DOCS IN ORBIT / MASTERS EPISODE LYNNE SACHS PART 2 TRANSCRIPT

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DOCS IN ORBIT – INTRO

Welcome back to part two of our Master Edition Episode featuring the highly acclaimed feminist, experiemental filmmaker and poet, Lynne Sachs.

In the first part of the episode, Lynne Sachs spoke about how feminist film theory has shaped her work and her approach to experimental filmmaking.

We also discussed her collaborative process in her past films including, TIP OF MY TOUNGE and her short documentary film A MONTH OF SINGLE FRAMES (for Barbara Hammer) which is currently available to screen at Sheffield Doc/Fest until the end of this August.

Today, we continue the conversation about her latest feature length documentary film, **FILM ABOUT A FATHER WHO**.

FILM ABOUT A FATHER WHO is perhaps one of Lynne's most personal works and the longest of her collaborations. Filmed over a period of 35 years, Lynne Sachs collected interviews with her father, her siblings and other family members in an attempt to understand the web that connects a child to their parent and a sister to their siblings.

With a nod to the Cubist renderings of a face, Sachs' cinematic exploration of her father offers simultaneous, sometimes contradictory, views of one seemingly unknowable man who is publicly the uninhibited center of the frame yet privately ensconced in secrets.

In the process, Sachs allows herself and her audience inside to see beyond the surface of the skin, the projected reality. As the startling facts mount, Sachs as a daughter discovers more about her father than she had ever hoped to reveal.

Film critics and programmers have described **FILM ABOUT A FATHER WHO** as "a divine masterwork of vulnerability that weaves past and present together with ease."

I definitely consider this film essential viewing for filmmakers who lean towards the personal.

FILM ABOUT A FATHER WHO had its world premiere at Slamdance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. It then went on the screen at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City as part of Documentary Fortnight, and will be having it's international premiere at Sheffield Doc/Fest in Autumn.

Lynne also briefly speaks about her writing process, and her book, Year by Year Poems.

Christina:
I think we should go to ***Film About A Father Who* (2020)**, which was shot over a period of 35 years, and it's described as a portrait of your father, though actually I think in your film, you say it's not a portrait of your father.

Lynne:
The convention of a portrait is sort of one facade. And as I was making that film, I started to think about Cubist paintings, portraits, let's say - Pablo Picasso made portraits of his daughter, Maya Picasso, or, you know, there, there's a way that you see multiple facades at the same time, multiple sides of a person. And so I think we tried to, together myself and my siblings construct, an understanding of our father, which I think basically any child, whether that child knew their parents or not, you try to have a mental image of them in order to understand how you yourself can move forward.

So, in some ways it's like a failed portrait because I certainly didn't have access to all of the things that one might think that one should ask, but I actually was able to finish it when I realized that the pursuit of knowledge of my father, which might lead me to understand myself and my family better was what the film was. It was a pursuit. It's driven the desire to paint a picture of a person, but it also has lots of holes because that's kind of the way we can, we can know anybody else or not know.

Christina:
And it's also a very moving pursuit and I appreciate and am grateful for all your films and this one in particular. So 35 years though - so can you talk a little bit about what was the first kernel of the idea? So where did the film start in terms of process and what the motivation to begin filming your father?

Lynne:
I'd probably say in a very typical way that perhaps as a going back years as a young woman, I was both enchanted by my father and deeply exasperated by him. And, I wanted him to be like everybody else's dad, and yet he wasn't.

There's always this impulse by children to be both conventional and invisible and to be a little different. And so I was kind of in a quandary about that.

And, from an early age, I knew my father was not monogamous, even before I knew the definition, that word.

I saw him as letting down my mom, or I saw him as going from one girlfriend to the next or one wife to the next. And, and, and it seemed like he was always kind of indulging his own interests and I felt like resentful of that while I also was completely enamored with my dad and the sense that he was very loving to me, he respected my work as a student and as an artist and -

Practically every film I've ever made, my father was there for the premiere in that old fashioned way. Like, does your father come to the spelling bee? If you're a good speller come to, you know, I never was a good speller, but he would come to things and clap, but it was all the other stuff that was sort of the in between things that he couldn't necessarily be counted upon.

And, there was a point where I started making films, which was in the mid eighties. And then by 1991, I said, Oh, I'm like, I make experimental documentaries. And maybe I feel connected enough to my work as an artist then maybe it could be part of my own process of understanding who my dad is and who I am in relationship to it.

