage from Johnson's backup hard drives, it is a highly constructed piece of nonfiction that is intellectually rigorous and emotionally gripping; and all the best documentaries share these similar qualities. They use the art of editing to draw connections visually and thematically, to compress and elongate time for us

to share in an experience, and to give us an impression of reality that is more akin to poetry than prosaic.

My latest project, *Satan's Greatest Lies* (2024), is a documentary character study of George Russell, an environmental activist mourning the unexpected loss of his youngest daughter. This film has challenged me to navigate the tension between staying true to George's story and expressing my own creative perspective, raising fundamental questions about truth and authenticity in the documentary form.

The process of portraying another person's life, particularly someone as complex as George, has illuminated the multifaceted nature of authenticity. Questions of how he will perceive his own portrayal, and whether the story aligns with his reality or mine, have underscored the intricate balance of representation in nonfiction storytelling. Having worked primarily as a solo director and editor of my own material, I've realized that my solitary approach, while affording me full creative control, limits the external perspectives that could refine and deepen the narrative. By attempting to stay true to George's story while infusing it with my own vision, I've come to see that authenticity in documentary filmmaking is not a fixed endpoint but a fluid, evolving process shaped by the interplay of personal intention, subjectivity, and creative decisions. Perhaps collaboration with an editor could clarify some of the complexities I've encountered, offering a dialogic process where creative expression and authenticity could be further interrogated? Or would such collaboration introduce another layer of interpretation, potentially complicating the very truth I seek to represent?

The purpose of this research is to examine how the documentary editing process differs between directors who collaborate with editors and those who edit their own material, with a focus on how filmmakers strive to stay true to the story they want to create. This small "t" truth reflects the subjective, crafted authenticity inherent in nonfiction storytelling, shaped by both the

raw material of reality and the interpretive lens of the filmmaker. The study explores how collaboration between directors and editors enriches creative expression while simultaneously complicating notions of authenticity, as the editor's influence introduces a dialogic layer to the storytelling process. In contrast, the solitary approach allows directors to maintain full control over their vision but limits the external perspectives that can challenge and refine the narrative. By investigating these dynamics, this research sheds light on the interplay between creative freedom, collaborative processes, and the pursuit of authenticity in documentary filmmaking.

Literature Review

Ann Utterback (1977) begins *The Voices of the Documentarist* with some historical context explaining that “Documentary film emerged as a *genre* out of early experiments in newsreels and travelogs only to become one of the most confusing classifications of film” (p.31). Bill Nichols (2001) shares Utterback's sensibility when he admits that the “Documentary” can be no more easily defined than “love,” or “culture.” Its meaning cannot be reduced to a dictionary definition in the way that “temperature” or “table salt” can be” (p.20). Part of the documentary's perplexity is that, in a way, “Every film is a documentary. Even the most whimsical of fictions give evidence of the culture that produced it and reproduces the likenesses of the people who perform within it. (Nichols, p.1).

Prominent efforts to define the documentary genre started at the beginning of the 20th century. By developing three main principles of documentary film, Grierson (1932), in the essay, *First Principles of Documentary*, was one of the first to explain how nonfiction film works and its potential. First, Grierson distinguished between fiction and nonfiction films, stating that documentary, different from fiction, has the capacity to show the real world. “We believe that the cinema's capacity for getting around, for observing and selecting from life itself, can be

exploited in a new and vital art form,” he wrote, adding that documentary can capture “the living scene and the living story” (p. 97). In a second principle, Grierson argued that “the original (or native) actor” and “the original (or native) scene” provide the viewer with a more varied interpretation of reality. Finally, Grierson said capturing spontaneous and “raw” material helps to achieve the “intimacy of knowledge,” which is impossible to achieve in a studio, to give a greater sense of what is real (p. 97). The development of these 3 key principles by Grierson (1932), lead him to the slippery exegesis of documentary as “a “creative treatment of actuality” (p. 8). Grierson’s foundational definition calls attention to a bedrock of documentary discourse, that is, that these kinds of films are representational.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997) briefly defines representation as “the production of meaning through language” (p. 16). Documentaries record the everyday and reconstruct the experience of reality. For this reason, they are perceived to signify truth. However, documentary filmmakers use the language of cinema, framing and composition, choices in lighting, and more importantly editing, to create meaning in their work and deepen their stories. For Hall, meaning is not inherent in things, it is constructed and “the result of a signifying practice...that makes things mean” (Hall, p. 24). Despite their presentation, documentaries are not objective. They are subjective and are reliant on a relationship between the documentary filmmaker, their participant, and the audience. Hall (1997) describes this relationship as, “a window for the audience, where the lens of the camera is, in effect, the eye of the [documentary filmmaker] with the implication that the two are interchangeable, so that the viewer is in effect there “(p. 85). The way a filmmaker engages with the historical world is what Bill Nichols (2010) calls the "documentary voice" (p. 31). Documentary filmmakers engage with reality through their unique point of view and then interpret their experience from their perspective. Therefore, the informational value, is

mediated through the frame of mind of the person making it, and it is presented as a mixture of emotion and information (Hall, p. 83). Their personal interpretation of a topic is influenced by any number of preconceived attitudes, biases, or angles; and most importantly, what the filmmaker hopes to get out of the film.

To be an effective representational medium, the documentary must make audiences feel as if they were co-present to the recorded reality captured by the documentary. Stuart Hall (1997) quotes Roy Stryker, who documented America's Great Depression, to frame the way Hall believes documentaries frame reality "a good documentary should tell not only what a place or a thing or a person looks like, but it must also tell the audience what it would feel like to be an actual witness to the scene" (p.83). An image in a documentary is not simple or innocent but is deliberately used to shape the film's meaning, as well as to help form the context through which to interpret the meaning of subsequent images.

Part of the documentary's DNA are arguments about truth, questions about how real a film is or isn't are inherent to the form. Any attempt at representing the real is suspect. Nichols (2001) argues that "for every documentary there are at least three stories that intertwine: the filmmaker's, the film's, and the audience's" (p.61). The intentions of the documentary filmmaker are to communicate "a sense of what we understand reality itself to have been, of what it is now, or of what it may become. Documentary films also *convey truths if we decide they do*. We must assess their claims and assertions, their perspectives, and arguments *in relation to the world as we know it* and decide whether they are worthy of our belief" (Nichols, 2001, p.2). Nichols holds a gracious viewpoint of the medium and doesn't hint at the possibility of being duped or deluded into thinking something is real, when it is in fact, constructed, to feel real.

On the other hand, notable contemporary film theorist, Dirk Eitzen (1995) defines documentary a little more cynically, stating that “all documentaries, whether they are deemed reliable or not, revolve around questions of trust. A documentary is any motion picture that is susceptible to the question ‘Might it be lying?’” (p. 81). This is because, as is often said, every edit is a lie, and the history of documentaries is an unspooling of truth caught in an intricate web of fabrication.

Writer and filmmaker Robert Greene (2015) insists that editing a documentary “requires a nimble dance of ethical considerations, cinematic interests and practical limitations,” (para. 3). He goes on to compare documentary filmmaking to “trying to bag a thousand snakes at once,” (para. 3) and attests to perhaps the slipperiest snake being the process of “shaping of a meaningful performance out of the raw, volatile and often friskily interactive relationships with the real people being captured” (para. 4). Greene’s description of the process alludes to the complicated nature of making films about real life, real people, and real experience, and upholds the innate responsibility of the filmmakers to represent what was captured in as authentic a way as possible; a feat of filmmaking that is more easily said than done.

History of Documentaries Through the Lens of Editing

Documentary editing involves creative challenges that confront the filmmaker and requires consideration of the power they wield re-constructing real people lives. Wanda Bershen (2010) opens her essay *A Question of Ethics: The Relationship between Filmmaker and Subject* stating that:

Any filmmaker who sets out to make a documentary faces multiple challenges...How to portray the subjects of the film? What to shoot and what not to shoot? How to edit so

that the film is true to its topic and subjects, yet also works as a compelling story for the audiences? (Para. 3).

To make a documentary is to enter a pact, a covenant, a partnership, between the filmmaker and the participant; while the participant opens their life and tells their story, the filmmaker captures moments.

They choose when and what to film, and where to put the camera. Then, perhaps even more crucially, an editor cuts the material down, trying to find structure amongst the mayhem to inflict a narrative, and create a character or set of characters, for the audience to engage with. When directors and editors must make their own ethical decisions, how do they come to their answers? What are their responsibilities, if any? Do they do what is necessary to tell the most compelling story?

Issues regarding a filmmaker's potential bias, respect for privacy (especially when dealing with vulnerable subject matter) and avoiding exploitation all raise ethical concerns in the process of making a nonfiction film. To film, or not to film? How close is too close to a participant? How far is too far? What if this quote is put in another context to raise the stakes or to add drama? Filmmakers must delicately navigate these complexities, ensuring that the people at the center of their work are treated with compassion and respect, while simultaneously sticking true to their creative vision.

In a study looking at ethical challenges in the documentary field, Aufderheide, et. al., (2009), found that "filmmakers were acutely aware of the implications of telling a story one way rather than another" (para. 53). Since editing is a creative act, it's complexity in the ethical space of making documentary films is elevated because of the process involved in putting two shots back-to-back, seemingly both shot at the same time, but maybe not, and then presented as happening relatively around the same time. Or, often even more unnoticeable are the tiniest

pieces of sound and dialogue that are spliced, recontextualized and strung together to make single coherent thoughts. The filmmakers interviewed also admitted that their intentions were always to make “a fair film and a truthful film,” not necessarily one that would, for instance, make their subjects happy or their networks richer. Their goal was “to tell the story honestly, to try to keep as emotionally truthful as possible.” They strove to represent “the truth of who [the subjects] are” or “of what the story was” (para. 55).

The film that is widely considered to be the very first documentary, *Nanook of the North* (1922), directed and edited by Robert Flaherty, is a seemingly observational portrait of survival on the frozen Canadian tundra. The film has become a cornerstone in the development of nonfiction filmmaking. Encumbered by large and unwieldy camera equipment, Flaherty was required to shoot his film like the dominant fiction films of the time, using standard coverage in scenes to illustrate the events of Nanook’s life. More importantly, Flaherty uses a classical style continuity cutting to dramatize the everyday of Nanook and his family.

Taking the opening scene as an example, the dogs surrounding the igloo, the cutting of the ice, the opening of the door, Nanook stepping out into the sunlight of the frozen landscape raising his finger to check the direction of the wind. Each of these actions are captured with a tremendous attention to detail that gives Nanook’s emergence from his igloo a dramatic quality. The editing in *Nanook of the North* (1922) imbues the film with a conventional realism that brings audiences closer to the action and to the character of Nanook, while simultaneously bringing attention to the creative choices being made. The elements of the *mise-en-scene* suggest Flaherty’s heavy hand in staging the opening action, thus Flaherty fulfilling Eitzen’s “fear” of the documentary by lying. However, Flaherty believed that “one often must distort [reality] to catch its true spirit” (Gravely, Lund, Pendleton, 2015). It should be noted that *Nanook of the*

North (1922) was made in the Pre-Grierson Era, and thus it can be argued Flaherty never intended to make what we might call a “documentary”.

Earlier criticism of the film puts stress on Nanook’s looking into the lens of the camera in the third shot of the opening sequence as evidence of Flaherty’s close direction of the action; but this moment actually feels much closer to what one might find in a more contemporary documentary because it seems like Nanook is being caught in the moment, unaware of the camera’s gaze until he notices Flaherty watching. Therefore, while Flaherty’s use of standard Hollywood techniques highlights the staged quality of the film and brings it further away from “documentary,” his choice to leave the “looking” shot in the edit brings the film closer to what we may assume is a documentary. *Grey Gardens* (1976), a landmark of the American documentary, directed by Albert and David Maysles and co-directed and edited by Ellen Hovde, with editing from Muffie Meyer and Susan Froemke, depicts the daily life of a mother and daughter, both named Edith Beale, who lived in isolation on a historic property called Grey Gardens. An intimate and claustrophobic film, there is an elliptical quality to the film that makes the Beale’s lives feel like a series of “discontinuous takes or rehearsals, where we never get the full performance” (Robeson, p. 44). The challenge, then, confronting the filmmakers is to take the repetitious, chaotic, and undirected moments and shape them into a form that is at once intelligible to an audience and faithful to the essential quality of the filmed material. These characteristics of the Beale’s are made evident through the episodic and associative editing style used by the team of Hovde, Meyer, and Froemke. In a film where ostensibly nothing really happens, the editors had to rely on patterns and juxtapositions between Big and Little Edie to focus in on a change in power dynamics between the two women, being observed in their own home by the filmmaking brothers, across the passage of time, as opposed to a change in events. A good example of this can be found in the use of the racoon who has taken up residency in the

Beale's wall. Big Edie, in the opening of the film speaks about her annoyance with the rodent and her inability to rid it from their home. Throughout the film we return to the hole in the wall almost as a structural element that allows for a moment of breath between the tangential arguments and non-sequitur conversations between the women. In addition to repetitious patterns, the editors also had to excavate themes to give the film weight and substance. One of the most prominent throughout *Grey Gardens* (1976) is freedom. Not only are there overt details like the American flag held by Little Edie during the famous dance number, but there are also more poetic symbols of freedom at play in the editorial choices that help to make the Beale's feelings of confinement more resonant. A prime example, an important scene in her brother's former bedroom, Little Edie tells the Maysles that she must proceed with the planned redecoration of the room. She proposes hanging a birdcage and a travel brochure entitled "Around the World" in the same corner of the room. Shortly after, there is a cut to an ocean liner before Little Edie takes a swim and a quick cut to a bird flying from the roof of the house. These two cutaways, while seemingly serving the purposes of transitional material, are adding depth and nuance to the main thematic element of the film. Upon its release, many critics claimed that the Maysles used two vulnerable participants for their own benefit, exploited them, and invaded their privacy (Vogels, 2005). However, the Beales were positive about with the film's outcome and somewhat benefited themselves from its existence. To reinforce the intimate relationship the filmmakers, share with the Beale's, there are several instances where we hear or see the Maysles, whether in a mirror, or the microphone dipping into the frame. There is also several moments where the Beale's directly address the filmmakers. Normally, these types of moments would be cut around by the editors, but here it adds to the notion of collaboration and a shared understanding of intentionality between the filmmakers and participants. Rogers (2015) argues that *Grey Gardens* can alternatively be viewed as "a testament to the manifold ways in which

human beings survive in the most extreme of circumstances: that is, to our ability to mutate, adapt, evolve, create and to keep on carrying on" (p. 125), and a film that "reveals the inherent performative and creative nature of selfhood"(p. 114).

Two Dominant Modes of Representation

Kerrigan and McIntyre (2010) suggest that "to acknowledge the documentary filmmaker's ability to participate in the social construction of reality brings a whole new meaning to the phrase '*the creative treatment of actuality*.' In fact, the '*creative treatment*' they engage in is derived from the [documentarians] understanding and ability to deliberately construct and manipulate the '*actuality*' that is unfolding" (p. 118).

Nichols (2001) provides six modes of documentary representation: *poetic*, *expository*, *reflexive*, *observational*, *performative*, and *participatory*. In creating these modes, Nichols (2001) "[establishes] a loose framework of affiliation within which individuals may work; they set up conventions that a given film may adopt; and they provide specific expectations viewers anticipate having fulfilled" (p.99). Each mode describes "different qualities of observation, different intentions in observation, and, of course, very different powers and ambitions at the stage of organizing material" (Grierson, 1933, p.19). Bill Nichols (2001) argues that these "modes signal a better way to represent the historical world than a new dominant to organize a film, a new ideology to explain our relation to reality, and a new set of issues and desires to preoccupy an audience" (p.102). Documentary films often display an array of disparate shots tied together less by a narrative character than by controlling logic or argument. Although many documentaries do rely on continuity editing techniques, the case can be made that it is a different kind of continuity that is closer to what Bill Nichols (2001) calls "evidentiary" editing, which is described as:

organizing cuts within a scene to present the impression of a single, convincing argument supported by a logic. Instead of cutting from one shot of a character approaching a door to a second shot of the same character entering the room on the far side of the door, a more typical documentary film cut would be from a close-up of a bottle of champagne being broken across the bow of ship to a long shot of a ship, perhaps an entirely different ship, being launched into the sea. The two shots may have been made years or continents apart, but they contribute to the representation of a single process rather than the development of an individual character (p. 52).

The purpose of the documentary is not to show surface level veracity, but to extract a deeper candor out of its subject matter to provide a broader sense of the truth in the realities depicted in their images. The *truth of a documentary* lies in the audience's willingness to believe that the documentary filmmaker isn't deceiving them, which, somewhat ironically, is a trust crafted in the edit room. The audience has the right to criticize the film's validity, and to question the filmmaker, their creative choices, and their intentions.

Constructing Truth: Authenticity and the Role of Editing in Documentary

Authenticity in documentary filmmaking has long been a contested and multi-dimensional concept. Rather than being a static marker of objectivity, it is a dynamic interplay between representation, interpretation, and creative expression. As Stella Bruzzi (2000) notes, "Documentary is not merely a reproduction of reality; it is an engagement with it" (p. 54). This understanding frames authenticity not as a fixed truth but as a constructed narrative shaped by the filmmaker's intentions, the subject's story, and the audience's perceptions.

Editing plays a pivotal role in crafting this sense of authenticity. Bill Nichols (2001) asserts that the authenticity of a documentary lies in its capacity to “convey a sense of what we understand reality itself to have been, of what it is now, or of what it may become” (p. 127). Through editing, filmmakers juxtapose images, structure sequences, and build emotional arcs, transforming raw footage into narratives that resonate with deeper truths. This process does not undermine authenticity but redefines it as an interpretive act—a way of engaging with reality rather than merely presenting it.

As Jill Godmilow and Ann-Louise Shapiro observe, “We are not just talking about authenticity, then, but about the uses of invention and its implications in the telling of a 'true story.'” This framing moves beyond the idea of fidelity to raw facts, suggesting that the power of documentary lies in its ability to evoke an emotional and thematic truth. Authenticity, in this sense, is not tied to a singular or unaltered version of reality but is rooted in the interpretive lens of the filmmaker and their engagement with the subject matter.

This interpretative quality highlights the inherent subjectivity of documentary filmmaking. Stella Bruzzi (2000) argues that documentaries “negotiate constantly between the real and the representational” (p. 54). This negotiation acknowledges that every documentary is a construction—shaped by the filmmaker's intent, the material captured, and the choices made in the edit. These creative interventions are not distortions but essential tools that allow filmmakers to shape raw material into meaningful narratives, enabling audiences to connect with the story on a deeper level.

The collaborative dynamic between directors and editors further complicates and enriches the notion of authenticity. Editors act as interpreters, shaping the material in ways that reflect both the director's vision and their own creative instincts. This collaborative process introduces a

dialogic layer to documentary storytelling, where authenticity emerges from the interplay of multiple perspectives rather than a singular authorial voice.

The tension between creative expression and representation underscores the role of editing as both a technical and philosophical practice. The editor's task is not merely to organize footage but to excavate themes, draw connections, and shape a narrative that feels both truthful and resonant. In this sense, editing is where the "truth" of a documentary is negotiated, crafted, and ultimately realized. It is a process that embraces subjectivity as a means of revealing deeper layers of meaning and connection. This selection process can be seen as "editing the truth instead of just showing it raw," highlighting the editor's influence on the film's authenticity (Dickerson, p. 6). This perspective aligns with the view that documentary films are not mere reproductions of reality but engagements with it, where the filmmaker's choices shape the representation of truth.

By reframing authenticity as a collaborative and interpretive construct, this section emphasizes the integral role of editing in documentary filmmaking. It is through this creative process that filmmakers engage with their material to craft stories that are not just reflections of reality but explorations of its emotional and thematic depths.

Director-Editor Collaboration

Mary Lampson (2022), famed editor of films such as *Harlan County USA* (1978), believes that "the relationship between the editor and director should be a close collaboration because the editor is absorbing a director's vision and then looking at the materials through the eyes of the audience" (para. 2). When filming in the field, the director works most closely with their cinematographer. Together, these two make all the creative choices that will dictate the visual language of a film. After the images are shot, they need to be selected, sequenced, and constructed. It is during this point when the

director needs a skilled and acutely aware editor to help shape the film into something that gets beneath the surface in an ethical and honest way.

When speaking to *Filmmaker Magazine* about his film *Spermworld* (2024), director Lance Oppenheim (2024), discussed his close relationship with his editor Daniel Garber, by stating, “Every time I’ve worked with Dan, I feel like he’s the co-author of the movie” (para. 18). Typically, the director of the film claims authorship, however, often, in the documentary world, the director has an acute acknowledgement of the importance a great editor brings to any project. This type of co-authorship goes back to the Direct Cinema movement. When the Maysles began making films, they started to share directing credits with their primary editor Charlotte Zwerin, along with as an acknowledgement of the control, power, and prowess she had in shaping the bold stories they wanted to tell. In the same interview with *Filmmaker Magazine*, editor Daniel Garber speaks a little bit more directly about the editor director relationship describing it as “a meeting of idiosyncrasies, and you hope that people’s individual proclivities are complementary” (para. 25). It seems that having a distinct point of view is important as both the director and the editor and the hope is that parts of these various perspectives are shared, while others are seemingly disparate from one another. Which, in the end, seems to make a lot of sense, because this would better provide a more well-rounded look at how to approach telling someone else’s life onscreen.

Director and producer Robb Moss (2022) explains the role of the editor as having two priorities, “they translate the idea of the filmmaker; and they have a way of seeing possibilities in the material” (para. 3). Editors are interpreters. They are tasked with approximating the director’s intentions. Lewis Eskrine (2022) calls editors “The

alchemists of filmmaking. We're the people who turn the raw materials of the film into the gold an audience gets" (para. 5). Acclaimed editor Joe Bini (2022) furthers this point about the alchemical process of editing by describing the physical task of cutting as going "through the footage, and you have one thing in mind when you first look at the footage, and then when you start to put it together, it changes in your mind as to what is important. This works, this works, this doesn't work. And suddenly, "Oh my god" (para. 6). While documentaries don't typically credit writers, it is the editor who is often attributed to "writing" the reality of a documentary. However, this doesn't happen alone, the work of the editor requires close collaboration, a sort of unspoken bond with a director that leads them to finding the story in a chaotic mess of raw material. Bini (2022) details his working relationship with German director Werner Herzog as somewhat of a symbiotic collaboration:

I understand [Werner Herzog's] vision quite well; there's a lot we don't have to discuss. When I'm going through the footage, I know what to look for. He's a very unique filmmaker and yes, there's the story, but there's also the poetry to his work. So, I know when I'm looking at the footage what he will think of as the poetry (para. 7).

The editor's job is dichotomous and complex; on one hand, they must imbue the film with a distinct perspective, a point of view that audiences can empathize with, something that they can latch on to that only the editor can provide and on the other hand, they must follow the creative direction and overall vision provided by the director. In addition to being the alchemists of the documentary filmmaking process, editors also seem to be the jugglers of multiple intentions inherent in the making of nonfiction films.

Research Question

In summary, the literature review reveals that filmmakers hold responsibilities not only to their participants but also to their artistic vision, which complicates ethical decision-making in the field (Aufderheide et al., 2009, Butchart & Har-Gil, 2019). Therefore, this study aims to further analyze perceptions of the collaborative approach in documentary filmmaking practice through the lens of the editorial process. This study hopes to fill the gap in the scholarly conversation by contributing to the discussion of collaborative editing, to a practical and sound approach to documentary filmmaking. The goal would be to talk with different combinations of director-editor. Several pairs will be directors and their long-term editors, while others will be directors who edit their own films.

The research aims to answer this research question:

RQ: How does the collaborative filmmaking process between director and editor differ from solo directors who also edit their own films?

Examples of Interview Questions:

- How early in the process is the collaboration starting between editor and director?
- Is there a boundary for creative freedom drawn for the editor?
- How do you both address issues in representation? Meaning, how do you handle authenticity vs creative expression together?
- How often are you thinking about your own identity as the filmmaker(s) during the process of editing a film? Does this ever inform the way you choose to edit a character?

- When a film is finished, to what extent do you feel the vision for a film and how it is portrayed on screen, is a shared endeavor?

Methodology

This qualitative research makes a concentrated effort to better apprehend the intricacies of possibly the most essential relationship in the documentary filmmaking postproduction process: what close collaboration between the director and editor and co-creation bring to the documentary filmmaking process and how this partnership better suits a more ethical form of non-fiction film.

To settle on this study's participants and the documentary films they created, the researcher used criterion sampling (Yin, 1994). This inquiry uses six documentary films that, from the researcher's point of view, show a diversity between films that utilize a collaborative editing approach between director and editor, and films that are directed and edited by the same person. The documentaries also had to adequately suit the following criteria:

- The chosen film must be less than a decade old. Considering the field of documentary has developed and changed significantly in the past decade, the purpose is to discuss contemporary documentary practices that can still be applied in a professional setting.
- The chosen documentary has been programmed at one of the leading documentary festivals in the world, such as True/False, IDFA, CPH: DOX, Sundance, Sheffield Doc/Fest, or First Look Film Festival (Hanna & Anderson, 2014).

- From the researcher's point of view, the chosen documentary must be a work of portraiture, meaning it focuses on no more than a few central characters and/or relies on place and setting as a major character in the narrative. These kinds of documentaries require a delicate balance between creative expression and the authentic representation of their participants.

The chosen documentary must be directed and edited by two filmmakers who have at least one collaborative experience with each other, therefore representing a richer working dynamic. Or directors who edit their own films. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with four director/editor duos, two directors who edit their own films, and one director who has worked collaboratively with an editor.

Descriptions of the Discussed Films

The research includes the following films, and the interview participants as follows:

- *So Late So Soon* (2020) directed by Daniel Hymanson and edited by Isidore Bethel. The film focuses on Chicago artists Jackie and Don Seiden, who both, a half century into their marriage, are facing alarming interruptions to their health and the hardships of aging. They are filmed on and off over the course of five years and the film uses a uniquely intimate approach to allow us, the audience, to bear witness of the fragility of elderly life. Both Daniel and Isidore were interviewed.
- *The Taste of Mango* (2024) directed by Chloe Abrahams and edited by Isidore Bethel. An enveloping, hypnotic, urgently personal meditation on family, memory, identity, violence, and love. At its center are three extraordinary women: the director's mother, Rozana; her grandmother, Jean; and the director herself. Their stories, by turns difficult

and jubilant, testify to the entangled and ever-changing nature of inheritance and the ways in which we both hurt and protect the ones we love. Only Chloe was interviewed.

- *Gasoline Rainbow* (2024) directed by Bill and Turner Ross; edited by Bill Ross IV. With high school in the rearview, five teenagers from inland Oregon embark on one last adventure. Piling into a van with a busted taillight, their mission takes them to a place they've never been-the Pacific coast, five hundred miles away. The film, like their others, is a documentary-fiction hybrid that uses non-actors and a loose fictional framework to capture the excitement of the transition from being a teenager to an adult. Both Bill and Turner were interviewed.
- *Cameraperson* (2016) directed by Kirsten Johnson and edited by Nels Bangerter. Using decades of footage shot in locations all over the world, cinematographer Kirsten Johnson composes a memoir of her years spent behind the camera. Through a series of episodic juxtapositions, Johnson explores the relationships between image makers and their subjects, the tension between the objectivity and intervention of the camera, and the complex interaction of unfiltered reality with crafted narrative. Both Kirsten and Nels were interviewed.
- *Fire of Love* (2022) directed by Sara Dosa and edited by Erin Casper. An archival film that shows us the intrepid scientists and lovers Katia and Maurice Krafft who tragically died from a volcanic explosion, the very thing that brought them together in the beginning. Using a massive archive of recorded materials the film unravels the mysteries of volcanoes through the lens of two fierce researchers and life partners whose love burns as red as the lava they photograph. Both Sara and Elizabeth were interviewed.

- *Bad Press* (2023) co-directed by Joe Peeler and Rebecca Landsberry-Baker and edited by Joe Peeler. The film follows Angel Ellis, a reporter for Mvskoke Media in Okmulgee, Oklahoma, who fights for the independent press and transparency among local officials in the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. With attentive documentation of unfolding events, the film tells a nuanced and empowering story of how a united group of people can make a difference. Joe Peeler was interviewed.
- *Mayor* (2020) directed and edited by David Osit. The film follows Musa Hadid, the mayor of Ramallah, a Christian city that serves as the de facto administrative capital of Palestine. Through daily observations, the film offers a unique and intimate portrayal of the city from the mayor's perspective. With the Israeli-Palestinian conflict present as a theme, the film delves into the question of how to govern a city when one does not have a country? David was interviewed.

In addition to the films described above, participants have the liberty to discuss other works they have done, either independently, or collaboratively. General questions focused on the working relationship between the director and the editor. How do they collaborate on creative choices, sequencing, and structure? How do they handle authenticity and representation? What types of ethical challenges arise during the documentary filmmaking process? How are they handling these challenges collaboratively?

Five interviews were conducted over Zoom and took between 30 and 60 minutes; and two interviews were conducted over email and used audio recordings. Permission to record each Zoom conversation was obtained in advance of the interview from each of the participants. Each interview has been transcribed, coded, and analyzed to better understand the complexity of the

documentary development process. The conversations will add a significant analysis to the scholarly conversation about ethical decisions related to collaboration in documentary editing. This study may also help practitioners to rethink their approach toward editing and the representation of the chosen reality on a practical level. This research will inform and invite current and future documentary creators to learn about other practitioners' experiences and reconsider their role in the documentary industry.

While this research offers valuable insights into the distinctions between directors who work with editors and those who edit their own material, there are two limitations in the methodology that must be acknowledged. One significant limitation is the lack of diversity among the directors and editors interviewed for this study. The participants represent a relatively homogenous group in terms of their professional backgrounds, access to resources, and cultural perspectives. Most of the interviewees are white and based in Western contexts. Therefore, their experiences may not fully capture the challenges faced by filmmakers from underrepresented or marginalized communities. Filmmakers from different cultural, geographic, or socio-economic backgrounds might encounter vastly different collaborative dynamics and creative challenges that this research does not address.

Moreover, the absence of voices from historically excluded groups limits the study's ability to generalize findings across the broader filmmaking landscape. Diverse cultural and personal contexts often shape how filmmakers approach collaboration, authorship, and the editing process, potentially leading to unique practices and perspectives that remain unexplored in this research.

Another limitation lies in the selection of participants, all of whom have achieved notable success with their films. The interviewees have received critical acclaim and recognition within

the documentary filmmaking community. This success bias limits the study's ability to account for the struggles and failures that are often integral to the filmmaking process. Filmmakers working in less visible or less resourced contexts might face unique obstacles, such as limited access to experienced collaborators, financial constraints, or institutional barriers, that significantly impact their creative processes. By focusing on successful filmmakers, the study potentially overlooks the lessons and insights that can be gained from examining less visible or commercially unsuccessful projects.

Personal Project Overview

For the past decade, I have been a practicing filmmaker, mostly working in the nonfiction form making work that is largely autobiographical in nature. However, my most recent project, is not. My film, *Satan's Greatest Lies* (2024) is a biographical character study about George Russell, a maverick environmental activist with a God complex, mourns the unexpected loss of his youngest daughter, causing him to question his lifelong crusade to preserve the piney woods of East Texas, the furthest stretch from an autobiographical self-reflexive documentary.

Making this film has been the hardest thing I've done. The notion of expressing myself through the experience of another human has presented issues of representation that have, up to this point, felt unimaginable. George is a character that is broken, dealing with a tragedy, while simultaneously confronted by the resonance of a legacy left short. Starting a project with a singular vision and being left with a sliver of the initial conceit is a taxing effort, but one that I have been able to glean a tremendous amount of insight from.

This process proved difficult and presented dilemmas that didn't think were possible before. A charismatic, camera-ready personality, on one hand, seems like the perfect collaborator to make a film, yet, at the same time organically makes the process of representation more difficult because of the creative choices involved in the process. Questions about authenticity and truth have been swirling around the editorial process without any hard critique that could create a new perspective for viewing. Am I portraying George in a light that he would find endearing? Will this be a portrait that he will think is honest? These kinds of questions have led me to be curious about whether having a different person in the role of editor to collaborate with would help to clarify some of these burning inquiries during the postproduction process.

I've often only edited my own material, working as both director and editor, and while collaboration is typically central to my working process, editing has remained a solo effort, partly because of pragmatic reasons, like lack of financing to pay for an additional editor, and also because of wanting to control things; but overall, this has been the first time I've felt like the film could have maybe benefited from another set of eyes earlier on in the process. These experiences have brought me to the conclusion that questions must be asked about the difference between director/editors controlling authorship, and the collaborative nature of sharing editorial decision making in the process of documentary representation.

Analysis

Directors and Editors Meeting for the First Time

Documentaries are written in the edit suite; documentary filmmakers sift through mountains of footage crafting moments of captured reality into meaningful narratives, bringing order to chaos. Collaborative editing, where directors work closely with editors, brings a multi-

layered perspective to the process. The relationship is more than a division of labor; it is an intricate partnership that shapes the creative process and defines the final shape of a film. Together, they act as co-authors of the story, finding creative solutions and uncovering layers of meaning that may not have been apparent during production. The interviews with the directors and editors of the films described above indicate that a successful collaborative partnership often hinges the cultivation of trust and shared vision during the early stages of engagement.

In 2016, director Daniel Hymanson and editor Isidore Bethel connected through a mutual acquaintance. This meeting, as Hymanson describes, was purely coincidental—Bethel happened to be in Chicago completing his low-residency master’s program at the same time Hymanson was in the city filming for his debut feature documentary *So Late So Soon* (2020). Their introduction was “very serendipitous,” Hymanson says. He had seen Bethel’s work on *Of Men and War* (2014), which he greatly admired. He explains that seeing Bethel’s editing style on a project that was “very different than how anyone else I had been working with... edited” resonated with him, suggesting that he was drawn to Bethel’s distinct sensibility even before they began working together. Hymanson felt that Bethel’s restrained approach to narrative structure and his tender nuanced eye for character development could provide an elegant touch to his film, *So Late So Soon*.

Rather than discussing the project directly, Bethel and Hymanson spoke about Hymanson’s life, including the complex personal circumstances he was navigating while shooting. Bethel recalls, “We didn’t talk about Daniel’s film at all. We talked about what his life was like shooting.” At the time, Hymanson would return to his childhood home after shooting, where he was dealing with a family health emergency and the urgent sale of his parent’s apartment. For Bethel, Hymanson’s life circumstances had “strange echoes and divergences” to

the themes of *So Late So Soon*, and he was drawn to Hymanson's willingness to embrace this difficult and unusual life situation. He could also see that Hymanson was looking for a way to channel what he was going through into the film he was making.

After this initial meeting, the two remained in touch, exchanging thoughts and ideas about the project over the course of several months before any formal agreement to collaborate was discussed. The slow, organic progression from acquaintances to collaborators meant that by the time they officially began working together, "there was no need to negotiate roles or boundaries because we had already established a mutual understanding of each other's strengths, values, and creative sensibilities," Hymanson said. Bethel explained that "by the time there was a formal ask of like, do you want to work on this film? It was just like self-evident." He emphasized the importance of this long, exploratory period, explaining that "it allowed both him and Daniel to assess their alignment in terms of creative and ethical perspectives."

Director Chloe Abrahams recalled that she didn't even consider editing *The Taste of Mango* (2024) herself at first, as she felt the project was beyond her experience. It was in this early phase of the project that she met Stella Heath Keir, who became her first editor for the film. Reflecting on her first meeting with Stella, Abrahams said, "She told me that she likes to work with the director in the room. She likes to look through all the rushes with the director present, take notes on everything... and then just have lots and lots of conversations." This structured, collaborative approach was new for Abrahams, and she noted that Stella was instrumental in "shaping [her] idea of how this [process] is supposed to work," as she had "no real precedent for what it was like."

Abrahams first became aware of Isidore Bethel through her partner, who spoke highly of his perspective on filmmaking. "I don't think I'd seen any of his work at that point," Chloe

recalled, “but I loved the way that he talked about film.” Intrigued, she decided to reach out to Isidore when she found herself stuck in the editing process for *The Taste of Mango*. At that time, she was searching for a fresh perspective to bring her deeply personal documentary closer to completion. Isidore’s response was immediate and thorough. “He watched the cut and sent back pages and pages of notes,” Chloe said, marveling at his meticulous feedback. “This amazing way that he does, like, time-coded, every single thought that he’s having throughout the whole film.” While she didn’t agree with every point he raised, she found many of his insights illuminating. “There’s something here that I’m wanting and not able to see myself,” she admitted. Recognizing the value of his input, Chloe invited Isidore to join her for an editing residency at the Jacob Burns Film Center.

For Sara Dosa, choosing Erin Casper as the editor for her first film *The Last Season* (2014) was based on recommendations from trusted colleagues and an immediate personal connection. She said, “Two different people who I really respected recommended that I work with Erin.” Aside from saying, “the most wonderful things about her,” Dosa recalled that Casper was specifically suggested because “she would be great in terms of working on a film that had to do with developing a relationship between two characters; and *The Last Season* (2014) is kind of a story of friendship turned family.”

They met for tea and as Casper recalled, “I think we were only supposed to meet for half an hour and my memory of it is that it went much longer.” Dosa remembers an immediate personal connection, “Erin just said such brilliant and insightful things about the story and the characters.” Casper was reminded of how Dosa struck her, “as a very smart, warm, thoughtful person and artist.” She explained how Dosa walked her through the film, “and told me this amazing story.” Casper noted that Dosa anticipated her immediate questions to some of the

things that she described having filmed by saying, “We have that. We filmed that. We got that.” She said, “I knew right away that I wanted to work with her and just like know her and be friends with her.” Dosa explained how this initial interaction, “felt really natural,” and that she was overwhelmingly inspired after meeting Casper. “This was my first film that I ever directed, and I was very new to so much,” Dosa said. She shared that she felt Casper could be, “a guide in this way,” and expressed how, “From the start, I felt like I could learn from her, and that’s why we’ve kept working together for over a decade.”

After 25 years of working as one of the preeminent documentary camerapeople, Kirsten Johnson was “sitting in a room with all editors I really respect, and filmmakers I really respect,” at the Sundance Edit Lab. Johnson had been to Sundance many times before, representing films she had worked on as a cinematographer. But now, she was there as a director, screening a rough cut of a film called *A Blind Eye*, about the visibility and invisibility of women in Afghanistan. The film ended and when the lights came on, she said, “They were like, this is a pretentious mess.” Johnson was devastated. She described the moment as, “a total disaster, personally and professionally,” and recalled, “I’d worked on it for three years. We built something. I thought I was almost finished.” At that point, all Johnson could do was let the tears flow, she said, “I cried. I really cried in front of everybody.”

This heartbreakingly emotional experience led a failed project down the path toward evolution, launching Johnson into the process of what would eventually become her 2016 breakout *Cameraperson*. After the tumultuous Sundance screening, Johnson took a step back from editing the project and she spent the next eight months interviewing “many, many, many different editors” before finally landing on Nels Bangerter, whose reputation as a complex and creative editor was growing after the release of Jason Osder’s 2013 film *Let the Fire Burn*, for

which Bangerter won an International Documentary Association (IDA) Award for Best Editing. Johnson said, "I knew I needed someone who could handle the complexity of this material." She saw in Bangerter's previous work that, "He had this amazing ability to find the emotional core of a story while keeping the structure intact. That was critical for a project like *Cameraperson* (2016), where the narrative wasn't immediately obvious." For Bangerter, the opportunity to collaborate with Johnson was both exciting and daunting. The two seasoned veterans of the documentary scene weren't friends, but they knew each other's work. Bangerter even admitted to hearing from other people about Johnson's uncanny and complicated film. He admitted that he recognized the uniqueness of the project, "This wasn't a conventional documentary. It wasn't about building a story from interviews or verité sequences—it was about shaping a deeply personal archive into something that spoke universally. I knew it would be a challenge, but that's what drew me to it."

Over the last decade, brothers Bill and Turner Ross have quietly built one of the most singular and idiosyncratic careers in contemporary, nonfiction cinema. Renowned for their immersive and intimate films, they have established a reputation for employing playful and formally inventive storytelling methods that are highly collaborative from front to back. They began making films in their back yard after their mother bought them a small camcorder. Bill learned to edit this way, and Turner found an interest in the visual poetry he saw through the lens. Turner reflected on how their shared history influenced their approach to filmmaking, "We grew up in the same environment, with the same influences, so a lot of our sensibilities overlap. That solid bedrock makes it easier for us to rely on each other in the creative process." Bill added that their closeness has allowed them to develop a shorthand that eliminates much of the negotiation typical in creative partnerships, "We don't have to explain things to each other the

way you might with someone else. There's an unspoken understanding of where we're coming from, and that gives us a lot of freedom to learn by experimenting."

Director and editor, Joe Peeler came into the *Bad Press* (2023) with a background in editing and directing. In late 2018, following the repeal of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation's Free Press Act, co-director Rebecca Landsberry-Baker, a citizen of the Muscogee Nation and former editor of Mvskoke Media, recognized the importance of documenting this pivotal event. She and her husband, Garrett Baker, who also served as a producer on the film, approached Peeler, who is white, to see if he wanted to work with them on the film. Peeler explained, "I was drawn to the story's complexity and the opportunity to amplify marginalized voices."

When he and Landsberry-Baker first connected, their conversations quickly revealed a shared commitment to journalism and storytelling as tools for advocacy. Reflecting on their initial meeting, Peeler noted, "Rebecca had such a clear vision for the story, and her connection to the community was invaluable. I knew right away that her perspective would be the heart of the film." Their collaboration was built on mutual respect and complementary strengths.

Landsberry-Baker's deep understanding of Muscogee culture and the broader issues of Indigenous sovereignty provided the film with authenticity and grounding in its journalistic intentions. While Peeler, as both co-director and editor, brought an ability to craft a compelling narrative from complex and sensitive material, "Joe brought an outsider's perspective, which was important for balance, but he was also so willing to learn about the nuances of the story and the culture. That made me feel like we could work together as equals."

