

PULL FOCUS:
RACHEL LEARS & ROBIN BLOTNICK
"THE HAND THAT FEEDS"
2014



REACHING AUDIENCES

BLOTNICK: I've always believed that art and media can change people, I mean I don't think that a single work of art can like start a revolution or make a massive change but I know from personal experience that if I hadn't you know even things as banal as listening to a certain music when you're in high school can influence your politics and watching movies like a when I first saw Michael Moore's *Roger & Me* when I was in high school it really inspired me to think about the way that film and activism can be connected.

That said I think it's really important that it be an actual work of art. I don't think that just kind of making video propaganda is going to have a strong effect on people. I think that connecting real stories that really resonate emotionally with people to issues and having a sense of nuance is really important at least at least to me as a filmmaker. Acknowledging the complexity and the subtlety of life and not just painting everything black and white because you're not going to convince anyone or anything if you take that sort of approach.

LEARS: It's not so much about message as about experience and how are they going to understand this character and how do we make this character's experience relevant to them intelligible to them. And, you know there are a lot of choices that go into that, that I would say are a little bit different from messaging per se, but it kind of winds all of that ends up being part of what the, you know, relatively complex message is.

Gaining the Viewer's Trust

BLOTNICK: I think people are very sophisticated when it comes to reading other people they may not know a lot about the issue they may not have read up about the politics of it but they're going to trust a person who is trustworthy or who shares some of their vulnerability on camera and I think that's really the ingredient that makes film work.

I think with films about important issues and that sort of thing, it's always hard to know if you leave the audience feeling like just, like they've watched a fiction film maybe they're not going to connect it to the real world maybe they're going just to feel satisfied and go home and that's it. But I think there is enough, I just think it resonates enough with what's going on right now that people are going to have a hard time just moving past it. They're going to read about the fast-food strikes the next day. They are going to go to their deli and look at their deli worker that hands on their sandwich and they're going to think differently, I hope so anyway.

The Gray Blurry Line

LEARS: We don't consider it an activist film per se we're very concerned with the art of telling the story and making sure those nuances are there. But at the same time I don't think our point of view can really be missed. So that's sort of tricky. And you know ultimately that's really a sort of blurry gray line when you're making a social issue documentary about an issue that you have a point of view on.

BLOTNICK: Yeah we have strong points of view, but I feel like the point of view is only part of what goes into crafting a story. Reality has so much to say about what happened about who these people are about what their struggle is and that, influences the story more than our own point of view our point of view kind of helps to shape it.

LOOKING FOR THE HUMAN SIDE

BLOTNICK: So, Rachel and I were documenting Occupy Wall Street. We had made films before in Latin America but we hadn't really gotten engaged with activism or politics in any really direct way until Occupy Wall Street happened and we kind of got swept up in that filming it and we didn't want to make a documentary about it because there were like hundred other people making documentaries about it. But we were looking for a story that was maybe on the fringes of it that was more of a human story more intimate.

And we heard that a group of workers had reached out to a group at Occupy Wall Street for help in case they needed to occupy their bakery and when we found out they're undocumented immigrants mostly from Mexico we thought that's a story so we started following them and they were incredibly open right away they let us in, they told us about their status publicly. They didn't mind having cameras in their most like secret strategy meetings, and we were really impressed with their courage and we just kept following them. If they hadn't had a success it would have been a lot harder for us to craft the kind of film we wanted to craft. I think it would have been hard not to feel we're just putting out one more story that makes people feel cynical and depressed and like there's no point in trying. We would have tried to craft a story where it's about the political consciousness they developed and what they're going to take away from it, and how they are forever changed by the experience. But I think having the victory made all the difference for us.

Where Are They Now?

LEARS: Yeah we're in touch with the workers from the story. They are, something really interesting just happened recently actually the store was closed again for couple of months while they renovated and rebranded but they, it just reopened last week with the whole same workforce and they negotiated that beforehand so there was never any danger or fear that the whole thing would fall apart. I think we had that fear because with the way the

campaign went every time I get a phone call from Mahoma it's like oh no, what happened, but he's just calling to congratulate us about another festival or something. So it's really remarkable they're still in place the majority of the people that you see in the film are still working there. A couple of them left for personal reasons to look for other jobs along the way. They've also, you know, they hired a bunch a new people when it reopened and a lot of them are still working there as well and they've been able to negotiate things with the management and it's a whole different experience from how it was when they started the campaign.