So in 91, I consciously thought I'm making a film with and about and around. And, and despite my dad, and he loved the idea and he was seemingly cooperative, in his own way. So he'd say things like we're losing light then, or, you know, that's a cut or all that kind of movie language. It became truly like a running joke in my family. *"Oh, Lynne's making her dad film again."*

So I had high tapes and mini DV tapes and 16 millimeter that I just kept shooting for all those decades, And then I kept being really baffled. I had to make it, and I felt there were two reasons. I think why I finish it, initially.

And one was that it was hard, painful to make. And my other films gave me more joy at got point.

And then second of all, when I dare to look back at the material at shot on these cameras that now seem to obsolete video cameras or film cameras I'd look at the footage. I was very judgmental.

I thought it was horrible because I was trying to deal with my personal life. At the same time I was, I was making a movie and I felt aesthetically that it was very compromised.

And then about three years ago, I said, I have to finish the film because I needed to move on to the next phase of my life, whatever that may be.

I saw my dad get older, though keep in mind you grow older at the same rate that I grow older at the same rate that he does, we do it day by day. But he was having some problems with his speech so I didn't think I'd get very much further with our conversations.

Christina:
So 35 years of footage, so it's um, I can't imagine how much footage that you amassed over that period of time.

And, I was totally in this film from the very first shot where we see this shared moment between you and your father. And it's a very recognizable moment. It's very touching. It's - you're with him, you're, you're giving him a haircut which so many daughters do to their, to their fathers. And it immediately establishes a relation between two people between you and your father.

And for me, this relation is carried out through the film, and this closeness, but also the acceptance of the pain that comes with this closeness.

And you come back to this similar shot in the end where we see you both on the sofa, watching a film together. And by the time we get to both of you sitting together, there's meaning in that image because we've kind of been on a journey of, of, uh, of your reckoning with him.

So I wanted to ask, I mean, I just think that these, the beginning finding that the beginning of the ending are just so powerful for me. I wanted to ask about how it was finding the opening and the closing of the film.

Lynne:
Clearly you are asking this as a filmmaker, so I love it. Because when we're editing work, especially work, that wasn't shot with the, with the kind of structure in mind, we're always looking for the shape of the work.

There are a few images that I knew would in a sense, like a balloon, would inflate with meaning for the audience. The audience would be able to create that fullness based on your immersion in these 74 minutes.

The image of the brushing of the hair on the cutting is kind of repeated, but the first time it's like a gesture, like a woman, you don't even know maybe this is the daughter, but I needed to land myself as filmmaker.

For example, when you're making a movie, do you put a film by, or directed by at the beginning? I didn't want to do that. So I had to leave my fingerprint pretty early. So the fingerprint was actually on the scissors in a way.

Like if you saw scissors in a film, it's kind of like **MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA** and you see **Dziga Vertov's Elizaveta Svilova**, I don't know how to pronounce her name, but you see her with the scissors cutting that film, you know, that she edited that film.

So you see this person with scissors and there's something that says this person might be involved on a deeper level.

So, by the time you get to the end and you see the two of us sitting on the couch, or you see my cutting of the hair again, you know, you know who I am.

And it's tricky because do you give ideas for yourself? I didn't, you know, like there's a lot of like little details that you're trying to work out.

But I really appreciate your thinking about the visuals in that way because I try to make films that aren't so dependent on dialogue. And especially a movie like this, when you don't have the chance to direct people and you can't say, "*can you do it that again*?"

So you have to take those images that have resonance beyond the plot or beyond the conversations. And I tried not to have anything that I would call a B roll in any of my footage. So the B roll the convention of the B roll, which is just backdrop to voiceover, like, *Oh, well, let's go into that folder called B roll*. And then it doesn't have any resonance, it's filler and no shots should be filler.

The B roll folder or envelope should be those images like that resonate beyond the story.

There's one other shot in the film that I used that lasted about seven minutes, but I use it three times. And it's the image of the children. Me and my siblings like out in the, in a little stream

bed in the rocks, and you hear my father because he shot it. It was shot on VHS. It was kept in a garage for like 30 years. It's very degraded.

But to me, that image is so important because it has this fatherly resonance, where a father is shooting a home movie and also being a little bossy and also getting irritated and also lovingly recording his own children with his camera.

And I think it's shot exquisitely. Like, you know, when we talk about a classical image that takes on a triangle shape and everything kind of moves in towards the center of the, of the frame.

So I use that film three times and it's not that the image was repeated. It's continued. I don't like to repeat the same shot, but as it continues, I hope it does what you suggested earlier that each time you engage with it in a deeper and deeper way.

Christina:
So yeah, this takes me to ask about the editing - so how did the editing process work on this film?