In contrast to the collaborators above, director David Osit edits his own films. For him the decision to work as both director and editor is not merely a logistical choice but a creative philosophy. Solo editing, as he described it, "is an extension of the directing process," and it

enables him to maintain complete control over the film's narrative and emotional arc. Reflecting on this, he said, "For longitudinal vérité films, I don't know how I could call myself the director if I'm not editing it. The two are intertwined. The way I shoot, the way I think about narrative, it all comes together in the edit room." This process allows Osit to stay intimately connected to the material, shaping the story in a way that aligns closely with his vision. By editing his own films, he can ensure that every cut, transition, and choice reflects his original – or, oftentimes, shifting – intent.

Collaboration as a Creative (and Personal) Partnership

Sara Dosa and Erin Casper's collaboration embodies a remarkable creative partnership, driven by mutual respect, deep trust, and shared values that foster an environment of artistic discovery. Their relationship goes beyond a professional connection and has evolved into a deeply personal and transformative bond. As Dosa described it, their relationship "is too bound up in everything," explaining that she owes everything in her filmmaking to Casper. The creative synergy they share has become a hallmark of their creative partnership. Dosa has sought Casper's perspective from the inception of all three of her films, *The Last Season* (2014), *The Seer and The Unseen* (2019), and *Fire of Love* (2022). Dosa emphasized that she doesn't feel like she's creating space for Casper's input because as she explains it, "we arrive at these things together." Casper echoed the sentiment by adding that, "Sara creates teams of people she trusts and empowers them, and that mutual trust drives us toward realizing the vision together."

Dosa and Casper's process is anchored in constant dialogue, whether they are navigating character relationships, shaping narrative arcs, or experimenting with ideas that push creative boundaries. Even disagreements serve as productive ground for exploration. Reflecting on their

differing opinions, Casper highlighted, “It’s all about uncovering the clues and moving forward. Disagreements aren’t personal; they’re productive.” Dosa explained that she appreciates Casper's patience and humor during her "rabbit hole" obsessions with ideas, some of which evolve into guiding thematic tools even if they don’t make the final cut. Casper described Dosa’s ideas as “maximalist,” noting how they often lead them both on “creative adventures that often clarify elements of the film.”

Their collaboration has adapted across various film styles, from observational (*The Last Season, The Seer and the Unseen*) to archival-driven projects like *Fire of Love*. This evolution has required new creative approaches, such as combining narration and archival footage to rewrite meaning. Their adaptability extends to their post-production workflow, balancing in-person collaboration and remote "edit camps." Whether brainstorming sequences or selecting music, their process is fluid yet intentional. Casper noted, “Editing is re-editing... getting it wrong until it’s right.”

Their collaboration underscores the transformative power of partnership in filmmaking. Dosa rejects the hierarchical “auteur” model, asserting, “There’s so much power in discovery and exploration together.” Casper agreed, adding, “Collaboration offers fresh perspectives, preventing you from becoming inured to your own ideas. It’s essential.” Dosa and Casper’s creative synergy doesn’t just enrich their films; it also profoundly impacts their lives. Dosa referred to Casper as “a sister in arts,” while Casper described Dosa as “one of the most consequential and meaningful relationships I’ve had, creatively and personally.”

Chloe Abraham’s journey with *The Taste of Mango* began as a solitary exploration of her family's story, where the intimate nature of the material demanded that she film and edit the material herself. Once the film began to materialize into something she could understand she

knew she was going to need an editor to work with. Her first collaborator, Stella Heath-Kir, shaped Abrahams' understanding of the director-editor relationship. Reflecting on her initial experiences, Abrahams recalled that when Heath-Kir asked her "How do you like to work with an editor?" She admitted that she didn't even know that was a question she would be asked, noting how she, "just figured it out by working through the edit."

Abrahams admitted that she is a "more intuitive, feelings-driven filmmaker and editor," noting that when Isidore Bethel joined later in the process, his austere approach to storytelling brought a fresh lens to the project. Abrahams explained, "He sent back pages and pages of notes... some I didn't agree with, but a lot of it was what I needed and couldn't see myself." This early feedback established a foundation of mutual respect and set the tone for their collaboration. Abrahams and Bethel's differing approaches enriched the film's editing process. Abrahams described herself as an instinctual, feelings-first filmmaker, while Bethel brought a cerebral, structured perspective. This dynamic occasionally created tension but ultimately fostered creative breakthroughs. "He forced me to find ways to explain why I was making every decision," Abrahams shared, adding that this process of articulation deepened her connection to the material. Their editing workflow exemplified collaboration as a process of evolution and mutual influence.

During the fine cut, they alternated editing duties, shared detailed notes, and discussed every decision in depth. This iterative approach ensured that both voices were integral to the film's final form. Abrahams reflected, "It became a back-and-forth process... it really felt like two editors collaborating." Abrahams' trust in her collaborators was evident throughout the post-production process. She emphasized, "Both Isidore and Stella were very opinionated in the best

way. I wouldn't want to work with someone who just did what I said. I wanted real creative collaborators."

Bethel has gained a reputation as an editor who is willing to take risks with first time directors. Their faith in his ability to use tasteful restraint and to approach narrative structure with an acute sense of patience. Daniel Hymanson's debut feature *So Late So Soon* (2020), evolved from a far-reaching survey of the careers of Chicago artist couple Jackie and Don Seiden, into a tender and intimate portrait of an aging married couple confronted with the ailments of time with Bethel's deft touch on the editing keys. Since working on Hymanson's film, the two have continued to collaborate; Hymanson is shooting a new film that Bethel is editing, and Bethel is stepping behind the camera for a film of his own that Hymanson is editing. Their relationship has blossomed over the past eight years into more than a professional partnership, in the same way that Sara Dosa and Erin Casper are creative collaborators and close friends, so to, are Hymanson and Bethel.

A key component of their creative partnership is their willingness to trust one another by relinquishing control. Bethel reflected on how this mindset developed from previous projects he had worked on, saying, "There was something incredibly gratifying about throwing whatever ideas or vision I had out the window. The film is much stronger because I gave up a lot of control." While working on *So Late So Soon* (2020), Hymanson leaned into Bethel's philosophy despite his initial apprehensions, "At the time, I had never worked with an editor before, so there was fear in losing control," he admitted. However, his growing trust in Bethel's creative instincts allowed him to embrace the process, even when the film evolved in unexpected ways. Hymanson and Bethel's collaboration blurs traditional hierarchical boundaries, allowing their shared trust to guide the editorial process.

Hymanson expressed this dynamic clearly when he said that *So Late So Soon* (2020), “would be completely different without Izzy’s (Bethel’s) input. It feels like a totally shared experience.” Bethel agreed, adding, “Trust means I get a long leash when I start working—sometimes it feels like I have no leash. But Daniel is always there to tell me if something feels off.” This balance of freedom and accountability is a trademark of their working relationship and there is a shared understanding that they can rely on each other to bring out the best in their work.

Beyond the professional realm, Hymanson and Bethel’s relationship offers a deep reservoir of emotional support. Hymanson openly described the significance of Bethel’s presence. He said, “I cannot overstate how significant Izzy’s support has been in my life. It makes me feel much, much less lonely in my creative work.” Their trust in each other extends beyond the framework of documentary filmmaking and has developed into an understanding that they can rely on one another during challenging emotional situations outside of the editing bay.

When Bethel experienced personal loss, Hymanson became an anchor for him. “Daniel has been there for a lot of situations,” Bethel shared. “Having Daniel there as a steadfast presence, saying ‘This is meaningful to me,’ that’s without parallel.” This mutual trust enabled Hymanson and Bethel’s collaboration to transcend work, becoming a source of comfort and meaning for both. The trust between Hymanson and Bethel has become the foundation of a partnership that is both deeply creative and emotionally fulfilling. As Hymanson put it, “Izzy legitimizes the work I’m doing. His constant support makes me feel in it.”

For the Ross brothers, filmmaking – which they’ve been doing together since they were kids – is not just about the end product but about the collective journey. Bill reflected, “These are big life experiences. It’s about the desire to live a full life with different people in different places.” Their films are impressionistic portraits that rely on the small, in between moments of

reality, lending an authenticity and naturalism to their style that, for them, can only be found by embracing a shared authorship in each stage of production and post-production. Turner emphasized this inclusivity: “We never put ‘a film by’ on our work. It’s not just us; it’s everyone involved.”

Both Bill and Turner stressed that the concept of role fluidity is “critical to their process,” which is marked by a playful spirit and emphasizes discovery. Their collaboration evolved significantly after their first film, *45365* (2009), when Bill took on much of the editing alone. Reflecting on that experience, Turner joked, “We almost lost Bill. It was bad—really horrible and really hard.” This realization led them to refine their process, ensuring that future projects would be more collaborative in the editing phase. Turner emphasized the value of being present. “Having collective knowledge of all the material and being there as a resource has made the whole thing more holistic,” he said.

Now, their workflow is more integrated, with both contributing at every stage. Turner noted that this approach not only improves efficiency but also fosters deeper creativity. “The more we can explore together, whether conversationally or by sharing edits, the more articulate and denser the final work becomes.” Bill added, “it’s helpful because when you get stuck, not just searching for a file, but just like thinking through what’s going on, that collective consciousness is invaluable.” He explained the importance of sharing the editing bay together, noting that when they are deep in the edit, “having someone in the room who knows everything keeps us grounded when the possibilities start to overwhelm us.” Turner added, “We trust the process, we trust the people we work with, and we trust each other. That’s why our films feel alive—they come from a place of shared belief.”

Joe Peeler described the collaborative process of working on *Bad Press* (2023) as “bowling with bumpers,” where both director and editor guide each other toward the same

creative goal. He said, “We both want a strike. If we’re aiming for the same movie and willing to adjust along the way, we’re going to have a great partnership.”

From the outset, Peeler trusted Landsberry-Baker, a citizen of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and an advocate for Indigenous journalism, to guide the cultural aspects of the story, while she relied on his extensive experience to shape the film’s broader narrative. Reflecting on their dynamic, Peeler noted, “I trusted her instincts to guide us through the cultural nuances of the story, and she trusted me to structure it in a way that resonated with audiences.” Through trust, adaptability, and a willingness to explore, Peeler and Landsberry-Baker created an environment in the editing bay where each collaborator’s strengths and insights could be shared openly.

Peeler explained, “One of Becca’s strengths is her ability to trust her collaborators, and that trust never wavered, even when we were two-plus years into the edit and the story still wasn’t quite working.” This assurance instilled a confidence in the editing team, which included Assistant Editor Jean Rheem, who organized, managed, and prepared all the filmed material for Lead Editor Peeler, that allowed them to experiment freely, knowing that their director supported them. Landsberry-Baker’s approach encouraged a sense of ownership among her collaborators. Peeler remarked, “When she does step in and feels strongly about something, you know you have to listen. If a story beat didn’t make sense, or the vibe of a scene was off, she would let us know, and we’d figure out how to fix it.”

Peeler and Landsberry-Baker’s process exemplified how adaptability can enhance collaboration. Peeler described the editing workflow as an egalitarian effort, “Jean Rheem and I would edit together in the same room on two different computers, showing each other scenes, getting notes, talking story, and restructuring.” Landsberry-Baker joined the edit bay weekly, contributing her perspective on themes, story choices, and the ongoing political situation

effecting Muscogee culture. Peeler noted, “We didn’t really ‘negotiate’ creative decisions because we were nearly always on the same page. Rebecca was willing to follow threads with us as we worked them out in the edit.” The trust and decisive input shared between Peeler, Rheem, and Landsberry-Baker ensured that the editing process remained collaborative yet focused. This alignment of vision allowed for a fluid and harmonious collaboration, even as the team explored various creative directions.

From the beginning of their collaboration, which started with *Cameraperson* (2016) and continued to *Dick Johnson is Dead* (2020), trust formed the cornerstone of director Kirsten Johnson and editor Nels Bangerter’s relationship. Johnson highlighted her deep appreciation for Bangerter’s perspective, saying, “Nels’ thinking is really interesting to me. I always learn from Nels’ thinking.” This openness to learning from each other fosters an environment where ideas can flow freely, and risks can be taken without fear of judgment.

Both Johnson and Bangerter valued honesty as an essential part of their collaboration. Johnson described Bangerter’s directness as vital, stating, “Nels assumes a collaborative relationship is an intimate one. He tells you exactly what he thinks, and that’s what makes it work.” This openness encouraged meaningful dialogue and ensured that the best ideas emerged during the editing process. Bangerter highlighted his appreciation for Johnson’s ability to reflect on her vulnerabilities and her commitment to turning them into art. He remarked, “KJ films in a way that few others do, directly engaging with people. That honesty comes through in every frame.”

For Bangerter, trust meant relying on Johnson’s vision while also challenging her ideas when necessary. He explained, “The collaborative relationship is an intense one, a respectful one. If I say this scene isn’t working, it’s not about the movie being bad or anyone failing—it’s about making the scene better.” Johnson described the deeply personal nature of *Cameraperson*

(2016) as a challenge that required trust in Bangerter to shape her raw, vulnerable footage. She reflected on her footage's emotional weight, describing how she "was grappling with decades of difficult experiences," and explained how she knew that "Nels was very aware of what I was going through." While working on *Cameraperson* (2016), Bangerter's role as an editor extended beyond technical precision to include emotional support and a nuanced understanding of her story.

This dynamic was evident in moments where Bangerter had to push Johnson out of her comfort zone. He shared, "We had to let go of the idea that this would be an explicit examination of the ethics of filmmaking. It became about letting the footage speak for itself." This decision was transformative, allowing the film to rely on the images to resonate on a more universal level. Johnson, in turn, appreciated Bangerter's clarity and ability to ground the project. She noted, "What's nice about working with Nels is we both value uncertainty... nothing's written forever." This shared willingness to experiment allowed them to refine the narrative without losing sight of the film's core themes documentary ethics and one's relationship to the full-body engagement non-fiction filmmaking requires.

Adaptability in Collaborative and Solo Processes

The Ross brothers' approach to filmmaking hinges on their shared vision, which allows Bill and Turner to independently contribute in ways that align with their collective goals. Turner explained that during the actual shooting of their movies, "Bill's always been most interested in what is actually captured rather than the capturing." His brother is often looking at the day's material throughout production acting as a "cheerleader" in their process. Turner explained that they're "often having fun with the footage" and interacting with it even while we're shooting it.

Bill shared how they are often “showing rushes, little edits, and behind the scenes footage” to the cast and crew to create “an environment where we are having fun, and we are playing.” Turner added that by immersing themselves in the captured material from the beginning of production, by the end of a shoot, “We know there are things that we're excited about.”

During post-production, Bill and Turner’s adaptability and commitment to holistic collaboration radiates through. Wasting very little time between the end of a production and the beginning of the edit, Bill noted, “There's just too much excitement to like, to get into the footage and see what we've done. And for me, the editing is like, I love every part.” Turner described how they’re priority “is to always make a film that feels genuine to us,” noting that, “There was never a question of dividing roles or responsibilities. We just started working together, and our collaborative methods grew out of that process.” Bill emphasized this organic growth in their partnership, “We never approached it with a rigid plan. It was more about responding to what we saw and felt and trusting each other to follow those instincts. That’s been the basis of how we’ve worked ever since.”

Turner explained how on their first film, *45365* (2009) Bill was the editor, “When I left LA, it's like I had done my function, the things that I was good at, and Bill knows how to edit. So, we leave Bill to do that.” Bill added, “I wanted it that way. I didn't know how hard it was going to be. It was not conducive to our happiness or really to the success of the project.” After the lonely and difficult experience of cutting their debut feature, the Ross Brothers have committed to being “mutually a part of every step of the process.” They have taken their shared dynamic on set and have adapted it to the editing room where Bill and Turner can confidently rely on each other’s instincts to bring fresh insights to the work, “because so much of our process is about what isn’t on the page...you’re defining and redefining all your intentions and then saying, now what happened? And then trying to make those things speak to each other.”

In the edit room, they often alternate between solo and collaborative editing roles. Bill reflected, “It’s fun to play and put different blocks next to each other and see what color (feeling) comes out of pairing those things together.” Typically, Bill is focusing on the narrative framework of the movie, leaving Turner to focus on more abstract elements of the story, “creating charts and graphs and maps with character arcs.” Bill described his brother’s role as focused “on the intangible pieces of their filmmaking.” Both Bill and Turner are quick to point out that every film requires a different approach. Turner reflected how “The evolution of each project is an improvement of our processes before.”

This creates a dynamic where Bill and Turner can confidently rely on each other’s instincts to bring fresh insights to the work, “because so much of our process is about what isn’t on the page...you’re defining and redefining all your intentions and then saying, now what happened? And then trying to make those things speak to each other.” Bill noted that sometimes independence is vital to their process, as it allows them each to fully explore ideas before coming together to synthesize their findings, “You’re writing in every step of the way, most especially in the edit.” This balance of solo exploration and collaborative synthesis ensures that their films are both personal and unified. However, Turner is quick to point out that both him and his brother, Bill are always available for one another “as emotional and creative support.”

Chloe Abrahams’ editing process on *The Taste of Mango* (2024) began as a deeply personal and independent endeavor. She reflected on her initial approach, saying, “I had spent months editing alone, trying to piece together what this film was about.” She described how this time allowed her to “experiment and figure out what things in the edit could do” without needing to adhere to a clear storyline. By approaching the initial stages of her editing process with a more conceptual framework she was able to explore her creative instincts and emotional connections to the raw intimate material of the women in her family. However, the process also revealed the

limitations of working alone. Abrahams reflected on the challenges of maintaining a level of clarity in this early exploratory editing session, “I became so immersed in the material that I couldn’t see what was working and what wasn’t. I needed someone to step in and tell me what I couldn’t see.” She realized that an external perspective was going to be necessary to “gain some distance to the material,” to shape the story into something cohesive and accessible for an audience.

Bringing in Isidore Bethel marked a pivotal shift in her process. She admitted that this was initially challenging, “I was scared to lose control over something so personal. But I also realized that bringing in someone like Isidore wasn’t about giving up control—it was about making the film better.” This mindset shift allowed her to embrace collaboration as a tool for discovery rather than a compromise because while Bethel’s feedback challenged her initial ideas, it also provided Abrahams with a new lens through which to view her footage. Chloe highlighted, “I’m more instinctual, and Isidore is so precise. That mix is what made the film stronger.” Bethel’s ability to challenge Abrahams’ ideas without undermining her vision was critical to their dynamic.

Abrahams and Bethel’s collaboration on *The Taste of Mango* was marked by a concerted effort to challenge the narrative assumptions of deeply personal documentaries. Rather than rigidly holding onto her initial ideas, Abrahams welcomed the iterative process of trying, failing, and refining. She reflected, “We’d work on a scene, and if it didn’t work, we’d try something else,” explaining how sometimes she would, “need to step away, rework it on my own, and then come back to discuss it with Isidore.” This interplay required both Abrahams and Bethel to adapt their iterative process to accommodate for patience and thoughtful consideration. While she initially struggled with articulating her creative instincts, she learned to justify her decisions in ways that resonated with both her emotional intentions of the film and its narrative needs.

Abrahams reflected on how Bethel encouraged her “to explain why I was making every choice,” explaining that she would “go with what felt right, and Isidore would ask why it felt right. That back-and-forth made the story stronger, and it made me a better filmmaker.” By embracing Bethel’s critical feedback and learning to let go of control, Abrahams transformed a deeply personal story into a cohesive and resonant film, emphasizing that, “The process wasn’t always easy, but every step made the film clearer, stronger, and truer to itself.”

Echoing Abrahams early fears over losing control over her film, Daniel Hymanson admitted that he also struggled with this balance when he initially started working with Bethel, stating, “I was scared to lose control.” Hymanson emphasized the importance of physical proximity to Bethel during their collaboration on *So Late So Soon* (2020). He explained, “I was always with Izzy when he was editing—either in the other room or right beside him. I wanted to be part of it all the time.” Hymanson revealed that when Bethel had to move out of the country, “I moved to Mexico because he was in Mexico and then I moved to France because he was in France,” admitting that “It made film a lot harder to make,” but that it was necessary for him to feel comfortable in the process. Bethel acknowledged that this proximity factor helped “legitimize the work I’m doing,” explaining that Hymanson’s constant presence in the edit bay, “makes me feel less alone in this process.”

Kirsten Johnson and Nels Bangerter’s collaboration was built on a mutual respect for each other’s distinct approaches to storytelling. Johnson’s self-described “maximalist, exploratory style,” often contrasted with Bangerter’s rigorous analytical mindset, creating a dynamic that allowed them to balance intuition and structure. Johnson described their dynamic, saying, “I’m interested in putting everything into a rectangle, and Nels is great at telling me when too much is too much.” This balance of perspectives provided the framework for an editing

process that exemplified a balance of probing free-flowing intuition and methodical approach structure.

Throughout *Cameraperson*'s (2016) editing process, Johnson and Bangerter developed a fluid ability to shift between collaborative and independent workflows. Nels often worked alone from his edit suite on the West Coast, to develop sequences based on the agreed-upon direction. Johnson noted, "When Nels works solo, he creates these incredibly thoughtful edits that I couldn't have imagined. Then we come together to see how it all fits." Johnson would periodically join the edit, sometimes, when convenient, in person, but mostly via video conferencing. Bangerter explained that "When KJ would come in, she'd bring this incredible energy and a fresh perspective." Johnson would provide deep and thoughtful feedback and propose new ideas. Bangerter noted, "It kept the process dynamic."

Given the deeply personal nature of the material in *Cameraperson* and Johnson's relationship to it, both filmmakers had to navigate the emotional challenges of the material. Comprised of nearly three decades worth of rushes shot by Johnson while working as a documentary cinematographer on some of the most celebrated films in the genre, *Cameraperson* is a tour de force featuring some of Johnson's most painstaking experiences in the field. Johnson explained, "It was hard to see some of these moments edited, but Nels understood how to shape them in a way that felt true to me." Nels approached this responsibility to the heart wrenching material with sensitivity, acknowledging, "It's not just about the footage; it's about the person behind it. My job was to honor Kirsten's experiences while crafting something that connected with an audience." A personal memoir about the effects of violent imagery and the toll it takes on the people who make it their duty to tell these kinds of stories, Johnson and Bangerter's emotional resilience and creative flexibility was pivotal in balancing the *Cameraperson*'s personal and universal themes.

Johnson summarized her dynamic with Bangerter best, explaining that, “It’s about listening—to the footage, to each other, and to what the film wants to be.” Bangerter echoed this sentiment, stating, “The footage tells you what it wants to be. You have to listen to it, even if it takes you in directions you didn’t expect.” Together, their willingness to let the raw material guide them allowed *Cameraperson* to evolve organically, resulting in a film that “plays like a study not only of cinema itself, but a warm, welcome reminder that there is (ideally) an intelligence, and maybe even a bit of grace, behind the moving images that wedge themselves in our memory,” (The Globe and Mail). Bangerter described how stepping away from the editing bay and returning to the material with a clearer perspective weeks later allowed them to see connections they hadn’t noticed before. He emphasized that, “Sometimes the footage didn’t make sense right away, but over time, patterns started to emerge. That’s when we knew we were onto something.”

The team’s enthusiasm for reinterpretation was critical in shaping the film’s fragmented yet cogent narrative. By sitting with the discomfort embedded in the footage and accepting that they didn’t have all the answers, they allowed themselves time and space in the process to reveal new meanings. Johnson noted, “Time helps us understand things. What I thought a scene was about when I shot it often changed when we looked at it again in the edit room.” Bangerter stressed how, “It’s not just about what’s in the footage; it’s about the layers of meaning behind it. Embracing that complexity is what makes the film work.” He added that, “This became the main thesis of the film.”

From their early work on *The Last Season* (2014) to the Oscar-nominated *Fire of Love* (2022), Sara Dosa and Erin Casper have consistently adapted their workflow to follow the film wherever it needs to go. Over the years, their creative partnership has developed into a roving model that includes both in-person and remote collaboration, creating a dynamic chameleon-like

working process. Dosa reflected, “We worked in so many different cities—San Francisco, Iceland, New York. It is nomadic lifestyle, but it worked because of how well we understood each other.”

Their pliable working methods were tested further during the production of *Fire of Love* (2022), which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. Forced to rely entirely on remote collaboration, they developed new ways of working through their screens. Dosa explained, “We joked about these long-distance edit camps, but it became our reality. Erin and I would check in constantly, setting priorities and touching base as we worked independently.” Despite the challenges that the pandemic created, their process retained its dynamism. Casper noted, “Even when working remotely, we know each other’s rhythms so well. It’s like we can anticipate what the other person is thinking, which keeps the process alive and creative.” Their ability to conform to a fully remote workflow without losing their sense of drive and creative enthusiasm exemplifies their resilience as collaborators. Casper emphasized that while “It was harder to stay connected without in-person feedback,” both her and Dosa knew that they could rely on each other. She added, “That trust kept the momentum going.”

Throughout the production of *Bad Press* (2023), Joe Peeler’s role evolved based on the film’s needs. While he primarily served as the editor, he often took on responsibilities that overlapped with direction and producing. Peeler explained, “Sometimes you step in as a producer, other times you’re helping refine the directorial vision. It’s about filling in the gaps and supporting the team however you can.” This elasticity was especially important during moments when the team faced logistical challenges, such as navigating tight deadlines or addressing audience feedback during test screenings. Peeler recounted, “When you’re working on an independent film, you have to wear multiple hats. It’s not always easy, but it keeps you flexible and resourceful.”

Peeler's adaptability on *Bad Press* extended to his ability to shift between solo editing and collaborative review sessions. Peeler often worked independently to refine sequences, develop tone, and establish the narrative stakes. He then shared these edits with director Rebecca Landsberry-Baker and assistant editor Jean Rheem for feedback. He described this workflow, "I'd take a first pass on a scene and then bring it back to the team. Rebecca would offer cultural and narrative insights, and Jean would push for emotional clarity. It was a constant back-and-forth." This back-and-forth process ensured that all three collaborators influenced the film's final shape. Peeler emphasized how the combination of solo exploration and collaborative critique allowed the *Bad Press* team to achieve a more nuanced final film. He reflected, "When you work alone, you can experiment freely. When you work together, you see what actually sticks."

David Osit directs and edits his own films, often working alone on films like, *Building Babel* (2012), *Thank You for Playing* (2015), and *Mayor* (2020). For Osit, editing is inseparable from directing. He described this integration as a necessity rather than a choice, explaining, "I can't visualize filmmaking if I'm not involved in the edit. I don't know what filmmaking is if I'm not editing." Osit's hands-on approach allows him to stay intimately connected to his material. He often takes full control of the initial assembly to ensure that the film reflects his vision before inviting collaborators to weigh in. He highlighted, "The master sequence lives with me. And the ultimate veto power lies with me, obviously, because I'm directing the movie. But I want to be challenged, and I want people to disagree with me or to ask me questions, or I want people to bounce ideas off of."

He described his current very personal project, as a "lonely" film both in terms of the content of the film, and the post-production process. He emphasized that this has required careful consideration of boundaries when thinking about collaboration, describing it as, "more sensitive

for a movie like this.” He added that, “it requires a lot more conscientiousness on my part to figure out how I can work with certain people, which has been a big learning curve for me.”

However, Osit recognizes the value of collaboration in pushing the creative process forward. He has opened his editing bay to several editors with specific expertise in areas he conceded “I just don’t excel in,” such as visual effects and data driven graphics. He explained, “I wanted to work with someone who knew how to do the blurs and cuts and all those things that I just don’t care for. It allowed me to focus on the emotional elements in the edit,” adding that he felt the need to work with, “somebody who was different than me.” Osit admitted, “Ironically, that what ends up happening, right? If someone's different than you, it means they have different sensibilities than you, which means maybe you're not collaborative. But that was what my initial goal was.” Osit explained that at this current stage of the editing process he has worked with four different editors, stressing that, “Four different people have had their hands on the project.” However, he lamented, “I know myself, and I know that for me, basically what ends up happening is I'm a bit of a control freak, and I want to do things my way, and I get frustrated if things don't work well.”

By understanding his own impulses and creative desires, Osit shared, “I have had patience for one revision,” from each hired editor, adding, “and then I start to lose my patience, and I'm just like, I'll do it my way.” He highlighted that, “It's never really an argument. It's more of just, it's me having to check myself,” describing how he’s never been good at delegating or leading a team, noting, “which is why I've always worked alone. Because I'm in my comfort zone when I'm the only point of contact for success or failure.” Osit’s new project has required him to attempt to step outside of his comfort zone to some success, but ultimately what the learning curve has taught him is that he is most suited to a process that allows him complete and total control over his documentary practice.

Creative Friction as a Driver of Discovery

In documentary filmmaking, where narratives emerge out of a commitment to the process, directors must have faith in their editors to empower risk-taking and foster innovation; and editors must believe in their directors to provide a clear vision for the film and to articulate the heart of the story. This interplay of confidence and reliance can create friction in the space. However, sometime this friction is what propels raw footage into the uncharted territory of adventurous authorship and profound truthful narratives.

The tension between director Kirsten Johnson's emotional connection to the footage and editor Nels Bangerter's focus on narrative clarity became a driving force in the edit room while working on *Cameraperson* (2016). Their trust allowed them to navigate disagreements productively, leading to more creative breakthroughs. Johnson reflected on how these moments strengthened their collaboration, revealing that, "There were times when Nels would push for more structure, and I'd resist because I wanted to preserve the chaos of the footage. But instead of shutting each other down, we used those moments to dig deeper into what the film needed to be."

For example, during the late stages of the editing process, as Bangerter recalled, his trust in Johnson's vision was tested when she pushed back on his rule of not mixing scenes from different locations in a single sequence, "insisting that the emotional resonance of the juxtaposition was more important than following the rule." Johnson described this moment as a turning point in their collaboration because Bangerter pushed back at first but she, "knew we had to try it." For Bangerter, breaking his rule required not just trust in Johnson's vision but also a willingness to reconsider his own approach, "You build rules to break them. Kirsten's insistence pushed me to rethink my approach, and that tension led to breakthroughs I wouldn't have discovered on my own."

They began exploring how they could cut scenes from different locations together at specific times within the film's structure for emotional impact. There is a moment where we see a flurry of images where Johnson is operating the camera. It's a montage of her following behind a series of characters from several different films she had previously worked on. Another standout moment occurs when we see a myriad of locations that are sites of the terrible horrors Johnson faced over the course of her career. These two montages said everything about Johnson's intentions with the film, without being overly didactic in its approach. They are artful, tender, and virtuosic. Their trust for one another allows them to experiment with something unconventional, and as Johnson explained, "it ended up becoming one of the most impactful sequences in the film."

Co-Director and editor Joe Peeler focused on structuring the narrative and giving it clarity in the edit, while Rebecca Landsberry-Baker approached the footage from *Bad Press* (2023) from a different angle that emphasized emotional resonance. Peeler shared, "Rebecca's emotional radar helped us find moments of vulnerability in the footage," and it allowed them both "to interrogate the material more deeply and made the film stronger," he explained. The two of them were able to balance their individual expertise to create a space where both collaborators felt empowered to challenge each other's ideas without jeopardizing the partnership. Rather than stifling the process, this tension became a productive force, sharpening the film's storytelling.

One notable example of this dynamic arose when deciding how much historical context to include in the film. While Landsberry-Baker wanted to prioritize the emotional impact of the personal stories they had captured while shooting, Peeler believed that grounding the audience in the political history of the Muscogee Nation was essential to their understanding of the narrative

stakes in the film. Peeler admitted that “Those conversations weren’t always easy, but because we trusted each other, we found a balance that worked.”

One of the most striking aspects of *Bad Press* is how the tone and pacing of the film reflects the urgency of the story. The trust Landsberry-Baker had in Peeler, gave him credence to experiment with bold ideas without fear of failure. Peeler chose to use a thumping electronic-synth heavy score that amplifies the tension of the edit. The music coupled with Peeler’s ability to cut mundane moments in the office as if they were life and death situations creates a palpable tension in the film that edges audiences closer to the edge of their seats. Peeler described how Landsberry-Baker was never afraid to challenge his ideas and that he “trusted them to push back when something wasn’t working.” This spirit of experimentation extended to the use of emotionally charged footage, which required a more delicate straddling of the lines between transparency and sensitivity. Peeler noted how, “Some of the footage was incredibly raw, and it wasn’t always clear how to use it.” While they both agreed many of the moments where the participants of the film were captured in extremely vulnerable positions were important, they wanted to make sure that when they used them it was motivated and not exploitative of their high emotional state. Peeler said that as they began to try splicing this material in, their trust in each other’s instincts and attention to authenticity meant that, “we could have honest conversations about what worked and what didn’t without feeling defensive.”

Similarly, editor Erin Casper emphasized the trusting bond between her and director Sara Dosa enabled her to fully engage with the footage and offer bold ideas in the edit room. She believes that Dosa’s openness to collaboration created a space where she felt comfortable offering any idea that she believed could elevate the film, she noted, “That trust is what makes our partnership work, it’s always a dialogue.”

On *Fire of Love* (2022), Dosa and Casper had to grapple with the unique challenge of crafting a narrative from archival footage of volcanologists Katia and Maurice Krafft. The footage shot decades earlier was visually stunning but lacked the verité intimacy of contemporary footage. Many of the rushes came in as previously edited pieces. The clips were short and sometimes not in any order. To overcome this, Casper suggested focusing on the thematic elements of the material, rather than looking at it chronologically. Dosa reflected on this idea, admitting that at first, it felt, “counterintuitive,” but relinquished that Casper’s approach “revealed the emotional threads that we hadn’t seen before.” This came as a breakthrough and completely redirected their approach to the film. For Casper, this risk was made possible because of her and Dosa’s shared confidence in each other’s instincts, “I knew Sara would be open to trying something unconventional. Even when we weren’t sure if it would work, her trust gave me the space to experiment,” she said. This willingness to embrace uncertainty and explore unconventional methods has become a hallmark of their collaborative process and has led to some of the best documentaries of the past decade.

However, their partnership is not without creative tension. Dosa noted, “Erin and I don’t always see things the same way, and that’s a good thing,” because they’ve found ways to channel these differing perspectives into productive debates that allow them to interrogate their intentionality on a deeper level. Dosa explained that Casper’s focus “on the emotional resonance sometimes conflicts with my structural instincts,” but she admits that these conversations “push us to find the best version of the story.” Casper echoed this sentiment, highlighting how their bond as collaborators allows these disagreements to lead to “moment where the magic happens,” and because they trust each other and share a mutual respect for each other’s talents they can challenge ideas, “without it feeling like conflict.”

Over the years, Dosa and Casper have developed an intuitive understanding of each other's working styles and they've found a way to streamline their collaboration while preserving its creative energy. Casper reflected on how their partnership has evolved, explaining that because they've worked together in so many different contexts, "That shared history makes it easier to trust each other and stay aligned." By not undermining their partnership Dosa noted, "That trust lets us pour everything into the story without worrying about ego or miscommunication," and allows both her and Casper to use creative tension as a means for refinement rather than a source of division.

From the outset, Daniel Hymanson and Isidore Bethel established a relationship of trust that allowed space for disagreement and exploration. Bethel explained, "There's no need beforehand between us to say, 'This is what the role is.' It's more just like we're working on things because we love what we're doing." This lack of rigid role definition created an environment where both collaborators could push each other without fear of overstepping boundaries. Hymanson reflected on how Bethel's perspective challenged his own instincts: "Izzy would take the footage and turn it into something I never could have imagined. That's what I was looking for—someone to bring the film somewhere I couldn't."

Their differing approaches to storytelling often led to moments of creative tension, which ultimately strengthened the film. Bethel described how his role involved pushing back against Hymanson's initial ideas: "There were times when Daniel would suggest cutting something, and I'd push back if I didn't feel it was right. Those conversations often uncovered something deeper about what the film needed."

Bethel recalled a moment in Hymanson's raw footage that was particularly compelling, "Daniel is in the bathroom [filming] with Jackie, and she is about to brush her teeth or wash her

hair and she is struck by a memory that she's had recently, something related to the cosmos and bowling. It was like this woman is inhabited by a vital need to express something even while taking care of her own personal cleanliness; and then Daniel's there because there's this seamless rapport between them; and I thought 'oh, this is incredibly promising for what this body of footage might include.'" At this point in the process, Hymanson didn't think that his film *So Late So Soon* (2020) reflected what he loved about Jackie and her husband Don, the main characters of the film. He said, "It didn't represent why I enjoyed spending time with them." While this moment in the bathroom is not in the final film, Bethel's response to the clip forced Hymanson to refine his vision, realizing that, "Izzy could bring something to the film that I could not."

Bethel reflected on how Hymanson's trust afforded him creative freedom, describing it as being given "a long leash" during the project's editing phase. He explained how they "started from the beginning watching everything and logging all the footage together," pulling out any moments that were "exciting, confounding, angry, upsetting, or moving for any reason." Hymanson's initial intention was to focus his film on Jackie and Don's careers as artists and their house, not necessarily on their relationship as an aging married couple. However, Bethel leaned into moments that captured the essence of Jackie and Don. He found an interest in a long shot of Jackie dancing around the room to Sade's "Smooth Operator", a peaceful tableaux of Don sketching in his La-Z Boy, or a 3PM dinner conversation pondering the best part of their Italian Beef sandwiches and which part they'd be willing to part with. Hymanson, in turn, found confidence in Bethel's unique vision and ability to bring out dimensions in the footage that he couldn't see alone. He said, "the things [Bethel] pulled out I never would have thought to pull out. Izzy was able to do was cut out all the noise."

Both Hymanson and Bethel share a commitment to emotional authenticity in their work, and trust plays a critical role in achieving it. Hymanson said, “There were scenes that I was hesitant to include because they felt too vulnerable,” and he explained that he was afraid they may be misunderstood by the audience or that whether the scene featured Jackie or Don, that they may be laughed at or taken as a joke. For Bethel, this means being willing to push Hymanson to confront difficult truths in the footage. He noted that, “Sometimes the most powerful moments are the ones that feel the most uncomfortable to include,” and he explained how trust allowed him to encourage Hymanson “to lean into those moments without worrying about how it will be received.”

Hymanson shared that Bethel was instrumental in helping him see how those moments, “could connect with the audience on a deeper level.” His willingness to allow Bethel to take a more restrained approach to the film’s narrative structure reshaped the film into an intimately observed portrait of two artists struggling with the complications of old age and the possibility of having to leave their home of nearly fifty years. Hymanson revealed that often it felt like Bethel’s choices were “pulling out the rug from under me,” but he noted that they forced him to see the film in a new way and that “those shifts were where some of their best ideas came from.” While there are still tinges of Hymanson’s original vision for the film embedded within its narrative, the pacing and sequencing of the film is much more minimalistic; and it relies on the subtleties of Jackie and Don’s interactions and the day-to-day observations of their relationship to communicate the themes of creativity identity, memory, and legacy. Bethel reflected on their shared openness to fresh perspectives, saying that, “When you know that your collaborator has your back, you’re more willing to try something unconventional. That freedom to experiment is where innovation happens.”

Echoing Hymanson and Bethel's relationship, siblings and collaborators, Bill and Turner Ross' carry an ethos of fluidity and openness to their storytelling. Turner reflected on their intuitive understanding of each other's unique talents, explaining how they "go into a project with an idea of what we're looking for, but we're also open to what happens in the moment. That openness to surprise is only possible because we trust each other completely." Bill echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of allowing the footage to, "tell you what it wants to be," explaining how, "That only works if you believe in each other's desire to follow the story, wherever it leads."

For their documentary-fiction hybrid *Gasoline Rainbow* (2024), Turner and Bill experimented with a fragmented editing methodology. Bill spent three months working on an assembly cut of the film with sound and image, to provide a narrative framework for *Gasoline Rainbow*. Meanwhile, Turner created a purely visual cut of the film, focusing entirely on the imagery, while another team member concentrated on an audio-only edit, comprised solely of interviews with the subjects of the film. Turner explained that the reasoning behind this decision was that they wanted, "to see what stories they could tell on their own," within the limitations they agreed upon. By deconstructing the process, Turner reflected on how, when they brought the separate edits back together, "the interplay created something unexpected, something we hadn't planned." He said that, by starting that way, he was "exploring all kinds of fun stuff that you normally don't find until the final stages of the edit," but because Bill was working simultaneously on the assembly, "no matter what I did, we weren't losing any progress." Bill noted that by the end of the edit, they were "consulting those early creative cuts that because they had freedom."

By creating a space for unexpected connections, the resulting in a film feels both formally experimental and narratively cohesive. Turner noted how their discovery first mindset fueled their creative process, explaining that because they “don’t start with a fixed narrative,” they are able to “create conditions where the footage can surprise us. Iterative play allows us to find connections we didn’t know were there.” He continued, saying that “Bill continued to integrate those things and refine the edit.” Bill noted that if he got stuck on something, he could use what Turner and their assistant editor had done, “to play around in various scenes and go in separate directions and come back and say, oh, wow, okay, well, here's something I discovered, here's how this could work together.”

The brothers continued to experiment with combined versions of all three edits throughout the post-production process of *Gasoline Rainbow* and their commitment ultimately led to the discovery of the final shot of the film, which was pulled from Turner’s visual edit, a rickety tracking shot following all the kids to the coastline in one final moment of youthful exuberance. Turner explained that the decision to use this as the final image of their film was simple because “this is the living thing,” that encapsulated all the themes and emotions of the feeling they set out to capture.

Director Chloe Abrahams echoes the Ross Brothers’ motivation for discoveries that enrich the narrative. She explained how she’s learned to let go of control in the edit room, “Trusting my editor to experiment with pacing or structure,” noting that this can often lead to moments of brilliance she couldn’t have anticipated. For Abrahams, this trust develops in the edit suite by creating a safe space for emotional vulnerability, both for her subjects and her editorial collaborators. This openness is vital in achieving authenticity and depth in her work. She described how her editor's understanding of her creative vision enables this dynamic, “When you

work with someone who not only gets your vision but also challenges you to go deeper, it's transformative. I trusted my editor to hold the space for those emotional moments and to bring them to life in the cut." This trust extends to the way Abrahams represents her subjects, ensuring that their stories remain true to their lived experiences while being filtered through her creative lens. She noted, "You must filter real life through your own creative choices, but it's a delicate dance. Trust with your collaborators ensures you can stay true to the essence of what you're capturing."