BLOTNICK: Also some other workers in the film have gone on to become organizers of other stores. Mahoma the main character of course is born into it, like he is just perfect for it so he's been doing it for a while but also Maurilio, one of the older gentleman in the film is now working for the Laundry Workers Center as well as an organizer.

The Other Side

LEARS: We did have a number of off-the-record conversations with the lead investor for the former company and so originally we were hoping that he would appear on camera he wasn't willing to appear on camera. But he did want to speak to us because he wanted to clarify some misconceptions that he felt had happened in some of the press coverage of the film. He was a little confused about the relationship between us as an independent film crew and say the Village Voice Blog. So we asked him a lot of things and we wanted to hear his side of the story and they were, he felt, unfairly targeted by the campaign.

Through that conversation I think we decided that it made sense to cut his name out of the film so a lot you'll see blurs on some the signs with, it's his name and the names of some the other owners. I think there were some misconceptions and miscommunications between him and the campaign I don't think that - I think both sides contributed to that. I think he had a lot to do with why they didn't understand where he might have been coming from. He actually helped bring on the new investors, he was instrumental in getting the new investors in the story so we have a title card that says that when the old investors did that but it's you know it's easy to miss.

So there's, he was actually more pro-union and pro-immigrant than we expected. He said that he thinks the minimum wage should be raised to twelve dollars an hour and businesses that can't compete should fold. So it was a bit of a surprising kind of situation I think there were a lot of different investors co-owning this location he had a greater share than anyone else but not a majority so some of the others, working together had a majority and made some of the decisions such as to close the store.

BLOTNICK: Yeah I would add to that we blurred the names not just because of our conversations with him but because we felt that these issues, the kinds of problems that they're facing at the store, at the Hot & Crusty are just so widespread in restaurants across

the city and across the country. We didn't want it to be about some one villainous company here or one villainous boss. It was it was about a system that needed to change.

DOCUMENTING A STRUGGLE

LEARS: The first folks that we met were Mahoma Lopez, Gonzalo Jimenez who, those were the two leaders, the worker leaders of the campaign. And Virgilio Aran, who is the main organizer in the story. And, all three of them were very open to having the campaign documented. I think in that point they had just started, they felt like they were already making gains in their workplace. They were really pumped about doing this campaign and they were excited. I think it made them feel even more significant. They knew they had the potential to really achieve something historic and unusual. And they were excited about to have that process documented.

I mean we weren't familiar with the labor movement or with immigrant worker issues particularly. So we spent a lot of time in the beginning, and all the way through, talking to everyone the organizers, the lawyers, the workers. But in particularly the organizers and the lawyers who had been through it multiple times what can we expect. And, there was a certain amount of more than anything it happened faster than we expected. And, but they were able to predict everything that happened is somewhat typical. Often, someone will accept a deal with the company and leave the campaign. Often, companies will close a store when faced with difficult negotiations. So there's a lot, that was relatively typical even though the whole thing played out much more dramatically than we imagined.

"How Dare You Tell Me to Move? I Have a Camera!"

LEARS: I think the risks were so much higher for them that we were more concerned that they would get arrested. In protests there is always the risk of getting arrested and, you know, we were familiar with that risk from previous experiences. and I don't think we were too worried. But there was defiantly the risk that that might happen to them.

BLOTNICK: Yeah, I mean we had some kind of anxiety producing moments here and there. It was a little bit nerve-racking for me to walk into the headquarters of Pax Wholesome Foods during this one scene in the film and like, be told repeatedly to stop shooting and continue shooting but, you know, it was a new kind of filmmaking for me I hadn't done the kind of, you know it's almost like a Michael Moore moment I think.

But we never were at any kind of risk at the level the workers were in. I think the camera can be very comforting. I think being behind equipment kind of removes you from the action and if you use it that way you can find more courage than you think you have. Certainly our experience documenting Occupy Wall Street we were in slightly more dangers situations than making this film. But there's something about considering yourself part of

the press that gives you this sort of audacity like how dare you tell me to move, I'm with, I have a camera you know, and I think that can help, that can help like give yourself the courage you need to get the interesting footage.

