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Ethics and Filmmaking

Ideas Arising from the Documentary Film Works of Professor Melinda Levin

Melinda Levin is both a professor and a documentary filmmaker. In the documentary “The Last Lesson”, Professor Melinda Levin films the events leading to the death of her father. At the time the documentary was being filmed, her father was dying of lung cancer that had spread to his brain and caused brain cancer as well. At the time she was shooting the footage, she had no intention of making the video for distribution or for anyone else to see. The footage was being exclusively for personal reasons, and at the request of her father to film the events.

Some could argue that this is a form of exploitation on the filmmakers part, in exposing a sick and helpless person to the camera, or if it is distributed, the world. But in this particular situation I see it completely differently. We are not talking about some sleazy filmmaker coming into the life of a man struggling to overcome cancer, with the intensions of making a name for himself or getting his big break. This case involves a close family member, who is emotionally attached to the patient and just happens to be a filmmaker. Dr. Levin was not in it for fame or fortune, she simply granted a dying man his request. And I personally cannot blame her for that.

While listening to Dr. Levin describe the way the film was made, I could not help but try to place myself in her situation. I love my parents dearly, and I am very close to them, especially my mother. If my father was dying of cancer I don’t know how I would deal with that emotionally. But, if my father asked me to shoot the events leading to his death, like Professor Levin’s father did, I would certainly do it out of respect. I believe that I would definitely be able to put my emotions aside to make a film that honored my father without exploiting him.

One important ethical issue that Levin was able to avoid was exploitation. When she was approached by KERA, and asked to produce a film about death, she did not have to wrestle with the issue of whether or not she betraying her father because he asked he to shoot the events and he gave her explicit permission to do so. With that in mind, Professor Levin was still walking a fine ethical line, while trying to decide when to shoot and what to shoot. One of the major reasons for this struggle was the fact that in this particular case, she represents both a filmmaker and a daughter. “When do you stop being the filmmaker, and return to being the daughter?” This struggle to determine what and how much to shoot actually hindered her from making a film in the manner in which she usually does. While shooting the events she makes use of guerilla filmmaking techniques, which takes a raw, edgy, and spontaneous approach to making films.

Although, I totally agree with Professor Levin’s decision to film her father, I cannot say that I agree with her decision to actually produce the film, and ultimately have it distributed to the world through PBS and shown at film festivals. I personally might feel a little guilty distributing such a film after the death of my father, even if I had been given his permission to do so. But this is in no way a criticism of Professor Melinda Levin, or her work. I am speaking from the outside looking in, and I have absolutely no way of understanding the pain, struggle, or battles that go on within one’s conscience and beliefs to undertake a project like this. Hopefully, I never have to deal with a situation like this, but in this crazy world you just never know.

Another documentary that Professor Levin has done that intrigued me was called “Standing on the Edge Watching”. In this film she followed a homeless man in New York, and actually lived with time from time to time. She told his story and the two of them quickly established a mutual respect that would eventually evolve into a strong friendship. Once again this caused me to try and place myself in her situation. I quickly tried to weigh the advantages

and disadvantages of developing a strong relationship with the subject of a film. Sure you may be able to gain further access to them through the aspect of trust, but is it really worth possibly risking the integrity of film?

I believe that I could make a much more truthful film about a subject who remained distant than I could about a stranger who became a friend. Subconsciously, I think I might inadvertently cover up certain aspects of a story that shed a negative light on the subject with whom I had built a relationship. This reminds me of the situation a nature filmmaker is constantly placed into. When shooting a nature film, you never step from behind the camera to save the prey that is unknowingly about to be killed because the integrity of the film would be damaged. I believe that this could also be the case when dealing with human subjects as well.

I am also faced with the question of why Dr. Levin chooses to film the way she does. Her filming style makes use of aesthetic techniques which give the audience an “up close and personal view” of the subject. She has produced numerous projects and each one has increased her knowledge and experience in filmmaking. I can only imagine how much her filming styles and ethics have changed since she first ventured into the world of documentary filmmaking. She briefly touched on this subject when she cited the fact that her mindset and technique have changed since she filmed “Standing on the Edge Watching”, and that if she were to edit it again it would be done completely differently. Also the way she goes about her filmmaking is very open and frank. She doesn’t try to hide anything from her subjects, she basically expresses all her wants and concerns in the very beginning, and establishes a channel of communication between herself and those who she is working with to capture a story on film.

In addition to explaining some of the ethics that come in to play when shooting a film, professor Levin also presented some words of advice. The advice that caught my attention was to make a decision early on in pre-production about what direction you want to go in, how the film will be shot, and how the film will be edited. She explained that a lot of what goes into editing is intuition, and that hopelessness sometimes you tend to edit in a way that resembles your mood and state of mind. This information is of great value because the way you edit can greatly affect the way your vision is displayed to the audience. For instance, I'm sure everyone knows that homeless people exist, and that it is a huge problem in America. But until you see a story such as this, when homelessness goes from being just a situation, to actually having a name and a face that you can visually see, you may possibly be somewhat reserved in your emotions. Dr. Levin's documentaries allow you to emotionally and visually interact with subjects and situations that you might not otherwise ever come in contact with.

As an aspiring filmmaker, I hope that I will have a successful career in the not too distant future. I know that there is the possibility that opportunities will arrive that will seem too good to pass up, especially to someone who will be new in the profession. I also understand that with such great opportunities may come ethical questions that may be extremely difficult to answer. The media and the arts, be it film, video, or television, hold a great deal of influence over those who view these works for knowledge or entertainment. The decisions that one makes may not only affect the work, but also those who view it. There is a saying that "With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility", and I truly believe that media has great power over the way people act, interact, and think. I just hope that if and when the time comes I make the right decisions, and let my ethics be my guide.