Abrahams initially resisted the idea of excluding her aunt, a suggestion Bethel offered late in the process, as it felt deeply personal. She described her attachment to the footage and her struggle to let go of it: "It was a tough decision because, for me, the presence of my aunt carried so much emotional weight." However, Bethel recognized that including the character complicated the film's core narrative. He pushed for clarity, explaining how her aunt's storyline might detract from the central relationships that grounded the film.

Bethel approached this suggestion with care, offering constructive reasoning rather than imposing his perspective. Abrahams reflected on how his feedback helped her see the bigger picture: "Izzy showed me how keeping my aunt in the film would dilute its emotional impact. He wasn't dismissing her importance but rather advocating for what the film needed."

This collaborative tension was essential in reaching the decision. Abrahams admitted that the process forced her to articulate her reasoning for each narrative choice, a hallmark of their working relationship: "It wasn't about just agreeing or disagreeing—it was about uncovering why we felt so strongly about certain decisions."

Ultimately, Abrahams trusted Bethel's instincts and agreed to remove her aunt from the final cut. This decision streamlined the narrative, allowing the film to focus more deeply on

Abrahams' relationships with her mother and grandmother, which were central to its emotional resonance. She reflected on the experience, saying, "It was a compromise that felt right in the end. Letting go of those scenes made the film more cohesive and truer to its intent." Abrahams emphasized that the role of trust is most evident in her commitment to empowering her editors to take risks that she might have otherwise avoided, noting that "When you know your team has your back, you're willing to take creative leaps."

David Osit's dual roles as a director and editor allow him to deeply engage in his work, often navigating the tension between collaboration and personal control. Trust becomes the thread that connects his creative instincts, relationships with collaborators, and storytelling choices. Osit highlights how editing his films provides him with the personal space to explore the narrative vision he's constructed in his mind, a process rooted in self-trust. He explained that editing alone allows him to stay in touch with his creative instincts while also confronting the vulnerability inherent in crafting a story.

He explained how, "When you're editing alone, it's all on you to question whether what you're doing is working. That solitude gives me the space to reflect and let the story reveal itself over time." While editing his film *Mayor* (2020) Osit allowed the footage to dictate the film's rhythm and focus, rather than following a traditional chronological structure. He explained that he "didn't want to spoon-feed the audience," noting that the goal was "to immerse them in Musa's world," and to let them draw their own conclusions. This approach enabled him to capture the duality of Musa's role as the mayor of Ramallah, his efforts to bring normalcy to city, and the ever-present challenges posed by the occupation of Palestine.

For Osit, this meant leaning into the humor embedded in the footage. He acknowledged that acknowledged that, "Humor can be risky, especially in a film dealing with serious topics,"

but he was confident that the “moments of levity would make Musa’s humanity shine through and help the audience connect with him on a personal level.” He was willing to take the risk and punctuated the film with Musa’s humorous exchanges with his staff and his musings about urban planning. These moments ultimately brought levity to the otherwise heavy subject matter the film is dealing with. Osit admitted that the challenges of solo-editing, particularly the lack of external feedback, can often create a real sense of isolation, noting that because “You don’t have a collaborator to push back or challenge your decisions,” you can be lead down paths that can create blind spots, which is why I always bring in trusted voices during feedback sessions.”

To combat this issue, Osit relied on input from outside sources during the post-production process of *Mayor* to shape and refine his creative vision, explaining that these feedback sessions “played a role in fine-tuning the balance between Musa’s personal story and the larger political context.” Osit shared those early cuts “leaned too heavily on the broader political themes,” risking the loss of the film’s emotional core. He said that the feedback reminded him “that the film wasn’t just about politics, it was about Musa as a person.” Osit noted that the feedback from these rough-cut screenings, “helped him re-center the narrative around Musa’s humanity.” Osit explained how when you are editing something by yourself, “You get so close to the footage that it’s easy to lose sight of how it feels to an audience,” and he emphasized how these sessions with trusted audiences provided fresh perspectives that led him to a more intimate and relatable story.

Discussion & Conclusion

Documentaries are not made in a vacuum; they are made collaboratively. Whether in the field or in the edit suite, documentary filmmakers work together to bring stories based in reality to the big screen. Therefore, for this project, which seeks to expand the conversation about what it means to make a documentary and the role of collaboration in the cutting room, it was crucial

to weave together both the director and editor's perspectives on the matter, to draw a more in-depth and nuanced conclusion.

This study sought to answer the question: How does the collaborative filmmaking process differ between directors who work with editors and those who edit their own material? The findings illustrate a spectrum of creative methodologies shaped by factors such as individual personality, artistic intent, ethical considerations, and logistical constraints. While collaboration between directors and editors provides opportunities for dialogue, diverse perspectives, and a sharing of creative burdens, directors who edit their own material demonstrate a deeply personal and immersive approach to shaping narratives. Each mode of working offers unique advantages and challenges, but both ultimately rely on the foundational principles: cultivating trust and a shared vision, fostering dialogic processes for perspective-sharing, embracing adaptability and experimentation, and prioritizing constructive feedback and refinement. Each of these principles underscores the dynamic interplay between creativity and authenticity in nonfiction filmmaking.

Cultivating Trust and Shared Vision from the Outset

Trust is the bedrock of any collaborative effort in filmmaking. In such partnerships, editors are not merely technical facilitators but co-creators who bring their unique sensibilities to the project. Directors like Sara Dosa have emphasized how trust allows editors to fully engage in the process, pushing creative boundaries while ensuring alignment with the director's vision. Dosa's long-standing partnership with Erin Casper exemplifies how a shared vision evolves through mutual respect and the freedom to explore.

Similarly, Kirsten Johnson and Nels Bangerter's collaboration on *Cameraperson* (2016) highlights the interplay between vulnerability and precision. Johnson's deeply personal footage required Bangerter to balance emotional honesty with structural coherence. His ability to push

Johnson beyond her initial intentions demonstrates the editor's role as a critical partner in shaping the film's narrative and emotional arc. Johnson's reflection, "What's nice about working with Nels is we both value uncertainty... nothing's written forever," highlights the trust inherent in their collaborative process.

From my own experience with *Satan's Greatest Lies* (2024), I realized the importance of trust in representation. My solitary editing process limited external input, which could have illuminated new dimensions of George Russell's story. Reflecting on this, I understand now how collaborating with an editor might have enhanced the portrayal of George, balancing his lived reality with my artistic intentions.

Fostering a Dialogic Process

Filmmaking, particularly in the documentary form, requires a willingness to revise and reimagine narratives in response to the evolving material. The Ross brothers' approach to editing—marked by role fluidity and a shared commitment to discovery—illustrates how a dialogic process fosters creativity. Their iterative process, described as "defining and redefining all your intentions," ensures that their films remain authentic while embracing the unexpected. In parallel to the Ross Brother's partnership, Chloe Abrahams' transition from solo editing to a collaborative partnership with Isidore Bethel reflects the transformative power of external input. Abrahams' initial reluctance to relinquish control evolved into an appreciation for Bethel's analytical approach, which challenged her instincts and refined her storytelling. Her reflection, "He forced me to find ways to explain why I was making every decision," highlights the growth that can arise from talking things through with your collaborators. These conversations can lead to the uncovering of new emotional depths and new definitions of ideas, allowing documentary

narratives to resonate on a personal and universal level. This can help documentary filmmakers address the complexities of interpreting the realities of their participants, ensuring a fair and authentic representation of their lives.

Embracing Adaptability and Experimentation

Directors who edit their own films approach the craft with a deeply immersive and holistic mindset. For David Osit, editing is an extension of directing, allowing him to maintain complete control over the narrative's emotional and structural elements. His assertion, "I don't know how I could call myself the director if I'm not editing," reflects his belief that the editing process is inseparable from the act of filmmaking. Osit's iterative approach—shaped by experimentation and guided by the material—exemplifies the advantages of solo editing in preserving a singular artistic vision.

However, solo editing also presents challenges, particularly in maintaining objectivity and addressing the ethical complexities of representation. As Osit navigates the emotional weight of his material, he acknowledges the "loneliness" of the process, suggesting that the absence of collaborative dialogue can sometimes hinder creative discovery. This tension underscores the trade-offs inherent in working independently, where the freedom to shape a narrative is balanced against the absence of external perspectives.

Prioritizing Constructive Feedback and Continuous Refinement

Both collaborative and solo processes confront the challenges of representation, authorship, and truth. For collaborative teams, these challenges are negotiated through dialogue and shared decision-making. Joe Peeler and Rebecca Landsberry-Baker's work on *Bad Press* exemplifies how trust and mutual respect enable collaborators to address cultural and narrative

complexities. Peeler's description of their process as "bowling with bumpers" underscores the importance of a shared vision in navigating ethical challenges.

In contrast, solo editors like Osit must grapple with these questions independently, relying on their personal judgment to balance authenticity and creative expression. This solitary navigation of ethical terrain underscores the heightened responsibility borne by director-editors in shaping narratives that resonate truthfully with audiences and participants alike.

The collaborative filmmaking process and solo editing are not mutually exclusive but complementary approaches to documentary storytelling. Collaboration brings a multiplicity of perspectives that enrich the narrative, while solo editing offers an intimate connection to the material that fosters a singular artistic vision. Both methods require adaptability, trust, and a commitment to iterative discovery.

Reflecting on my experience, I often found myself immersed in my own creative vision, missing opportunities for external critique. Engaging with collaborators who provide constructive, incisive feedback could have broadened my approach to editing, enriching the final film.

Ultimately, the choice between collaboration and solo editing depends on the filmmaker's goals, the nature of the material, and the specific challenges of the project. As the research reveals, successful documentary filmmaking—whether collaborative or solo—is rooted in a shared pursuit of truth and meaning, where the creative process itself becomes a journey of exploration and transformation. By embracing the unique strengths of each approach, filmmakers can navigate the complexities of their craft with integrity and innovation, contributing to a richer and more diverse landscape of documentary storytelling.

Professional Component

My professional component consisted of completing my short documentary film, *Satan's Greatest Lies*. The film follows 79-year-old George Russell, a maverick conservationist with a God complex, mourning the unexpected loss of his youngest daughter, causing him to question his lifelong crusade to preserve the piney woods of East Texas.

The film uses a multi-layered approach to storytelling, including observational footage, collaborative participation, and a rich resource of archival material to unfurl an associative editing style that paints a psychological portrait of Russell at an extremely vulnerable time in his life. As a documentary director, I consider my practice to be collaborative. Before production started, George and I discussed our general ideas for the film, which were based primarily on my own independent research, and what Russell felt was important to convey in his story. In my practice, I followed George's lead on what should be filmed, giving him the space to think about it and to offer his own recommendations. I would design the visual approach to capturing these moments, and when appropriate I would proposition Russell with my own objectives.

I edited the film on my own and relied on my cinematographer and two producers for emotional and creative support. I decided to not work with an editor because I wanted a sense of control over the post-production process and felt the most confident in my own abilities to represent Russell in the most honest and authentic way possible. George was given an opportunity to look at cuts of the film to avoid misrepresentation, but ultimately chose not to see anything until the film was completed in May of 2024. His response was overwhelmingly positive, and this was the biggest confirmation of the film's success. I struggled during the postproduction process. I felt very isolated at times, on an island stuck with my own thoughts and ideas, without a reliable sounding board for much of it. It was in these moments that I really wished for a partner, an editor. However, due to a lack of financing and very inflexible work

schedule, it made it impossible on a practical level to even consider putting someone in this strenuous of a condition. I feel proud that I was able to get through it unscathed and with a lot more confidence in my own talents as a storyteller than I had before. This research directly relates to my practice as a documentarian and informs my interest in the craft of nonfiction filmmaking.

Self-Evaluation

I'd like to begin by discussing the process of creating the documentary, *Satan's Greatest Lies*. From the beginning of the brainstorm and concept stage to the very end of post-production, this film took over 18 months to complete, and it has had a significant impact on me both professionally and personally. When we began filming, I found the process liberating because there were no guideposts, no rules, no hierarchy of crew positions; everything was pure organic creativity and the adrenaline rush of trying to capture truth in the real world. The main participant of my film, George Russell, was open minded about the direction of the film and right from the get-go we had an extremely intimate relationship and were able to communicate effectively with one another. As time went on, and the footage started to pile up, that liberating feeling I had at the beginning of the process slowly morphed into a feeling of stress, anxiety, and insecurity. With as much previous experience as I had, I was certain that the editing stages of the process would be just as freeing as the shooting. But the more I worked and worked and re-worked scenes, I began to lose sight of the film, what I was trying to say, who I was saying it to, and why I wanted to say it. This scope and size of this documentary was beyond anything I had worked on before, and having mostly made autobiographical work previously, now here I was making a character driven piece of portraiture about a luminary figure in East Texas, who had felt stifled in his attempts to get his voice heard for quite some time. I was feeling the pressure of

making a good film and showing George in as best a light as I could because my hope was that we would continue to work together after the making of the documentary. Looking back at it, I think that this anxiety, this stress that I was feeling ultimately became a great motivating factor for the remainder of post-production because it kept the representation of George, the facts of the story, and the delicate nature of the situation surrounding his daughter's death at the forefront of my mind at all moments. I feel that this forced me to make deliberate editorial choices in which the priority was always to show the authentic Russell, not a fabrication, not a rendition, or a caricature.

Overall, the experience of making the film provided me with a multitude of moments that have become life-affirming in many ways. When I started this program, I gave myself three goals for the film: 1) To get three thumbs up of approval during the pitch forum in Spring of 2023; 2) To get accepted to the Rough Cut Screening at the First Look Film Festival at MOMI in Spring of 2024; and finally, 3) To win an award at the Stronger Than Fiction Film Festival in May of 2024. I am quite delighted to say that I successfully marked each one of these goals off after winning "Best Director" at the Stronger than Fiction Film Festival back in May. Over the decade or so that I've spent making films, I've teetered on the line between narrative and non-fiction. While documentary was what initially drew me into filmmaking, I sort of lost sight of its power and intrigue over the years and didn't pursue those types of projects as much. After making this film, I can proudly say that I have firmly committed myself to nonfiction cinema.

In terms of my research experience, it was a tremendously fruitful opportunity to speak with some of the most well established and highly regarded documentary filmmakers of our time. The mix of seasoned veterans and new talents showcased the full breath of creativity and boundary pushing attitudes in the field of documentary. The conversations gave me unique

insight into the working methods of some of the best directors and editors in contemporary documentary and what I found to be fascinating, and ultimately inspiring on a personal level, was to learn that they are all still figuring out just as I am. What I mean is that there is no playbook, no right or wrong way, but what I found unique is that each of the filmmakers were so committed to the process and that it is the ups and downs, the failures and successes of the process that has shaped their varied approaches to collaborative storytelling. My primary challenge was the representation of solo directors who also edit their own films, I would've liked to have had at least one more person who could have spoken to that specifically, but in the end, I achieved a better balance than I initially thought. At the end of the research, I felt a sense of relief to finally feel accepted into the documentary community, so many of the participants that I interviewed offered to stay in touch, to look at drafts of my film as I continue working on it, and they were eager to lend a hand in whatever way they could. This, to me, is the true value of these conversations, the filmmaking, and the research; it has given me a far-reaching community that I've been on the outside looking in at for a long time, and now I'm thankful for the opportunity to rub shoulders and collaborate with so many people I've looked up to for so long.

Appendix

Field Notes

Field Notes #1: August 23rd, 2024

This week I began reaching out to potential interviewees. I have received responses from two sets of director/editor pairings: Kirsten Johnson/Nels Bangerter and Daniel Hymanson/Isidore Bethel. Kirsten and Nels have agreed to an interview when they visit the Murray Center in November. Kirsten also is working on putting me in touch with Mary Lampson, a longtime documentary editor who is currently writing a book about the relationship between editors and directors in the documentary space. I am hoping to add Lampson to my roster of interviewees because I think that her long career will add a rich perspective to the research. I've set a date to interview Isidore and Daniel in early October.

I created a spreadsheet to track who I have reached out to, the responses I have received, and the potential dates for each interview. I've also started to return to many of the films made by the people I've reached out to help refresh my memory of them and to provide a framework for each potential interview.

Next week, I'm going to reach out to a few potential directors who edit their own material and other editors for a potential conversation. I'm also going to reflect on my interview questions and continue to consider the best angle to approach these conversations. One thing that I am excited about is that each potential interviewee is currently working on a project, and my hope is that they will be able to sort of in real time be able to articulate the nuances of their working relationships in the present moment on their current projects.

I'm also currently editing a few music videos with a director whom I've never met and so in a very real way I'm currently experiencing the very thing that I am researching, however,

on a much smaller scale. And, so, I think that what I need to do is sort of look at what I'm going through right now and try to relate it back to what I'm trying to get out of these interviews and this research and how it may apply to my own career in the future and how to better handle relationships and the arduous process of making creative work with different people, with different tastes, goals and ambitions.

Field Notes #2: August 30th, 2024

To be honest, this week has been sort of terrible. Work stuff. Life stuff. Long weekend interrupted by Covid. The perfect thing to bring the optimism that I began the semester with down to about 30%. I still haven't heard back from Sara Dosa or Erin Casper about an interview. I'm going to reach back out to them this week and consider backup options. I spoke to Benjamin Zweig, another student in the program, and he offered up a few names of editors that he knows who may be appropriate. But I'll cross that bridge once I feel Sara and Erin are no longer in the running.

I sent another message to Kirsten Johnson about putting me in touch with Mary Lampson. Hoping to get that communication going this coming week. Isidore and Daniel have set a date of October 4th for an interview. Bill and Turner have also agreed to do an interview sometime in early October, same with David Osit. Those dates are not set specifically, but we've all spoken about trying to do it in October. Now, it seems like October will be the month that most of my interviews will be taking place.

This past week, I rewatched Daniel and Isidore's film *So Late So Soon* (2021) and was once again blown away by their work. I have a little bit of knowledge about the movies, and I think something that consistently floors me about the making of the film is that Daniel spent nearly 10 years shooting/editing the picture before Isidore came in to edit. And, from what I understand, most of the final film consists entirely of footage shot within the last year of production. I think what this sort of speaks to is this notion of collaboration allowing for a new freedom to experiment and let go of a preciousness that comes with working in solitude. Something I'm hoping to explore in all my interviews is what kind of safety net creative collaboration can give directors in the heat of experimentation?

Through a different process, but getting similarly masterful results, I went back and watched Bill and Turner's first film *45365* (2009). Shot entirely over the course of a year, with maybe only a few specific exceptions, this portrait of Sydney, Ohio has continued to inspire me for all sorts of reasons. Again, with a little background knowledge on the making of the movie. After the film was shot, Bill and Turner spent, something like 3 years editing the picture. And it was only upon watching a cut made up of clips that were not used in the initial rough cuts, that the two brothers found the language of the movie. This is another situation where I feel like without having one another to support wildly different thinking to push the film over the hump toward not just completion, but it's most perfect version.

So, while the week started off as kind of terrible, getting sick gave me an opportunity to return to a few films that have served as tremendous inspiration for my own movie and have kind of rewired my approach to thinking about these conversations I'll be having in a little over a month. I've started to think a lot about experimentation this semester and how having another voice in

the fold, someone to lean on, when you are compelled to try wild and outlandish approaches to storytelling, can be comforting, if you believe that that collaborator will be non-judgmental.

Field Notes #3: September 6th, 2024

I heard back from Sara and Erin and along with most of my other interviews, it seems likely that we will be scheduling sometime in October to have our conversation. Pretty much all my interviews will take place over the month of October. I also was put in contact with Mary Lampson, and we are trying to carve out some time to discuss her book that follows her career as an editor through the lens of the relationships she's had with various directors and the nature of collaboration in non-fiction storytelling.

I caught up on re-watching Sara and Erin's *Fire of Love* (2020) and gathered some thoughts about the nature of archival storytelling and the challenge of telling someone's story through images of their past, particularly when those people are no longer alive. This has been something that has become a large part of my own film *Satan's Greatest Lies*. George has a hoard of archival material and given that Karen, his youngest daughter who tragically died a few years ago, plays such a vital role in the film, I'm left to tell her story through these archival pieces. It's been a delicate balance to try to tell Karen's backstory and tumultuous adult life through images from her childhood, twenties and well on into her thirties and forties. I've found myself wondering what she would think about the way that I'm portraying her, the images I'm choosing to use to convey her story; would she agree with my choices? Am I elevating her life? Or is what I'm doing diminishing her to something like a victim? George and his family have so far applauded my efforts, and they've really enjoyed getting to see Karen when she was happy,

precocious, and coming of age. Many of the clips have been in storage and not digitized, so even the small gift of allowing the family an opportunity to see her living, breathing, and smiling again, has made me feel quite confident and honored to give them this small gift during the making of our film.

In other project specific news, the Huntsville Police Department finally released a large dossier of information surrounding Karen's death: police reports, autopsy reports, forensic information, photographs, interview transcriptions with witness testimony, and 25 hours of video footage. It's quite an undertaking to sift through this material and I'm not sure what it will lead to, if anything. Something that has been on my mind though is this challenge of knowing that George wants answers, but also understanding that he may not get the answers that he is seeking. On the contrary, he may have the unfortunate circumstance of Karen's death, initially ruled a suicide, confirmed by these documents. I'm trying to think through the options of how to present this material in the film with as much nuance and compassion as possible and I've felt very lucky to have a few key collaborators to provide a sounding board and fresh perspective on how to best approach these new developments.

I think that filmmaking can often feel like such a vacuum, particularly in these sorts of middle stages of production. Collaborators can often give key insight by just lending a listening ear to talk through different approaches. This is something that I've really relied on during these past couple of weeks and I'm looking forward to exploring some of the similarities and differences in these other filmmakers' practices during our pending conversations.

This coming week, I'm going to dig into my interview questions and start to develop a list of questions to help guide my conversations and I also plan to do some research on the pairings and sift through previous podcast interviews and publications trying to get a sense of what I think their working relationships may be ahead of the interviews themselves.

Field Notes #4: September 13th, 2024

This week was a bit slow without much impact. I've started to seriously dig into the police evidence surrounding Karen's death. This process has led to a possible direction for the longer version of my film, which will introduce me as more of a character in the film, as a quasi-detective trying to find the truth to many of George's suspected conspiracies.

I've been thinking a lot about the many form's films take over their production life. Already, in a little over a year, I can think of 4 or 5 different versions of Satan's Greatest Lies. I've been lucky in that each new iteration has expanded and enriched the previous version to make for a much more compelling narrative altogether. I know that the filmmakers I'm planning on interviewing have dealt with this too, it's something all filmmakers share. Something I'm curious about asking all of them is when in the process did their editor come on board? And why did they select this person to work with? What appealed to them first? Was it the previous work of either the director or the editor? The material? Their attitude? Approach?

These are the weeds I'm looking forward to getting into with each director/editor duo. I know that Bill and Turner have always worked together. Same with Sara and Erin. But Daniel/Isidore and KJ/Nels have a different backstory. Both directors, KJ and Daniel, found their editors later in

the post-production process. They both had spent a long time working with their material before allowing another set of eyes to wash over it and begin to make creative choices/changes. I'm curious about that dynamic in contrast to the others who have clearly developed and conceived of the project from the get-go.

Something that I think is interesting is that for both KJ and Daniel, they started their first films alone, then found their editors, but now, on their new projects they've started from the ground level collaborating with both Nels and Isidore respectively. I'm excited to learn about the differences in growth during those initial collaborative environments vs what it's like now after a relationship and working process has been developed.

I think I've finalized my interview questions and this coming week I'm going to reach back out to Mary Lampson and Chloe. These are the last two contacts needed to fill out my interview list. At the end of the month, I must reach back out to David and the Ross brothers, to finalize a date in October for our interviews.

Field Notes #5: September 20th, 2024

Alright, I scheduled four of my interviews this week. Right now, the way the schedule is shaping up, I will be doing one interview every Friday at 1PM over the course of October. I'm still waiting on a response from Mary Lampson and while this would be a great conversation, I don't think that it is essential to the research.

I don't have much to report this week. My film is picking up steam. I've found some meaningful collaborators to help me expand into a feature film and therefore, the team is beginning to grow.

This growth both excites me and gives me anxiety. I've always worked in an insular way and this transition into a more legitimate, supported, and well-funded project may mean that I must answer questions that I typically have an ability to avoid because of the nature of my past work. I don't think that I'm afraid of answering questions or having to justify creative decisions. This has led me to think about the way in which we learn how to collaborate. Where do we develop these skills? How does this vary from person to person? Director to director? Editor to editor? I'm curious to talk about this in my interviews. I know personally, I developed a lot of these kinds of interpersonal communication skills through sports. I was always very comfortable being a team player and committing myself to the common goal of playing strong and winning games. This is the aspect of production that first piqued my interest, it was a natural transition to move into a team player in a different environment based around the same principles of commitment and discipline guided by making the best work possible.

The end of this month I'll be prepping for my first interview on October 4th with Daniel and Isidore. I'm going to look at previous interviews with both and try to glean some kind insight into their own dynamics as collaborators before going into the interview.

Field Notes #6: October 4th, 2024

My gosh, let me start this by apologizing for completely flubbing on the last Field Note Entry. I must have dreamed about writing it because I could've sworn up and down that I did. Alas, it's not here and for that I take full responsibility.

This week, I prepped for my first interview with Daniel and Isidore. I just got off the Zoom with them a little over an hour ago. Our conversation was fruitful and led down many winding roads. Something I was really excited by was that Isidore, while primarily an editor, has also directed a few films, so they were able to bring this wholistic perspective to the conversation because Isidore was able to speak from both side of the coin on the nature of collaboration. What stood out about our conversation was the intimate relationship these two filmmakers share. It seems entirely forged through the work they make together, but not in a problematic way, rather in a loving and supportive way. They seem to not only be creative collaborators, but they are great friends who tend to rely on one another for emotional and creative support. This was enlightening because I think that I also have these kinds of creative relationships. The kind of person I want to make art with is someone who allows the boundaries between work and life to become blurred, and someone who is unconditionally supportive throughout the creative process. Isidore and Daniel seem to have this together and it was really inspiring to hear them wax poetic about the nature of collaborative relationships and how life can bleed into the work to make it richer and more authentic.

I've already transposed the interview and will spend this next week preparing to talk to Bill and Turner Ross, as well as beginning to analyze more deeply the conversation with Isidore and Daniel.

Field Notes #7: October 11th, 2024

I transcribed and reflected a little bit on my interview with Daniel and Isidore last week. Today, I had a conversation with Bill and Turner. What I've been struck by in the couple of hours afterwards is the uniqueness in each approach, the differences in their viewpoint of collaboration

and how these varied differing ideas lead ultimately to the same outcome, which is a wholly original, organic, and authentic film.

Isidore and Daniel have a very methodical approach to collaboration and seem to work very closely from beginning to end during the editing process, literally sitting next to each other every moment of every day. Bill and Turner on the other hand, have taken a roundabout way to finding their collaborative editing process. Their approach begins with a set of rules and scenarios that are set out from the beginning of the production process. This serves as a backdrop for exploration and experiences beyond the frame. When it comes to editing, given the rigor of the set-up of the film, they are then allowed the freedom to explore the more authentic moments in the edit that lead to a richer version of the original scenario set out during pre-production. A prime example of this, was their explanation of the beginning stages of editing on their most recent film *Gasoline Rainbow*. In the past, Bill usually takes the role of editor, goes away, makes an assembly, and then Turner chimes in with notes and conversations based around that assembly. In this scenario, Turner seems more like a director, and Bill the editor. On *Gasoline Rainbow*, they took a more experimental approach to try to see what could come out of the material. Bill still did an assembly over the course of 3 months, In the meantime, Turner made a cut that was purely visual, no sound, no story, just feeling. And their assistant did a cut that was entirely auditory, no visuals, only sound.

After this initial 3-month period they watched and tried to understand the nuanced differences of each version. Once this was digested, they made a sort of Frankenstein version that led to the final form of the film. This was highly collaborative and required Turner to be present for the

entirety of the editing process, literally taking a role in the shape of the film beyond just serving as a support system for Bill, the editor. I think my biggest take away from the talk was the fact that Bill and Turner see collaboration as essential to the process. They compared it to the adage “it takes a village to raise a child.” They feel very strongly that without the people around them, their films would not be as good as they are. I identify strongly with this notion because without my own collaborators I would feel completely isolated and lost in the process, not knowing which was up and which is down.

Next week I’m interviewing David Osit, which I’m excited about because he should bring a different flavor to the conversation. David is an editor and director, mostly editing his own films, while also working on other people’s films. Needless to say, I’m curious to hear his insight and to dig into his own process when it comes to collaboration. I will also be interviewing Sara Dosa and Erin Casper on Friday. They will also provide some unique insight because from my research it seems like they work together very early on, almost as if they are co-directing projects together. I’ll also be finishing the transcription of the previous two interviews and continuing to find inspiration in these conversations to put forth in my own work.

Field Notes #8: October 22nd, 2024

Dropped the ball on getting this in early, but not without a good excuse. I mixed up my dates last week and failed to realize that my interviews were this week instead of last week. This morning, I spoke with David Osit, director and editor. The conversation was quite insightful. David was

able to speak to the collaborative process from the perspective of a director and as a for-hire editor. As a director, David has primarily worked alone, editing his own verité films out of a desire to have complete control and a good understanding of himself as a person. He finds the solitary work required for his specific brand of longitudinal documentary filmmaker invigorating as opposed to isolating. His detail-oriented approach to story, scripting out his films like fiction narratives ahead of time and trying to match the material to the script allows him to focus on the emotional and thematic content of a film above everything else. He feels that for his first three films it was a necessary process to tackle the material alone without other voices because it gave him the time and space to focus on what he felt was important first without having to deal with the constraints of another body, another opinion, another voice.

However, David admitted that he has come to understand that different films require different processes of interrogation. Now, he is working on a new film with different narrative elements that has required a change in his editing process. He has worked with 4 different editors on the new film. Each editor was chosen based on what he felt they could bring to the table that could address issues he has come across in the editorial process. For example, without revealing too much, he spoke at length about a true crime element in the new movie that requires some more flashy graphical work, as well as the implementation of archival material, two things that thus far he has strayed away from in his previous films. He knew early on that it would benefit the early stages of the editing process to hire someone who could collaborate with him on this specific part of the narrative structure.

David also provided insight into the rough-cut screening process and how he often finds himself wanting other filmmakers to watch material because they are going to ideally engage in the material through an interpretive lens, as opposed to deferential one. He wants them to focus on the elements hidden inside of the craft, not the surface level components the general audience would prescribe to. I relate to this and often only consult other people who also make films for feedback because I know that they are going to look at a cut through a similar general lens that I am. The biggest lesson David had regarding “fresh eyes” and gaining perspective on what is working and what isn’t working on a film, was how to choose what notes to listen to and what to discard. His approach is to disregard anything that is prescriptive and to only take notes that deal with the way in which an audience is interpreting the film.

In terms of representation, David holds that the way to balance good representation with creative expression, is to hold the story above all else. He believes firmly that if you are challenging yourself to tell the best story that the material will allow for, then that is the ideal pathway to good representation. If there can be an emotional journey that leads to a moral lesson or asks the audience to reflect on something personal through a character in one of his films, that means that you have done your job representing not just your character but the story in as truthful and authentic a manner as possible.

Overall, the conversation was fruitful and wide ranging since he can speak to both the directing and editing roles. At the end of the week, I’ll be interviewing Sara Dosa and Erin Casper, a director and editor who seem to have an extremely collaborative relationship that I think will

yield some very nuanced conversations about how these relationships develop and influence the creative process.

Field Notes #9: October 26th, 2024

Due to life issues on both fronts, my interview with Sara and Erin had to be rescheduled for a later date. They were busy and amid traveling and some intense deadlines, I had a car issue that kept me away from a computer for the better half of yesterday. So, not too much to report.

However, I have been reflecting on my conversation with David and this theme “fresh eyes” that has run through every interview I’ve conducted thus far. When one has been sitting on the same material for a long time, it becomes difficult to gain perspective on it from a different angle.

Admittedly, I have been really lacking the motivation, or maybe it’s been more of a feeling of creative stifling, regarding my own film. I’ve made a lot of progress on getting things going to finish production, but reopening the edit has been quite a slog recently and I’m not sure why. But what was insightful about my conversation with David was this notion of “fresh eyes”. I think that I need “fresh eyes”, an objective third party to sit and watch and to collaborate with on finding where the film can go in the future and what holes need to be filled to get it over the finish line. This is also a tough position to be in because I hold my work very close to the chest and I often don’t let many people in until it’s finished. This is mostly my own insecurities working against me and I’m realizing now that I am a little bit of a control freak. I also am learning that I need to let go of these insecurities and trust my better judgment to allow “fresh eyes” to help me through what is now a fork in the road of the process. What I admire about everyone that I’ve spoken with so far is that they truly understand and trust the process. Sure, they all have the same insecurities and apprehensions as I do, but they have done it enough to

this point, that they have come to believe in the process of collaboration as a tool towards creative freedom. So, while I don't have much to report on this week in terms of progress, I think that this small reflection and change of heart and mind is a show of the process of not only the research working, but the filmmaking process also growing and shifting my own perspective in a fruitful way.

Field Notes #10: November 2nd, 2024

Interview crisis avoided. I had to do some serious rescheduling with folks and unfortunately lost one of my prospective interviews in Mary Lampson, editor extraordinaire. But I found a replacement in Chloe Abrahams, and I think that will work out swimmingly because Chloe has both edited her own films, and worked with Isidore, who I interviewed back in October.

In the meantime, I've scheduled my defense for December 2nd with both of my chairs. We've also worked out a schedule over the month of November to finish a draft, get feedback, and make changes ahead of the defense.

I started to write portions of the analysis that I can, given my interviews are still in progress. And I've just left holes where the new information can be weaved in accordingly. I also wrote the professional project component of the final paper and finished transposing my remaining interview with David Osit.

Admittedly, I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed with my interviews coming at such a late stage. I think the difficulty has been that many of the people I have reached out to are in the very heat of the process I am researching, trying to hit deadlines for festivals and grant funders. Which, I will

say, has a bit of learning to it, because what it illuminates is the fact that the grind never ends. Deadlines are a part of life; you suck it up and move forward putting in the time and getting the work done. At any rate, it has been frustrating, but simultaneously inspiring to understand that I am in the same boat as many of my fellow documentary filmmakers.

In terms of my film, I have been seriously considering what the future looks like and if hiring some sort of assistant editor to work with on a consistent basis would be a good idea after my next shooting days. I think that I would like to have a suite mate to work with, it will allow me to move past the tedious work of syncing and setting up selects and I think that the fresh eyed perspective will help enrich the film.

Field Notes #11: November 16th, 2024

My sincerest apologies for missing another week of field notes. I've been a bit underwater with the deadline for getting a draft done, teaching, filmmaking, and life. Not using that as an excuse, but just want to be open about the missing check in. The proverbial storm has passed and I'm feeling pretty good about where everything is at.

My writing is taking shape, I've finished the analysis and narrativization, with one hole left for the last conversation with Nels and Kirsten on Monday. The discussion and conclusion section will come together next week. I did three interviews last week, one with Joe Peeler over email, a Zoom with Chloe Abrahams, and a Zoom with Sara Dosa and Erin Casper. There are several connections I've been able to draw between all of these interviews, the most meaningful of them has been the desire for trust and personal connection as a characteristic of the ideal collaborator for almost all the directors, with David being a bit of an outlier; however, he provides a nice

counterpoint to the entire narrative due to his desire for control and having an understanding of his own personality being more productive when left to his own devices. The conversation with Chloe was also interesting because she worked with Isidore, who I interviewed back in October with Daniel Hymanson. Much of what was discussed with Daniel and Isidore creates a connective tissue to the conversation with Chloe through the process Isidore uses, inspired by his initial encounters with Daniel, to make informed choices about the projects he decides to work on. Chloe confirmed much of the same long conversations occurred with Isidore, these talks often eluded specific talk about the project, and rather were a means of getting to know one another on a personal level before even deciding to work on the film. This creates a foundation of trust from the beginning allowing both director and editor the freedom to treat roles fluidly and to approach the edit with the same vision in mind.

The biggest struggle with the writing so far has been finding a unique way to organize the analysis, I've been kind of approaching things in a very chronological order and trying to breakdown the interviews in chunks that can sort of scaffold on top of one another to get a more holistic view of the nuanced processes of each filmmaking duo. I have a feeling I may need to plug in some holes, based on the feedback coming in the next few weeks, and those will have to be questions I send the participants via email and hope for a prompt response.

Personally, I am feeling more comfortable with my own filmmaking, and I have been gaining a tremendous amount of insight about the role of collaboration in the edit. This has led me to feel better about taking on my own film as editor and continuing down the path that I have been going, relying on people close to me for fresh insight, eschewing another editor and allowing

these previously formed relationships to create the backbone of the support system necessary to bring a film to the finish line. As messy as the past few weeks have been, I'm looking forward to bringing this research to a close and having a document that I truly feel will be insightful to any documentary filmmaking entering the daunting world of feature filmmaking. The research shows that creative skills are important, but they can only take you so far before trust and unique perspective is necessary to make the best film possible. Whether working with an editor or not, it's important to surround yourself with individuals who can support your vision and are open to exploration and experimentation as a means of creative storytelling.

Thanksgiving break will be hectic, but fruitful. Let's bring it home.

Interview Transcripts

***So Late, So Soon* (2020) Interview with Director Daniel Hymanson and Editor Isidore Bethel**

[Michael Coleman]

Cool. So just to kind of give you a little bit of context, because I think I may have talked to Daniel a little bit about this, but so I made my thesis film for the graduate program back in May, and then now I'm just finishing up my research portion of that degree. And my sort of area of focus, I guess, is about the sort of collaborative relationship between directors and editors.

So in addition to you two, I'm interviewing Bill and Turner, Kirsten and Nels, Sarah and Aaron, and then a couple of directors who just edit their own projects to kind of get like a full spectrum of, you know, what it means to work with somebody else, but also what it means to kind of be doing this kind of stuff on your own and maybe wanting to have somebody else to collaborate with. So it isn't really specific to like any, you know, particular movie or anything like that. We can kind of take it in whatever direction feels the most natural.

I have a general list of questions, and we can just kind of go from there if that's all right with you guys.

[Daniel Hymanson]

Cool, that sounds great.

[Isidore Bethel]

Cool. That sounds great. Also, what a nice corner of the US nonfiction world to be exploring with the people that you've named as your interviewees.

Yeah.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, it's been great to have Robert on my side and, you know, kind of pulling the strings where necessary. And then just over the last year, like getting a chance to go to First Look and, you know, being involved with True False and, you know, actually feeling like I'm sort of in the conversation now, as opposed to like, being on the outside kind of looking in has been, has been great, and really helpful, I think, and kind of trying to figure out where my movie is going to go and everything now. Because, yeah, it's, you know, making a feature out of a short is no small feat.

[Daniel Hymanson]

Yeah.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. Cool. Okay.

So, so just to start, I guess we can be a little bit of a little bit specific. So I know, just through kind of following both of y'all's work, both together and sort of separately, you know, I know, quite a bit of the background, I feel based on just my own research with So Late, So Soon. But I'm, am I correct in understanding that, Daniel, you're working on a film right now that you're editing Isidore, right?

And then are you also, Izzy, working on a movie that Daniel is involved with? And yeah. Okay.

Yeah, that's maybe, I mean, that I think, as far as like collaboration goes, I think like the evolution from us working together on So Late, So Soon to how we're working together on my film, but also this film, this film that sort of, that sort of is called There Now, which is going to be changed, but it's like another film that we're co-directing, but only, and so, I mean, maybe those like normal sorts of descript, like role descriptors, I think probably don't apply in the way that we're, like, in some ways, Izzy is more naturally like taking on responsibilities that someone would think of as a director on that film. But in some ways I'm taking on some of those responsibilities, maybe. But I think, yeah, I can, sort of like what the roles are on those different projects, I think is interesting.

[Isidore Bethel]

I can talk about the film that is about my dad's artwork. I see like a certain lineage in the ways, so this is the third feature that I've made. The first feature I made, I handed the camera off to a lot of the other protagonists in the film, and they would film me, they would film other things.

I, in a very intuitive way where I wasn't thinking things out beforehand, it just felt right. It was a film about my best friend growing up who was killed when I was 21 by a drunk driver. It felt

right to have other voices depicting, like, what was happening in the film, that it wasn't solely my voice.

And I had a pretty extensive collaboration with an editor on that film who took a rough cut that I had kind of strung out and revamped it with her own sensitivity and touch. And I kind of learned there that there was something incredibly gratifying about throwing whatever ideas or vision that I had out the window, gratifying and also just like right, like the film is much stronger because I gave up a lot of control. And then on the second film that I directed on set, I worked with a DP who kind of operated as a director on set because I was on camera.

So it'd be like he and I would check in. His name's Ryan Saunders. He and I would check in before shoots.

But once we were on set, I wasn't checking in with him. I never saw frames. I didn't know what, like, it was important to me to be able to let go totally and let a scene like overwhelm me.

And then in the edit of that film, I worked with someone who ended up co-signing the film. So it's a film, I think the right language is that it's a film by both me and Francis LaPley. Because of the industry that we operate in, we identified both as directors because I wanted Francis to be able to travel with the film.

Francis wanted to travel with the film solo, sometimes when he and I couldn't both attend a festival. And it's a film that's both of ours. And if we listed him as like anything else, the outside world wouldn't look at him as a primary author of the film.

And with Daniel, because we've known each other for, I guess, about eight years at this point, and have been working together for seven, pretty continuously, there's no need beforehand between us to say this is what the role is, and this is what it involves. It's more just like we're working on things, both the film that he's directing, and then the film that he and I are making together. We're here because we love what we're doing.

And we can figure out specific titles retrospectively. But on the film about my dad's artwork, the things that we choose to film, I'm making those choices about this is something that we're going to film, this is something that we're not going to film. Daniel is pushing back sometimes when it's legitimate.