LEARS: That said, it can be a target. I was going to say that at Occupy Wall Street at some of the bigger more rowdy protests events I did feel a lot more physically threatened than I did in the stuff we were shooting for this film. And I think that there were a lot of press and camera people that you know got their heads cracked and their cameras broken and all kinds of stuff that really is illegal but it does happen. So, I mean I think you have to gauge the situation and know your rights. Cops will routinely tell you to stop filming, I just got to the point where I would say no I have a right to stand here and film, and they would kind of stop bothering me because it was true.

A National Movement

LEARS: There are a lot of groups that are working on stories like this. The tactics aren't always the same exactly. The situations aren't always the same. But, we are building a network of national partners who have local affiliates all over the country. And we want to get the film into the hands of people that can have community dialogs with it I mean I think screening here at American University is definitely part of that vision. We want to screen on campuses we want to be part of broader dialogs about what social movements are and mean and can do. And I think that involves bringing it to workers bringing it to students bringing it to broader communities there's a lot of different ways that plays out.

BLOTNICK: Yeah, I think Occupy Wall Street to me was, it was just one manifestation of a moment in the country where the issue of economic inequality really took over and people all over the country all sorts of ordinary Americans, people who were occupying parks felt very strongly about that issue, and I felt proud to be part of that movement and that moment and I think our film reflects, reflects that.

LEARS: I think working with activists you have a challenge because a lot of times they have their narratives of what they want to say to cameras. And, they have often experience speaking with the media and so they will kind of give you their message. And sometimes it doesn't feel genuine. Sometimes it feels a little bit too too on point, just too rehearsed. So I think it takes a lot, both in the production to sort of get more from activists than that and then also you know, get them to say, make the argument in a slightly different way or how would you explain it to someone who, you know, without talking about without saying the word class struggle.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE YOUNG FILMMAKERS?

LEARS: Do you want to tell them our thing?

BLOTNICK: Sure, yeah. I guess what I would tell myself when I was younger, perhaps in college is make sure that your subject is a topic that a lot of people want to hear about. Because we all have our unique obsessions and interests and I think the best thing you can do is find something that a lot of people want to hear about and get passionate about. Find your own entrance to that subject because with documentary topic is everything and so yeah I would say go ahead find that find the subject to change the world but make sure it's something that kind of hot right now that maybe it's really relevant to a lot of people's lives.

LEARS: Or alternatively or perhaps at the same time make sure you find what the niches are, and connect with the people that are in those niches. Because maybe it's not a topic that's going to be relevant to everyone because that's almost beyond the definition of what an audience is. But you know, make sure you figure out who it's going to reach, and who you want it to reach and be realistic about, that and you know, think about that as you're making it make those connections beforehand, so that you can really make sure that it has a place to go and that you have a strategy for getting it there.

Imagining the Audience

LEARS: Within the process of making a film, everything from the story you choose to tell, the point of view that you use to present a narrative - we made a very conscious choice to make a film that was imagining an audience of workers as well as consumers. You find with a lot of social justice documentaries that the you can just kind of tell the imagined audience is kind of the general public, maybe not, maybe consumers, maybe people who are not in the country or the situation of what is being represented. And I think we really wanted to reach both the types of people that are having these experiences in their workplaces and people who, for whom that experience is very foreign.

Sharing a Vision

LEARS: It has its challenges, but I think you see in documentary, more than almost any art form pairs either couples or friends you know that are working together it's a form that requires a lot of dedication and probably unpaid investment up front and that's very difficult to do on your own. It can be done we both did it separately before we did it together plenty of people do it alone. But it's very it's definitely helpful to have someone who's got your back who can take on some of that labor.

BLOTNICK: Yeah, I would say you absolutely need a partner. Do you have to co-direct with that partner? I wouldn't say you do. I think producer-director teams are very popular and work really well. Co-directing it something we just decided for this project because we just both were kind of equally passionate about it. Rachel found the topic, so she's sort of, she gets first billing perhaps. But at the point that I was so invested in it that I've put in so much of my time and energy and I cared so much about how it came out, we decided that we are just going to team up and be co-directors.

LEARS: And I think co-directing too, I mean you want to pick your collaborators with someone who really shares a vision with you. And by the time we started working together we knew each other very well we knew our approaches to film very well, we knew and we didn't have a lot a conflicts about a vision for the documentary, you know obviously we argued about stuff. But that's, you know, it's always tricky to figure out a division of labor but a collaboration is, I think kind of the key to everything it's really hard and there is a reason why films have so many credits at the end.