Lynne:
I'm really glad you asked that because I wanted to talk about one extremely important person, and that is **Rebecca Shapass**. So she is a young artist who was a student of mine when I was teaching at NYU.

And she, about three years ago became my studio assistant meaning she comes to my editing room, studio space a couple of times a week and we work all different kinds of things.

And I said, one of the things we're going to do is go through all the tapes and transcribe them. And what was so liberating was as we were doing that, which we did for a year, she was never judgmental. She was never kind of, Oh my God.

You know, she would just listen and she would ask me questions - such good questions that, I said, Hmm, I think she understands this material in a way, with a level of detachment that I cannot get.

I cannot edit this form by myself. I can't, because I'm always trying to contextualize, I'm always trying to apologize for situations.

Like, I think women do that a lot and sorry to make a generalization, but -

Christina:
You are apologizing right now.

Lynne:
Yeah. I just apologize. Right. But we take situations for which we have no control and we still apologize. So I think that I was going to do that throughout and even the film would have become a big apology problem.

So by working with Rebecca over the course of three years, and we worked on other things as well, uh, it became more fun and fun is key. It became more about making a film rather than just excavating material that I found very upsetting to look at.

And, she was sitting at the keyboard and I was next to her. So when we were transcribing, sometimes I would be typing and she would be moving through Premiere and vice versa.

And so, within a few months, I realized that nothing embarrassed me, and that was a breakthrough. She just was so open to work with. And supportive. And I think she learned a lot. I'm sure the most complicated film she ever edited. So it was a breakthrough for both of us. So that helped a lot.

Christina:
That's great, I was also giong to ask about managing the vulnerability. You're exposing yourself. And so, it sounds like she was integral in being able to distance you from the material and also having fun with it as well.

Lynne: (01:33:58)
Yeah, and it's not just Rebecca now because I've now shared it with a lot more people than Rebecca. And that was emotionally pretty hard, but also has led to so many interesting interactions with people that I still, I feel okay about it. So, um, but I wasn't sure how I would feel because this, you know.

I made a film, for example, the House of Science, that's super personal, but it's also very generic. Like I'm talking about women's experiences, even though I kept a diary, it could have been a diary button, woman. But this story is very much my story. And so it has layer of vulnerability that, um, you know, which is tricky.

Christina:
Yeah. I think it's brave. I think these types of films are really compelling because they're so honest.

Christina: (01:39:06)
There are a couple moments in this film that, um, that I wanted to kind of pull out and have you speak about, uh, I think because they're, they're reflexive, they're, there's this like self reflexive.

There's this moment where it's a young age, you you're, you're it's you at it as a young filmmaker, seemingly talking to your father. I think your father might actually be filming you you're outside on a patio and introducing the idea of like, why you're going to be doing this project...

And the second, the second moment that I wanted to kind of pull out and have you talk about is I think it might've been your brother who said it, which is very self reflexive and it's that "you and Dana liked to ask dad for things that he won't give you."

And after that, you talk about, um, the motivation for this and about understanding your father and about using the lens as a way to capture the reality in a sense. And it's a moment in the

film where it's actually about the film. It's like, you, we understand why you're actually making this film so yeah, cause you're talking about moments in the film.

Lynne: (01:40:03)
I really appreciate your picking both of those moments. And I think that those are definitely examples of material that initially I might have thought would not be included in the film. And that's one of the reasons I would share, like with any, um, young filmmaker to cut your home movie and then to go back and look at the sections that you dismissed because they weren't, they weren't useful enough or they were, they were hard to understand orally or they were, they were about the making an initial reason. Well, why would I include something about the making when I'm making it? And then you go back and they, you, that that's kind of the glue that content sections together.

So, um, when my brother's cutting, um, telling me that, that I do a certain thing at first, I'm going to feel like how dare you tell me, but then I realized that he is looking at the rhetoric of filmmaking.

Lynne: (01:41:16)
So the part of the rhetoric of documentary filmmaker is to ask the questions that we think people won't answer, but to ask them again and again and again, so he's a fiction filmmaker and I'm a, my brother Ira is a fiction filmmaker. So he's not, he's not standing in front of those walls because he writes stories, but I'm a documentary filmmaker more so, so I'm constantly being put in front of situations that I'm trying to enter, but there are so many walls that come in front of come, come before me.

There's also a process of therapy. You could say, which I'm not trying to say the film is therapy, but I think Ira recognized that part of the maturation process is to recognize things that you cannot control.

like to recognize where you, the point at which you cannot shape other people.

And I think that, um, my sister and I were always expecting our dad to come around and to be what we wanted him to be. And I think that's, that's part of like eventually becoming a mature human being is to recognize that people are who they are.