And we're having kind of conversations about that. But then everything that has to do with film craft, not everything, but most of it, that's Daniel's purview. I'm again, a protagonist, I'm on screen, it's so freeing in terms of my performance, to not have to worry about, are the mics functioning?

Is it better to be in a close up now or in a medium shot? And I just trust Daniel and his intuitions are the right ones. And we've been shooting for two and a half years at this point, I've seen a lot of the footage, I haven't seen all of it.

And there's no time when I'm like, oof, I wish this had happened differently. It's all just like, it's all exactly how it should be.

[Michael Coleman]

Go ahead. So much goes unsaid, because we've been working together for so long. There hasn't been, we haven't talked about how the film, how things are filmed, basically ever.

[Isidore Bethel]

We don't need to.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah.

[Isidore Bethel]

Yeah.

[Michael Coleman]

It's like a never-ending discussion or a discussion throughout about form in any way. Yeah, I have a really similar relationship with my DP. We've been friends for 12, 13 years at this point.

And we kind of learned the craft of filmmaking together. Quite ironically, I started out wanting to shoot primarily, and he wanted to direct. And then on the first project we did, we realized that we were actually paying attention to what the other person was supposed to be paying attention to.

And from that point, we sort of carried on the path that we are now. And it really does come down to this notion of trust, right? And over time, kind of with that trust developing, yeah, like you were saying, like both of you have kind of mentioned this sort of intuitive understanding that the personal relationship that we may have, like, puts us in a place of ease where we can allow ourselves to let go of things that we might otherwise be really uptight about, I guess, in the process.

And so on that notion of trust, I'd be curious, like, in those early conversations that you two were having about so late, so soon, what was it for you, Daniel, that made you feel like working with Izzy was going to forge a trusting relationship? Like, before you guys sort of got into the edit and like working together, like, what was it that made you feel comfortable that this would be a good path to go down? I mean, I think at the time, I was very inexperienced.

I had never worked with an editor in any capacity, like I had never. And I don't think like, at this point, this is I don't think this is generally a good way to judge a collaborator, but I'd seen, I mean, to a certain extent, but I'd seen *Of Men and War*. And that's like one of my favorite films of the past 20 years or whatever.

It's like, and I was just blown away by it for a number of reasons. And then we had a personal connection. It was through someone who didn't work in the film industry who Izzy had gone to high school with.

We happened to be, like, it was very serendipitous. We happened to, Izzy was finishing, he was doing like a low residency master's at, in Chicago, and he was there that summer. And then I was also there shooting.

And so I didn't talk to any other editors. I'd seen *Of Men and War*. I thought *Of Men and War* was incredible.

It was strange. I thought that it was edited by someone who was at the time, at the time, like younger. And, and was like from Atlanta.

I was like, oh, what a strange. And it was my friend, Sarah Quinn, who's a teacher. And it was all, and, and, and so yeah, there were all these things that were just sort of serendipitous.

And we happened to be in Chicago at the same time. And then I don't, and then the conversations were easy. And I think probably also seeing *Of Men and War* and talking with Izzy, realizing that he could bring something to the film that I could not, like, I think more so than seeing commonalities.

I mean, this is a while ago, but I think I probably saw differences. It was like easy, easy conversations that I'm sure speak to similarities in terms of like our values or what we're, I mean, you know, certain that made it possible for us to have an easy conversation and sort of dialogue over a number of months. But then I think also the way he responded to the material and what, how *Of Men and War* is edited was very different than how anyone else I had been working with, or on that film or beforehand as like an associate producer.

And like, it wasn't like anything that I had seen before. And I think probably I was, I was looking for someone to, yeah, do something to bring the film somewhere that I couldn't.

[Isidore Bethel]

Mm hmm. I can also speak to that because I think a lot of things happened. I'm just avoiding having direct sunlight on my face.

Have I succeeded? Sort of. I just can't do that.

Okay. I think I did a lot of things with Daniel that I later formalized to a greater extent because realized like, oh, this is a really good methodology to have in terms of deciding whether to work on a film and then laying groundwork for ensuring that the collaboration is right and fruitful. So something that happened is we met up because we were just serendipitously in Chicago in 2016.

Over the summer, we met up and we didn't talk about Daniel's film at all. We talked about what his life was like shooting. Daniel struck me as someone who was incredibly unusual and comfortable being unusual.

So Daniel, please correct me if I'm saying anything that's off base. But my impression of that first encounter was Daniel was spending his days with these two people who were 60 and almost

70 years older than he was, finding inspiration in ways that they built their lives. And then at night would go to the apartment that he had grown up in, where his parents had lived, and would empty it of stuff because they had left.

Some of this feels like it's not mine to tell, but his dad had had a health emergency. They kind of left urgently. And Daniel had the task of helping them empty the house and get it ready for sale, or the apartment, the home.

And there was something beautiful to me in terms of, oh, this is a person who is making work that has such strange echoes and divergences from his own life of finding elders who are artists in his daytime, while he's working through the absence of his immediate elders in the nighttime. Their artwork is domestic and residential, and he's working on this domestic and residential space at night. And none of it was pitched to me like this.

It was just Daniel telling me about his life in a really direct and humble way. And I was like, oof, this is a strange person who I can learn something from, who is right where he is in the world and is open-eyed and open-minded. And then progressively over the subsequent months, he would share a little bit of footage with me.

I would respond to it in writing. And I think that's something that I've very much formalized since. It's a way for me watching raw footage and responding to it allows a director to kind of get a sense of how footage would sit in my mind if I were to edit a film.

And it allows me to figure out what my relationship to the material would be, how it could, in some sense, be like an echo of my own story or my own story. And something that I really adored is that it took months. We were in kind of patient, continuous communication over the span of months.

And by the time that there was a formal ask of, do you want to work on this film? It was just self-evident. We met, I would say, probably in June or July, and we started working in April of the following year.

And that's something that the collaborations that have been the best since *So Late, So Soon* involve a turnaround of between seven and 24 months between the point of contact and the decision to work together. And that all creates trust. And it means that I get a long leash when I start working.

And I basically have no leash. It's like Daniel's always there to tell me if something feels off. But it gets to be my playground, which is so exhilarating.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. And that was actually a question that I had written down. I was curious from you, Daniel, if there were any sort of creative boundaries that you tried to implement at the beginning of the process of starting to work together.

I mean, not that I quite remember, but I feel like there definitely, I wanted to, on that film, I mean, also, yeah, in terms of creative boundaries, I think probably with the next, I mean, definitely with the next film I'm directing and Izzy's editing, this will not be the process just sort of given kind of what the film is. But for that film, we watched every, basically every second of footage I had shot together. We never worked remotely.

I was always with Izzy when he was editing, like in the other room or beside him. Like basically, I mean, we did the whole logging, watching footage together, and then I would be in the other room. And I'm working as like an assistant editor and then also to talk whenever felt necessary.

But I think for that film, I mean, part of that was because of fear, probably. Like I was just scared to lose control in a way that I wouldn't be at this point, I think. But I, yeah, I wanted to be there and be a part of it the whole time.

And that was probably the biggest kind of like, yeah, rule, I guess, for our work together on that film. Yeah, just the proximity factor. I moved to Mexico to like, because he was in Mexico, and then I moved to France because he was in France.

It made the film a lot harder to make. But yeah, that was like, that worked.

[Isidore Bethel]

Yeah, that felt like the only the only kind of like constraint or boundary. And it was one that I it just, yeah, that's it.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. And so so how is it? How is it different now with like with with the film that you know, either of the films that you guys are making?

Like how has how is the process sort of developed further or is different in any kind of way? I guess we're not we're just like at an earlier stage in mine in like the one film that I'm directing. It's like, easy has been a part of that film since the very beginning in a more in like a producerial type of capacity as someone to call as I mean, it from the very beginning.

I had like no hesitation at all about working with Izzy. And it also to me felt it has made me a lot more confident in my work to have him as someone who's always there supporting my work. And so like, from the very beginning of wind up, he was just kind of there for me to talk about anything with, in a lot of ways, there hasn't been that much.

I mean, he's been extremely instrumental in like written materials, which is like a super producer type of role. But it's like, yeah, there was a there was a discussion about how to shoot things, camera setups, stuff like that. And then we'll go months without talking about those types of things.

But then also last I was in Chicago a couple months ago, nervous about asking two people and I would they the two people that I have that I've been filming with. They have an elderly dog that's

15 years old, and very, they're like, very close to this dog, Pepe. Pepe is going through a lot of health issues.

And I was nervous to ask them to call me if they were deciding whether or not to put Pepe down. And so Izzy was the person who I would call if I was like, trying to think through that question. You know, he's he would be the person I'd call to think about probably like the hardest kind of ethical questions that I'm dealing with.

And I guess that's like not, that's like not maybe normally what the role of an editor would be, you know, but that is his role in my work. But we haven't started any sort of formal editing process. And I think just given the amount of footage, and budget, like limitations, and just like budget stuff, it's like, we're probably not going to be able to go through all the footage sitting down together.

And I think in a lot of ways, we're just sort of waiting to and not thinking about process that well. I mean, we, it's like not even worth really thinking about process because it's so dependent on how much money the film has, where Izzy is in his life, geographically, and sort of the same with me. It's almost not worth thinking about process at this point.

I'm sure it will be different because we've both evolved as filmmakers and sort of also in our lives.

[Isidore Bethel]

Otherwise, yeah, yeah, I mean, on windup, we're not we're not editing yet. And I don't, it doesn't matter much to me to parse between like what my tasks as a producer, or as a writer or as an editor are on different films, or as a translator, like that's something I often do on films. But for what it's worth in terms of like silly distinctions, I don't feel like I've done any work as an editor on windup yet.

I've done work as like a collaborator, a confidant that like, would come under some kind of producing heading. Yeah. And I think that we'll figure out, like Daniel and I both have more flexibility, experience, and probably like resilience than we did seven years ago, in terms of how to approach post production in the best creative way.

And we'll, we'll figure that out when, when it's time. Yeah.

[Michael Coleman]

So would you both say that, you know, like piggybacking kind of off something that you were mentioning, Daniel, like, for me, support is really instrumental in, like feeling supported is really instrumental when I'm sort of like thinking about who to collaborate with, or who to work with. That's probably like, you know, in the top two characteristics of like, what I would want in a collaborator is someone who's going to make me feel supported. To deal with tough decisions, obviously, and also just like to have an ear to, to, to listen and to lean on at times.

And would you both agree that that's something that like, you know, whether you're working together or with other people that you're kind of, you know, you need to feel like you can be

supported creatively, and also just through all the trials and tribulations of, you know, the production process and post production? I mean, I cannot overstate how significant Izzy's support has been in my life, generally, and as like a filmmaker, it's like, I think I would feel much, much more lonely and alone in like, my creative work, if he was not, I mean, I know that, I mean, it's had a very, very significant role. And, yeah, it just makes me feel in it, because with the second film, in particular, there have been long moments, it's never been something that's funded, you know, it feels very, a lot feels very insecure, you know, in terms of, and that, you know, it's, in some ways, it's been harder to make them so late, so soon, I feel like, in a lot of ways, less kind of institutionally supported.

And Izzy really is the main sort of constant support that makes me feel like this, in some ways, it legitimizes the work I'm doing to have a collaborator, like him, that is always there. I know he's always there, if I feel like something is important to talk about, or work on. Even though he has a ton of other responsibilities, working on tons of other films, somehow, he finds the time, if like something is important to me on the film.

[Isidore Bethel]

I, the question of support is one that I, I mostly think about in the terms that Daniel laid out, where it's like, it's interpersonal, it's emotional, it's artistic. And I don't know that, like, I need everyone on the teams that I can factor that I join, I don't need everyone to be a source of kind of like unconditional support. I think I need there to be at least one person on a team who does that, whether I'm joining a film as an editor, producer, or whether it's a film that I'm directing.

If there's not that kind of unconditional, supportive, loving bond with at least one other person on a film, it's like, why am I working on this film? And I think something on *So Late, So Soon*, I obviously got a lot out of working on that film. It's a film that feels like it really reflects my sensibility, my passions, where I was at that point in my life.

And I watched it a couple months ago, and was just like, yep, it's right. And I'm like, I feel really good about what Daniel and I accomplished together. But I'm also aware that I gave a lot.

I gave a lot to that film, I gave a lot to Daniel. And there was something when my dad died two and a half years ago, I wanted Daniel there, and I wanted him filming. And it felt like, oh, this is that is an insane ask.

But it's one that I know Daniel is going to meet with enthusiasm. And it was like, it was a few days after my dad died, Daniel came and lived in the house for 10 days with my mom and me. And he's been doing that for stays of like, a week to two weeks to a month.

He's done that seven times since, since my dad died. And in terms of support, Daniel's been there for a lot of situations. I'd broken up with my boyfriend and had to move my stuff out of a storage unit in Spain.

I was in another relationship with someone and was like going through that breakup, my dad's death, the organization of a show of my dad's artwork, financial pressures for my mom's house for her health, wondering if she's going to regain her sight, like all of these things that were

pretty overwhelming, and that I couldn't, in the moment, see as meaningful. Having Daniel there as this steadfast presence saying, this is this is meaningful to me. This is interesting to me.

That's without parallel. Um, and Daniel and his camera, kind of embodied this, this promise that like, these things that you're feeling right now that feel chaotic and overwhelming and like meaningless will have meaning and you just need time and perspective and, and this will be part of the story of your life. And it's availability.

It's like Daniel is available for me emotionally, like, and is interested. It's not like he's not doing me favors, like, even though we do each other favors all the time. It's like, I know that he's here because he wants to be.

I'm, I'm with him because I want to be. Yeah.

[Michael Coleman]

And it's based and it's like, our relationship, I was thinking about this sort of recently, it's like our relationship is based on work.

[Daniel Hymanson]

Yeah.

[Michael Coleman]

Like, I think about that with Jackie also, actually, it's like the reason why over the years, we've been able to maintain this very close friendship is because we're like making films together.

Yeah, I don't think. Yeah, it's like, I love that type of relationship.

It's like, yeah, it is what's it's transactional is sort of a bad, there's like a bad, has a bad connotation. But like, I do think there's some sort of transactional aspect of these things, which I think is nice.

[Isidore Bethel]

Where it's like, maybe, to me, it feels more like there's a container. I mean, the corollary that I have in my mind is that the last film that I directed, I made with a guy named Francis, he and I had met on a dating app in 2015. We'd had like really strong feelings for each other.

And like hooked up a few times. And it was just like, that's not, that's not what I want with him. But like, there's still this, like, there was a lot of love between us.

And it was like, what do we do with that? And for a few years, we were kind of like dancing around each other, like trying to be friends, but didn't really have a container for the relationship. And then when we started editing, that film's called acts of love.

When we started editing it together, it was like, Oh, fuck, this is like, this is where the relationship was meant to channel itself into. And when we finished working on that film, we edited that film for maybe like three, three and a half years of seeing each other almost every day hanging out, like doing the thing of like, he would, he would draft the texts that I would send to

like someone that I was going on a date with or whatever, and like vice versa. And it was like dovetailed very much with like the content of the film.

But as soon as we finished it, it was like, I saw him in Paris a couple days ago. I love him very much. But we there's not really like a substrate for the relationship anymore.

And like, I can see him once every six months, and check in and be very happy. But like, it's not a there's no container for the relationship. And I think that like, something that's really beautiful about my friendship with Daniel is that we've had containers for for the relationship this whole time.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And I and again, I think like many, many of my closest friends, like that's, that's how our relationships developed was like through the work.

And it's like, that's basically why we're checking in with each other and calling each other and staying in contact is because that's, that's what it is, you know. So which I agree, like, I really like that. I do think it at times can be a little bit problematic.

But without it, I don't think that I would be motivated to continue to do any work really. And I don't think that they, I think that they would be in a similar position in a lot of ways. I think it has been problematic for me in other situations.

But I think with Izzy, there's never been any doubt about how he feels about the work. I mean, there have been moments, I think, probably throughout the editing process or whatever. But with other people, I feel like I've, there have been times when I feel like I've doubted how they view me or the work.

I know from Izzy, he's always going to be there and like, believes in me, believes in the film. And I feel the same way, like there's never going to be any. And I think like in the past, I have worked with friends, people who were very close friends of mine, and it has been complicated.

And I felt like in some ways, there are friendships, it hurt the friendships. Sort of acting as a container. So this is kind of a question that I guess is more specific to the editing process.

[Daniel Hymanson]

I'm going to run for that. I'm sorry.

[Michael Coleman]

Okay, no, you're okay. Have fun. He needs some things on his walls.

[Isidore Bethel]

I think it maybe suits him to have it be kind of Spartan like that. I don't know. Daniel is very meticulous about about decor.

And he's been living in that apartment, maybe about two years at this point, but has been like, so like he the number of things that he's bought and then returned because he was like, Oh, it's not quite right is like infinite.

[Michael Coleman]

I've made it three years. There's literally not one thing on the wall. Stocking up on store credit.

Okay, so yeah, so this is a question that's sort of more specific just to the editing process. And so how do you both address issues of representation? And maybe more specifically, how do you handle kind of authenticity of the characters that you're portraying versus creative expression?

You mean representation of the people themselves in the film? I mean, for these types of questions, Izzy's answers are far more meaningful, because I have barely I've done this one time. And I did it one time.

And it was my first time. And it was at this point, five years ago. Yeah, time flies.

[Isidore Bethel]

I don't necessarily see a trade off between authenticity of expression and like, or like authenticity and creative expression. I think my mo as an editor is to honor what's intrinsic in the material and the material can be writing that a filmmaker's done or has dug up from an archive, it can be archival footage, it can be footage that a director has shot. But like what is, what is the desire that's in the footage that is looking for expression?

And how does that speak to me? And how can I be a conduit for distilling it? And I think that like, I'm not looking to impose creative expression on anything that I'm editing, I'm mostly looking to bring things to the surface, and to eliminate what seems like noise or pollution that's distracting from the essence of the questions that the people on screen or the people behind the camera are asking of themselves.

Yeah, I think that's where like, I think just choosing my projects is the biggest, the biggest instance of work. Because like, if I've chosen a project, and it's the right one, I just have fun, you know, and I don't I'm not even like, I'm just following my intuitions.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. So when you're, I'd be curious, like when you're, when you're asked to come on to a project, like, are you? I mean, it seems to me like, you, you know, there's part of it is, am I going to get along with this person that I'm going to be working with?

But are you asking to see material before you agree to come on to a project? And if that's the case, like, how much are you getting, like all of the rushes, like everything that you can possibly get your hands on, or?

[Isidore Bethel]

I'll read an example of a, of like, what I send to a director who contacts me cold. This was a fiction director who wrote me a couple of weeks ago, and I don't have the bandwidth. So I was I

said other things, but I said, a useful starting point has been having a director send me unedited rushes to give me an idea of the conditions on set and the filmmaker's ways of responding to them.

For a feature that usually looks like 40 to 70 minutes of long duration sync sound shots. I typically take extensive notes on whatever's running through my mind as I watch and then I share them with a director. Sometimes those include seeds for how a film might take shape.

My writing is a way of letting a director into my mind so they can see if it seems like the right place for the film to reside during the edit. These loose selections are also a way for me to figure out if this is material that I have something to contribute to, if it can also be my story in some sense. All in all, we're figuring out, am I the right fit for the film?

And those notes act as a starting point for our conversation. Our discussion, especially any disagreements we might have, then stands as a, as an approximative blueprint for a possible future collaboration. For pulling together those raw selections, I'm interested in seeing moments that confound, excite, upset, stimulate anger, or move a director, whatever they like, but also whatever feels beyond the conceptual or cinematic or intellectual frameworks they currently have in place.

I tend not to care about context or any kind of informational priorities. What's most important to me are feelings and sensations.

[Michael Coleman]

And that's exactly what I had sent Izzy.

[Isidore Bethel]

Go ahead.

[Michael Coleman]

A bit long in 20, in like 2016 or something, that's what I had sent Izzy. Not, it wasn't prompted by anything like that. Like everything's been like formalized, I guess, more, but it was at the time I had, I sent him something like 30 minutes of footage.

It's sort of presented as raw, but you're obviously, as someone sending that footage, you have a say in sort of the order and sort of what you're sending.

[Isidore Bethel]

And certain directors obsess over it and they shouldn't, but like, yeah. Yeah.

[Michael Coleman]

So what were, what were some of the things then when Daniel sent you that initial 30 minutes that were confounding or exciting or, you know, hitting sort of all of those descriptors that you just kind of lined out in that, in that email?

[Isidore Bethel]

The only thing that comes to mind, cause this is eight years ago, Yeah. bear in mind, is there's a moment when Daniel's in the bathroom with Jackie and she has like done something recently or is about to do something for her personal hygiene, whether it's like brushing her teeth or washing her hair. And she like is struck by a memory or an experience that she's had either recently or in the distant past.

I can't remember that's somehow related to like the cosmos and bowling. And I may be misremembering some of this, but it was just like, this woman is inhabited by a vital need to express something that is like an unusual bending of different parts of the universe towards each other. Daniel is there with her.

The intimacy between them is like manifest in the fact that like this thought occurs to her when she's doing something as personal as like taking care of her own body's cleanliness. And Daniel's there because there's this like seamless rapport between them. And like, oh, this is incredibly promising for what this body of footage might include.

Yeah. Yeah. And that was a moment that's like not in the final film, but it was like a very compelling moment.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. Where's the deleted scene, Daniel?

[Isidore Bethel]

In a big ass hard drive somewhere.

[Michael Coleman]

So, how often, and this can be about so late, so soon or either of the projects, any of the projects, really. But how often are both of you thinking about your identity as filmmakers during the process, during the editing process? And does that ever sort of inform the way that you choose to represent a character?

[Isidore Bethel]

I mean, I think it comes into play for me much more when I'm directing. When I'm editing, it's a lot more just like listening to what's intrinsically in the footage. And I think when I'm directing, I have a responsibility to upend my own control and point of view.

So there was, what I can think of is, have you seen Acts of Love?

[Michael Coleman]

I would like to.

[Isidore Bethel]

I'll send you a link to it. I'm trying to think of, I don't remember specifics, but a friend of mine watched a cut of it and had like a pretty negative response to it. He watched another cut of it maybe a year later when it was very close to picture lock.

And he was turned off by how controlling I seemed in the film. And his responses led me to, with the editor, co-director, include a scene where the protagonist kind of like mutiny against me and call me out and question me. And I think for Lucas, whose father is Ethiopian and whose mother is from the Midwest, who's white, there was a racial valence to, one of the protagonists of the film is black.

They all have identities that kind of diverge from my own. One is a man who was in his fifties who was white. One was a man who was in his early forties from a rural part of the United States, a military veteran.

And another, one of the kind of less present protagonists is also an African-American guy. And Lucas, who's a colleague of mine, was like, there's something uncomfortable for him in having this conventionally handsome, younger white man control everything in the ways that narrative is playing out. And I mean, it just makes for good, in my, like the kind of filmmaking that I want to make is filmmaking that calls into question its own representational tools.

It says that like, story's not a monolith. It involves contradictions and involves different points of view. So it came, that critique came to me through a partially racially inflected lens.

But at the end of the day, it was also a narrative question and a formal question. And I think that Luke, I mean, I don't want to, I don't think it's appropriate to, it's both appropriate and inappropriate to say that like Lucas' background experiences and racial identity inform his outlook on the world. I think it's like both very true and also very untrue.

Like, because I have sex with other men, does that inflect like how I see the world in many ways? Yes. And in many ways, no, like both are true.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. Yeah. And I think that I'm sort of curious about this question because, and you guys probably had dealt with this a little bit on *So Late, So Soon*, but in my film, you know, my character, he's pushing 82 years old at this point, and he's a very colorful personality that can you know, could very easily be turned into a joke in a lot of ways.

And there's been many instances where I've had to try really hard to have a certain scene or a certain moment read as truthful, but not have him seem as if I'm making fun of him, if that makes any sense. And I, if I'm not mistaken, I think that I had read somewhere, or maybe it was in another interview with you two, you kind of talked about this process of showing rough cuts to people or like, kind of in the middle of doing *So Late, So Soon*. And there were some scenes where you all had realized that the audience was kind of responding in the exact opposite way that you had thought that they were going to respond to certain scenes with Jackie.

And so I'm curious, like, what did you then do to kind of mitigate that sort of negative or, you know, change the response, I guess? I mean, it depends so much on what you want out of a film and what you want out of an audience and who your audience is. And I was thinking about this last night, because I'd seen a film this past weekend, called *Moment of Impact*.

And then I was filming with my parents yesterday. And my mom looked really kind of disheveled. And I think, I'm So Late, So Soon, I was so scared that people would judge Jackie in a negative way.

I wanted to be so sensitive. And I think in some ways, I love that film, but I think in some ways, it may be, it's not a mistake, but it may be like sort of like muted certain things or softened edges that didn't need to be soft. I don't really know.

I mean, I do think it, I was, I just watched this, this movie Moment of Impact was with the right, with the wrong audience, I think it could have a different, people could respond differently to the person on screen. And I think that the director kind of respected or respect is the right word, but just sort of like trusted the audience would not laugh at this person. And so I do think, like I'm, I was filming with my mom and her hair looked crazy.

And I was like, in the right context, in a lot, with the right people, they could laugh at this. But I think it may be, how I'm thinking now is like, it's maybe okay. It's so much, it's so dependent on sort of who your responsibility is to, how, what situations the film will be in, who's watching the film, like what your responsibility is to the person you're filming.

And, but I just don't want to be that worried about my mom's hair looking so messy when we're editing the film. I don't want to be, I just, I don't want to be so cautious about that. Whereas with So Late So Soon, we were in a situation where I had photographed all of her, all of this artwork.

And we were at the like rough cut, the like True Pulse rough cut retreat and people had watched it. And I think they had interpreted, they had, I mean, this has something to do with identity also, but it's like, they had interpreted that footage as the filmmaker showing this kind of mess, whereas I was seeing it as brilliant artwork. And I think in certain ways, it's easier to control those sorts of things in a first person film, like what Izzy was talking about with Axel Love.

He's a character in that film. So he can do this thing where it's like, there's a mutiny against him. So it's like, there's a lot, everything is then seen through his eyes.

And in some ways, that's maybe easier than a film that's like observational, where you don't have that. With Wind Up, the film I'm working on now, in terms of like seeing, this is your last question, but it's like in terms of see how you see someone, how a character is kind of represented. It has so much to do with like, how you create your own character, because it's all seen through your eyes.

Yeah. But yeah, I think like, we changed how we edited that film. So there wouldn't be the possibility of it being interpreted that way.

[Isidore Bethel]

The film shows very little of her artwork at the end of the day, except when it's like narratively and psychologically like pertinent. Yeah.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. Yeah. And it's, it's interesting, because one of the ways that it's been suggested to me, particularly on how to maybe get around some of those issues has actually been like getting, I've been getting a lot of it.

And I think we were talking about this back in the summer, Daniel. I've been getting really sort of like encouraged and pushed to like put myself in the movie more, so that I'm like more of a present character, so that the audience really understands that like, who they're kind of seeing everything through. And I've really been struggling with whether or not I want to commit to doing that.

Because in a lot of ways, I feel like some of these, some of these problems are a little bit uncontrollable, like you can't really predict or fathom how any one particular person is going to read something in a way that may go against the way that you originally had hoped that they were going to perceive it, you know. But I do think like through rough cut, I think, I feel like for everything I make, I want as many rough cut screenings as possible. That you're not looking at something that, you know, you don't think you're seeing something that other people are seeing so differently.

I just think like it's that to me feels like a way to control for like a huge amount of disparities between what you're doing or seeing and other people are. Yeah, just getting more eyes on it. I mean, I'm, that's, I'm a big proponent of that as well.

I'm constantly sending scenes to people who probably don't really care to watch, you know, five different iterations of the same thing in the span of one week. They're like, wow, this is a lot. I also do think like the first person, it is kind of an, it is, I recently, like with that same screening I went to, the filmmaker was saying, because she was putting her father in this vulnerable position, she made sure to include, it's similar to what he was talking about, Hacks of Love.

And what I'm always thinking about when I'm making this film, it's like, she made, she was like, I made sure to include moments when I look bad. And in certain ways, it's like, it's, it's, it's maybe an easy out or something.

[Isidore Bethel]

It's also where like, I find it essential to not edit the films that I direct, because I can't make evaluations about how my protagonist seems on screen. And I think that at the end of the day, like, Daniel, to your question about depicting your mother, it's like, if you have a strong, loving relationship that involves mutual respect and mutual challenge with your mother, and you maintain that, anything's okay, if it's meaningful. And, and, and like, what is okay, and what is meaningful can shift, of course, according to circumstances, but it's like, that's the nice thing about making first person work, because there's, there's continuity between what's on screen and what's off screen.

Yeah, yeah.

[Michael Coleman]

Okay, one, one last question. I know we've went a little bit over. So, when a, when a film is finished, whether that's so late, so soon, or anything that you've worked on with anyone else, Izzy, to what extent do you feel that the vision for a film and how it's portrayed on screen is a shared experience between both the director and the editor?

For me, it feels entirely like a share. Like, I feel that Izzy has a huge influence over what these films are. And the same goes for the Atlanta film.

It's like that, and that has to do with like, Foner, that they would be completely different films, if he wasn't working on that. I just feel like if you're, yeah, it feels, to me, it feels like a totally shared and product. I think it, it's not really presented in that way to the public, like, but it can be, it can be.

But also, I think, in some ways, I, I think, like, that, how much that matters, I think, isn't, is it, is over emphasized sometimes. But, yeah, to me, it feels like a totally shared type of experience.

[Isidore Bethel]

I think it depends film to film. And I choose films where I'm going to be contributing significantly to the path of the film's identity going forward. But I also know there are films where, like, the edit doesn't really matter that much.

Like, the essence of the film is elsewhere. It's in performance, it's in photography, it's in, like, the relationship between the producer and the director. And sometimes there's a little bit of, like, negotiation that happens upon a film's release, where, like, where does my name appear in the credits?

Is it directly after, like, protagonists and director? Or is it after the producers? On different films that I've worked on, my name appears at different places.

And it sort of, it doesn't matter that much at the end of the day. But for me, it reflects the extent to which I feel my voice or my sense of sensitivity or sensibility in a work. And it also impacts, like, Daniel and I have done a lot of Q&As together for So Late So Soon.

That's important to me. That was the case on Of Men and War. That was the case on What We Leave Behind.

It's not the case on other films where, like, I've played a big role, but it wasn't, like, just the director and me, you know? They were projects where, like, the producer was much more instrumental, or it was a collective. Yeah, I mean, I think the thing that's beautiful about art and about filmmaking is that, like, any configuration is possible.

And it's just like, what are you, what are you choosing? What are you gravitating towards?

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah.

[Isidore Bethel]
Yeah.

[Michael Coleman]
Cool. Well, thank you, guys.

[Daniel Hymanson]
Thank you.

[Michael Coleman]
Yeah.

[Isidore Bethel]
I hope you have a good rest of your day.

[Daniel Hymanson]
You too.

[Isidore Bethel]
You too. Yeah, I might take a nap. We'll see.

I'm not sure.

[Michael Coleman]
Yeah, I think I'm going to do the same, unless I get woken up by more walnuts.

[Isidore Bethel]
I love the image of just, like, a waterfall of walnuts on your roof.

[Michael Coleman]
I mean, yeah, I would love to actually capture one or many of them actually falling, but I seem to just notice them at the point of impact and then scatter them. So, and we have a couple of friends coming over this weekend for a play date with our son, and we have to clean up the yard to put up a bounce house. So, yeah, it's not big.

It's a small bounce house that we sort of inherited from somebody else, but can't be bouncing around on a bunch of walnuts, apparently. So. That makes sense.

Yeah. All right. Great.

Cool.

[Isidore Bethel]
Thank you so much.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, absolutely. Have a great weekend.

[Isidore Bethel]

Yeah, you too. We'll be in touch.

[Michael Coleman]

Okay. See you. Bye-bye.

Gasoline Rainbow (2024) Interview with Directors Bill and Turner Ross

[Michael Coleman]

Okay, cool. All right. Yeah, so I guess to start, like, I'd be curious, like, when it comes, when it comes to, okay, you're done shooting, and now we're entering the edit, you know, what is, I have a feeling that this kind of varies from project to project, but I'm just kind of curious, like, what is y'all's sort of general approach to, like, entering the beginnings of that process in terms of, like, in terms of collaboration?

[Bill Ross, IV]

Getting, just getting into the edit?

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, yeah, just getting into the edit.

[Bill Ross, IV]

Trying to think, you know, as much as I, like, after a shoot, like, when I take a break and, like, sort of distance myself from the footage so I can see it clearly, there's, I think, usually just, there's just too much excitement to, like, get into the footage and see what we've done. And for me, the editing is, like, I love every part. Well, not every part.

We're pitching currently in that stuff. But the editing is, like, you've gone out and you've, you've, you've hopefully gotten what, you've gone through the most stressful part. Twice.

Right. And now you're, you're safe and back home, you know, you've gone through the war. And so I'm always usually pretty eager to get into it because I've been doing that since I was a little kid.

It's just fun to play and, and put different blocks next to each other and see what color comes out of pairing those things together. And you also want to know that, you know, you didn't fuck up and hopefully there's good stuff in there and other stuff that you've forgotten or stuff that you didn't even know you got because we don't wear headphones. And so, like, you will have caught scenes that you didn't even know you, you had once you, once you pair the audio to the, to the visual.

But I don't know, T, I mean, T is, like, the, on this last one, we actually edited together and previous to that, T, and he still was, but, like, he's sort of produced, he's, like, post-production,

like, producer. And so he's, like, he's in the room, like, making charts and graphs and maps about character arc. Anyway, T, why don't you speak to that sort of where that goes for you?

Because you're reassembling your intention.

[Turner Ross]
Yeah.

[Bill Ross, IV]
Right. Because so much of our process is about what isn't on the page. So the third part of it's, you know, writing and development, the actual execution, production, and then post-production.

Post-production, you're revisiting everything that you orchestrated. You're defining, redefining all of your intentions and then saying, now, what happened? And then trying to make those things speak to each other.

You know, I think a unique part of our process is Bill's always, Bill's always been most interested in what is actually captured rather than the capturing. So I think throughout the process, we're often looking at stuff, you know, he's such a cheerleader in our process and for our crew that we're often having fun with the footage and interacting with it even while we're, you know, even while we're making it. So that at the end, we know there are things that we're excited about.

And then, and then it's the, you know, the genuine slog of going through all of what has been captured saying, did we hit all the beats? You know, usually, yes, we've done so, but what else happened? And really combing through all of the material, we try to watch everything that's been captured and, you know, knowing what all is there and saying, you know, did we get what we wanted to get, but also what, what did we, what did we get and what is the more interesting of the two and how can we allow them to speak to each other?

Because hopefully, like is the process right now, while you're developing it, you've set your intentions so clearly that if you hit all those beats, it makes sense. And if you hit all those beats, you've executed something in line with your vision of the thing, but there's usually in terms of our process, so much more there that does better than what we could have preordained.

[Michael Coleman]
And so, you know, that's, that's an interesting thing that like, I know that you, you two are very, like you, you seem to have a tendency to be very planned out in the beginning, but then when it sort of comes to the shooting, you're kind of using that process as a means, like the sort of template of the story as a means to explore things that are beyond what you may have kind of plotted out, so to speak beforehand. And so with, with that kind of juxtaposition, and I'll use kind of what I understand to be part of what the process of editing Gasoline Rainbow was, and kind of even going back to, to 45365, like, is that why you guys will sort of do these, go through these processes of like, okay, I'm gonna, Bill, I'm gonna do a, an assembly, right, for Gasoline Rainbow.

Turner, if I'm not mistaken, you did like just a visual cut of the movie, and then your assistant did like an audio cut, right? And so is that like, and then with 45365, I know that like, there were many cuts of the film, but then ultimately, like the movie kind of became more born out of a cut that I think did one of you made that was like stuff that wasn't used, right? And so do you kind of take that, that time to like, play with the material so that you can ultimately find these more authentic moments that weren't necessarily part of the kind of planned experience, so to speak?

[Bill Ross, IV]

Yeah, for sure. I think you have to, you have to forget everything that came before that. And then what you've gotten are now the words that you're going to use in order to write your book.

So it's, I feel like in every step of the way you're, you're writing, and most especially, you're in the edit, you're, you're rewriting, or not rewriting, you're just, you're using that material to write the, the story. It doesn't matter what your intention was, it's what you, what you've, what you've captured. And the way we shoot, hopefully, there's so many surprises and things that we didn't plan, that it makes our intention for the film just like so, so much better and deeper than what we set out to do.

It's like the mental version of what an athlete does for a game, right? You can only prepare for the game, suppose, and then you show up and you play the game that's presented to you. But you've, you've done everything necessary to be able to participate, you know, the structure, but within that, that's where the magic happens.

That's the joy of watching, you know, a sporting event. So we prepare for each step, as if it's going to happen a certain way, knowing that if we play the game this certain way, we'll get to the end and hopefully have, you know, done what's necessary to, to, to win that. But yeah, it's always, it's always the magic of what happens within the framework of that, that you can't anticipate.

Yeah, you just, you can't force, you really have to go down, who, who described, like is Garrett, I think, I think I heard Garrett Bradley talk about, like, it needs to feel like you're floating down a river, you know, like you can't, you can't, you may have all these like big ideas, but if the ideas don't, aren't in your footage, you, you can't force that shit in there. So you gotta just, it's gotta feel, yeah, it's gotta feel right to, to, like 4-5 is a great example, because we, we, the language of the film was, was, and, and ultimately the language of what our work was developed in that, in that edit, it just like, this is how, this is the only way this story really, or this film really works, is, is if it's done this way, so. But the guideposts for that one were only time and character, so it had quite a canvas, and that, that was a, that was a rough learning experience.

Over the years, we've, we've hewn closer to a pre-production that understands its intention and can set up a scenario that we can, we can exist more freely within it, the more structure that we impose at the beginning, so that when we get to the end, again, like, as long as we've shown up on, at all these beats, we can allow for the magic to happen because the choreography was, was considered in advance. But the, yeah, I mean, with the, with our first, with our first movie, that was so broad that we really had to mine what we did to understand what we did.

Because a lot of it is, is still even, still even with, with, you know, honing in on, on production and the approach, it's like, it's like programming your subconscious so you can be available to the reality of the thing. And that's, that's where the most interesting stuff happens.

[Michael Coleman]

Mm-hmm. What would you say is, like, I guess, what are like some characteristics that are important in terms of having collaborative partners, like, during post? Like, if I'm, like, for example, if I'm, you know, I'm, I'm editing my own film myself, but I, I sort of really rely on my DP, who's the only, you know, we work in a very similar method to you two.

Like, when we're shooting, it's sort of just us. And I know that your projects have kind of grown, you know, as, as you've moved forward in your career and everything. But from my perspective, that's kind of how I, like, I see both of you, you know.

And, and when I'm deep in the edit, like, I rely really heavily on him as a form of support so that I don't feel isolated when I'm sort of deep in that process. And I'm just curious about, like, as you kind of move forward and get closer to the end, like, what does that collaboration look like? And what does that sort of, like, back and forth in terms of support kind of look like for both of you?

[Bill Ross, IV]

I think it was really helpful last time to, not only for me to be there full time, but also to have Tom there for the majority of it. Even if Tom and I hadn't pressed any keys or done any of our own work, it was so helpful to have that collective shorthand of knowledge of all the material so that when you get stuck, you know, not just searching for a file, but just, like, thinking through what's going on, that we had that collective consciousness and could easily point to a shared knowledge of the material. And I think that shorthand was invaluable, no matter what the workflow looked like.

Yeah, having people in the room that know everything, it just, cutting anything by yourself is tough, but especially, like, the way we work, there's so much material that you can go down these rabbit holes and you have all this information in your head, and you're just, like, you're making yourself crazy by all the different possibilities, and you truly lose sight of, like, bigger picture stuff. So, like, having somebody in the room to be, like, I'm kind of going for this in this scene, do you guys remember a moment? And then, yes, yes.

Or, like, oh, there's a piece of audio that would help that, or that really truly sucks. Why are you doing that? It really, like, for your mental health, it's good.

I did the first one, kind of, Turner and I were not in the same place, and I... We almost lost, Bill. Yeah, I'm not trying to be funny.

It was bad, and it was really horrible, and really hard, really, really, really hard. So, would not advise.

[Michael Coleman]

Well, and so, after that, was it more important, sort of, moving forward that you guys were kind of working closer when you got, like, when you got into the edit? And I guess, like, since then, do you make more of a point, Turner, to, like, be kind of, I guess, more a part of the edit?

[Bill Ross, IV]

Yeah, the evolution of each project is an improvement of our processes. So, you know, that first time, Bill was the editor. Bill, you know, when we left LA, it's, like, I had done my function, the things that I was good at, and Bill knows how to edit.

So, we leave Bill to do that, and that was... And I wanted it that way. I didn't know how hard it was going to be.

It was not conducive to our happiness, or really to the success of the project. So, now, yeah, we try to improve each step, you know, just because one of us has a skill set in another department doesn't mean that we don't need to have that collective knowledge of what's going on, and be there as a resource. And it's really improved what we do, and made the whole thing more holistic.

You know, we're mutually a part of each step of the process. It makes it move faster, too. You know, even if we still take a year on a project, the thing becomes more dense and more articulate, the more that we're able to explore it together, whether that's conversationally or in actual sharing edits and things like that.

[Michael Coleman]

Right, right. Okay. So, this can kind of be specific, or I guess what this question is kind of more about is like, could you provide any specific examples of maybe between like the last two films of a moment where, or a couple of moments where, like, having each other actually helped maybe you, Bill, like, figure out a moment that was particularly a struggle while you were in the edit?

[Bill Ross, IV]

Oh, yeah. I mean, like, every day. While you think about it, I think that first step was the most revelatory, right?

When we reconvened after three months, Bill showed up with an assembly, which is what a good editor does, right? That's productive. He has, he reassembled the film in terms of what we were doing.

I had the freedom to just go in and play, which is usually the final stage of the edit. So, by starting that way, I had been exploring all kinds of fun stuff, because no matter what I did, we weren't losing progress.

[Turner Ross]

Right.

[Bill Ross, IV]

And I could just have the freedom to experiment. And by the end of the edit, we were consulting those early creative things that we did because they had freedom. Yeah.

But we still had... I think that's the most, I think that's the most, I think that best illustrates where we're at currently, where it's like, I do sort of the boring work of, like, okay, this is the movie point A to point B. But then, like, Turner's going on, like, feeling and fun.

And, you know, that's ultimately what you want your movie to be. So, yeah, we were pulling stuff from that. I forget how long it was for our edit.

Quite a bit. It was the last thing that we put in it at Hassan was that that final rickety shot from running into the field, right? Because it's like, this is the living thing.

Right. And to have the freedom to like, to just play in communion with actually getting the work done, like, we never lost the playfulness. And we could always be experimenting.

And it was, you know, as we continued on in the process with Gasoline Rainbow, he'll continue to integrate those things and refine the edit. But if he got stuck on something, it was like, you know, go play with this scene, go, you know, what can we do here? How can we think differently about this?

And we could go in separate directions and come back and say, Oh, wow, okay, well, here's something I discovered, here's something I discovered, here's how they could work, you know, just like that, that freedom to play and, and, and bring it back into the rational process, I think was the has been the most helpful evolution.

[Michael Coleman]

Sure. And I guess perhaps like that, you know, that moment that you're mentioning, Bill, you know, seeing that in the context of an of an assembly may not have had the same allure that it possibly had when you see it sort of in this more like playful version of the edit, right? Right.

Yeah.

[Bill Ross, IV]

It was exciting. And I think part of that also stems from things like when we were working on Ben Zeitland's Wendy, we had the freedom to just go and explore. And at the end of the when everybody was dragging ass, and was fed up with their job and couldn't really see the forest for the trees.

We threw a party every Friday, Bill called and family fun nights, and we'd show them behind the scenes footage, dailies, fun videos that we shot, because it reminded people that we were having fun, and we were playing. They were really cool things coming out of it. And so in the slog of the edit, which can be a miserable space, we've learned from experience, it's good to also have the morale, you know, where it's like, No, but we also did this crazy shit.

Yeah. And, you know, there are also these things that we didn't plan on that possibly we could bring in. I mean, my dancing skeletons didn't make it into the final edit, but we had a lot of fun while we were editing the whole time, trying to get it in there, but didn't make a whole lot of sense.

[Michael Coleman]

So how do you? This is kind of a weird question. But how do you how do you both address issues of representation in your movies?

And maybe more specifically, like, how do you balance kind of authenticity with creative expression? If that makes any sense?

[Bill Ross, IV]

Wait, say that one more time. How do you balance authenticity with creative expression?

[Michael Coleman]

So I think like, question is kind of more about like, okay, I've spent some time filming with this person or with this group of people, right? And now I'm going to take that and sort of mold it based on my own creative choices in the edit. And ideally, you're kind of trying to match your match the authenticity of the experience or the person that you spend time with, but you have to kind of filter that through your own creative choices.

And so that's just something that I'm kind of talking to everybody about is like, how do you sort of waver those two things? Because you obviously want the film to be a way for you to express yourself, but also you have to bear in mind, like the way in which you're representing the people that have given you their time, and so on and so forth.

[Bill Ross, IV]

Yeah. I think our ethos, our ethos comes less from a journalistic allegiance, and more from like the Herzog school of ecstatic truth. It's never been about a journalistic truth.

And I think this is a two parter, sort of a binary thing. It's more authentic to present the essence of what it was like to be there than it is to have time continuity or, you know, or tell bigger truths, what gets at the better truth. Backtrack and make it a two parter.

The more that we understand and define what we're setting out to get, the more authentic the experience can be. And if we've done our research and set this up enough that we believe in the authentic structure of what we're doing, then we can let people be their authentic selves within that. And we can be our authentic, creative selves within that, and hopefully come away with the materials that can convey that, you know, the authenticity of being there in spite of our, you know, artistic intention.

Right. Yeah. And I think so much of the creativity is done up front.

We build this sort of sandbox for everybody to play in. And then, yeah, like T said, people can, you know, feel free to just be themselves. And that's really what we're after is casting people that we love and are drawn to.

And just it's just a showcase to show them off. So. And I guess in terms of the edit, as it applies to the edit, we try to run with, you can't tell it what to do.

You have to listen and it'll tell you what to do. Just as in the shooting of it, we can't impose ourselves on our subjects, at least in the way that we work. You have to allow them to inhabit their own space.

So it's always listening, allowing it to tell you and not making it do something, not imposing yourself on it. You're creating the conditions for life. You're not making it or like the Khalil Gibran thing.

Like if kids aren't you, they come through you, you know?

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. Have you guys ever ran into any issues or instances where like you've shown a cut to someone that's been involved with the project and they haven't necessarily liked a moment that you've used of them or like have you ever had to kind of come across making any changes in regards to things like that? Yeah.

[Bill Ross, IV]

That's a complicated scenario. Everyone responds to seeing themselves differently. And sometimes that is an evolution in itself.

You know, I think it can be scary to be that vulnerable and that exposed, especially if that hasn't happened for you before. I think one of the most resonant examples for us, the most complicated and difficult was in bringing an actual actor into one of our productions, Michael Martin and Bloody Nose. His experience of that in relation to the way that we work was a bit hostile, you know, as his craft and his idea of himself and his control of his representation was confronted by the reality of existing in a paradigm that was out of his control.

And so the results to him were confusing because one, it wasn't all his expertise on display. And also people's perception of that was skewed. You know, what's he performing or was he actually that person?

And so initially he responded very poorly. Well, he responded poorly because the articles that were coming out calling it a documentary or whatever, but he had not seen the film at that. But when he finally was able to consume the film and also allow in the feedback of the experience, it became the highlight of his career.

And that was a long process. You know, it's like it took until the film had run its course, basically. And a couple of weeks before he died, he called me and just finally said, you know, he

had created his own conversation around it, but he had to mold it in his head, which I totally understand.

You're highly exposed. It's a big deal, you know, especially on that kind of world stage where you're getting, you know, hundreds of articles written about you and from varying viewpoints and not, and I understand how that could be confusing, but ultimately he was extraordinarily proud of what he did and felt brave for having done it. But that, you know, that was fraught.

We had to have a lot of conversations. We had to go through a lot, but we believed in what we did. You know, we didn't, we didn't just throw some shit out there and, and we're never trying to exploit anyone, but sometimes that requires some real, you know, vulnerability and it's your choice what you put out there.

So we question ourselves a lot when we do that. But I think, you know, if someone's willing to commit to us like that, in the end, it's on us not to be timid about it. You know, some of the most revealing things that can be the most scary are actually the most humanizing and the most beneficial to a viewer if we're collectively making art that is trying to convey something.

So it's a messy dance, you know, it's when it, when it's in, in this way that we're operating, we don't have a set where somebody shows up having rehearsed and they either like their performance or they don't. This is a real collaborative vulnerable space where sometimes the insights are the things that you didn't plan to bring. And it's a person by person thing.

I don't know. That's the most extreme example. I mean, after Michael died, there were several memorials to him where, you know, we played the film because people want, like, thought that was the best thing he ever did.

And it really showed him for, you've got the essence of Michael. It's not, you know, it's not who Michael was, but you got to see Michael and yeah, his essence. So yeah, he ended up loving it.

But like Turner said, it's just a very long journey. There's other examples, but they're far, far less than that. And sometimes it's the opposite.

Like, I didn't know I was that cool. Yeah, yeah. But Martin, Martin Western, I saw him the other day and while I was in Texas and I remember after he saw he's like, shit, I'm fucking funny.

It's like, well, we added you to like, yes, you're welcome. Yeah, there's both sides of the coin there.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. Yeah, I think that's interesting to like, kind of being able to, I don't know, show somebody in a way that is in a positive way, like different than what they may have seen themselves as like beforehand or whatever.

[Bill Ross, IV]

Yeah, I think Martin's actual quote would probably have been something like, God damn it, motherfucker. I didn't know I was so goddamn, you know, intellectual. No, we made you a good father.

We made you a spoken person. You know, we like we because you are that person. Right, right.

Even though that's not the actual experience of spending time with you. Sure. That's what's in here, you know, and that's that's your responsibility in the craft.

Yeah, I remember during the lockdown, pandemic lockdown, William from Chapatula's texted me. He's like, you know, we were all going through our feelings in that period. And he was just like, he's like, hey, man, I just want you to know that that movie really changed my life.

Like I, you know, I saw that I was I was important and it just yeah, it really affected how I saw myself. And yeah, so you get that too. And that's amazing.

Within the film, his brothers aren't listening to him, but he's the narrator of his inner voice in her film. So that's our actuality of experiencing him, but not the actual reality of his experience.

[Michael Coleman]

That's right. Hmm. That's kind of beautiful.

[Bill Ross, IV]

Yeah, it is. This is nice. Yeah.

Hmm. Yeah, we don't sit around talking like this all the time. So it's nice to hear some of this stuff.

[Turner Ross]

Yeah.

[Michael Coleman]

Okay. So when a when a film is finished, to what extent do you feel that the vision for the project and how it's portrayed on screen is a shared experience between both of you? And maybe even beyond that, like everybody else who's sort of involved?

[Bill Ross, IV]

So say that one more time. Sure. A shared experience.

Like, yeah.

[Michael Coleman]

So so when a so so when you guys finish a project and you premiere it, right? When it premieres, how much do you feel that what is what is what is on the screen, what we're seeing as an audience is a sort of shared experience? And I guess what I mean is that for some of the

people that I'm interviewing, actually, I think I've done a good job of choosing people who seem to work very collaboratively almost from beginning to end.

Right. But I could only assume that for some, you're an editor and you're working with a director who might be a little bit heavy handed in terms of their control over what it is that you're actually doing. Right.

And so then when in those instances, it's probably more of a like, this is this is my movie, Michael, but you just happen to kind of be there helping me, but it isn't really a shared end product, I guess. Does that kind of clarify that a little bit?

[Bill Ross, IV]

Yeah, I mean, you use the word experience. That's the whole point. That's the that that it's the whole thing.

Like when I these are these are big life experiences making these things. And it's about the desire to, you know, we make these things so that we can be with certain people in certain places and have certain types of experiences. The films are a great, you know, end result, but it's really about like trying to live a very full life with different different folks in different places.

So, yeah, I mean, the end result is great. And it's definitely shared. I mean, it's it's and it's not just Turner and I, but it's everybody that's involved.

It takes everyone being open and willing to to be a part of these things for it to work. So it's yeah, we never we never put like a film by, you know, like we never do that kind of thing because it's not it's it's like, you know, I'm glad the films exist, but it's it's it's an experience for for all involved. That's why we work this way.

You know, when say like Bill is the editor for somebody else, that's that's a different story. We have a shared intention here. We believe in these things from front to back and we wouldn't put out anything that we didn't believe in.

Once it goes in front of an audience, it becomes it becomes their experience, which we can't control. We have to believe in what we have to believe in being the standard bearers for everyone who collaborated with us in the making of the thing and putting out only the thing that we believe in. You know, when when when Bill's getting notes from a director who believes that his film is this way and you're like, you know, you may have a conflict of interest.

That's a totally different story, which, you know, that that's why we work this way.

[Turner Ross]

Mm hmm.

[Bill Ross, IV]

I don't know how you wrestle with an ego like that. You know, we have to be able to let that go internally, fight for what we believe in and end up at a place. That's where our process is long, ending up at a place that we stand by, you know.

Yeah. Come at me. I know why this is this way.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. And I think that that was like that's kind of part of why I was sort of interested in talking to people about this is because I I sort of feel like. It's like the the people that choose to believe in an idea that you may have are ultimately the ones who are going to help you bring something to life.

And I kind of view like filmmaking kind of under the pretense of the adage of like it takes a village to raise a child. Right. And yeah, like the whole sort of like egocentric, like director relationship is kind of ridiculous, I guess.

So. Yeah, I mean, that that's kind of that's like the inspiration for, you know, having all these conversations and stuff is to try to talk to people that I believe like kind of feel feel about everything in the same way that I kind of do with with the people that I work with and stuff.

[Bill Ross, IV]

So I think a good example for us is that that can go sideways, that that can be not true. You know, one of the best, most collaborative and creative experiences we've ever had was filming a heavyweight fight in Vegas. We had an incredible crew.

We did some of our best work. But the director is an egocentric idiot. And he did not make something that represented that experience.

He made what he wanted. He made what he wanted to impose on something that was really beautiful and therefore created something lifeless that didn't represent the experience of making it.

[Turner Ross]

Yeah.

[Bill Ross, IV]

That's disappointing.

[Turner Ross]

Yeah.

[Bill Ross, IV]

Yeah, totally. That should not be the way that things go, which, again, is why we put all our energy in this stuff as much as we can.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. Well, and it's like nobody can do everything on their own. And like the work is only going to benefit from having, again, like a group of people who believe in a central idea and are willing to put forth the time and effort to, like, create that the the most the most perfect version of it.

Yeah.

[Bill Ross, IV]

What did you say last night, Bill, about Byrne, his ethos? I don't remember. I mean, it was about.

I think I was talking about. Uh, we were talking about crew. No, I know.

But like it's an energy. It's an energy thing. It's like a commitment thing where it's just like you're nothing is ever done halfheartedly.

It's like either you're in or you're out. It's about passion. I don't remember how I said it, but.

I know he's trying to work on your homework and you don't show up on time, and what are you doing here? You know, it's like we're this should never be a job. Right.

I'll be doing the wrong thing because it takes more than that.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. Were you guys on Contemporary Color like David Byrne is such an iconoclastic character and were you going into that like at any point worried that he would try to exert some significant amount of control over the way that you guys were going to sort of make that film?

[Bill Ross, IV]

Yeah. But we said we said on the first day we met that we had no interest in making something where we were just button pushers for him. And he was very excited.

He was like, no, no, no, you're here because of you guys. You need exactly what you want to make. Art by Committee is the death of creativity.

You know, like he said, all the right things. And he stuck to it. A lot of people say that shit, but they don't act.

But he does. Like we had to beg him to watch like a cut of the film. He was like, no, no, no, just you guys just do what I'll see it at the premiere.

Like, well, a lot of you're at the butt of the joke of a lot of these jokes. We kind of need you to be OK with it. But yeah, we were concerned.

But he he allayed those concerns at our initial meeting. Yeah. We don't we don't want to take a for hire gig here.

It's like we need to be able to do our thing. And he said, well, that's you know, it's your movie. But we had to articulate what that was to us and have him obviously concur because the whole thing was going to be collaborative.

But generally, I mean, because we also collaborated on the show, you know, like we we came in at the beginning of that thing. And it was always as long as people were passionate about where they were coming from and willing to, you know, collaborate on it. There was always a conversation to be had.

It wasn't a dictatorial thing. And I think that was the wisdom of him having gone through many creative iterations of himself and collaborative scenarios. We learned a lot in this case.

And it became. It would be hard to have an experience like that again, I think, where it literally everyone worked their asses off, was so excited to be there all the time. The result was collective just like awe at what we all could do together.

And everyone was so fucking excited and happy at the end of it. I it's it's a bit insane. You know, it's like at the end of a year spent collaborating on a show that had hundreds of participants.

And, you know, how many like four stadium shows and an enormous film crew trying to pull something off? David just walked in the back room and didn't even have the words. He was just.

Yeah, we know we did it. You know, it just it was such good energy. And we've taken a lot from that experience.

Yeah. Have you ever seen John Wilson's document of that movie? Yeah.

Yeah. Uh huh. Uh huh.

Yeah. That captures that captures the attitude, I think.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. OK, cool. That's yeah.

I mean, that's really about it, I think.

[Bill Ross, IV]

Great. Great conversation, man. That was great.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. Thanks. Yeah.

It's nice to see you guys.

[Bill Ross, IV]

Good to see you, too. It's nice to reflect on this stuff sometimes. Remind you why you do it.

Do good work.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, yeah.

[Bill Ross, IV]

See you again soon.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, yeah, definitely. Cool, man. I'll see you guys later.

Take care.

Fire of Love (2022) Interview with Director Sara Dosa and Editor Erin Casper

[Sara Dosa]

Here we go. Hi, Erin. Hi, Sarah.

We just went into like podcast mode. Hi, Michael, thank you for bearing with our schedule. We will answer your questions now.

[Erin Casper]

Yes, absolutely. I'll read out question one. How did your collaboration as a director and editor first come about and what made you realize you worked well together?

[Sara Dosa]

Well, I guess I'll first say that when I was first working on the last season, two different people who I really respected recommended that I work with Erin. They just said the most wonderful things about her and specifically that she would be great in terms of working on a film that had to do with developing a relationship between two characters. The last season is kind of a story of friendship turned family and that seemed particularly exciting.

As soon as I met Erin, she just said such brilliant and insightful things about the story and the film. She was a person that I instantly really liked but also felt like I could learn from. I'm so profoundly grateful for that moment because now it's over 11 years later and here we are continuing to work together.

Absolutely.

[Erin Casper]

I remember getting an email from the producer of the last season, Josh Penn. Sometimes there's the way that sometimes people will reach out in an inquiry. Even if there's not much said, just the way that they approach you or email you is like, oh, I have a good feeling.

Sarah and I met initially for a tea and I think we were always supposed to meet for half an hour. My memory of it is that it much, much longer. In meeting with Sarah, she immediately struck me as a very smart, warm, thoughtful person and artist.

Really, I just wanted to hear from her about mostly just how she saw the world and what she thought about the project. She walked me through the film and told me this amazing story. That's how I knew that I would work well with her because she could tell a story so well.

She was such a good storyteller. She anticipated my immediate question to some of the things that she described having filmed by saying, we have that, we filmed that. That to me, just that she, without even having to ask, said that.

I knew that right away that I wanted to work with her and just know her and be friends with her.

[Sara Dosa]

Aww, I'm getting all emotional hearing this. That warms my heart to hear. I'll just say, to answer part of the question is how did you realize you worked well together?

For me, I always loved working with Erin. There was never a moment where I even feel like I was interrogating, do we work well together? Because it just felt really natural and I was so inspired.

This was my first film that I ever directed and I was learning so much and I was very new to so much. I really felt like Erin was like a guide in this way and continues to be. That was so meaningful for me and it always felt like a very natural progression.

It's funny to even think, how did you realize you worked well? It's almost like it just was, if that makes sense. It just continued to develop in that way.

Erin's very easy to talk to and very funny and very smart and so many other things. I could spend this entire interview listing her amazing qualities. It's just a constant process of growing into things that I always wanted to learn about and grow into.

[Erin Casper]

It just felt easy. A real partnership, a true partnership where I felt like we were just figuring it out together and very in it together. I remember going through and watching movies and being like, what did they do?

Definitely still, and continue to learn so much about storytelling and I hope I never stop learning about storytelling. I specifically love learning about storytelling when I'm working with Sarah because I feel like I always uncover some new angle or something that keeps me creatively on my toes. Should we move on to question two?

Okay, go for it.

[Sara Dosa]

Typical day in the editing room. What does that look like? Do you work together physically or remotely?

How do you maintain momentum and stay inspired over the long course of a project? This is a great question for us right now as we are talking to you from Erin's Airbnb in Los Angeles where she has very generously come out here to LA where I currently live so we can work together on our new project tentatively called On Time and Water. Through the past few films, we have been creative about our long distance partnership through things that we kind of joke jokingly call edit camps.

When we first started with the last season, I spent about six months, maybe more, maybe it was nine months total in New York and that was super fun for me, but working in person was always so meaningful just to get that in person direct discussion. It's also so fun and joyful. It's great to watch things together and really interrogate the and talk through it in real time.

Ever since then, I feel like we've always found ways to work together in person while also trying to create good rhythms for remote work, which of course took on a new tenor with COVID and Fire of Love. Yeah, so I'll stop there.

[Erin Casper]

Yeah. I mean, I think on Seer and the Unseen, Sarah, you were living in New York for the whole time. And so we worked in person on that film the whole time.

[Sara Dosa]

Oh, the last season, you mean?

[Erin Casper]

Yeah. The last season. So the first film we worked on together, we worked the whole time in person.

And so we had that established rapport in person. And then for Seer and the Unseen, we went sort of a hybrid mix of remote and in person. And that was the first time that we really kind of had a nomadic working lifestyle.

We worked in so many different cities, New York, L.A., Iceland, San Francisco. And we were pretty nimble and kind of made it work. And then Fire of Love, of course, as Sarah mentioned, COVID took on a whole new sort of meaning.

And then we also started working with our dear collaborator, Jocelyn Chaput, during that time. And so that was also kind of like just sort of figuring out how to like, where are we all are? And then now we're still doing the hybrid model where we're sort of bouncing around.

But I sort of started saying that it's not a film with Sarah until one of us moves in with each other, which is true. You have lived with me. I've lived with you.

We've lived in so many different places. And it's fun. I think, you know, that maybe, you know, I'm trying to think of like, that sort of helps actually maintain some momentum.

Yeah, definitely. It's a change of scenery. And then even just day to day, I think it's weirdly like, when I am working remotely with Sarah and our team, I know our rhythms so well.

I feel like I know better what to go buy at a grocery store when I'm working with them than I do on my own. Because it's really fun. But just day to day, I think it kind of just starts sometimes with coffee.

Or if we're working remotely, checking in, setting the priority for the day. But we often kind of set it for the week overall. And then that, of course, like changes.

And then we just sort of like continue to talk and communicate. And then sort of, it's like the setting of priorities and goals is a sort of, it's a rolling conversation, and just sort of based on how it goes. But I think that also points to its overall, like, working together, it's a conversation.

And so like, there are periods of time where, you know, we just, you know, Jocelyn and I will need to like, work, you know, independently, and then like, and then we kind of come back, and then just and then we, you know, touch base, but we sort of like, start by whether it's a scene or a sequence, or even, you know, the overall film, which all of those conversations are at some state of play, throughout. You know, we're just, we touch base, and then we sort of, you know, pivot, and sort of dial in where we need to, and then move on.

So yeah, I don't know if that's sort of is, if it's too, if that's specific enough, but it's, but basically, it's like it starts with a hello, how are you checking in personally? And then also just, you know, how are things going? And then, and then talking, and then setting the priority for the day, and then working, and then checking in throughout the day.

[Sara Dosa]

Yeah, and because of that, like, I feel like, I mean, Aaron, tell me if you think differently, but I feel like we've always had a good sense of momentum. Sometimes, or quite often, the momentum is pressurized by deadlines, whether they're, I mean, they're, yeah, festival or internally set. But because the cuts always feel so alive, and kind of like these animals that we're learning about as we're making them, there's just like, and I personally never feel like there's a period of doldrums, or like we have to, you know, sustain creativity more than anything.

It's just about sustaining energy, because these can be very time intensive and laborious. They're very fun, because it's with Aaron, and Jocelyn, and our other collaborators, who I adore. But I don't think of it as like, like, it's never a slog.

It's never like, I have to sustain this, because I'm like, bored of the subject. It's, it's always feels like there's a sense of creativity and play in our process. So yeah, more than anything, it's just, our industry sets up very intense deadlines.

And I'm gonna hold my tongue about some of like the resource scarcity that can provide a different level of pressure. But always internally in our collaboration, it's always felt like really fun and good momentum. So yeah, I guess moving on to number three.

Sarah, as a director, how do you create space for Aaron's input while staying true to your vision? And Aaron, how do you approach offering creative direction or suggestions, suggesting new paths while respecting Sarah's goals? It's an interesting question, because I'm curious to hear what you think, Aaron.

But like, to me, I don't feel like I'm like creating space for Aaron's. I feel like we arrive at these things together. And so like, like, when I start a project, I'll get obsessed about an idea, and I'll like research it in depth.

But like, one of my very, very first stops is like checking in with Aaron. I'm like, what do you think about this? Is this a project that interests you?

Are these ideas that interest you? What do you think about these ideas? So from my perspective, from the very beginning, it's about a collaborative process.

And while there's like, a specific thing that I might be drawn to as a director, I just feel like there's, my intention is always that there's space just for all of us from the beginning. And that we navigate that space together from different perspectives, and in different ways, but that it's always, as Aaron said, it's a conversation. So I don't think of it as like Sarah's vision, and I'm making space for Aaron.

It's that isn't really how I've ever thought about it. It's more of like, here are some ideas, what do you think about these ideas? And let's move forward in motion together.

Yeah.

[Erin Casper]

Yeah, I think something that I've, one of the biggest things that I've learned about leadership from Sarah, that has been so meaningful, and I think life changing for me, is that Sarah creates teams of people that she trusts and establishes trust. And what I've learned that is that when you are a good leader, like Sarah, you do have a film and an idea in mind that you are obsessed with, but that you, but that you trust the people and empower the people around you. And then those people, in turn, I think, want to mutually work toward realizing that together.

And I think that that's, to me, that's a very exciting and meaningful way to work. And it's certainly like, again, like really enriched my life and made it, you know, better, because it's like, oh, everything is better together when you work together in a really collaborative way. And so, but that being said, I do think that what I've learned and continue to learn is that it's always important to really listen, because there are like, and there are like ideas that are, that Sarah has that are, that we like talk about.

And then sometimes like, it's like, we haven't quite yet figured out the right way or the right home for it. But that doesn't necessarily mean we abandon it. I mean, sometimes we tease about certain things.

We have like ideas that have become a long running joke about like, what about this, you know, that never ended up making it into the film. But I think that, I don't know, I just, I never like really feel like, you just kind of never really know. I'm hesitant to like fully like, be an axe, you know, and say like, this isn't going to work.

I think it's like, maybe this isn't working for now, you know, and then you kind of put it to the side, and then you arrive at a place where actually, that is a, that idea would really work here, or like, you know, and that's always super satisfying, because it's like, you just never know. And it's always good to sort of just like, put things to rest. And I'm sure I know that there's like stuff that I've like, definitely been like, but what about this idea?

And, you know, I think, and the same thing, it's just kind of like, well, more often than not, it's just like, no. But I think it's, I think because of that space that Sarah creates, or like, just that, that level of trust and openness, as the starting point, it's, I don't even think about it as like, you know, that sort of, you know, top down, it doesn't feel top down, but it, but, you know, it's like, it's just a, it's, there's an openness. And so it's like, for me, I want to listen, and think about it, and really just wrap my mind around and be able to see it.

A lot of times when I talk to Sarah, like I'm editing something in my head as she's talking about it, or it's like, we're talking about it. And if like, I can't quite like imagine how to edit it, then like, I just have questions, and we break it down even more, if that makes sense. And then, and then that usually kind of like, leads us to some really interesting territory.

[Sara Dosa]

Yeah, I think that's the thing. And we could talk about this forever. But I feel like I trust Erin so thoroughly that if like, we are coming at a scene or a question or an idea from different perspectives, like I will always want to know exactly what she's thinking and understand her perspective.

And if we still have a difference of opinions, like we know how to like, move together with it to like, it makes me think of like, Marx's original, like, you know, thesis, antithesis equals synthesis. And I don't think that we're ever at like a thesis and antithesis, like there's no antagonism. But it's like the discussion really does lead us to the best place.

And I just have so many examples of that. It's so tried and true that it's like, like, I can't imagine Erin saying like, like, I disagree and me being like, well, I disagree. And it's just like, I want to know what her thoughts are, because I know it'll make everything better.

And it has. And even the ideas that like, say, I get obsessed with that don't make it into the film, that we kind of joked about, like, like, I feel like we can find ways for them to be like thinking tools, or like, as Erin said, they can find homes later. And because there's trust in the process, like, yeah, it's just like, I don't know, getting like emotional talking about all this.

But I realized we can we can, yeah, we can move on probably to the next ones. Yeah, number four.

[Erin Casper]

The films that you've made together are known for having deeply emotional narratives. How do you collaboratively shape the emotional arc and pacing? How does each of you contribute to finding a balance between intimacy and narrative clarity?

Very good question. Good question.

[Sara Dosa]

Yeah. Yeah, I'll just say like, starting from the last season, I was really excited to work with Erin, because she had like, such a great sense of like, how to develop like a relationship between characters. And I feel like, like, figuring out relationships has always been a map for us, whether it was the last season with Roger and Koi, all the way through Maurice and Katya for Fire of Love, or Raka and the Elves and Seer in the Unseen.

And seeing how other people are like, reflected in each other's eyes. Like, I still remember, there's a moment in the Seer in the Unseen where Raka's husband, Lauris, talks about when he first met Raka. And I remember you telling me about like, how much you loved that moment, because we could see Raka through somebody else's eyes and standing in as like an audience surrogate in that way.

So I feel like looking towards like, yeah, how we can tell a story through other people telling their own stories in that relational way has been something that I think has been really fun for us to work with, and has perhaps been a theme in the projects that we've worked on together.

[Erin Casper]

Yeah, and I think like, there's a number of ways, but I think one very specific way that we both contribute to it is, is creating music palettes. And working with our composers, but also like finding, you know, temp music to sort of like, sort of test that out. And, you know, we, I think that sort of sets the stage where like, especially in like, early, you know, we worked, we worked with our composers on the last season very early in the process.

And that was so, such an interesting process, because we were just sort of like listening to things, and there's always like, an expression that registers or a number of expressions that registers on Sarah's face when she's listening to music, but specifically on music that really moves her. And so I always look to for that, or I don't mean to, it's just looking back, I'm like, oh, I can tell this is really, you know, hitting Sarah. And that's, that's even just like the look on, you know, like, or even just the feeling that you're having is like, or that we both have.

And if it's like creating a feeling in a room, and a shared, you know, like a shared feeling, it's really, that's, that sort of informs like the emotional palette, and we kind of just take it from there. I feel like, you know, the course of an edit is always like, it's like you're detectives. And you're just, the process is not so much about like, you know, mostly it's getting it wrong until it's

right, you know, it's like editing is re-editing, you know, and, and you just look for clues every time and carry those forward, you know, every day.

And music is like that, and like finding the emotional resonances like that, you may not hit it right away, you'd have your first sort of gut feelings and carry those with you, hopefully throughout. And I think those are something that we also come back to, always, like, I remember when I first saw that shot, or like Sarah, when you know, you were out in the field, and had a strong, you know, reaction and memorialize it in your field notes, you know, those are things that we also always kind of come back to, too, in order to like sort of shape the arc, but also leave space for unexpected and interesting evolutions.

[Sara Dosa]

Yeah. Yeah. I'm just gonna say, Erin's so good with music.

I mean, she's so good with everything, but I love hearing, like, you have such a great sense of music and music editing, like, yeah, it's always really wonderful to, to take, to, yeah, to work with her musically. I think one thing, too, with the films that we work on together, we really like our characters. Not every film, you know, some films are, you know, really taking a character down, and for good reasons, and, you know, for justice reasons, for all kinds of reasons, but we tend to work on projects where we genuinely, I think, love our characters, and not that we're after hagiography or anything, but I do think that in our process, we look for those moments where we really, like, the first moments where, like, oh, I like, this is where I first smiled, like, I still remember in the last season, when the film begins, there's a moment where Koi sniffs a mushroom that he finds, and he, I remember, like, that's like the first moment, I'm like, oh, I really like him, and we put that very early on because of that, and so I think the way that we've kind of worked on building characters based on our own kind of intuition of, like, this is where we open our hearts and connect to the characters on screen, that's been an important part of our process, and so I'm very grateful for that, but, yeah, I guess we can move on for the sake of time. I feel like number five we kind of already answered, but we can kind of talk about it a little bit again, so collaborative editing can bring unique creative tensions. Can you describe a moment where you disagreed creatively but ultimately found a solution that elevated the project?

How did that experience shape your working relationship? So, yeah, again, like, I feel like disagreement, it's like, we'll have differences of opinions, but we always discuss it and, like, come to the best, you know, thing for the story and for the film. We could talk about fish quotas or, like, we could, or is there another?

[Erin Casper]

The question of Fire of Love was a big question. Oh, yeah. Yeah, that was a big, yeah, and, like, kind of, like, I mean, probably just one of the trickiest things, but I think, in general, for disagreements, I think that, I think one of the things that I treasure the most is that we have very similar sensibilities about disagreement, where it's, I think we come, both come about it from the perspective of, like, it's all productive, you know, it's all, like, you know, it's not personal, it's, you know, it's all going toward, like, trying to really, again, like, uncover, like, the clue and, like, move forward, so I think we're really just trying to, like, I think we both understand that we are both wanting to know more in that moment out of the spirit of, like, and asking why and, like,

out of, in a spirit of, like, interrogating, interrogating to get to the heart of, like, you know, actually, this is, this feels good, you know, and so that feels really good, but I think, specifically, oh, yeah, fish quotas, there's fish, there's, do you want to explain fish quotas?

[Sara Dosa]

Sure, yeah, I'll just briefly say, I get obsessed with some ideas. Erin and Jocelyn, too, are very patient with me, because I'll get, yeah, there's, I'll just describe one, which is this concept of which, to completely oversimplify a huge thing in Icelandic history, it's this, no, I'm not going to summarize it, because it'll just take me forever, because I'm getting obsessed with it again, but for me, for *Fire of Love*, I mean, for *On Seer and the Unseen*, to me, it was a way of expressing the magical thinking at the root of capitalism that I thought was, like, a really exciting lens for the seer and the unseen and could, like, turn kind of these systems of belief on their head to just show how embedded kind of magical thinking and these ideas of belief were in our, in kind of these, you know, yeah, hegemonic systems of how we understand kind of the, quote-unquote, natural laws of economics that seemingly govern our world. That was very good.

[Erin Casper]

You can see from my perspective, like, this is, you know, why you would, as an editor, you would really, like, want to make that work, because it's just so cool.

[Sara Dosa]

It's an interesting idea, but it's, like, you would require so much, like, no one wants to go through an economics lesson of Iceland's fisheries. I wouldn't say no one, but there's definitely, I would love to watch a film that was just on that. That also is not the film that we wanted to tell.

Well, we realized that. Yeah, we realized that.

[Erin Casper]

It really speaks so well to the themes of the film, you know, and, but it also, we really wanted that to work.

[Sara Dosa]

Well, I mean, we did, but it wasn't, and that's the thing, and so it's become kind of, like, a joke of, like, the kind of ideas that might be, like, interesting ideas to think with, where, like, thinking with fish quotas helps us to clarify some of the themes of the film, even though the scene itself doesn't need to be in the film, and I think that, right now, we're joking about this idea of plastiglomerates, which are, like, these rocks that also- I'm not even touching that.

[Erin Casper]

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you.

[Sara Dosa]

No, no, it's okay. Jocelyn's working on that right now, but it's, like, again, it's something that, like, right now, it's, like, helping me to think through a lot of the themes in our film, but it might not actually make sense to be in the film, but sometimes I need to move through these processes where it's, like, I become really excited about an idea. It helps me to, like, refine some of the

themes, but putting it in the film could just be, like, this opaque wall of something that is not going to connect emotionally with an audience, so Aaron and now Jocelyn, too, are very patient with me as I go on these, like, rabbit hole obsessions that I do think ultimately have utility in the process, but are perhaps- they joke that I'm a maximalist because of the ideas, so I'm very grateful for their patience, and I think that that helps- their patience and their humor, which can completely deflate any sense of, like, tension that there might be in a process where there's disagreement about how to weave these ideas or not into a film.

[Erin Casper]

Yeah, and I was going to say, too, that Sarah is very good-natured about all of it, so, like, about our teasing, you know, and just knowing- but also, I think, for us, too, we know that it's important and ultimately, like, gets us- it is good to sort of move through these things because it's like, why not? I mean, sometimes you just never know what is going to lead to a good idea, so I think in the spirit of, like, you know, that sort of investigation, I'm always kind of just down for it anyway, especially with Sarah, because I think, you know, she, you know, is usually right almost always, but it's always, like, sometimes, like, the way to get there where she- making the connections she can, you know, seek the really fascinating connections she can see and feel always take- or not always, but can sometimes, like, be an adventure.

[Sara Dosa]

Oh, this is fun. Okay, number six. How do you think the collaborative process specifically enriches the final film compared to what it might be if one person had full control of the editing?

I feel like we- you can probably sense through this conversation thus far about how the collaborative process enriches the final film, but I'll briefly just say that, like, I feel like there's this myth that a director should know exactly what they need from the beginning of the film and that it must be executed according to that vision, as if it's this static, non-dynamic thing, and I think that that comes perhaps from legacies, especially of, like, patriarchal filmmaking that's rooted in the auteur, and I think that there's a lot lost in that.

Well, I mean, there's, of course, brilliant films. I don't mean to diminish that, but I think that hierarchical process sometimes does not make space for discovery, and even while there might be some ideas or, like, we'll, like, start off thinking, you know, having a vision for the film, one of my favorite things is to feel like I might have clarity in an emotional palette or a storytelling style and the world of the film. It's, like, I think the thing that best serves the process is saying, like, I don't know and inviting kind of, like, exploration together and discovery because there's so much power and precarity and nuance that's, like, learned in the actual discovery that you can go on jointly together, and so while there's certain filmmakers who, you know, do the process entirely themselves, whose work I absolutely love, so this isn't at all a knock against them, but I personally feel like that, like, yeah, that the joint, the discovery, the serendipity, the malleability, the dynamism that comes from collaboration, especially when your collaborator is as wonderful and brilliant as Aaron, it just enriches it so much because it can make the film feel that much more alive, having kind of the melding of perspectives that you wouldn't have necessarily if it was done in a different kind of way.

[Erin Casper]

Yeah, I think that's beautifully said, and the only thing I will briefly add to that is that, you know, again, like, everybody has a different style. There's no right or wrong way to make a film. I think for me personally, the thing, along with everything that Sarah just said, is the thing that I love about collaboration and why it makes it so essential to me, among many other things, is the opportunity for perspective, and I think, you know, you're going through the process together, and you inevitably, you really rely on each other for outside perspective because you become so, you know, just naturally, like, become so inured to fresh perspective. You really lose it, and I think that you, I just really rely on Sarah and any collaborator to, like, you know, to sort of, like, estrange me from the material and to, you know, sort of tell me if something is working, and more often than not, not working or not there yet and not conveying what we're meaning to, and so I feel like, I personally, like, I feel like, you know, why would you want to suffer alone with the material? And, you know, yeah, you can, you can, you know, edit something on your, by yourself, but I don't think that having collaborators takes away from, you know, what you're trying to do as a filmmaker and artist. I think, if anything, the collaborative experience enriches the experience even more.

[Sara Dosa]
Agreed.

[Erin Casper]
Yeah. So, number seven, can you describe your creative dynamic, how it has evolved across projects like *The Last Season*, *The Seer and the Unseen*, and *Fire of Love*?

[Sara Dosa]
I guess I'll start off by saying, like, *The Last Season* and *Seer and the Unseen* are much more verite-based, whereas *Fire of Love* and now *On Time and Water* that we're doing currently are archive-based, and in *Fire of Love* and *On Time and Water*, they're narration-driven. I shouldn't say narration-driven, but narration, the combination of, like, archival footage and narration means that we're kind of writing from the ground up rather than working with footage that we shot in the field and are kind of sculpting in a different kind of way. So, they're very different processes, even if there's a kinship between how we approach the processes.

And so, I think it's, like, yeah, *Fire of Love* is, like, a very new experience of, like, writing a film simultaneously to editing, and there's a hand motion that you got our Q&As from *Fire of Love* that I sent earlier last night. So, maybe we probably did the hand motion in this Q&A. So, there's, like, a hand motion that we would always kind of joke about of, like, a back and forth between the writing and the editing.

That's something that we're doing all the more in *On Time and Water*, which has a much larger archive that's far more disparate. And say this with love, it's chaotic. Not that the *Crafts Archive* in *Fire of Love* was not chaotic, but this is a whole new level of chaos.

So, all to say, it's, yeah, it's a very different process than kind of working with more verite footage that, you know, I was there in the field shooting for the last season and *Sierra* and the *Unseen*. *On Time and Water*, I have been and will continue to be in the field shooting with

glaciers, but that's very different than shooting with our main subject, Andre and his family. So, all to say, it's really evolved.

I feel like there's a continuity of kind of trust and collaboration and style and process. And at the same time, like, yeah, these latter two films are different animals than our first two films.

[Erin Casper]

Yeah, that's beautifully said. I think, just trying to think of briefly, I think when you edit, when you work on a verite film together, as an editor, you rely on the director's experience, who has a whole other life and who had a whole other experience like outside of the frame that you're seeing. And sometimes I don't actually want to know too much early on.

So, I can sort of just really take in what's happening within the frame because it's like, you know, you're the first audience. It's, you know, said all the time about editors, you know, like all the ideas, are they bearing out in what's happening in the frame? Whereas archival, you know, the director, you and the director are starting in similar boats where it's in pretty much the same boat where it's like you're encountering footage that was shot by someone else for, and especially for Fire of Love, like for reasons you don't know.

So, you're learning to reconstitute material for entirely different meaning, which actually is very creatively rewarding. Because that's where those like conversations really kick in, where you're like having, you're basically creating a whole different creative interpretation of this found footage that's, you know, you're arriving cold at. Yeah, so I think that if anything, our experience in working in verite film making really set the stage in terms of like learning a lot about each other and like creating a shared sensibility and then like, and then really kind of having a whole new experience in working in archival filmmaking where it's like, I think it really, as Sarah said, like you approach it with your writing hat on together and like, you know, really dig in into these chaotic archives.

[Sara Dosa]

Yeah, yeah, but I'll just say briefly, I think one of the things that was, has been so meaningful to us in our verite films has been listening deeply to our characters. Roger and Teresa and Koi, primarily in the last season, and Raka and her family and their searing unseen. And while in Fire of Love, Katia and Maurice died before, you know, 30 years before we ever even knew about them.

We tried to invoke that feeling of listening in our process of Fire of Love and trying to figure out, trying to like divine their spirits, so to speak, through their writing, through their footage, trying to learn about them however we could and finding ways to like invite them into the collaborative process beyond, you know, well, we like to joke from the volcano in the sky. But I think that if we hadn't had, who knows, you can never know how things would have turned out, but I'm really grateful for that verite foundation, which does really, it is centered on co-creation with your subjects in a meaningful way. And I think that bringing that into an archival process has really helped to inform how we approach the material that we're working with, especially when we don't have access to the living characters anymore.