And so maybe my filmmaking was, it's a series of chapters in which I'm constantly trying to figure out who he is, but also who I am in relationship to it. And so there's that section, where we're sitting on a patio and another one of the many visits where my father came to see me, which he's always done. And I was living in San Francisco at the time.

And so he'd come and we'd do things like eat meals or go to Alcatraz. And I'd say, now I have to make my movie dad, I'm going to ask you the same old questions and we'd sit. And I was really a young filmmaker. So I sat on a patio.

And the sound was horrible. And I didn't think I could even use that. I never even considered using it because it sounded so bad. And then I realized that it's this opportunity to look at myself as a younger person and to see that, that I was trying to reveal to him what I was trying

to do. You know, I'm making a film about you sort of, and other things at the same time. And I'm, I, I actually love in film and audio until I love when people can't find the right word.

I'd rather I watch somebody in search of meaning and have them sit there for like, I think in a film when there's a pause, then the audience has a place to enter in wonder there's an anticipation. I think pauses are great, but there's very few of them in documentary they're always filled with music or this or that.

So like you brought up that point that I was searching for my words. And I think that now that I look back at it, even though it's flawed, because I didn't know what to say, it has this opportunity for the viewer to think about process.

Christina: (01:45:13)
Yeah. I love that though. Yeah, it is about the acknowledgement of process in film, in your films. Um, and you do it in so many of them. I mean, it's definitely a part of your style, a part of your language is to include in there the process a bit.

I want to get to your writing and your process of writing, because that's also another element that is in your work. It's constantly popping up. I mean, you're, you're a poet. The language is very beautiful in all of your films. Um, the way that you described situations and then also in your year by your poems book, that accompanies the film **Tip of My Tongue**. Um, so can you talk a little bit about your approach to writing?

Lynne: (01:48:25)
Um, actually that could be another thread of like, I could explore through a lot of my work going back to, uh, the film house of science, which has a lot of writing, um, diary writing. And you hear, you actually hear the sound of my urinating at the same time that you see the, the, the words handwritten words on the screen. And what I tried to do all the way along in my work was to, to, to take writing as a, as a method of, of getting in touch with the internal voice.

So instead of saying writing is for writers, um, which so many people do. They're like they say, you know, I make films and I'm not a writer, but, but in a sense, writing is about introspection. It's just accessing that introspection. That's kind of the, you know, you could say the calling card of the essay film or you, I know you're interested in Chris Marker.

There's a way that he would write, for example, in Sans Soliel, he would write as if he were writing from a woman's voice or a woman reading a letter from a man. And there were all these kinds of iterations of the writing process. So I think that the writing is very active. It's not just a kind of skill that you have, or you don't have, but it's an engagement with your present moment, as well as your past and how those, through writing, we can integrate the present and the past.

That is something that's really hard to do with the image. We look at the image and we say, "Oh, that's like an archival image. So it's in the past." Or we see some new images, so it's present. But in writing we can have this fluidity through time.

And I'm also really interested in writing as a gesture.

So I mentioned the part about the writing in **IN HOUSE OF SCIENCE**, I have the sound of the pencil on the paper, or the sound - we write in our heads.

If you think of writing as just an access to what is on your mind, what is concerning you, especially during the pandemic, what is of utmost importance to you or how you respond to things, then it's a bit like writing is a validation of your mind.

Christina:
Right, and I think that's what I appreciated in your, by your poems is the process is again, it's the, you put the process in everything, whether you're making a film or whether you're writing a book or publishing a book of poems, you have the poem, but then you also have the scrap of paper that the poem was written on in its earlier form - and I go back and forth when you were kind of brainstorming what that poem be. Um, so it's really, it's really, uh, uh, nice to be able to see that.

Lynne:
I really liked that you say you go back and forth, because usually a book like a film moves in a progression from page one to page 64 or from minute one to minute 74. And we as an audience or as a reader, we expect everything to move forward.

And I think one of the experimental aspects to that book is that your eyes can move in various ways. You can move from the top of the page to the bottom. You can move left to right. You can go backwards and forwards. And so there's a kind of freedom that's different. And I think that was exciting to me as a graphic. And also because it's built on a chronology and we physically cannot go backwards in time, but through filmmaking and through writing and poetry, we can.

Christina:
And, so, Year by Year Poems, your book of poetry, where can we find that?

Lynne: (02:22:09)
Well, of course it's on Amazon, but it's also on small press distribution, which is a fantastic not for profit, but it's on bookshop.com. Pretty much any place that you buy or order books, it's available.

Christina
And I highly recommended it as a birthday gift! Thank you so much!

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