And so Aaron is just a phenomenal listener. And yeah, that's one thing that, yeah, maybe this is a good segue into number eight, which is about like, what is something you've learned from working with one another that has influenced your practice, either in editing, storytelling or beyond? I mean, I could spend like days answering this.

It still wouldn't be enough. But I'll start with kind of where I was going with question seven, which is like Aaron is a phenomenal listener and a phenomenal communicator in general. And I think I've learned so much about listening, whether it's to what the people in our films are saying, whether it's listening to her and her ideas, whether it's listening to the sounds.

She's brilliant with sound design. Like I've just learned so much, but there's something about the idea of listening that first comes to mind is not just a gift for storytelling, but I think it's something, a gift for life. And, you know, the risk of getting too sentimental, Aaron's not just like, you know, a treasured collaborator who I hope to always work with, but she's like one of my closest friends in the world.

And I think of her as a sister in arts. And so it's just like, it's hard. I can't even really kind of like say like, yeah, it's too bound up in everything to try to like even find discreet lessons because it's just like, yeah, I owe everything in my filmmaking to working with Aaron.

There's, yeah, it's getting emotional. So I'm going to stop talking.

[Erin Casper]

Well, I love this question because, I mean, there's so much that I think I've sort of talked about in terms of editing and storytelling, but it's the beyond that excites me to answer in this moment where, oh man. So I think just straight away, like Sarah, as a person has changed me or I'm a better person for knowing Sarah and working with her. No question.

And I think it's a really special thing to know that as you are, as you are experiencing it, which I am grateful for. It's not like a hindsight thing. It's like, I've always known that and felt that.

And sort of having that immediacy makes it even more special because like knowing and working with Sarah in such a deep way, it, you know, over these years makes this, you know, my relationship with her the most, one of the most consequential and important relationships I've, and meaningful relationships I've had in life, you know, like really just right up there with like family and partners, you know, truly.

And I think in terms of specific ways, like I've learned so much about Sarah's way in the world, how she interacts with people, how her warmth, her trust, her, her communication style, her openness that like I've, you know, continued to try to like naturally gravitate toward for the better. I think that conflict style has changed for the better. You know, and there was something else I was going to say and then a truck passed.

But I don't know, like so many of the best days of my life have been with Sarah and, and just experiences. And so it's like, man, you know, what a creatively and personally rewarding, you know, a meaningful relationship. Oh, also, too, I've noticed that my relationship with the earth

and with nature has changed because of, you know, sort of seeing the world through Sarah's eyes and how she thinks about the interconnectedness of our world.

And, and also not placing our human experiences at the center of, of our world, although, you know, they are, we are humans. And of course, we experience the world in a human way, but sort of, stepping back and seeing a greater view of it. And also, I noticed, I knew that my, and just to not ramble on for too long, but I knew that I was a changed person one day, when it was picture, it was actually picture lock day for the Seer in the Unseen.

And I went out by myself, we were working in a really creepy Airbnb in Venice, California. And I went out to go get a coffee, like, super tired. And, you know, there's like this, like, back alley where you could exit the coffee shop and then go back to our creepy Airbnb.

And I saw this beautiful, big eucalyptus tree across the road. And I just without even thinking about it, like, didn't even hesitate, just like, gravitated toward it, and then like, put my hand on it. Just just to like, because I wanted to, you know, just see this instinctive and intuitive moment.

And, and I was like, Oh, this is the I've changed. So I'm really grateful for that. And for everything else, just to know Sarah, and to be in her orbit.

[Sara Dosa]

I echo all of that and more about Aaron. It is Yeah, the most profound relationships I've ever had the pleasure of having in my life and deeply changed. Yeah, I'm finding myself getting emotional and trying to reign it in.

I think, like, Aaron is an artist that goes without saying, but I want to say it. I've always joked that she's like, not just an editor. She's a sculptor.

She's a painter. She's a musician. She not just wields all of these incredible tools in her edit.

But she has like the spirit of an artist. She's like a deeply curious, always wondering, always learning, always growing kind of person. And aside from being like, super fun, and one of my favorite people, I'm just really in awe of how her mind and heart works, and how she's always learning and discovering and has just like, not just really funny interpretations and observations, and incredible impressions of people, just side note.

But just like the way she is in the world, and the way she sees things, and the way she draws connections, and how she does that in a multi dimensional way. And yeah, and I could go on and on and on. But we should probably actually get to our own edit.

But yeah, but thank you for this opportunity, because it's like, it's really fun to just get to profess my love and admiration for Erin. So thanks also for bearing with the mushy stuff. But it's important for the process too, and shouldn't be counted as like a different element, because it's all, yeah, it's part of it all.

So good to take stock.

[Erin Casper]

Yeah, we'll high five over the speaker.

Mayor (2020) Interview with Director and Editor David Osit

[Michael Coleman]

Okay, yeah, so just before I kind of ask you some questions, just to kind of give you a little bit of context, you know, so I finished my film in May, and this is part of the research portion of my graduate degree, and so I'm talking to a bunch of different filmmakers, primarily directors and editors who work really closely with one another sort of over the course of several films, and then I'm also interviewing, you included, a couple of people who work both as a director that edits their own material, and then also sort of full double duty working on other people's movies, sort of in the editorial space. And yeah, you're the first person that I'm actually talking to, who doesn't necessarily work with an editor, if I understand that correctly, right, usually when it's your own films, you it's circumstantial.

[David Osit]

I've, this current film, I've worked with a few editors on it. But I'm also editing myself, my last two films.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, and so actually, that was kind of where I wanted to start. You know, what should I frame this? You know, you, you, you go and you make a film, you shoot a film as you're sort of, you know, in the process of finishing one now.

But maybe this can relate to kind of the previous two movies a little bit more specifically. But why, why does one sort of choose to edit their own material, I guess, like for you specifically? Why?

Why is that something that you decided, decided to do?

[David Osit]

Well, for me, specifically, it's actually the opposite of choice. It's it's kind of the necessity. I can't, I can't picture, I can't visualize filmmaking, if I'm not involved in the edit.

I don't know what I don't know what filmmaking is, if I'm not editing. For me personally, for documentary, specifically for, for very, for longitudinal verite, portraiture, which is what my last film was, for example, I don't know how I can call myself the director if I'm not editing it. That's not true for everybody.

But that that's true for me. And I think that's true for the sort of fathers of longitudinal verite filmmaking, who edited themselves and also worked with other editors. And to me, that's kind of where I've where I've come to in my career currently.

And that I, I enjoy speaking with other editors about, about the film and being able to have a shared language within the edit room. But to have a sort of ultimate directorial authority is

helpful, obviously, to be able to guide those conversations for my sake, because I know I have an ultimate idea of what I'm looking for, versus all of us. I mean, I've worked in edit rooms where we're all editors on a TV show, right?

And because I edit for a living, it's much more lucrative to be an editor than to try to pull a career together through grants, making films. And I've, I've edited on like HBO series and things where there's a bunch of editors, and we're all just like, you know, working together and like elves and the Keebler elf workshop, trying to make things make sense, without sort of the presence of a director at times, or working, you know, underneath a story supervisor or an edit supervisor. And that's different.

That's more collaborative. The way I like to work with an editor, while I'm directing and editing is that I'm, I'm editing, but I the master sequence lives with me. And the ultimate, you know, veto power lies with me, obviously, because I'm directing the movie, but I want to be challenged.

And I want people to disagree with me or to ask me questions, or I want people to bounce ideas off of. The particular film I'm working on now is a rather lonely film. And in terms of the subject matter, it's not, I found that I found a lot of joy in working on Mayer.

So that was a film that I enjoyed sharing with other people. And the film I'm doing now is not a film that is has sort of joy and beauty at the heart of it, in the same way that I felt like Mayer had in its best moments. So the collaboration is more sensitive for a movie film like this.

Sure requires a lot more of a lot more boundaries and a lot more conscientiousness on my part to figure out how I can work with certain people, which has been a big learning curve for me.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. And so to that point, how did you like what sort of factored in to your decision making process of like who you chose to work with on this new project in terms of collaborators?

[David Osit]

At the beginning, there were a few people I had in mind, I didn't know what I wanted the film to look like. I just wanted to, I just knew where I wanted to take people with it. And as a very unusual film, and that I knew the ending before I knew the middle.

And I basically worked to this ultimate end goal. But I didn't know how I wanted the film to look. And there are these big chunks of the film where I didn't know the style of it, but how it was going to feel.

And that's unusual for me, because again, I really, as a director, I only really have made verite films. And I don't do graphics stuff. And I don't do archival things.

I edit those so that way I can work within the style that's kind of there or I can hone it with the director. Sure. But with this film, I had to kind of create that style from the beginning.

So I wanted to work with the editor who had experience with that style. Also, this film that I'm doing now is rooted in true crime, in some ironic ways, and in some non ironic ways. So I wanted to work with someone who knew that stuff, because I felt like that was my weakness.

So I could work with somebody who kind of knew how to do the sort of salacious, sexy, you know, stings and blurs and cuts and all those things that I just don't really care for. And I felt like I would focus on the emotional elements in the edit. So I wanted somebody who was different than me.

Ironically, what ends up happening is that if someone's different than you, it means they have different sensibilities than you, which means maybe you're not collaborative. But that was what my initial goal was, was to find somebody who kind of had a different interest level in what the topic was. Mm hmm.

Tell it. Right. And does that answer the question?

Sorry.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, yeah. No, no, that that that makes total sense. You know, to be honest, I feel like I'm as my own film is growing, and, you know, we're sort of pushing it now to try to turn it into a feature.

And it's kind of getting into territory that was a little bit unforeseen. At the beginning, I'm kind of in a similar position at the moment where I'm kind of feeling like I might need to find somebody who has a different sensibility to kind of get it over some of these sort of creative hurdles that I'm kind of coming into now. So that I mean, that makes total sense.

Let's see. So, okay, so the new film has some some has is rooted in true crime, you say, and, you know, when I think about true crime, often the first thing that kind of comes to mind is, you know, here is a character or a set of characters or community even who's dealt with something oftentimes very tragic, right, or something sort of very real, very real situation that then you're trying to not only you're trying to represent in a cinematic way. And so I often think about like these sort of issues surrounding representation when I'm thinking about true crime. And I'm just kind of curious, you know, when, when you sit down and you start to cut this together, how are you yourself and also the people that you're working with?

How are you sort of addressing issues in representation? And maybe more specifically, like, how do you kind of balance the authenticity of the people's stories that you're telling and your own desire for sort of creative expression, if that makes sense?

[David Osit]

It does make sense. But I feel like, to be completely honest, I'm in a tricky spot about as to answering that because it's, like, I don't, can I ask, like, is this the idea that is this going to be published? Are you doing this?

Is this like a thesis that you're publishing?

[Michael Coleman]

It's, it's my thesis, I have no clue if it will be published other than basically showing up in Robert's inbox.

[David Osit]

I feel like the answer to that would require some to give a proper answer to that question. I feel like I should have to I should give context for what my film's about. And I feel like I can't necessarily do that yet.

Okay. Because the film's not out yet. Sure.

Does that make sense? I'm not trying to be coy. I genuinely would like to answer the question, honestly, but like, I can't yet because the film's not out.

[Michael Coleman]

Well, could we could we maybe talk about or could you maybe answer that question, say, in regards to Mayor? You know, that's a verite film has nothing to do with really true crime. But I feel like you could still probably answer the question of sort of, you know, these questions about representation, and again, the kind of balance between like, the authentic person that you're, you're making a film about, and balancing that desire for.

[David Osit]

Yeah, yeah. With Mayor, that was it was very, it was very much on my mind, because I felt like my task with Mayor was to make a film that was through the eyes of this person. Seeing Ramallah through his eyes, his city through his eyes, which doesn't mean that it's the way I see doesn't mean that it's the only story.

But I think that there's, there's a journalist, I forget his name, who said something interesting once about what we expect out of films. And he expects everything from a film that attempts to do something new. But we don't expect anything from films that have nothing to say.

And I felt like I always was at a tacit war with myself, being afraid that I that my film had to be representative of Palestine or of the full experience of Ramallah, until I realized, it kind of came to peace with the fact that, of course, it can't do that. It's a it's not my job to. But it feels like it is because there was such a dearth of representation, along the lines of what was interesting and compelling to me in the first place.

And what compelled me to make the film, which is that I saw a gulf in the way this part of the world was depicted, especially for Western audiences, and a sort of lack of dimensionality, and that everybody was portrayed as either victims or terrorists. And that felt and still feels obviously, unfair to me. And, and I saw it.

So that was kind of the purpose of it. So I needed a sort of multifaceted representation of either both my main character and of the city to be central to my filmmaking. And, and I realized that

that that was actually going to be stronger, the more I adhered to and respected good storytelling versus good representation.

Good, good storytelling has complexity and good representation. I don't know what that means anymore. I don't know what good representation looks like.

I don't. That's like saying a classroom is diverse. I don't know what that means.

It's just, it's just a, it's just a good diverse to compare to what good representation compared to what if something's in comparison with other flawed representations, then who cares if it's better? It's like, is it a good story? Does it move you?

I don't really know how to make films, aside from them being good tools for an emotional education. So for me, if it speaks to something unexpected or true, that summons some deeper thinking, or deeper interrogation or deeper self reflection, that's, to me, good representation. Maybe that's not the most PC answer, but honestly, I'm just, I just feel like an old man these days anyway.

[Michael Coleman]

No, I'm, I'm right there with you. And I think that that's a, that's a beautiful answer. Yeah, I think, you know, this is just a question that I've had to think a lot about.

Because George is certainly a character that could very easily be turned into a joke. And it's been real active, you know, thing on my mind to make sure that he can sort of, people can feel okay to laugh at some of the things that he might say or do without him becoming the joke, if that makes sense. Yeah.

So and, and again, like, like you said, I mean, overall, like the if it's a good story that can take you on this emotional journey, and you learn something or able to reflect on something deeper, like that's kind of that is successful representation, of course. So how often are you thinking about your own identity as the as the filmmaker during the process of shooting or editing? Both?

[David Osit]

At certain times, I think about it. And obviously, more so or less so with certain films. With Mayer, it was very fundamental to the reason I was there, I wouldn't have been able to make the film if I were any other identity, basically, than a Jewish American male who knew Arabic.

Like, I don't think that film could have been made by someone else who didn't have that identity. I don't think it would have been easy for a Palestinian person to make that film. I don't think it would have been easy for another American or another filmmaker to make that film.

Which isn't a brag, it's just like, I think that was just the reality of it. So I kept thinking about my identity as an outsider. And as a result, I kept thinking about my what I could represent as an outsider.

And that was pretty fundamental. And then there's a moment in the movie where the fourth wall breaks, and Moose asked me a question. And in that moment, I realized my identity is also the identity of the audience, in a way.

With my current film, my identity is a big part of it, too. But I think I no longer enjoy films that pretend that the filmmaker is not around. I think that we're all a little bit too savvy, and the camera is a little bit too integrated into all of our lives at this point, post more than 100 years after the invention of cinema at this point.

And I think we're all a little too evolved now, to the point where we can continue to pretend that a film like *Salesman* could be made anymore. I think we're all too keenly aware of what it means to have a camera on us. And I have started to enjoy films a lot more that play with that, and then think about it, and then ask me to think about it.

Sure. It just feels truer. So in a way, that is the identity of the filmmaker, and that he or she, or they, are a presence that is otherwise not there.

When you point a camera at something, there's something implicit about the fact that perhaps it's worth someone else's attention. A third party. So the filmmaker is basically a rubbernecker, and saying, look at this, look at what's happening.

And I think that innately, if you think about that as even just the basic starting point of the identity of a filmmaker, I think already a film starts to become more interesting when you imagine that there's a person making it, or a set of ideology behind the construction of the film. And typically, I think, on the contrary side of that, what you find with a lot of popular nonfiction today, is the stripping away of the identity of the filmmaker, to hide within the curve construct of a fiction film, where a lot of fiction films don't have. I think what separates fiction and nonfiction is often the presence of the filmmaker versus the sort of construct of the story that the filmmaker is telling, being more important.

And I think there's a place, obviously, for lots of films that don't feature personal identity of the director. It's not about that to me. It's just that I think that's really the only thing that's different, at the end of the day, that a documentary is uniquely able to do, is ask an audience to consider the act of its creation.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, could you talk like, so that moment in *Mayor*, when you sort of enter the movie, when was that something that you decided to include pretty early on? Or was that a sort of decision that you came to, like, much later in the process?

[David Osit]

Much later. Much later. It didn't happen so much later.

Right. I put it into the film's storyline, so that it's a little bit before the halfway point, but it happened towards the end of filming. Gotcha.

[Michael Coleman]
Okay.

[David Osit]
So... I put that moment in the film at a moment where the emotional stakes for Musa are at their lowest. Right.

Because it ups the stakes.

[Michael Coleman]
Yeah.

[David Osit]
It's when he has the least... Basically, the film is, the theme of the film is, one of the themes of the film is about agency, what we can and can't control. And under an occupation, the idea of being a mayor in this occupied place, what kind of powerlessness is that?

And it comes after the scene where the mayor is talking to this German delegation, and he's kind of at his wits end, basically, and tired and fatigued of the West, being unable to care. So then he, this is kind of the moment where he goes on a quest, basically. It starts this other journey in the film.

And that's it. That's all it does. It doesn't do anything else.

And you no longer think of me ever again. I'm no longer in the film. I'm never in the film after that.

The director is never in the film after that. But now you as an audience are implicated. That's the difference.

[Michael Coleman]
Yeah, well, and I think, I think what's really beautiful about where you place it inside of the story is like you're saying at this sort of moment where he's, he's at his wits end, he's sort of, you know, is kind of at his most bummed out. And, and just hearing your voice, I think like, for me, my immediate reaction is like, man, it must have been, it feels very nice in that sort of tragic loss of a moment of, of like, getting to hear you almost as if it's like, even though I'm here filming, I'm kind of like, now it's like there's a there's a sort of hand for him to hold or someone who's sort of there now with him to like, help along the rest of this journey, if you know what I mean? Sure, sure. Okay, so maybe let's transition for the last 15 minutes or so to speak more directly to like your experience just working as an editor.

And I know that you've worked on, you know, a multitude of projects, both on TV and, and, you know, feature films and such. And so I'm curious, like, I'm sure that this is always dependent on the situation. But like, typically, how early is the sort of collaborative process on on that kind of work like happening?

[David Osit]

How collaborative process between the editor and the director?

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, like, how, how, how early on, like, are you kind of, are you usually coming on board after everything is shot? Or as an editor? Yeah, yeah, you as that?

[David Osit]

Oh, that's, that's so depends. It really, really does. To be honest.

Lately, I mean, within the last several years, my career structure has been more like, I, I like work on TV shows, and like do pinch hitting, basically, and work like four to six months or something, or I finish at it. I'm not really editing anymore, like the way I used to where I like on a project for a year as a full time editor, for like, the only editor for a sort of longitudinal verite film, because now those are the films I'm just trying to direct more so. So the way it used to be, yeah, it's like I come on, depending on the relationship with the director, whether the director wants to work with me, or whether I'm replacing someone else that got fired, you know, like, it, it totally depends, I guess.

I mean, it's really subjective. It's, it's, it's, if you asked what my preference would be, I feel like there's some world where like a director and an editor, like Marty and Selma are just like working in cahoots from the beginning of conceptualizing a project to the end, just a lot less common. Funding doesn't really allow for that.

So like, I don't know, in a dream world, I guess, like, I got a project and I'm like, Oh, like, I want you to edit this when we're ready to start editing. And then like, you come to somebody with the footage, but it's, it's circumstantial. It's kind of more of a financial problem than anything these days.

Honestly, I would say it's a very unsexy answer. But I just feel like these days, like there's there's no such thing as an ideal anymore. I think it's just what can you do?

What can you afford? What can you pull off editors are paid too much money. It's disgusting.

So it's very, it's very hard to get somebody for a long amount of time. And I think I think it's just always great to talk about some something with somebody in advance if you can, but I don't think it's not necessarily vital. It really depends on the movie.

For example, for me, when I'm directing, like I script my movies, so I like I write a script of like a fiction film, basically of like how I want it to look. And then I like bring that into the edit room. And then the editor tries to work with the script and match it to the footage.

Some some direct I mean, I've done films where I was the editor where I was starting from the beginning where the director just like, okay, here's the footage enjoy. I don't know how to make movies. I hope you can.

And, and then I have to do that. I've done both. I think usually in documentary, I would have to lamentably say that the latter is more common, because I think that in documentary filmmaking, directors are funded for their access, not for their filmmaking prowess, where you get the access to the story, often, and especially first time directors, or you're independently wealthy, so you don't have to work that hard to get money.

So that's usually the case, too. So I feel like, for me, it's a little different, my working relationship with an editor than other people might have. And I think it also is really contingent on whether the director is also an editor or not.

And that makes a huge difference.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, do you? I'm assuming you've probably worked on a couple of films where you're as an editor, where the director is also an editor? Never.

Oh, really?

[David Osit]

Interesting. Is that by choice? No, I just haven't.

I don't think I've edited that many films. I've edited a lot of TV shows is the thing. Like, I've edited a couple of films, like a handful of films.

And often for first time directors. I've edited a couple of shorts for my partner, who's also a filmmaker. She doesn't edit.

She'd be a great editor, but she doesn't do it. She's a great director, though. Yeah, but I think she'd also be great at editing.

We always talk about it. It's just like, you'd be great at this. Maybe for a birthday present, I'll give her editing classes someday.

But I don't know. I don't know. I don't know if it's by choice or not.

I've always been a little curious about the kinds of films I've ended up editing. I think there's always a little story to be told there. If you're not a full time editor, which I'm not really.

So for me, it's like, it's curious. But no, this film that I've been doing now, I've shared the editing duties with the set now. Now, basically, four different editors with this current film.

I've now worked with four different editors on the film. Four different people have had their hands on the project. I know myself, and I know that for me, basically, what ends up happening is I'm a bit of a control freak.

I want to do things my way, and I get frustrated if things don't work well. I have patience for one revision, and then I start to lose my patience. I'm just like, I'll do it my way.

I don't think that ends up being an argument. It's never really an argument. It's more of just me having to check myself.

But I've never been able to delegate. I've never been able to lead, which is why I've always worked alone, or always wanted to work alone. Because I'm in my comfort zone when I'm the only point of contact for success or failure.

If I'm the only person that can control whether something goes wrong, that's so much more of a relief to me because I can control everything. Whereas I think some people would find that quite stressful.

[Michael Coleman]

You have worked quite a bit as a story consultant. Can you describe, this isn't really related entirely, but I'm just kind of genuinely curious about what exactly that is? Because it seems like something that, to me, I've kind of tracked over, say, the last 10 to 15 years as kind of a growing trend within the documentary space.

[David Osit]

It's because it's more common in series, non-fiction series, and that culture is infiltrating non-fiction filmmaking. Obviously, that's the predominant culture at this point, to non-fiction filmmaking, whereas 10 years ago, that wasn't the case. But yeah, it's coming more from that perspective.

But the way I've done it is just quite simply, I'll watch a cut, multiple cuts, and try to give good notes. And to me, good notes are, how am I feeling at all these points, and also offering some editorial solutions at times, or some moral advice, or answering questions, and trying to be thoughtful about the answers that the director's having or that the producing team's having. Because sometimes I think fresh eyes are really vital.

And that, to me, is what a story consultant's job is, basically. It's just to check in on what could be said with the film, or what's not quite landing yet. I think, for me, tracking themes of a film is really important.

And that's the easiest thing to lose sight of when you're in the edit room. And I think, for me, my favorite thing to do if I'm story consulting is try to see if I can identify what the film's theme is on my own, from just watching it, and then see where that theme gets buried or not. And yeah, tracking story.

I think some people have an electric reaction to the word story. I personally don't. I think that everything has stories.

Stan Brakhage movies have stories. If the story's not in the film, it's in you. It's inside of you as a viewer.

And you're telling your own story as you're watching. Your brain is making synaptic responses to what you're seeing. That's a story.

I don't see it as some capitalist thing, like some of my colleagues do. It's just the way we live. So to me, finding that and being able to extrapolate what that is, is really valuable.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. It's interesting. This theme of fresh eyes has come up in every interview that I've done so far.

While I primarily, again, direct and edit on my own, I'm somebody who finds fresh eyes to be very valuable at every step of the way. I was saying, I'm in this dilemma right now about whether or not I should actually bring somebody else on to help with the edit, or if it's better to just continue to go down the path that I have been, which is relying just on a small circle of people who are close to me, and understand what I'm trying to do with the movie, and can provide that fresh perspective every month or two as I'm making progress.

I think that that ultimately is the overarching thing that I'm trying to answer and think about in terms of collaboration and editing, and maybe that requires a title change in my whole thesis. But yeah, fresh eyes.

[David Osit]

Well, I mean, it's all data, right? At the end of the day, a stranger is giving you data if they watch your film, and a close collaborator is giving you data when they watch your film, and the interpretation of that data is up to you. But it is all data.

It's all empirical and contextual information about how something is landing for someone, and whether you choose to prize one person over the other is just as revealing of your own biases and your own kind of issues with a cut or where you're at in the edit as it is. It's also data, right, and in terms of how you process those things. So if you can divorce everything from the idea of things to be good or having your ego being satisfied, which is impossible.

It's very hard to do. It's not possible, but it's very hard to do that because we're filmmakers and everyone's kind of driven by these things. But if you can, it's great for the creative process and the note-giving process and the fresh eyes process because then you can see things fresh and learning what to listen to and what not to listen to, and whether a note is coming from a place of emotional response or a fixing, I think, is really helpful.

I tend to almost ignore the notes that are prescriptive or that are telling me something specific because those aren't notes tied to emotional responses. Because if someone tells me, I don't like that scene, it could mean that I actually didn't like the scene before that. An editor is a little more generally, if they're a good editor, a little more primed to be able to have that conversation with you, which is why I tend to favor the feedback from people who work in film.

But some people don't. Some filmmakers don't screen for anyone in film. But for me, I just need help interpreting the data, which is why I like screening for people who themselves know how to interpret their own emotional data.

But some people are excellent at just getting the data in and knowing what to do with it and knowing what to address. And that's a skill. It's a real skill.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. All right, David. I think that's about it.

[David Osit]

Awesome. I'm glad. I hope this was helpful.

I hope it wasn't too scatterbrained, but that's where I'm at right now.

[Michael Coleman]

No, not at all. No, that was all great. I hope you have a good rest of the day and I'm glad you got a babysitter.

Me too. Yes.

[David Osit]

I'm looking forward to staying up late and doing more work. Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

All right. Well, you have a good day, my friend. Thanks a lot.

Good luck with everything. And let me know if there's anything else I can do to help. Yeah, absolutely.

Thanks. Talk to you soon. All right.

Take care. Bye-bye.

The Taste of Mango (2024) Interview with Director Chloe Abrahams

[Michael Coleman]

Okay. Thank you, Zoom. Okay, so we'll just go back to the beginning of Taste a Mango.

And if I'm, if I understand correctly, you were working on that film for quite a while, like seven, eight years, right?

[Chloe Abrahams]

I think it was five in total, and six or seven, if you include the release.

[Michael Coleman]

Sure, sure. So when along the lines, sort of in the process of production, did you kind of come to the conclusion that it would be beneficial for you to find somebody to work with in the edit?

[Chloe Abrahams]

Yeah, so I, prior to making the Taste of Mango, I had made much shorter, more experimental video works that were much more contained, and I did everything myself, and I taught myself to edit by doing those things. But none of them really had like a wide or a long narrative, and it wasn't, it was much more conceptual work, so it didn't feel like I needed to really think through anything, I was really just experimenting myself and figuring out what things in the edit could do. And so when I started making the Taste of Mango, I didn't even consider editing it myself at the beginning.

I just had no idea what I would do. And at first, I thought it was going to be a short film, mostly because I hadn't made anything narrative before, and even as a documentary, but in, I mean, with a narrative. And so because I had no idea how to approach it, I thought I had to make a short first, and so went to shoot some material, came back, and it was then that I got in touch with an editor, Stella Heath-Keir, and she and I worked together to try and compile this short film, and at that point, I really didn't know what a director-editor relationship was.

I, yeah, like you, like I had only really done it myself. And I hadn't worked with a lot of material before, not that I had a lot, but it was a lot more than I had worked with before. And so I remember my first meeting with her, and she said, how do you like to work with an editor?

And I was like, I didn't know that that could even be a question. And then she said, why don't I tell you how I work, or how I like to work, and she told me that she likes to work with the editor, with the director in the room, she likes to look through all the rushes with the director present, take notes on everything, mark everything up in the editing software, and then just have lots and lots of conversations and start working through the material. I thought that sounded great, and we kind of got to it.

And I'm kind of going into more about how the whole thing was edited now. I think I skipped past your question.

[Michael Coleman]

Well, so you started working with Ella, or Stella, pretty early on then, right?

[Chloe Abrahams]

Yes, very, very early on.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, and I guess, like, she was very instrumental in kind of shaping your idea of how this is supposed to work, because you had no real precedent for what that was like. So what then, like, what was, because then Isidore ended up coming on the movie. When, like, when did that happen?

And what was kind of the process of coming to the decision that not only do you have Stella that you're working with, but maybe somebody else's voice would be better to maybe get the film to the finish line?

[Chloe Abrahams]

Yeah, so because this was such a long journey, the film went through so many different stages, and my work with Stella was the first year. And so that was when we were trying to make a short. And then we decided to continue, I decided to continue shooting, and we kept working together on and off for about a year.

And we, by the end of that time, we had assembled a kind of, yeah, a rough assembly, and started thinking about what the language of the film was. And at that time, I had been paying her out of my salary, I was working full time, and yeah, zero funding. So it was, it was really just, yeah, trying as hard as I could.

I couldn't afford to do that anymore. And so and she had another job offer. So it was like, of course, you've got to go get paid.

So she went off for a year to do another film. And in that time, I was doing fundraising applications. And I decided to get into the edit myself, I had been, I felt like I had learned a lot from Stella.

And I was, I felt more confident in being able to just dive into it. At that time, I hadn't touched the edit before before she left.

[Michael Coleman]

Right.

[Chloe Abrahams]

It was really just like, she and I would work in the same room. And then and then the pandemic started. So then we started remote working.

Yeah, but still on zoom. So it was as if we were in the room together. Sure.

And then she might take some time for half the day, put something together, we'd watch it, and then we'd sit on zoom together and work through it. And then so I continued editing for, I guess, two or two or three years. Or two, I guess it was about two years.

And not full time, but shooting, editing, fundraising, working, doing a master's. And in that time, I really figured out what I was making. And I needed that space on my own, and had multiple feedback sessions with friends and filmmakers.

And it was a very collaborative edit, even when it was just me editing. And then about, I think it was maybe like two months before I locked picture, it was, we were moving into the fine cut. And I, I had this editing residency at the Jacob Byrne Center.

And felt like I love, I just love working with other people. And I knew that I was getting to a point where it's like, I feel a little bit stuck. Yeah, it's not getting past this point that I needed to.

And I don't think I can see very clearly. It's so close, but it's just not there yet.

[Michael Coleman]
Yeah.

[Chloe Abrahams]
And I had, I had known of Isidore through my partner. And I just, it sounded, I love the way that he talks about film. And I hadn't, I don't think I'd seen any of his work at that point.

And I got in touch with him, and he watched the cut and sent back pages and pages of notes. And just this amazing way that he does like time coded, like every single thought that he's having throughout the whole film. And, and some of it, I didn't agree with, but a lot of it, I was like, Oh, wow, this is really, there's, there's something here that I'm wanting and not able to see myself.

Also, because it's such a personal film, there's so much that I can't tell what people are reading of certain things. Or, like, for example, at one point, we had my aunt as, as quite, featuring quite prominently in the film, but people thought that my mum and my aunt were the same person. And, and Isidore thought that too.

And they just, they look similar. And for, you know, for someone who's not your family, you just, yeah, it's easy to mistake that. So then after him realising that he helped me to completely just remove her as a character and that.

And so then anyway, so the, so first it started off as a kind of consultation feedback. And I asked him to join me at the residency for four days. And we worked very intensely for that four days.

And the cut really transformed. But then after that, so he was editing in that four days. And I was kind of just sitting behind as a kind of this director, editor, collaboration.

And then after that four days, I watched the cut and I was like, okay, there have been some huge steps forward. But it's not, it doesn't feel like my film anymore. And it wasn't what I wanted.

The feeling that I wanted wasn't there. It was a lot more cerebral and less feeling, which is actually just how Izzy and I differ in great ways. And then I, for the rest of the residency, I kind of used that as a base cut and continued work.

And then afterwards, got back in touch with Izzy. And I was like, yeah, there's something between this push and pull of the different ways that we edit that I think we need to land somewhere in the middle. And then yeah, I asked him, we didn't even, we didn't have a kind of, we didn't discuss what his credit would be.

It was just like, we want to work together on this. And so we were based in different places. So we came up with this system of working where we'd watch a cut.

We'd both write notes. One of us would edit and we'd go through each of, oh wait, no. So we'd watch, somebody would make, would send a cut.

We'd both watch the cut. We'd both write notes and we'd both comment on each other's notes and we'd decide what to do and what to not do. Izzy really had forced me to find ways to talk and explain about why I was making every decision, which is not something I was used to doing.

I was just like, but it feels right. And he was like, well, why?

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah.

[Chloe Abrahams]

And so every note we'd really discuss in detail over a Google doc or on the phone. And then the other person would take the cut and make all the changes that we agreed on. We'd watch it.

We'd both write notes. We'd both discuss it. And then the other person would edit.

So it became this back and forth. I think that went on for a month or two, between two weeks to a month as we were fine cutting. So it was, yeah, that was the fine cut process basically.

And in that sense, it really felt like two editors. Yeah. Collaborating in that way.

And yeah, that's how we finished the film.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. So like, could you tell me about any maybe specific moments throughout that process where getting that perspective from either Stella or Isidore kind of challenged your initial vision for the movie? And if that did happen, how did you sort of navigate those conversations and ultimately come to this kind of compromise between these two sort of, between this push and pull where you obviously have a vision for the movie and an idea, but as you were mentioning, like you and Isidore have kind of two different ways of approaching things, but liking to work together, you got to kind of find a middle ground.

[Chloe Abrahams]

Yeah. It's a little tough for me to answer that because honestly, I didn't have a kind of initial vision for the film. I had an instinct and a drive to make it, but I didn't know what I wanted it to be.

And I think I just figured it out by working through the edit with these different people and on my own. My process, I think like, yeah, my process is a very instinctual one. And even though, yeah, Izzy kind of forced me to put words on things, it's still hard for me to explain exactly a lot of that process or what, like, to me when watching a cut, it just, it has to feel, I have to feel something in my whole body and not just be thinking about whether it makes sense or whether things are being brought up in my head.

I have to really feel it and be fully immersed. And so then, yeah, sometimes there is just this thing of it just, it doesn't feel right.

[Michael Coleman]

No, I'm very much the same way. I think with, or I feel first before I'm really considering anything else. And while I think that that's been really helpful along the way, I think it's also been the primary function of what's created roadblocks at times.

And so while I don't work with an editor, I rely on my DP and one of my producers pretty heavily to just get fresh eyes and a different perspective, like very routinely, which is helpful, but they're also not really editors in their own right. So there's always a little bit of a disconnect, I think. Yeah.

And so would you say that that was kind of the, you know, in terms of the big picture, the kind of thing, I guess that like, they were both sort of offering is that if you're kind of approaching things more instinctually and kind of considering the way something makes you feel, as opposed to like how things are kind of lining up narratively, and then they're able to kind of come in and bring that other perspective.

And then ultimately this is how the film kind of, you know, gets its shape, I guess.

[Chloe Abrahams]

Yeah, definitely with Izzy. Stella is also a very feelings first editor. And so it was, yeah, it was just, it was such different ways of working with both of them.

And oh, I was gonna say something that I've just forgotten. But yeah, so, Izzy really helped to kind of drown out the noise in the film. I think what, at the point where he came on, I think I was maybe in a way not trusting that the audience members could understand things.

I was worried that because it's such a complex family story, that I needed to explain a bit more than I really needed to. And Izzy was the one who helped me lean into, or helped me to see that actually, if people are confused about things in notes, you don't need to give more explanation, you actually most of the time need to take things out. And yeah, sometimes when people are like, I want to know more about this, actually, it means you need to get rid of that altogether.

And yeah, just going back to what you were saying about feedback. It was a really important part of my process, getting feedback, so much different feedback from different people, but only once I had got the cut to a point where I was confident in what I was making. And that took quite a while, because I knew that I would be kind of swayed by people.

And yeah, even if people don't have an editorial mindset, I think it's like listening to, trying to ask for notes that are not like, what should I do? But what are you feeling? What are you understanding at different points of the film?

What are you left feeling? Is there something you're wanting more of or less of? Or are you confused about anything?

And those kind of things that are like, yeah, really encouraging people not to give specific editorial notes of like, cut this or move this or have the full picture. You will know it so much deeper than them. Yeah.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah. So did you have any kind of guiding principles for maintaining your voice as a edit?

[Chloe Abrahams]

No, and I think I didn't need to, because I really trusted the collaborators. It didn't feel like any guidelines were being kind of, any boundaries were being pushed or anything. It just kind of, it felt natural and right.

And there was no, there was, both Isidor and Stella are very opinionated in a great way. And I wouldn't want to work with someone who just kind of did what I said. I knew that I wanted real creative collaborators who were active in the process.

But it still just, it didn't feel like there was any need to, yeah, I don't know, to set principles. I don't know.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. No, I gotcha. I mean, you know, I think like, this is why these conversations have been really helpful, because I know that like, on one hand, I've only ever edited my own work, because for one, just out of pure necessity, like not having any funding or any way to pay anybody.

But also, I kind of know that I do have a tendency in myself to be a bit controlling. And so, like, trying to find someone who can understand what it is that I'm trying to do, once I can understand what it is that I'm trying to do, and then I guess, like, challenge me and push me to a point to get it to that place that I initially, you know, communicated was my intention for it to go or whatever. And so, like, you're not the first one who has said like, Oh, no, we didn't give any kind of explicit direction or guidelines or put any kind of, you know, cage around these people that like, we genuinely wanted to work with, because we, there seemed to be a trust there from the beginning.

You know, yeah.

[Chloe Abrahams]

Which I think one, oh, sorry.

[Michael Coleman]

No, no, go ahead.

[Chloe Abrahams]

The one thing that I can think of with is just that, if Izzy and I had a disagreement about anything, he would push me and push me and push me to, to make sure he pushed as much as he could to, to see that I, to make sure that I was not, to make sure that I really was disagreeing with him. And in the end, if I really was firm, he was like, well, yes, you're the, you're the director, of course, this is your call.

[Michael Coleman]
Right.

[Chloe Abrahams]
But he would make sure that I knew why he felt a certain way. And I really appreciate that because I, I just want, and sometimes he would, he would do that in one cut and maybe 10 cuts later, I'd be like, Oh, you know what? You were right that, and it would also go the other way.

And when I would push him and it's like, no, this is exactly what it needs to be. And then he understood 10, 10 cuts later or whatever. So, and that doesn't happen without clear communication and trust.

[Michael Coleman]
Right. Right. Yeah.

It's interesting. I hadn't really thought about this before, but it just kind of dawned on me that, you know, so often when, especially when you're making the kind of work, like you, you've made in Taste of Mango, you know, something that's extremely personal and very intimate and kind of, you know, correct me if I'm wrong, but sort of starts off as this thing that like, you want to make about your mom and your grandmother and your family, and you're kind of shooting and you don't really know what you're going to do with the footage. And once you meet that collaborator, like they're very much the first audience member who's kind of seeing this stuff for the first time. Right.

And so I think along those lines, like as you sort of move forward, when you're starting to get these certain responses to things that you may on one hand think are working, and then they're kind of telling you that you're not like that, that they aren't for X, Y, and Z reasons. Like, if you're a good communicator and open to the collaborative process, like that's something to take really seriously, because again, they're the first sort of version of an audience that you're showing this stuff that's really personal to you. There isn't really a question in there, it's just something that I was thinking.

Okay, so last thing that I want to ask is, when you finished the film, when you guys finished Taste of Mango, to what extent did you feel that the vision for the movie and how it, the initial vision for the movie, and then ultimately the way that it sort of presented on screen was a shared, a sort of shared experience, if that makes any sense?

[Chloe Abrahams]
Shared experience in what way?

[Michael Coleman]

Well, I guess like, you know, when you all came to the premiere at True False, you see the movie for the first time with a big audience, right? When you get on the stage to do the Q&A, how much do you feel that what it is that you've just seen was a sort of collective, a collective endeavour?

[Chloe Abrahams]

Oh yeah, I still, yeah, I think I felt like that from midway through the edit, and still continue to feel it now. It's like, yes, I directed it, and it exists because I wanted to make it, but it's got so many people's hands on it, and not just the people who physically edited it, or gave, or the team who gave notes, but even the wider circle of people who gave feedback, or if I talked to somebody about it at a dinner or something, and it was, yeah, impacted by so many people, and I feel that, and I think sometimes I like, laugh when I see the credits, because the thanks page is like three slides long, and yeah, but it just wouldn't feel right to not list all these people, because some of them were just, I just had a conversation with them, but it really, yeah, everyone in the credits, I feel like, made the film.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, Bill and Turner Ross, they kind of equate making movies to, or they use the phrase that it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to make a movie, and I feel the same way, yeah, entirely, so, okay, well, great, thank you.

[Chloe Abrahams]

I hope that was helpful, thank you.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, it was.

[Chloe Abrahams]

I'd love to read what you write, if you want to share it.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, yeah, definitely, it'll be.

[Chloe Abrahams]

And I'd love to see your film as well.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, yeah, I could send you a link, absolutely, I'm currently trying to figure out how to take the next, I think we have about two trips left before we can be done shooting, and I've really been trying to pull at Robert's sleeve to help me out on that front, to get just a little bit of money to be able to do that, so hopefully in due time. The struggle of financing.

[Chloe Abrahams]

Yeah, I know.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, and it feels like every conversation that we have about it, or, you know, I'll see some, you know, some grant or some opportunity, and he's very quick to be like, yeah, that would be wise, but right now, no one's really getting anything for anything, so I don't really know what to offer. I'm like, okay, buddy, really helpful.

[Chloe Abrahams]

It's depressing, but it's kind of true.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, no, absolutely, yeah, I don't fault him for being up front with me about that at all. It's just the reality of the situation, so.

[Chloe Abrahams]

If it helps, I didn't get any funding for The Taste of Mango until I had a pretty solid rough cut.

[Michael Coleman]

Yeah, yeah, and that's kind of where, that's kind of where we're at. Like, I'm trying to push the short thesis. Like, I have more than enough material to get what would, I think, be a pretty decent, like, 60-minute cut, so it's like, we kind of talk about it as being, like, 55% in the bag.

It's really just these other, we just need to take another couple of trips, because so, there's been about a year that's passed since I was down in Texas last filming, and that, I think, with that time, it could really enrich the story, so that's kind of where we're at, is we're trying to sort of stretch everything that I've got so far, as far as it could possibly go, to have somewhat of a rough cut. So, yeah.

[Chloe Abrahams]

Well, good luck with it.

[Michael Coleman]

Thank you. Okay, you have a good night.

[Chloe Abrahams]

Thanks.

[Michael Coleman]

Yep, I'll talk to you soon.

Cameraperson (2016) Interview with Director Kirsten Johnson and Editor Nels Bangerter

[Robert Greene]

Okay, we've got a full class, so let's get started. I've told them what this class is, I'm going to have everybody introduce themselves here in a second, everybody including Jeff Bell and Stacey Young and all of us, just to sort of open the room and get the discussion going. Just a

couple of notes, as always with Murray Center discussion, everything we say stays in this room, there's a recording device because Michael Coleman is doing a research project that has Nels and KJ as part of it, so that's why we're recording, but that's only for his graduate project.

So just keep everything we say in here because we want to be able to talk as much truth as possible, as we always do. And I just want to say a couple of things. So we watch camera person every single fall semester because in my mind, I don't think you can understand contemporary documentary or maybe documentary as a form without watching that film.

One of you is always joining via Zoom or occasionally in person, but never have we gotten you both here together, so I just want to thank you both in front of everybody for being here together, it's such a treat and such an honor. You guys are both my friends, but really I admire you and we all admire your work and that's why we're excited to have this whole week, which includes, by the way, tonight, Harold and Maude. Will you guys just tell us real quick why Harold and Maude, just briefly, we're going to introduce it tonight, but just why that film and what is the significance of it to you?

[Kirsten Johnson]

I think for me, I only saw a couple of films in my childhood and it was all sneaky, I wasn't supposed to be seeing films because I was a dentist, so it was transgressive just to watch it and then it's an incredibly transgressive film, which is very exciting to me.

It came up when we were thinking about Big Johnson, so it's obviously a direct inspiration of that, but from the first scene to throughout, it's picture perfect, it's hilarious, but it's also totally devastating.

[Robert Greene]

How do you play with death? So that's going to be very exciting. So tonight at 6 o'clock, of course, St. Mary's Center at the door, you get a free ticket. Okay, and then I wanted to just explain this title of the talk, Collaboration as Genius. No, I can't believe you. No, what I'm saying is that both of you are mortals separately, but together, you are superheroes.

I feel that in my own, I feel like my career as a filmmaker has gone from basically slowly realizing that the less control I have over every step of the process, the better the films are going to be. And that culminated with Procession where I literally, it's a film by everybody and that really comes from the Maysles who would say it's an Al Maysles film, but it was directed by us and Charlotte Zwerin, for example. They were very collaborative in the way they talked about their films and stuff.

But to me, the idea of that collaboration itself is a way towards great work. Obviously, you both are accomplished separately, but when you come together, you've created these works that are extremely special. So that's kind of where I want to go today.

So one of the things, KJ, when you're thinking about answering this question, and now as we're going to answer the same question, is part of what we're doing, we get the great benefit. And we talk, even though not everybody in the room is a filmmaker, the focus and the lens of the class is being a filmmaker, right? So it's like thinking like a filmmaker, because I think to think like filmmakers helps you understand the media that we're watching and thinking through it.

One of my goals, one of the things I love about teaching in the journalism school is that it's a whole bunch of people who care a lot about the world, rather than at an art school, which would be a different focus. It's a lot of people who are like, I'm trying to express myself. So in an art school, you might be trying to get people to think about the world a little bit more.

Here, I'm trying to get them to go interior, a little bit more interior, and think about who they are, what is that core person that is there inside, and how they tap that. So that is sort of like why I ask again, what made you know that you want to make film?

[Kirsten Johnson]

So one of my, like, I like to not know things.

I like to, I'm very interested in uncertainty. And I'm also interested in the way time helps us understand things. So if I look back, way back, one of the classic stories of my two-year-old self was apparently, I was away at daycare and I came home and I said, no, go back.

And my parents were slightly concerned, right? And so they asked me questions, what happened? And I go, okay, duh-duh-duh, and I wouldn't answer, and I wouldn't answer.

And they're like, it's really important you have to tell us why. And I said, no pictures on wall. Like, I like images.

I like looking at things. So I mean, pretty much everyone in this room said in some ways they like images, right? So I was an image-focused person.

I went to college thinking I was going to do painting. And I was also really interested in history and colonialism. And I was doing something called literature and society.

And I started making these paintings that made no sense. I was literally like trying to cram everything into the paintings. So there were words and there were, you know, and people would just look at my paintings like, what are you doing, what?

And then I remember I went and saw a couple movies and I was like, oh, an hour and a half. So I'm also a maximalist, I would say. Like I want to cram a lot of stuff into a rectangle, basically.

What got you thinking about making movies?

[Nels Bangerter]

That's a hard question for me. I had like various little interactions with movie stuff throughout my life. And I was telling Sebastian this morning, in college I came from Boise, Idaho, which is like a small town.

And there are no movie people there. And so I never thought of it as being anything even like that real people do. It was a total – my imagination was that movies happen somewhere else.

I don't even know if they've been thought about. But in college I met somebody who was close with Larry McMurtry. It was like one of the great writers and movie people of the United States.

And I met him and he seemed really nice and normal. And I think that shifted my whole idea of the world from being one where the most – like the greatest thing you could do was be an engineer, which is what I was doing in undergrad. Like a great career, very solid, very reliable, all those things.

So there's a whole world of trying crazy stuff for everybody and culture and all these things that kind of opened my eyes. So I think from that point – I didn't realize it at the time, but I think it was around that point where I was like, oh, the whole world is out there. And it was within a few years after that that I decided to go to grad school for filmmaking.

And I went to USC, which is known for its fiction filmmaking. And I thought I wanted to be a fiction filmmaker, even a cinematographer. I was thinking I wanted to be a cinematographer.

[Robert Greene]

Really? I didn't know that.

[Nels Bangerter]

And then there were a few things that happened there, one of which was we shot on film, which to me was the most stressful thing I've ever done because I'm very – I'm a penny pincher type of person. Because you still make a coffee.

[Robert Greene]

Yeah.

[Nels Bangerter]

And I always drink day-old coffee or the second. So when the camera was running and the film was going through, I just, like, froze because it was like dollar signs just flying out the window. And we didn't even have to buy our own film, but I knew it was expensive.

So anyway, that was too stressful. And being on sets was stressful, and that's how I got into editing. And at the same time, some of the faculty there were great documentary people, and they showed some films like *Nobody's Business* by Alan Berliner.

You know that one. This is this film where a guy, the filmmaker, interviews his dad, and his dad doesn't want to be interviewed. And it's kind of a metaphorical – he even makes this explicit – a boxing match between the two of them.

And his dad has a really interesting past that he just doesn't want to talk about. And the filmmaker, like, pulls it out of him bit by bit. And it's phenomenally edited.

It's hilarious, and it's a type of movie that I had never even considered could exist. Like, the movie is supposed to have characters and a plot and, you know, action and scenes. And no, this was not that.

This was a, like, showdown between a guy and his dad. And it blew my mind. And there are others.

I saw Highway by Sergei Dvortsevoy or – Anyway, things that came completely outside of a form that I had seen before. And I just got so excited about that. And so documentary was then the path forward for me.

It became pretty – like, I was like, oh, yeah, that's what's most exciting.

[Robert Greene]

So part of what you're going to experience, hopefully, with this talk is just how different the two of you are. We got a maximalist and a penny pitcher. That's two things.

[Kirsten Johnson]

He cuts. Yeah.

[Robert Greene]

Because – and that is the biggest, most primary lesson of collaboration is balance. Like, is the balance of being that kind of relationship. I want to – as questions come up, raise your hands.

And if I don't see you, someone yell at me. And if people enter, like, ask them to sit through. We all introduced ourselves, so introduce yourself real quick.

[Robert Greene]

Okay. So there was a student question that gets at the heart of – you know, the boring version of the question is, why a camera and why editing? One student asked the question, what are you thinking about while filming?

Which I think is a – can be adapted to, what are you thinking about while holding a camera, K.J., or directing? And those are maybe two different things. And then the same is, what are you thinking about while editing?

I love that framing as a sort of get at the heart of the matter kind of question. K.J., you go first. What are you thinking about?

[Kirsten Johnson]

I mean, I think – I mean, the brain is like – because you're a body in space and, like, you know, we were joking. It was like, I'm going to leave Nelson Robert behind. Literally, if I'm in a space like this, I'm just like, can I come over here and actually see what Aspen looks like?

Right? Because from down there, Aspen was in a wide shot. Right?

Right? If this is – the camera sort of gives me – okay, I had an idea. There's a journalism class that's filled with a bunch of students.

But then if I move around, I'm like, oh, my goodness. I don't know what's going on in the back of your mind. I don't like your handwriting.

[Nels Bangerter]

Right?

[Robert Greene]

I'm, like, incredibly curious. And I said I already had a visual. And I can just walk around.

I can just see it. And you're like, oh, I like you. I can see that I have brain.

It's, like, checking stuff out and getting close. And so the permission of the camera work – I'm thinking of things, too, right? Because I'm married to a British person.

I want to know more. I want to understand. Right?

And so you're thinking about all these different things that you're coming from your own life with. But then as soon as you move and you're with a camera, you're up in other people's lives.

[Nels Bangerter]

And you're like, okay.

[Robert Greene]

But it's really – it's a bouncing back and forth between what you're bringing and what you're discovering. Okay. So two very personal follow-ups to that.

So being a Seventh-day Adventist and then being 6'12". Yeah. So you've talked about this.

You grew up, like, not being told you can't engage in a way. I mean, maybe that's a really gross simplification, but sort of correct me. But then also you were a giant.

How does that change it? Do you know what I mean? Like, you're kind of – you can't hide and be 6'10".

[Kirsten Johnson]

I wasn't always giant. You were always colorful. True.

[Robert Greene]

Yeah. But you're not – it's interesting to put those two pieces together, I think. I would say, like, in some ways I had this sensation of I don't fit.

Right? Which I think is a pretty common human sensation. Like, wherever you're born and whatever context you're in, you're somehow – what's going on inside of you is somehow not in sync with everybody else.

And it may be that something that other people can look at gives some impression of, like, one of these things is not like the other. Right? So we were definitely – I mean, the world I was inside of, the world of Seventh-day Adventism, was big.

It included eternity, heaven, an all-seeing God, the entire world that we needed to convert. Like, it was a big world, and also we were not supposed to be in history.

[Nels Bangerter]

Hmm.

[Kirsten Johnson]

We were supposed to be outside of history. So I would say it was a fundamentally perspective – it was begging me to deal with perspective. So I spent all this time as, like, an 11-year-old being like, if Jesus comes now and I go to heaven, do I have to stay 11 for the rest of my life?

Like, I was always thinking these big existential questions on a weekly basis. I was thinking, like, what am I going to do for eternity? Am I going to be bored for eternity?

Right? So it was big, expansive thinking, but going on in a hermetic world. And then I was navigating the difference.

So I went to a Seventh-day Adventist school, I went to a Seventh-day Adventist church, but we lived in a neighborhood where there were not Seventh-day Adventists. So I was navigating the difference between my home and other people's homes, which is what everyone has to do, right? It's like as soon as you go into someone else's home, you're like, wait a minute.

They have powdered milk. Their dads have stacks of Playboys. They don't have books.

They have an axe, and they might be cutting their fingers off.

[Nels Bangerter]

Right, right, right.

[Kirsten Johnson]

But you immediately are like, wait a minute. Their system of the world is not my family's system of the world. Right?

So I think all of us are navigating all of this. I'm inside. I'm outside.

Nobody understands me. What do I see? We're all navigating it, and then we have a very specific set of variables.

But this is what we're all doing. I find it so profound to say that part of the teaching is that you're outside of history. For someone who was literally in Guantanamo, going to Fortress 4.

I hurdled myself towards history. I wanted to get into history. And I did that in college.

It was like, oh, your dad was in the Civil Rights Movement? I want to talk to you. Your grandmother was Nancy Mitford?

I want to know you. I was pulling myself towards history, I would say. Yeah.

So then, I relate. I think we relate. I don't like production very much.

When I'm directing, I'm basically just stressed out about the footage and thinking only about money. Exactly what you described. It's a totally different sort of way of thinking about the creative process.

And I don't think you're going to get up and walk around.

[Kirsten Johnson]

No.

[Robert Greene]

But you would love to have the material to put together. So what are you thinking while doing the work?

[Kirsten Johnson]

We can do contrasts, you know, a lot on this. I've heard from a producer who's worked with KJ in her life. Have you ever been in the field with her?

It's so stressful. She's, like, running out in traffic. Cars are coming, and she doesn't care.

So when she says she's thinking about everything, she's thinking about everything that is of interest to her. And then the other things, though, you can be...

[Robert Greene]
I'm still alive.

[Kirsten Johnson]
Yeah.

[Robert Greene]
I am thinking of my own physical safety, even as I'm taking risks.

[Kirsten Johnson]
But when I'm sitting there in the editing room, which is very safe, I'm thinking of a couple of things, one of which is rules and laws. I make up reasons, and as I'm cutting, I'm like, okay, this is how this works, and it has a set of clear things that it's telling me. I wish I had a better way to come up with specific examples for this.

But in camera person, for example, as we were working on that, it was like, oh, this makes sense to have each scene be a thing with a label at the beginning. And it's from one place, and then we just go to the next scene. And it was late in the process that K.J. was like, no, we have to have some of these scenes where we cut things together. So, like, the montage of locations, which were all, like, sites of horror, that was K.J.'s insistence on breaking the rules that I had developed.

[Robert Greene]
Yeah, and he had very specifically said to me, I do not need montages. He told me, this is a rule of mine that cannot be broken. And then I was like, oh, fine, boy.

[Kirsten Johnson]
Camera person might be considered the great montage of all time. The scene where everybody's walking and you're following them, that was like, no, this isn't within the rules. And then, of course, what I realized in part of my process is that you build the rules in order to break the rules.

And that gives such delight and, like, it's like a way to break things open. In a way, it can supplant plot. If you have the way something works and then when that way starts to twist or deepen or whatever, that's the audience's experience of a film.

Or that's how things develop and mature and keep your attention.

[Robert Greene]
That's it. Let me pick at that for a second. I love that because we just looked at Jonathan Oppenheim's sort of rules of editing, basically.

Not rules, but beautiful maxims that he allowed into the world. And we've all got to work with Jonathan in many ways before he passed. But the documentary footage is not footage meant to be edited, I think, is one of his great maxims.

And it relates kind of what you're saying, which is like when you try to put plot on documentary, often it just doesn't work. Because we as the audience can feel the artificiality of that. So what you're saying is just even establishing the rules and breaking the rules can feel like some sort of narrative motivation.

It can be like narrative framework. It can move you forward in some way. That's very interesting.

I also want to say that the rules thing applies not just to editing. I think in *Recession*, for example, I think I've told this story maybe before, but we were very adamant about certain kinds of rules. Because it was the inspiration, the formal inspiration for that film was like Roussan and all these transcendental styles of film.

Robert Roussan and Paul Schrader wrote a book called *Transcendental Styles of Film*, which was all about being absolutely as locked down and withdrawn as possible. So when we're walking up and Joe Eldred is going to his house, we set it up on the tripod just like everything else. And we were just looking at it, and it was like, this is just dead.

Every single version of this in my mind. It's like the pan around. What is the camera doing?

Why is it saying this? Why are we not just with him? And then we broke the rule, and it's handheld, and it makes the whole thing work.

So what do you do, KJ, when you hear rules? What does your brain do? Is it just like, I want to fuck with things?

Or is it like, well, actually, what do you do when you hear those rules? Well, I think this is where it's so interesting for each of us to think about where do I come from? What are the values I come from?

What are the things that have been imposed upon me? What are the things I'm pushing against? And I think it's hilarious how unconscious we all are.

And I'm literally taking notes about what Nels is saying, because Nels's thinking is really interesting to me. And I always learn from Nels's thinking. He's never said that thing, documentary footage.

The thing about the way you break rules can supplant plot. It's a great line. I don't want to forget it.

And so basically, the more you start to pay attention to what am I made of? Where do I come from? What is this set of obsessions I have?

Why do I have these obsessions? So obviously, you guys, and I really am trying not to say guys. People.

Lovely humans. And I allow myself to say words I don't wish to say and then try to find a new way to say them. So I move and I think words mean many things.

But I'm going to try. So you beautiful people. The thing that happens for me is you people already know I like to break rules.

I've showed you that. I've showed you physically. I've said it.

I've told you a why, right? Because I came from this really restrictive religious background. But I am not one thing.

And I have lots of rules myself. I have respect for rules. And one of the things that I've experienced over the many years of working with many people is, and I would say even just being in the world, everybody works really hard.

Everybody in the world is working really hard to do something that most of the rest of us don't understand. So you all right now in this room are working really hard. I have no idea what you've brought into this room, what you're carrying, what you have to go to next, but you're working hard, even though you're just sitting there.

You're working inside. And over the years of being a camera person, I started to realize I do all this work that no one can see. And some people value it.

Some people you work with really treat you wonderfully when you work with them. They give you water breaks and they let you eat food. And then other people are like, go.

I need as much footage as I can. Keep running into the traffic. And so over time, part of why I made camera person was like, I want people to see how much is going on inside of me when I'm doing this.

And in some ways, I want people to see the work everybody else is doing. Because that was what was building in me, this compassion for the work of other people. When Nels and I started interacting, part of the things that were so exciting for me were the commonalities.

Nels was raised in relation to the Mormon church. He understands rules himself. He understands transgression.

He understands people who are sanctimonious. He understands people who are funny. And he was willing to interrupt me.

He wasn't so intimidated by me or charmed by me or whatever. He'd stop me.

[Kirsten Johnson]

Yeah. I'm being learned better. No, we really just hit it off.

When we're talking about a collaboration, there's something about when we met, and it was at Tribeca, the premiere of a film that K.J. had shot and I had edited. And we never met during that process until this premiere day. And at that point, K.J. had already been working on camera person. I knew a little bit about her. But, yeah, when we met, we just had this kind of fun connection where we shared a sense of humor, but we also shared a background in terms of an intense religious past. And, yeah, it was fun.

[Robert Greene]

And also we sort of knew each other. You knew me through the footage, and I felt seen by you by the way you cut the footage.

[Kirsten Johnson]

That's nice to hear because editors hate cinematographers when we're watching their stuff.

[Nels Bangerter]

Always.

[Kirsten Johnson]

This happened to me with K.J. If you cut your own stuff, you especially know this feeling where you're like, why did I do that moronic thing? But you're, like, arguing with the cinematographer as you're watching the footage, and you're like, why did he not shoot that? Happens less with K.J., but the thing that bothered me with her was that she never shot establishing shots. So I was cutting the film, and it's like, oh, we're going to the New York Times headquarters, or the New Yorker headquarters, and there's never the exterior of the building. And so I'm like, why didn't you get that? You see K.J.'s writing this stuff down? I write the slug for the thing, you know, insert establishing shot here, and it all gets worked out later. But I said to K.J., I was like, your stuff's great, but why don't you shoot establishing shots? And she goes, oh, I hate establishing shots.

Rules. Yeah, I was like, oh, wait. That makes perfect sense.

Like, you don't need them in the way that, you know, traditional documentaries, I was like, you just slap it on, where are you? Okay, let's see the exterior of the building. That's weird.

[Robert Greene]

Well, I love this because it's like no montages, no establishing shots. It's like immediately, I just want everybody to understand, these are just basic things. I remember going into like fake and surreal, I was like, okay, look, no driving in car talking shots.

I just want none of that. It was just this random thing. I was just like, I don't want to see these guys driving around in a car talking.

And of course, there's a scene in the movie where it's like, that's the only way to get them talking. Because you just get these bees in your body, and you can't, and that establishes rules. And you're attempting to be original.

You're attempting to do something that's never been done before. Like, have you seen enough Talking Heads documentaries? Like, no, I'm not going to do that.

But what you don't know when you set those kind of rules is that, like, oh, the people who made that choice, they were constrained. And one is constrained when one is filming in the world, and one is constrained in the edit room. And you rival against those constraints.

So, you know, one of the things I'm doing when I'm walking around filming is thinking, oh, why is this overhead light like this? And I wish this wasn't, you know, and I'm critiquing myself. There's, like, a lot of interior banter about I'm failing.

I just missed that. Oh, I can't believe I didn't see that. What was I thinking?

[Kirsten Johnson]

That's the same thing the editors are thinking.

[Robert Greene]

Yes.

[Kirsten Johnson]

But we have all the time to worry about it.

[Robert Greene]

Can I do something really funny?

[Kirsten Johnson]

Yeah.

[Robert Greene]

So I once was at, I was working, I was asked to come and be second camera on a shoot at a party. It was a film that had been going on over years. There were multiple people who were in the film at the party, but I was arriving as a camera person, and I didn't know anybody.

So Toby Schimann, who is a really wonderful editor, respected editor, she, stand up, and I'm going to touch your body, okay? She basically was like, I'll help you. I'll show you who's in the room so that you can film everyone.

And I was like, great. So Toby goes like, Ben's over here, and he's here, and she's over here. This is happening.

And she treated my body like I was the toggle on the, but she treated my body like I was the rewind and the fast forward. And I was laughing so hard, and I just let her do it for like five minutes. And she just drove me around the room like that.

And she said, we got everybody. We covered everybody. And I was like, we sure did.

And then it was like two weeks later, she called me like laughing so hard. There was nothing usable in any of that footage. And she literally was super happy with herself.

She was like, I can't believe we covered everyone. We've got shots of everyone. You can even go home now.

And I was like, yeah, I think I'm going to stay. That's a great. I love that, because I remember I made this mistake one time shooting with Rob during the procession, where I was trying to get him to cut.

It was some tense situation, and I was touching. I started doing the thing in the back of the head. Don't ever, ever touch anyone.

You probably already know this. Don't ever touch anyone while you're directing them as camera people. It was so intense.

There's certain kinds of intensities that happen sometimes in filming documentary, where you're like, well, I know that that's a rule. But not now, because this is so important. And in the middle of it, he just starts going, OK, fine.

And he goes, is that what you want?

[Kirsten Johnson]

Is that what you want?

[Robert Greene]

And I was like, and I just go, OK. I just walked over, like, don't talk to him. It's hard.

That's the practice of being a camera person over time, is to manage the dissonance between what's happening inside of you and what you're physically doing with the camera. Because it's deeply out of sync. Way different.

OK, we're going to dive into camera person. T, you have a question. I, first of all, thank you so much for coming and talking to me.

[Nels Bangerter]

It's so nice. So there was a moment where I feel like during camera person, there's a moment I'm not able to stop thinking about, since we saw it and watched it.

[Robert Greene]

And it was, I feel like for me, when I was beginning to understand what you were making with this, which was, there's the moment that you show the last footage that you ever filmed with your mother. And then it cuts to the next thing you get. And the first thing you see is a dead bird.

And I remember that was the moment that I was like, oh, I don't know if this is like, I feel like they just told me exactly what happened. You see your mother, and then the next thing you really see is a dead bird. And I was like, hanging with your family, and I was like, oh, God.

I think I understand what this is like. It clicked.

[Nels Bangerter]

But hearing you talk about establishing shots and kind of things like that and the way that you kind of like help each other, like help, I don't know. I'm talking so much because the shot really got to me.

[Robert Greene]

The dead bird thing. I was like, that's an establishing shot that I feel like told me everything I need to know about, like, those different, like, what everything I've just seen and how all these videos, which aren't like timestamps, like all tied together.

[Nels Bangerter]

And I guess I just want to know, like, that's an intensely personal thing that you're collaborating with, with an editor. And I just was like trying to wrap my head around, like, how do you get to that point? Like, we collaborate and have that conversation of like, I especially know you made establishing shots.

I want to know how you arrived at that point where you were like, this is thematically, I'm going to communicate this in the service, painful, sad thing that happened. And, yeah, I don't know. I'm just talking.

[Robert Greene]

So one thing is I would say you see that as an establishing shot. You were able to see that as a shot that told you something because of things that you understand about before and after, about life and death. Not everyone sees that justification the same way.

And I would say Nell's probably saw it that way. And we talk a lot, you know, all films about life and death, right? Like the stakes of life and death and how cinema, cinema helps us, like, engage.

And then we went further, I would say, with Dick Johnson instead. But, like, how does cinema help us grapple with life and death? And so I was grappling, grappling, grappling, but on a scale of years and on a scale of filming in all these places around the world.

And I was pretty, I would say I was, I was pretty unaware of how it was affecting me deeply. And then camera person was the work of trying to, like, open it back up. And then I would say Nell's was very aware that I was grappling with decades worth of difficult stuff.

My mother's dementia. Like, he got it. He's no fool.

And this is the thing about collaborators. They can see you from the outside. And you can see I was trying to grapple with 25 years worth of feeling.

And that I imagined I could put it all in movies. So he was going to have to make some pretty strong choices that say, like, we're talking about this. We're talking about before and after, life and death.

We're going to do it a bunch of different ways. So that would be my perspective on it. Like, I was like, really?

Really? We did that? That's in the movie?

Like, I'm seriously like, I was like, I was waiting for what you were going to say. I could never have guessed that was the shot you were going to say. And I would never say that that was an established in shot.

I was just like, I just filmed a different.

[Kirsten Johnson]

I mean, I knew. But when you were filming with your family, I feel like that was a little different than what you were doing.

[Robert Greene]

Definitely.

[Kirsten Johnson]

Professionally. And maybe I'd forgotten or maybe I never knew. But when you were shooting with them, some of that was for camera person.

But some of that was also just for you. Like when you shot with your mom in Wyoming. That was just home video.

That was just home video. Right. So what's the difference maybe between home video and what you were doing with maybe with your kids and your dad?

Right. It was somewhere between.

[Robert Greene]

Right. Because I was aware when I was filming with my kid and my dad that death mattered. And that my mom had died.

And that I was making a film trying to grapple.

[Kirsten Johnson]

I think that's the thing. You were making a film at that point.

[Robert Greene]

Yes. So it's like. And that was like part of the problem of *The Jumper is Dead*.

Suddenly it was like, oh, we can't pretend we don't know we're filming all this stuff. It's unconscious. Most of the footage in camera person existed before I started making the film.

So I am unconscious about the fact that I will be in the footage. Because I don't think I will be. I think the footage is just being filmed for other people's movies.

So I'm unguarded. And I don't realize I'm being exposed by my own footage in a certain way.

[Kirsten Johnson]

This is funny though. Because when I first started working with KJ's footage. She had been talking with the directors I was working with a little bit about camera person.

And they said to me, they're like, KJ's had this amazing career. Because I didn't know you or your work really. And she's had this amazing career.

And she's thinking more about making a film about it. So she's filming a little bit differently than she usually would. And they're like, she's a little more like.

They didn't put it this way. But she's like not doing what they wanted. You were doing what you wanted.

And it doesn't show up in the film. It was called *Very Semi Serious*. It's about New Yorker cartoonists.

But I could start to see. As I was processing, I was starting to see that. And there is one shot that is you in the film.

Where you're backing up. You're filming the main character. And you hit a column as you're walking backwards.

And the camera shakes. And everybody laughs. But I put that in.

Because I was like, I always love the moments where the fourth wall is broken. But my introduction to KJ was that she was consciously and subconsciously working on this film this way. So the footage was transforming from both sides in a way.

You were shooting home movie footage as if it were going to be in a movie. And you were shooting movie footage with some vague sense that it might be in repurpose somehow.

[Robert Greene]

I think. That's amazing. So let's rewind and go back to the beginning of Camera Person.

So Camera Person comes out of. And in some ways I just think it's also. It is one of the great collaborative works ever.

Because of all the filmmakers who you're working with for all that time. And then the way it becomes the thing that we know is a great collaboration between the two of you. But it comes out of this really awful experience that was very painful to start.

When you were making a film. So talk a little bit about what was happening before you really decided to dive in deep to Camera Person. Well, just to say all of us have to make a living in this life.

And some of us come from families where we've got backup. And some of us come from families where there is no backup. And some of us come from families where they're like, go ahead and do whatever you want to do with your life.

And we got you. And I would say I was in the place where my parents assumed I could earn my own living. And if I completely ran out of money, they would say, we'll help you.

So I had both an autonomy and a backup. And I was doing cinematography to make a living. Right.

And it was amazing because I was getting to work with all these different people on these different subjects I never would have chosen. But I was increasingly feeling this feeling of, hey, wait a minute. I'm making one more person's film with them for them.

Because as I became increasingly experienced, I was like, come on. Do you have any ideas about what you're doing? So I was increasingly mad at my role in the situation.

Because so much of the history of film is designed hierarchically. And says, oh, you've got one genius at the top. And all the rest of the people are there to serve this genius.

And this film will be credited to this person. And as I did it, I would be like, wow, I'm working with this filmmaker who's really well known. And they're just leading me somewhere.

And I'm making the choices. An important part of that is that you started wanting to make your own films. Correct.

Correct. And I did make my own films. But as you all know, it's hard and long and expensive to make your own films.

And if you don't have money to pay monthly, you can't just make your own films. You've got to make other people's films or make other films with people. So I was doing all of that.

And I would say I was also like, I was always navigating how much am I in the footage or not. It was always part of my question. And you're like, I will be humble.

I will serve the film. But you also realize, that's not quite what's happening here. So I don't think any of this stuff is either or.

I really think it's always on this total spectrum. So you're not doing anything selflessly. And you're not doing anything fully selfishly.

It's like a continuum. You're there. You're working with people.

You're meeting their needs. You're meeting your own needs. And these things are shifting.

And you're discovering, oh, these other people have way more needs than any of us. So then you're humble. Then you are like, let me serve their needs.

It's always moving. So I would say that over the years, I was grappling with this feeling of encountering how many people in the world feel not seen, feel invisible, feel not known. And I was tracking that I was starting to have those feelings too.

So some people already, some of you already know what it is to feel invisible in your lives. You already feel invisible in your family. Others of us were like, I mean, my parents were like, you're the best.

You're the greatest. I love you so much. So I was really seen within my family in certain kinds of ways.

So when I went out into the world, I was like, doesn't everybody notice how awesome I am? Which I think is like an American, it's also an American way of going out into the world. And over time, you're like, huh, not everybody's loving that.

That's the vibe I'm bringing. So, you know, you're always sort of reorienting, right? British people know what I'm talking about here, right?

And so what was happening over years was I was navigating those feelings. And then someone said to me, oh, my goodness, you do such amazing work. Why don't you direct?

And under my breath, I was like, I've been trying to direct. I can't afford to direct. I'm pissed off.

Like, why hasn't anybody noticed that I already directed two good films? And that person said, do you want to go to Afghanistan and do this project? And I was like, yes, let me direct.

So it was the first time that anyone had ever said, we want to support you directing. The other films I'd made before as a director, I had done self-initiated. So it was really exciting.

And I went to Afghanistan and I started working on this project. And I worked on it for three years. But in the course of that time, the internet took over Afghanistan.

Cell phones took over Afghanistan. And the young woman who I started filming who had said, yes, I want to be in your movie, by the time three years in, she realized it was very dangerous for her to be in the movie. And she said, I can't be in your movie anymore.

And I was like, can't get you killed.

[Kirsten Johnson]

Which isn't what everybody would say. Many filmmakers, especially at that time, would have said, no, it's going to be fine. You know, try to convince her to be in it.

[Robert Greene]

And in fact, I will just, and this is what stays in the story. Look up Matt Heidemann and look up a recent film that Matt Heidemann made where he literally did not, he and his producers, he's a director, a person we know very well. He directed a film where someone was killed because they were exposed in the film.

So just, I think you, because I was about to say the same thing. It's worth noting that this moment of deciding, I want everybody to internalize this. 25 years of this, having started making, I actually have a copy of your student film, which is amazing, you should watch that.

It's really good, it's weird, it's very sci-fi, fantasy, crazy shit. I love it. But, and then you're doing this, and you get this opportunity, and then someone says, I'm at risk, I can't, and you decide, okay, I have to think more about the person than my own dreams and aspirations.

I don't think you get enough thank you for that. You should, and you probably think, fuck that, that's not why I'm saying it. But it's true because we have direct evidence.

What's the film called? I can't remember. It's Matt Heidemann's film.

It's called, it's a movie with an R. Yeah, Retrograde. Retrograde.

It's called Retrograde, and recently people are starting to pool awards that it won. It won all these journalism awards, and then it got these awards pulled because of the story that happened in the Washington Post. Look it up as a great counterpoint to what KJ's saying.

And that's not to talk shit, but it is. I don't get shit. Well, no, but, and, I also say, and we have to contextualize all of this.

We are in history, that's what I'm trying to do, is in history, and we're in a different moment in history, and we all feel it, than we were two weeks ago, right? And history, to be in history changes in unexpected ways at unexpected times. And, you know, we're coming with our own pasts, with our own understanding, and then we encounter a different place, a different moment in history, a shift, and we're bringing our old tools to the problem.

And so, you know, I always say, like, when I started making films in the late 1980s, it was before the internet existed, before there was any worldwide distribution system, before there were streamers, before there were telephones, so we really believed we can protect the footage. I can film you saying that there was a domestic abuse situation in your family, and your family will never see it. I can say you hate this dictator, and the dictator will never see it.

We believed that, and boom, okay, we were wrong, right? The images are out there, it goes on over time. So now you all know better than any of the old timers in the room, like, no, you can't control footage, right?

You know that. And you know just a screen grab will do. So that I was even, you know, I asked the young woman, well, can I remake the film and just use your voice?

Now you can have a voice identification, find that person, you know, so time keeps shifting, and I would say, like, I don't think it's so easy. I'm not throwing Matt Heinemann under the bus, personally, because I do not think it's so easy in this moment in time to know if it's okay to have someone's face in your movie or not. I really don't think it's that easy.

And I think they made certain choices about how they vetted the footage and who they vetted it with. They relied upon the U.S. military to vet things, but, you know, it's like in that case they knew the Taliban was coming, they knew history was about to switch. But a lot of times you don't know which way history is shifting.

And you've already sent the photo and sent the text message, and then history is like, huh, what's that photo and text message you just sent? Right? You don't know where the future's going.

So I think I don't throw any filmmakers under the bus because nobody knows what the future's going to be. So you're in this situation, and I appreciate that, you're in this situation where- And I'm throwing you under the bus for throwing Matt Heinemann under the bus.

[Nels Bangerter]

No, I'm not.

[Robert Greene]

I disagree with you. I will throw him under the bus. Because I would say, and this is a person I would consider friendly with, but I do think there's a career of certain kinds of decisions, not least of which is getting the U.S. military to vet the process, speaks to a kind of way he makes films, and I think that that's the problem. So we can have a deeper discussion about that. But let's focus on- And I also agree that's a problem. So camera person then- So then from this moment of this woman pulling out of the film, you're like, my whole life is in crisis.

I mean, that basically is what happens. I mean, it was devastating. I'd worked on it for three years.

We built something. I thought I was almost finished. I literally applied to Sundance with it.

And then she was like, you have to pull it. And also, you know how you tell yourself stories about what your life's going to be? So I had a really complicated thing happening, but I was pregnant, and I was like, I was going to finish this film before I had those children.

I was like, no, I wasn't. But how many of the people in the room think you're going to do your life in a certain order? I'm going to do this, and I'm going to do that, and then I'm going to do that.

And you're like, so totally wrong. So what was- So then I was forced to let it all collapse because I was pregnant, and those babies were coming out, and the film wasn't finished, and it was a mess on the floor. And that was kind of great because I couldn't force it so that I couldn't go against my own values and force it through.

And I do think lots of systems, systems of money, systems of distribution and broadcasting, say, like, force it through. Get it done this day. Deliver it at that time.

It's a product, right? So you're doing a weird thing to be saying, like, I'm making something that's in a different category than a product. It's a set of relationships between people.

And it is always that, even if people tell you it's a product. It is also a set of relationships between people. So what's the first idea of Camera Person?

And I want to hear from your perspective. What was the first draft of the film? What was the first idea?

And then what went to NELS? Well, so what happened was I had been editing for three years with Amanda Laws. We worked really hard on this film.

We got invited to the Sundance Composers Lab with it after- Which implies that you're close to done with the film. After we had to pull the woman's face out of the film and re-cut the film, then got into the Sundance Composers Lab with it, and everyone's like, it's fantastic. I want to compose the music.

And I was like, I think it's going to be pretentious, but I'm not sure. And then somebody saw it and said, this needs to go to the edit lab. And I sat in a room with all these editors I really respect, the filmmakers I really respect, and they're like, this is a pretentious mess.

And I cried. I really cried in front of everybody.

[Kirsten Johnson]

Was that a version that had your voiceover?

[Robert Greene]

It had my voiceover. Right. So it morphed from the original film to an early version of Canterbury.

But no, it was all Afghanistan footage. It had gone from being a film that had diegetic sound and characters and scenes to a film with voiceover. I was sort of trying to be Werner Herzog.

[Kirsten Johnson]

It was trying to be Chris Parker. It was partly about your choices and where you were put in the process.

[Robert Greene]

Yes. It was a little bit of what you were. It was a re-adaptation.

I was like, how did this happen to me? I'm here filming, and I didn't see it coming that it would be dangerous for this young woman to not be filmed. So it was a reflection on being a camera person and what you can see or not see, but very pretentious.

I was like everything in the second person. You see the future. I mean, don't you?

It was like that. So everyone, Camera Person is one of the great films of the last quarter century. It is one of the most important documentaries ever made.

Truly. It's in the pantheon, and it starts from a total disaster, personally, professionally, and then the first draft of Step Towards is a total disaster in and of itself. You must have been like, okay, I got it.

This was terrible, but if I could just do some voiceover. Then I doubled down. I did an even worse version of it.

For real. Because in that moment where I cried in front of everybody for some reason, filming the story of what happened to James Byrd in Texas, which was a terrible, racist murder of this man. Two tons of desperate footage of James.

[Nels Bangerter]
It came to me.

[Robert Greene]
I just remember, and I don't know why. I talked about filming that, and the people in the room were like, oh, do you have other stories like this? Not other footage like this, other stories.

So we made a whole other version of the film, which was voiceover, me talking about things I had filmed in other places, still with the Afghanistan footage. Because I loved the Afghanistan footage so much. It was really visually beautiful.

I couldn't let go of it. I couldn't let it die. And then little by little we realized this does not work.

We have to use actual footage. And I went looking for the Jasper footage to see if I had remembered it wrong or whatever, and then we saw that footage, and it was like, oh, this is interesting.

[Kirsten Johnson]
We can make a film out of this.

[Robert Greene]
So then that was that.

[Kirsten Johnson]
Now, what was the first thing you saw? I don't think I watched any of that stuff. I still think I haven't.

Because when I came on, it was like this film was a disaster, and then K.J. and Marilyn and Katie had sort of decided the best thing we can do is just take a break from this. And I think you sort of completely shouted at K.J. Can you feel the emotion of this moment?

[Robert Greene]

I could feel like I've heard this story countless times, but just something with the two of you sitting next to each other, I'm like, I'm devastated for you, K.J. And I was discovering how devastated I was as a person. Because I had been going, going, going, going, going, filming all the time, and this was a photojournalist in the room who was taking lots of difficult imagery, but I would say this for all of us in the room, who take in, just looking at our computers or on our phones, so much disturbing imagery. We are marked by it.

We are touched. And I, we made a version before my producer said stop, which we called the trauma cut, where there was literally three-quarters of the film was the baby in Nigeria dying. Because I was grappling with that.

And I had forgotten it, and I was bringing it back to light. And so we made this really disturbing movie that no one should see. Like literally no one should see it.

No one should see it.

[Nels Bangerter]

Because it's painful.

[Robert Greene]

It's trauma. It's traumatizing to anyone who sees it. And I remember the lights came up after showing it to Marilyn and, Marilyn Ness, the producer, and she said, KJ, do you have a therapist?

And I was like, of course I do. But it was so unselfaware. I was so lost in trying to process how disturbing this was.

I had no perspective. So we laid that cut down. That editor went off, and she had a baby.

And it took me eight months to start again. And I interviewed many different editors, including the great Steve Bang, who recently co-directed Union with Brett Story. I had this amazing conversation with him about the movie and what I wanted in it.

And he was like, oh my God, this movie's going to be amazing. How are you ever going to cut it? And I was literally on the point of hiring him.

And I was like, I guess it's not him. But I did interviews with many, many, many editors before we got to Nell's. But it was eight months of taking a step back from this disturbing thing we had made.

So Nell's, what was your, I mean, so literally you have an emotional bomb. I mean, it's like, if it hadn't gone up, it had already gone up a couple times. And it looks like it's the kind of thing it could go up again.

Right, and won't necessarily ever get finished. And I'll be very honest. Nell's, I remember one time when we were hanging out, he was like, look, he puts this thing with fun.

It's an interesting film, but I could take 15 minutes out of it right now. And I was like, fuck you, man.

[Kirsten Johnson]

Well, when we met, too. You insulted my stuff.

[Robert Greene]

Okay, well then tell me how. And then he was like, you don't really want me to do that. And it was like, that's the kind of person you are.

You're like, you're very direct. And that is one of your strengths. You get to the heart of something without mincing.

You're not worried about feelings. And when it comes to footage and cutting, there's something pure about it.

[Kirsten Johnson]

I should be better about that, but the way that I think about it is related to collaboration. Because I think what I like to assume or make explicit is that the collaborative relationship is an intense one, a personal one, a respectful one, a fully, all the great things it is. And those are presumed, I think.

Or sometimes I presume them. And then I go and say something like what I said to you, and it's totally offensive. It's not.

Well, no, but in a way it is. But within the context of the relationship, it's not.

[Robert Greene]

Well, let's pause for a second. This is an important thing. I think because we're similar ages, I think there is a thing that is a generational shift, which is our generation is like, yes, we clearly respect each other, so I'm not holding back anything.

And I think maybe, it's a broad assumption, so I want to be careful making this, but I think maybe there's a generational thing where you guys wouldn't necessarily talk to each other like that. Maybe you would, maybe you wouldn't. It depends on the relationship, right?

I would say there is something lost in not being so blunt. And I think that you should seek out collaborators who absolutely will tell you exactly what they really think, and that is becoming harder and harder, especially, honestly, post-pandemic, we're all so fucking fragile for good reason. Post-racial reckoning in this country, fucking Trump has ruined our brains.

Like, we are all so fragile for good reason that we often are just wrapping each other in plastic wrap and being like, I just don't want you to hurt anymore, so I'm not going to. But sometimes, like, the best, my producer Doug Troll and I, like, we get in the fiercest fights, and we now have learned, we can't do that in front of people because people will misunderstand what's going on, but we're like, literally, like, how could you be the worst person to give me that note to cut three seconds out of the film? And that's just, and then at the end, we're like, oh, thank God, felt great, you know?

Like, that's just who we, so I would just say there is something very valuable, so just saying that to put you in a mindset of, like, how do you, what did you see? What was your approach?

[Kirsten Johnson]

Yeah, I think that the important presumption to either make explicit or understand between two people is the deep respect for each other and the deep respect for the project. It's like, if I say, if I say this scene sucks, this does not mean that the movie sucks or you suck or any of us are bad. It's like, this is only about the scene.

[Robert Greene]

That's the best way to say it. The film matters so much.

[Kirsten Johnson]

Right, but the way I said this between us was, oh, this scene's a B plus, that's what I would say. You know, and I like, KJ would take it as if I said it sucks. So the message got through, but it was still, you know, like, supposed to be.

[Robert Greene]

It took me, I mean, I think this is like, you know, like Robert, you've got one version of what's possible and the way that you can relate to it, and the fact is, like, we're all really different, and some of us have been raised to imagine our creative work is ourselves. We've been raised to imagine we can't, we're not allowed to ruffle anybody else or hurt anybody else. Like, we've been socialized to, you know, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

So, like, we're all coming from really different cultural positioning, right, about sort of what we think is okay to do in relationships with people, even in intimate relationships, right? But what, so what Nelson's saying on a certain level is like, he presumes a collaborative relationship is an intimate one, and he treats it like that. Like, what I said to him, which was like, I was like, I wish someone had said this to me as a camera person, I said it to him, I said, what's your favorite way of working?

How do you like to work? Because I'm pro-pleasure. I think people should experience pleasure in the work.

And Nel said to me, I like to sit down and talk for like five days straight. I would rather that you didn't show me which footage you think is good, let me watch the footage for myself, and I'd like you to leave me alone a lot. And I was like, what?

You don't want me in the editing room? But one, I asked him that, and then I heard what he said, and I trusted him.

[Kirsten Johnson]
I believed in it, which is huge.

[Robert Greene]
I believed in it, and I'm not a control freak. And a lot of us are, because we're trying for good reason. We're trying to get good grades, and we're trying to manage trauma, and we're trying to make sense of the world.

[Nels Bangerter]
And the work is an extension of ourselves.

[Robert Greene]
Yeah, it is an extension of ourselves. And so our relationship to control is a really big deal in our collaborations. It is actually hard to trust other people with the things that are most precious to us, right?

So one, I think what's nice about working with Nails is we both value uncertainty. So it's like nothing's written forever. So it's like, let's try some things.

So let's talk, Nails will try some things, I'll look at it, and I don't say, fix all of that right now. I'll say, huh.

[Kirsten Johnson]
That's so nice, yeah.

[Robert Greene]
Right?

[Kirsten Johnson]
Yeah, yeah.

[Robert Greene]

But that's the thing that makes it possible, and I had to, sort of in some ways, like being an adult, and be like, oh my god, I thought that story was so good, it was a total A-minus story. But I had that conversation.

[Kirsten Johnson]

A-minus.

[Robert Greene]

A conversation to myself. Right? I didn't be like, how dare you call my story a B+.

It's like, oh, that's really wild that you said that to me. So how did the voiceover get removed? It was an idea that someone, Jocelyn Barnes had raised it at some point in the making of.

Jocelyn Barnes produced Hell County, produced Strong Island, two films that we watched with filmmakers in that. It was an idea she had raised at one moment, looking at footage, and then I was just like, I really destroyed myself trying to write voiceover, and I couldn't bear to write any more voiceover, and then you had the idea also. And it was like, maybe can the footage speak for itself?

Because I was like, I can't speak for it.

[Kirsten Johnson]

I remember this conversation, because I think I'd read some of the voiceover you'd written, and I'm like, KJ's a good writer. Really, it's true, she's a great writer. And I think of myself as a good writer, too, with words.

And I looked at it, and we talked about Joan Didion, and we talked about Susan Sontag, and I looked at it, and I'm like, this shit that we're putting together is A-minus. We were good, but we weren't as good as we wanted to be at writing. And I think we discussed that idea exactly.

We love these writers who are the best of the century. And can we do that?

[Robert Greene]

It's just like, oh my god. You're literally thinking of Joan Didion and Susan Sontag, and we want to be that.

[Kirsten Johnson]

And we knew we couldn't. We knew we couldn't.

[Robert Greene]

I had delusions of greatness.

[Kirsten Johnson]

At that moment, I told KJ that we couldn't. But we agreed. We're like, let's try this without voiceover.

And yeah, that was the moment that I remember.

[Robert Greene]

And the moment that I remember, I had been trying and trying and trying to solve this for years now. I'm like four years into a process. I can't win.

I keep running into walls. And so then when we said, look, let's try it. And I was just like, really leave me alone.

I'm going to cut a lot. And he cut 40 minutes with no voiceover. He was like, I have to cut a lot to see if this works.

And just leave me alone. And he did it incredibly fast. I feel like it was like two weeks.

[Kirsten Johnson]

It was kind of fast. It was probably four weeks. Yeah, you did it in a very short period of time.

And I thought it was more than 40 minutes, but I can't remember exactly.

[Robert Greene]

It might have been an hour and a half. It was an hour and a half. But you always say the thing like all the wheels fall off of everything after 40 minutes.

[Nels Bangerter]

Maybe that's right, yeah.

[Robert Greene]

So maybe I only felt like it only has to work for 40 minutes. Then it's like proof of concept. But I saw this 40 minutes or longer, and I just wept with, once again, with relief.

It was like, oh, it can work. It was like, hallelujah, I can see the tunnel. I'm right at the end of the tunnel.

I've been in the tunnel for years. And it was just like, oh. So that was really amazing because you have to sustain, right, over long periods of time, this is never going to work.

That feeling of this is never going to work. My life's never going to work. In fact, you feel it 90% of the time of the process.

90% of the time, you are sure, and the filmmakers in the room, I know you're in similar, but it's never going to work. It's never going to work. It's not going to work.

It's not going to click. It's not going to work. And you hold on to that as long as you can because actually, that's what drives you to get it to eventually work.

[Kirsten Johnson]

But I knew it was going to work.

[Nels Bangerter]

I'll tell you this.

[Kirsten Johnson]

I knew because KJ films in a way that very few other people film, which is that she is directly engaging with people in front of the camera. And I knew when I said there's no voiceover, I knew we had plenty of KJ talking. Like, there was lots of footage where we heard her voice.

And so there was the one scene where you're pointing out, like, oh, I filmed this. You're kind of describing the way you work to somebody, a producer sitting next to you. I'm looking for a shot of the mosque.

And I can't even remember the dialogue. But there was dialogue like that throughout or even in the first scene. Hey, go ahead.

And we're talking to the director sort of off camera. I knew we had enough talking. And I love words and talking.

But I was like, oh, yeah, we have plenty of that. We're going to be good. But I guess maybe the thing that we did have to release at that point, though, was the idea that this would be an explicit examination of the questions like, what do I see?

Or what are the ethics of filmmaking? That those things couldn't be discussed within these rules as much as the film that existed before had been about those. And I think that was probably the most stressful and hardest thing to work out was, how do we make this film about seeing, about all of these questions that existed in the years coming up to when I came up?

[Robert Greene]

I think what's remarkable about the film is it's in there. I brought up the axe moment with the kid. I think of that moment all the time because I'm just like, it's the one where I'm like, oh, I know she's a mother.

I know I'm already very aware of the idea of cultural sensitivity, which is made aware by the locations, like the fact that we're jumping around with all these locations. And I'm aware. And I'm just like, you don't know whether it's OK to stop this kid from cutting his fingers off or not.

Like, I just remember that feeling so clear. And then I think it's all, which I think is you guys really going through this. We're talking stuff like 10,000 feet level.

How's it going to work for 40 minutes? What that really means is, effectively, is the material itself saying everything that you would want to say? And that's not just like, so that's different than like, does the plot, do you laugh at the joke, or is it sufficiently jump scary enough in a horror movie?

Literally, is the material itself saying everything that we want to say in an emotionally resonant way so that we're drawn in, not pushed away? That's what working is over 40 minutes. Is that right?

Is that more or less correct?

[Kirsten Johnson]

Yeah, I think so. But in that moment with the axe, there is KJ going. You hear it.

It's in the soundtrack. And many thanks to Pete Orner and other people for making that, getting the volume up to where you can hear it as an audience. But that stuff was there.

So anyway.

[Robert Greene]

I think also that question of what are we willing to allow in our work? And there's a thing you think intellectually in your mind or in your heart you think you want to say. I've been raised to and struggled in my life with the idea of, I want to be a good person.

I'm trying to say I'm a good person. And in fact, this film is like, I am sharing with you that it is really complicated to exist as a person with a camera in the world. And I cannot say I'm a good person.

I would like to say that. I've been struggling with ethics and trying to be decent my entire life. For real, I really bleed into that one.

But I couldn't say that. And the footage wouldn't allow. I mean, I guess maybe the footage would have allowed it.

But that would have been false. So in some ways, it's like the film was teaching me to let go of trying to say I was a good person. Well, I'm going to call you every second.

So get your questions ready now about camera person, specific questions about camera person. So get ready. But I'm going to tell a story while you're getting yourself ready to ask your question.

I remember heading to Sundance 2016 when it premiered, seeing a programmer. And I had seen an early cut. I had seen a close to finish cut of the film.

And I was like, big fuck you. And he was like, well, of course you think so. Because you're a filmmaker.

And his concern was like, I just don't know. I don't know if people are going to get it.

[Kirsten Johnson]
Inside baseball.

[Robert Greene]
Yeah, it's too inside baseball, which is why it was programmed in basically, with all due respect, a side thing. It wasn't in competition at Sundance. And I remember just being like, you are so wrong.

You're so wrong. And I was very happy to be right in this case. Because I was like, this, in fact, is what people do when they're watching documentaries.

And most filmmakers, and this is my entire, my whole idea of documentary is to activate these things. And you guys just did it in the best way possible, is all these things that are actually there, that are not discussed. And they're not discussed because people are like, oh, too inside baseball, too meta, too self-reflective, too this, too that.

It's actually what people care about. It's like, when people raise their hands at documentary screenings, and they're like, what camera did you shoot on? Most filmmakers roll their eyes, like, oh, it's an irrelevant question in my vision.

It's like, no, that's the most fucking important question. Because people cannot figure out how you got into that room. How did you get into the room, and why were you filming these people?

[Kirsten Johnson]
And literally, that's what the whole movie is. But we knew. We said to ourselves, in fact, I said this, I think, explicitly, is, you know what, I think maybe the only people who will like this film are the attendees of Krupauf's film festival.

And I said, that's good enough for me. Or maybe it was, yeah, anyway.

[Robert Greene]
And then we didn't get in.

[Kirsten Johnson]
Is that right? Well, it did. And it did.

No, it didn't. It did after. After Sundance.

[Robert Greene]

OK, so wait, wait, wait. Full disclosure, it was Paul from TruFoss, and I don't think he got it yet.

[Nels Bangerter]

He was worried. He saw the reference. He was worried.

[Robert Greene]

He was worried that people weren't going to appreciate it. And I was, it was such a, I shared the concern with him. Well, you're the filmmaker, so you're going to have those concerns.

For me, what I saw was something that was like, no, no, no. Actually, this is the thing that opens up everything.

[Kirsten Johnson]

Right. But we said, you know what? And I think, to me, it helped to have had the three years of you going through the process of trying to make this film everything it ought to be.

And I think you were tired of doing that. And I think we both realized that that meant that there was a blank slate, a complete openness, that we didn't have to make a film that was successful or that won anything or any of that. We just made the film that we really loved.

And I think that was vital to the process, because I think had we second-guessed ourselves on any of those questions, we could have been in big trouble.

[Robert Greene]

I will just add the word need. I needed to make that film. I mean, I just.

It was a real need. I mean, the thing I want to affirm to all of you, your needs are real. And they are contradictory.

And it's a great thing to write down on a piece of paper. Not right now, because it'll distract you. But what are your real needs?

And let them be. I want to show people what a good person I am. I want this.

I want that. I want to travel. I need this.

I need that. Just write them all down and look at them. But I needed to grapple with this footage.

And at a certain point, we were really doing that. I also needed to. I've seen a lot of movies.

I needed to make something that was interesting on a cinematic level. And Nels was doing that with all of his rules and questions. We were like, we are making something new.

We don't know if anyone will value it, but we are making something new. And we're not doing any shortcuts. We're really doing that.

Raise your hands for questions, please. Who's got questions? Okay.

So, need comes from. Thank you. One second.

Need. The need. And then the exhaustion.

Listening to other people. Being even more exhausted. Listening to other people.

Finding a collaborator who thinks completely different than you. And then that opens up the thing that you actually needed. I want to say thank you for camera first.

Because it feels like after watching that stuff, and Ralph Barber's down footage stuff, or his archival stuff. If it was something I needed. I'm working on my archival stuff.

And so, do you guys have any advice for making more personal or projects close to us? And how do we use archival work in that? So, like, I don't know you.

I didn't know that you needed that. Right? But I think when we actually expose the complexity of our own needs, then it resonates with other people's needs.

And one of the things that Nelson always says, audiences aren't stupid. Audiences are smarter than you are. They're trying to get ahead of us all the time.

That's what you're doing when you watch a movie. You're getting one clue and you're trying to get ahead of it. So, it's like that thing that people tell you, like, make it for your audience.

You don't know who your audience is. I don't know you. But I made something that you say you needed.

How did I do that? Because I allowed in my own needs that I'm ashamed of, that are scary for me, that I'm uncomfortable with. And, like, as Nels knows, I had needs.

I wanted to put things in the movie. He was like, you need that. The movie doesn't.

[Kirsten Johnson]
B-plus.

[Robert Greene]
Yeah. Right?

[Kirsten Johnson]

I can give an explicit one to that, staying in the room. So, KJ has, and I think this is one of the stories that you were talking about, the story about when you were driving along the road and you saw the people walking, they were carrying somebody or something.

[Robert Greene]
Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[Kirsten Johnson]
On the Lakota Reservation. Right. Wait, was it there?

Anyway, there was a group of people and they were carrying somebody who was injured.

[Robert Greene]
Oh, no, in Rwanda. In Rwanda. In Rwanda.

[Kirsten Johnson]
They were carrying somebody who was injured to the hospital or something.

[Robert Greene]
Someone who was pregnant.

[Kirsten Johnson]
Right. Oh, they were pregnant. Okay.

So, there were these people carrying a pregnant woman on the way to the hospital and KJ's film crew drove by in a van and saw them and had room in their van. And KJ's story of this, if I remember it, you can correct me, is that they stopped, they filmed the people walking with the person, and then, horrifyingly, KJ, in a way, well, they filmed them first and then took them to the hospital. That was what happened.

So, in a way, I'm like, well, that's great. You film them and you took them to the hospital, but that was traumatizing to you because you should have just taken them to the hospital. That was your thinking, is why did we film them first?

We should have just loaded them up and that it was extractive and that it was the wrong thing to do. And that was eating at you. Oh, absolutely.

And we didn't have that footage for some reason.

[Robert Greene]
It's disappeared into the mist.

[Kirsten Johnson]
Right.

[Robert Greene]

But I think, you know, this is the question we're all asking ourselves all the time when we photograph something. Should I be filming this? Do I have a right to?

Et cetera. And we were literally in a car in a valley in Rwanda, and we hear screaming from across the valley, and we can see little people walking far away. And I say to the director, are we going to help them?

And she said, we're going to film them and then we're going to help them. And I was like, because then I have to figure out how to do that if I want to do that. Because you also can be the person who in that moment stands up and says, no way, I'm not filming them, let's go help them.

You've been given that choice. Just because you're hired and you're working for that person doesn't mean you have to do it in that order. So one, you have to own that choice, but then that's why you're there.

You're not an aid worker, you're not an ambulance driver, you're there to film, but are you there to film most people who need to get to the hospital? Yeah, here's a question.

[Kirsten Johnson]

But let me finish the story, though, because there were two reasons that that didn't go in the film. One was that we didn't have the footage and it didn't obey our rules. We weren't going to have KJ pop up in voiceover to tell that story.

And the second one was, that's an ethical level that is higher than everybody else was operating at. This was the odd thing is that KJ was too good in that moment for it to be cinematic. The cinematic story is if you ditch them and don't give them the ride.

And to me, at least, and in that context, we were like... Because movies are fucked up. That story will come across as KJ patting herself on the back, in a way, for making an ethical decision when really...

She's just too good. Matt Heineman should make a movie about ethics. That would be truly shocking and interesting.

But when KJ does it, it's her strength. It's a yawn.

[Robert Greene]

I also think that in a world put before camera person, it's less clear. The film actually changed the world in that way for all of us filmmakers, that we now all question ourselves because the film created the language. Because you were the conduit of that.

Because you were dealing with severe... Because that, should we... Omar Malek has said, every time he comes to the Murray Center, he says, always put the camera down and help people.

That's it. And he got that because he's been in combat zones doing... Before he became a celebrated filmmaker, he was taking combat photography only, exclusively.

Because the severity of the situation created that ethical understanding. And most of us will never, hopefully, be in a situation like that. I think the film speaks to that directly, which is good.

I think you had your hand up at the end.

[Nels Bangerter]

You kind of just touched on this, actually.

[Robert Greene]

But I was going to ask, how do you let your collaboration with the world around you impact the decisions you make as a filmmaker, as a cinematographer? As well as, how do you let it impact the decisions you make as an editor? I think it's all relational.

But there's all kinds of relationships that are invisible to us. And you're discovering them as you're working. In principle, we all have agency.

We all have some form of power. But as you all know, the world is actually much more complicated than that. And our relationships to power are super complicated.

And you're operating within systems. So we're within the system of the university right now. And Robert is giving the green light.

We can say anything we want to here. But there are some things I might say in this space that would go against the system of this university. And we'd be shut down.

I may or may not know what those are.

[Nels Bangerter]

I don't know what those are.

[Robert Greene]

But that's what's... Whenever you're in a situation, whether it's a family, there's a system of invisible networks of power and relationships, a town, a country, right? And so you're trying to not be stupid about what all these relationships are.

You're doing research. You're thinking about it. You're asking people.

But you're also trying to be sensitive and pick up signals of things you don't understand yet. And imagine there's a lot you don't understand. So I think that whatever you get the feeling like, I get it.

Stand down. You don't get it. And you might not be able to get it until you age 30 more years.

Or you might not be able to get it until someone tells you something, right? So just allow for different ways of learning things. You don't learn everything by talking.

You don't learn everything by looking, etc.

[Kirsten Johnson]

But Keiji is a radically collaborative thinker, especially within the film crew. From I don't know how far back, but you're interested in what does the sound person think about the scene? How can I empower the editor?

Or can I film with the fixers in Bosnia? And these are things that the director, I have no idea what the director was thinking when you were shooting with those two. It probably quite annoyed.

But you across the board are extremely, there's a spectrum of how interested people are in other people's experience. You are the most intense, farthest on the level of deep interest in that. And I think that that has made all of your films what they are.

And they're inward looking too. But I think that's what's remarkable about you. It means that camera person was a film.

Other cinematographers came up to me after camera person. Oh, I wish I'd done that. Or I was thinking of doing something like that.

Or I could do a really cool project with my own footage like that. And I was like, no, you couldn't. You don't understand, or you haven't thought about the way that you're doing your job in a way that Keiji does and is and still does.

And then it's so respectful, thoughtful, collaborative, all those things on an out-of-this-world basis. And I think that's, if there's a collaborative genius.

[Robert Greene]

Sometimes I get an A+.

[Kirsten Johnson]

No, that's A+++ . Because that is.

[Robert Greene]

I'm writing that down.

[Kirsten Johnson]

A+++ . No, that's what allows things like this to happen is where you were able to go overboard in terms of empathy throughout this entire film, but also throughout the creative process too. And I think that, yeah, that's a lesson.

[Robert Greene]

And I would say, for us that aren't saints like yourself, he just made you out to be saints, didn't he? No, but he's right. And I think it's like, I would say that just like, understanding that process opened up me as a filmmaker, just understanding what you were doing and having the great privilege of having conversations for years with you now.

And I was like, Nels probably feels the same way. I mean, the lesson for that is, what can you do to be more collaborative? How can you be more collaborative with the people that you're working with?

Because I feel like, for me personally, as a filmmaker, I think I padded all my insecurities. The things that I was good at were wrapped in so many insecurities. Just basically, for example, the idea of what you're supposed to do on a set.

And when I finally could just accept that, I don't really particularly like it. Everyone already knew this because I was miserable. And then I could just be okay with that and then lean into what the collaborators are good at.

And then I'm just a better friend. I'm a better nurturer. I'm a better person for the participants in the film.

I'm a better father when I come home. All these things. Because I'm not clinging to things that aren't really there, that don't matter.

And I think a lot of that comes from learning how to be a good collaborator. I don't think there's anything that matters more, actually. I think your core idea of, if you want to make films, which not everybody in this room wants to do, if you want to make films, your core idea is very, very important.

I think the relationships you build around that core idea are as important, if not more. And what they do to pull at that core idea and who you are and everything, and they allow you to move forward, that's why I think I would say collaboration is important. So I think, I know it's hard for you to hear these compliments, but I do think that there is something...

[Nels Bangerter]

Bring it on.

[Robert Greene]

I can take it. You took us in a great space with that.

[Kirsten Johnson]

So I guess going back a little bit in the conversation, like filming things versus not filming things, and the idea of uncomfortability, and then editing as well, how do you distinguish, I'm uncomfortable because there's something in me that can't film this or can't edit it like this, versus there's something here that cannot be edited, this can't be shown, this can't be filmed, how do you navigate that one?

[Robert Greene]

It's such a great question. It's such a great question. It's such a good question.

How do you know? You can't know. Right?

You actually can't know the difference between those things. So you take a little step towards that thing that feels really uncomfortable and notice what happens. Is it you who's staying uncomfortable or is it the other person who's becoming more uncomfortable?

Right? Because it is... It might be shared, right?

It might be like, whoa, we're dealing with this super forbidden, subversive thing and we both know we're doing it, so we're both really uncomfortable. Or it could be like, here's this person who wants to talk about the death of their child and you are freaking out because you don't know what to say and this person is speaking that out loud to you. They're already indicating, of course I am uncomfortable with this, my child died, but I see you have a camera and I'm talking to you.

So then it is to you to find something to ask. This example's coming up because I was just in Toronto and this woman told me that watching a camera person helped her grieve losing her child. It's the first time anyone's ever said that to me.

And I was just like, I am so uncomfortable right now. I am so sad for you, and I have no idea what to say. And then I was just like, what was your baby named?

And she said Seymour. And I said, what? You named him Seymour?

And then she said, after Seymour Hersh. I said, you're kidding. And then I said, oh, you know, and then she said, but also Seymour.

You named him Seymour. And then we were able to keep talking about this impossible, uncomfortable, horrible thing to talk about. And so, I mean, Seymour.

I love that question. That's incredible. I love that question because the notion of what it, like, there's an easy thing to put the camera down, help.

Right? That's it. And I think your story, the story being told here of, like, there's someone who needs help, and we decide to film instead of helping is so clear.

The truth is, in most of the situations we're going to be in are not so clear. Right? And they're not take-a-stand moments.

They're often these very imperceptible things. I think what KJ's saying is, is that person uncomfortable? Are you uncomfortable?

Your job is to figure out the why, like, as best you can in your own moment. Like, are you being re-traumatized for some reason? Is it good for you to step away?

Or is it good for you to lean in? You don't know. It's always situational.

I think there's also a broader cultural context. I think maybe in the 80s, say, you know, some fictional past, it was like, you have to film. Like, you're not doing your job unless you film.

I'll take you to a couple examples. One, Fake It So Real is about pro wrestlers who are doing the most homoerotic thing in the world, being pro wrestlers. But they all, they say these homophobic things.

And they're constantly saying these horrible homophobic things. But the film, in 2010 when I filmed it, the ethos of the moment was give them enough rope to hang themselves, quote, unquote, right? And, like, basically let them say everything because that reveals some deeper truth.

If I were to film that same scene, these same scenes post-Trump, I would say, I'd have, absolutely not okay to film those without some sort of intervention, without me stepping in. And that's just because times change and the way we film changes. So part of it is also that other, so it's the interpersonal, it's also this other thing.

What does your audience expect? One of the best examples I can give is in Procession, it was my idea for the survivors to play priests. And I don't even know where that idea came from except for in my desire to fuck shit up, basically.

Like, my desire to be as incendiary as possible and to speak to Keiichi's direct point. I said this, and if the person said, what are you, whoa, what? Then I would have been like, oh, okay.

That's because I was not abused in this way and I have no idea what I'm fucking talking about. Instead, I was greeted with the opposite. Like, oh, oh shit, yeah.

And then it was not my idea anymore. It was our idea. Even if I came up with it.

And then the same thing, they could come up with ideas. It was their idea to go to all the places of abuse. Like, I would have never come up with that.

I would have never had the courage to come up with that. And they were like, we should be able to go back to where we were abused, right? Like, whatever, man.

So does that kind of get to the heart of it a little bit? Yeah. But it's a really excellent question.

[Nels Bangerter]

It's the most important one.

[Robert Greene]

It's like you're right at that, it's right where it's, you can't know. Like, was that wrong or right that Robert asked that, gave that idea? It's like, oh, it's so precarious.

It's so fragile. Are you going to offend that person forever and they don't want to work with you and talk with you? You don't know.

And you can't ask that on day one. You can't ask it on day 20. You have to talk about it when the time is right.

And that is your job. It's the thing. So my whole ethos here is I can't teach you how to be filmmakers.

You have to go figure it out. And then we have talks like this that hopefully illuminate a lot of the process, right? But you've got to go figure it out.

The thing you most cannot be taught is that. You only can do it by literally saying the wrong thing and then just having the self-awareness to go, oops, I said the wrong thing. And I also just have so much compassion for all of you because you're living in a world where, like, if you say the wrong thing, it's really loaded.

It's really high stakes for everybody. And, you know, I think it's... That has always been true.

That was true for me when I was in college. But it's differently true for those of you who can say the wrong thing and someone else is posting something about it and it goes into the world, right? So there's a...

You're... I would say, generationally, you have more reason to wonder, should I do this? Should I say this?

Can I say this? You have... You're smart.

You're right. It's a very delicate time to make mistakes. There are higher stakes.

So we got a little bit more, you know, room to play, even though I would say, like, I left college being like, I probably shouldn't speak. Like, that's the way I left college. I was like, I think I'm going to shut up for a while.

But so just be kind to yourselves about the time that you're living in. It's quite complicated to know whether your discomfort is something to be listened to or not listened to. Eric?

Did you have a question? No, I'm done.

[Nels Bangerter]

You have to speak now.

[Robert Greene]

What's your question, Eric? Anybody else have a question? I want to go back to something you were talking about earlier.

Before this program, like, fiction film is, like, my background. I, like, love movies. It's, like, the thing I want to do with my life.

And something I've had to train myself to think about when I revisit, when I visit a movie from, like, decades ago is, like, I'm not trying to take this thing and bring it to me right now. I'm trying to go to that thing. And one of the biggest, like, shifts in this program and documentary theory is thinking, like, you can't necessarily do that the same way with documentaries.

And hearing you talk about, like, and Robert's talked about this, and other filmmakers who've come in and talked about this, like, you have to be thinking about, like, the impossible of what is time going to do to this. I can't just trust that this is a time capsule. And you talked a bit about that earlier and the impossibility of knowing that.

But I would love it if, yeah, you could talk a bit more, especially how it pertains to, like, memoir as film. Because this is, like, this is a fixed thing in that sense. Because it's you in this moment, or it's you over 25 years, but you've made it, it came out in 2016 or 2020, and this is this thing.

So I would love to hear you talk more about that. Yeah, yeah. That's such a fun question.

It is a time machine. Like, cinema is a time machine, which is what's amazing about it. And I do think, like, I'm so grateful to be able to have finished something at a certain moment in time after many years of trying to finish it.

And I think it was meaningful to attempt to understand the scope of it and choose to be done. Like, I really felt like we worked as hard as we could. We went as far as we could with our rules and our footage and the timing of knowing it needs to get out into the world right now.

And then it was, like, so funny. It's like as if I forgot that I made a film with my own footage when I made Pete Johnson. I was like, oh, I can reuse the footage from my own life?

It's just hilarious. And I can reuse it now, which is just kind of mind-blowing to me. And I could even remake a film with all the footage of the camera person right now.

I could do that. And I was just in Toronto, and there was an Afghan student, and I showed the film I had made. I had made a short film with Nels that we cut called The Above.

And I showed it to the students, and she started weeping. And she said, I'm just so, it's like I could see that blimp in my window in Kabul, and I can't go back to Kabul, and I can't film anything in Kabul. And I was just like, you can use that footage.

Make something with that footage. That footage belongs to her as much as it belongs to me, right? And I came to feeling that because we got to make this film.

I'm not sure I would feel that if I'd never made a film with the footage I shot in Afghanistan. I'd be too sad about it. But now I'm generous about it.

It's like, she can use that. So I think this thing about time is real. And we were in time in 2016.

We made what we could make with it. Now it's 2024. It's not just that that woman I would have filmed would be filmed, and that one woman.

It's like all women in Afghanistan are not allowed to go outside and speak out loud. It's insanity, let alone film. So here's an Afghan girl in exile.

She can use whatever she wants. So time changes. Like Robert was saying, there's big history, there's your history, there's cinema history, and then these threads and timelines moving along.

[Kirsten Johnson]

I will add that every director that you worked with prior to camera person made that same decision to allow you to use their footage, which is kind of interesting. I knew when KJ went and she's pouring through somebody's basement to try to find their old tapes or something. It's like that director not only answered the email from KJ but was like, oh yeah, I think I have that stuff in my basement.

Come on over. Dig through. Find the stuff.

Yes, you can use it. All these things were supremely generous of all those people. And also speak to KJ's relationship with the people she works with.

Could you get permission to use all this stuff?

[Robert Greene]

The relationship that she created.

[Kirsten Johnson]

That you've worked on, not as the director, but as somebody who wasn't the director. And that's amazing.

[Robert Greene]

In some ways, do we own any of this? Right? And I think this is what we're all faced with right now in this crazy world that we're living with.

It's like our bio data, right? Is being sold, monitored, like it could dox us. What cameras do is they separate images from mortal bodies.

Turns out each of us is in a mortal body and the images are going out into the world. And they're living and being reshaped and reconditioned by other people. That's what we're up to here.

And we don't have all the control. All of us in this room don't even have control about what happens to our own images, right? It's a pretty complicated, crazy world we're living in.

It's new, too. It's a new world. That's a great place to end for this part of the conversation.

So I wanted to say a couple things. We have Nails Back on Wednesday. KJ will be here through tomorrow, including tonight for the screening of Hail to Maude.

Plus afterwards, if you have direct questions about Dick Johnson's day, we mostly talked about cameras for today. I do want to give you a chance, though, to tee up. Maybe we'll continue the discussion.

We talked a lot about editing today. So while we're doing the discussion of Dick Johnson, maybe we can dive into the editing of that. Give us the...

We are almost out of time. So give us just the brief segue. How did...

So, lifetime in the making of Cameraperson. Dick Johnson is also a lifetime in the making in many ways. How...

Just give us the introduction of how you came to decide to make that film. So, one, I would just say making Cameraperson was very empowering, I think, for both of us. It was like we really didn't know what we were doing.

We really thought we were failing. We gave it our all. We enjoyed ourselves.

And we finished it. And then it was received. And we did not cheat on any level.

We were not like, oh, we better put this in because other people might need it. We really went all the way just doing it in terms of what we thought made sense. And it was super liberating.

And I was like, I'm done. I can die now. I really had that...

I have faced... Kirsten Johnson is dead. Kirsten Johnson is dead.

That's the point. Unless any of you can make that into a film. But that was just like, whoo!

I could die happy. I literally had that feeling after making Cameraperson. And so then I was just like, oh, let's fail in an interesting way.

Like, let's take a big risk was the feeling. And then it was just, and I was like, I literally want that film to keep my father alive forever. It's like built-in failure.

I want this film to stop my dad from having dementia. I cannot make it happen. And yet, Nels and I like messed around with my dad's dementia.

And we rebuilt my father. And we pulled him apart again. And we, you know, so...

I think I was very excited, almost on an existential level of like, what can cinema do? How can cinema help me?

[Kirsten Johnson]

KJ kept saying during that process, I want to keep my dad alive through this movie. And I was like... That's not how it works.

Wait, do you really think that? I kept saying like... That's not possible.

I'm like, you know, we don't believe that that can really happen.

[Robert Greene]

He was a little worried about me.

[Kirsten Johnson]

We agree. But I didn't get it. I didn't quite...

I didn't quite understand it. And I think the process of that film was us figuring out how to try. Like, we tried and we tried and we tried in different ways.

And I think that... Of course, we don't succeed. But Dick Johnson is still alive.

But all these questions are like really hard. But I think it was engaging with something that we knew was impossible that gave us what to do next. You know, what do we do?

We have to try another way.

[Kirsten Johnson]

But you get all these ideas from such funny places. And obviously in the history of cinema, like, I don't know, the idea of someone coming back to life, like, it's sort of what cinema is, right? Like you were saying, I go back in time to that object, right?

Like I go back to Buster Keaton and he's still alive there. And Nels did this amazing thing in *Cameron Person*, from my point of view, was that he showed a shot of my mom's ashes and then he cut it next to a shot of my mom alive. And I swear, the first time I saw it, I was like, oh my God, my mom alive.

I really thought it for like fractions of a second, but I felt it. And that's what cinema is, not just of the mind. It's not just intellectual.

You feel it. And I, the other day in Toronto, I showed the *Cameron Person* trailer I hadn't seen in a long time. And there's a moment where my mom's standing in the cabin in Wyoming and she does this with her hands.

And I felt my mom's hand. And I was like, that's it. That's all I'm asking for.

Like, I want to keep feeling these people who I can't. And images and sound do that for us. We have hallucination.

It's like a hallucination of being alive. So. Can't imagine a better place to end this.

Thank you so much. Alright, see you all in a couple hours. Yes.

Nice get right there.

[Kirsten Johnson]

Thanks, that was fun. I'm more emotional than I know.

[Robert Greene]

It was fun.

***Bad Press (2023)* Interview with Co-Director and Editor Joe Peeler (done over E-Mail exchange)**

1. In your view, what are the most valuable elements of a strong director-editor partnership?

How do these elements contribute to building trust and cohesion in the film's creative direction?

I think the key to a strong director-editor partnership is the mutual willingness to respond to the footage and not adhere to any respective preconceived notions. As an editor, my favorite collaborations are with directors who are willing to throw out their original ideas based on what we are seeing in the footage. You might circle back to one of those original ideas, but when both the editor and director are able to stay nimble and follow threads that might take three or four versions to figure out, you're going to produce the best movie. I liken the director-editor relationship to bowling with bumpers. The editor and the director both want a strike, and you both act as separate but equally important guide rails to get there. If you are both aiming for the same movie - the same strike - and willing to adjust as needed to get there, then you're going to have a great partnership and hopefully produce the best version of the film possible.

2. In *Bad Press*, how did your role as both co-director and editor impact the storytelling process? Did balancing these roles alter how you approached collaboration with other team members?

"Impact" is an interesting word. I think my dual role *benefited* the storytelling simply because, while I was directing, I was able to track what we needed for the edit and know when we captured the necessary footage for each story beat. In that way, having the editor part of my brain running while directing is extremely helpful. I'm not sure if it *impacted* the storytelling process, though. During production, we cast our net pretty wide and tracked multiple storylines that didn't end up making it into the final film. So, while I was trying to "shoot for the edit," we were still open to a breadth of options and different possible directions the story could go.

Balancing these roles definitely altered my approach to collaborating with other team members. We had a large number of producers, so sometimes it felt like there were “too many cooks in the kitchen.” As a director, it was often my job to shield my collaborators, like our cinematographer Tyler Graim or our editor Jean Rheem, from the producerial fray and keep them focused on the job at hand. In the edit bay, I would simultaneously have to act as a firewall and a co-editor with Jean. The actual editing was fairly egalitarian. We would cut in the same room on two different computers and show each other our scenes to get notes, talk story, restructure, and all of the other things you would do with a fellow editor.

3. Can you walk me through the collaborative process between you and Rebecca during editing? How did you negotiate creative decisions or settle on a unified vision for the film?

Becca is a great leader, and Jean and I were very lucky to have her as a director during the edit. One of Becca’s strengths is her ability to trust her collaborators, and that trust never wavered even when we were two-plus years into the edit and the story still wasn’t quite working. Our collaborative process was fairly straightforward: Jean and I would edit together, then, when I felt we were ready for feedback, I would send it to Becca for notes. Becca would usually join us in the edit bay one or two days a week, and we would spend that time discussing themes, story choices, ideas on how to move forward, and Muscogee culture and history. As we got closer to picture lock, Becca’s time in the edit bay increased. I don’t think there was ever a moment where it felt like we were “negotiating” creative decisions because we were nearly always on the same page and she was willing to follow potential threads with us as we worked them out in the edit.

Becca’s trust in us had an additional effect, though. Because she gives you so much leeway to figure out problems on your own, when she does step in and feels strongly about something, you know you have to listen. If a story beat didn’t make sense, or the vibe of a scene was off, or we misrepresented some aspect of Muscogee culture, Becca would let us know and we knew we would need to figure out a way to fix it.

4. What specific advantages did collaboration bring to your editing process on *Bad Press*, compared to your experiences (if any) working on projects where you were the sole decision-maker?

When you are collaborating with an editor or a director, I find that you can be wrong faster, which is what you want - to be wrong as soon as possible so you can fix it. Maybe the director has an idea for a scene and the editor has an idea for a scene and neither of them work. A good collaborator can help you generate new ideas, and potential fixes, fairly quickly. When I'm the sole-decision maker, I don't have that dialogue in the room, which is frustrating. So, I end up having to watch the cut more to figure out what's wrong, which then burns me out on the footage more quickly than if I had a collaborator. When I'm alone, I'm more desperate to show a work in progress to another person to get some outside perspective. While collaborating on *Bad Press*, I could just turn around and show Jean what I was working on, and vice versa, to get feedback and keep moving.

5. How do you find that creative tensions or differing perspectives between an editor and director affect the final film? Do these moments typically enhance or complicate the storytelling?

Some amount of creative friction and differing perspectives can be fruitful. Jean, for example, has a high emotional radar when it comes to watching raw footage. Allowing her to follow that radar and fight for the moments that she cared about definitely made *Bad Press* a better film. At the same time, I was more aware of the overarching structure and flow of information necessary for the drama to work, so I was able to provide that perspective. If one or the other was absent, the movie would have suffered immensely.

Generally, though, I can feel when a collaborator's perspective is too different from mine to benefit the project. It can become obvious fairly quickly if you aren't making the same movie. If my collaborator

doesn't want to hear my ideas, or rigidly adheres to a preconceived notion of what the movie "should" be, that tends to complicate the process and negatively affects the final product.

6. As someone with experience in both directing and editing, how do you think the collaborative editing process influences narrative structure in a documentary compared to a solo director-editor approach?

Collaboration in the edit bay often includes throwing structural ideas around and trying things out that you may not have thought of on your own. I think it's harder, but not impossible, to make these types of structural changes when you're working alone. This may just be my process - I tend to talk out ideas in the bay, so if I have no one to talk to, I might have fewer structural ideas. So, I definitely think the collaborative process influences narrative structure. More voices in the room means more potential ideas.

7. How often are you thinking about your own identity as the filmmaker during the process of editing a film? Does this ever inform the way you choose to edit a character?

As a young editor, most of my mistakes came from trying to impose my personality, or something I thought was "cool," on the edit rather than reacting to the character's personality. With more experience, I try to adjust my editing to the character in order to bring out their personality as fully as possible. That being said, I do gravitate toward certain types of footage and I do have certain tastes and standards. Even though I'm not consciously thinking about this while I'm working, I do think my personality comes through in my editing. I gravitate toward humor, suspense, absurdity; I enjoy and tend to hold on wide establishing shots; I tend to prioritize narrative movement over character emotion. These things inherently inform how I edit a character, but I try to balance my personality with theirs.

8. When a film is finished, to what extent do you feel the vision for a film and how it is portrayed on screen, is a shared endeavor?

I personally feel that the final film is a completely collaborative endeavor, not just between the director and editor but the entire crew. I hope that every member of the crew feels some amount of ownership over the final vision. As a director, I am looking for the best ideas, and those ideas can come from anyone. Once the film is finished, I hope the crew sees all of those ideas and discussions come to life, and recognize that the final film couldn't have taken this specific shape without their input.

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