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**Megan:** Alexandra Hidalgo is an assistant professor at Michigan State University. Her research deals with film and video production, film studies, gender, race, immigration, and memoirs. She's also an award winning documentary filmmaker. Her films have been recognized and screened around the world. I sat down to talk with Alexandra about her journey as a feminist filmmaker, how video is being incorporated into the field of rhetoric and writing, and how we can work to become and support future film makers.

**Alexandra:** My family is a family of storytellers, but we were for the most part writers. My Grandmother was a pretty successful writer in Spain and the US actually and Venezuela between the 30's and 50's, and my Dad was an unsuccessful writer in the 70's. So when I was growing up what I wanted to be was a writer, that was the thing for me.

My Dad disappeared in the Venezuelan Amazon when I was six, so I had spent a lot of time trying to make sense of who he was and what happened to him and so on. So I have spent most of my adult life in some way or another being dedicated to this. My Dad has always been a big driving force for me as a human being. He was great and magical and we were very close, so when he disappeared that was a profoundly traumatic thing, and of course, there was nobody and nothing it was just like, we didn't even know if he was dead, some people said he ran off with this woman, there were all these stories. And he died, well disappeared in the middle of the jungle so it was really hard to go and find out what happened, so it became a very defining moment and it was a story that it happened when I was six and I remember telling my Mom, I want to write a book about this.

(music transition)

**Alexandra:** We had cameras growing up, so I had held a camcorder and I liked them, but it never occurred to me that I could potentially make films until I found myself not having enough time to write this piece about my Dad during the Ph.D. But also having a desperate need for that creative storytelling aspect of my being to find a place in my new life.

(music transition)

**Alexandra:** I'm a pretty intuitive person and I make decisions very rashly. So I was 20 years old and my best friend was like I met this guy and he's perfect for you, he should be the love of your life, and I was dating a filmmaker then or I had just broken up with him and I was like no filmmaker guy, I'm still sort-of thinking about him and she was like no, I'm just going to have you meet this guy because he's great, he's like amazing. And I walked through the door and I was like oh, yeah – that one, that's the one. That was on a Wednesday and by Saturday we were living together and we've been together, that was in 1999 and it's 2017, 18 years, two children later. So film was sort-of like that, I went to talk to my advisor because I was like I think I want to do film and she was like well, Shirley Rose was my advisor, mentor at the time and she was

like, you can't do film studies that wouldn't make any sense for us, if you want to do film, you should make movies and I was like, oh okay.

**Megan:** Like all filmmakers, Alexandra's enthusiasm for the genre helped her to overcome technical hurdles and frustrations allowing her camera work and editing skills to improve over time.

**Alexandra:** I'm from Venezuela, I have lived here since I was 16 years old and I have this set of feminist friends here and feminists friends there and the feminist friends here would never get breast implants because that would be so weird but the feminist friends there all had them and that's always been very confusing to me because plastic surgery seems weird to me, so I was like if I'm going to make a movie, I should do it about something I am curious about. So I was like I will just go to Venezuela for 10 days and find some Venezuelans and ask them about their boobs and see what they tell me, so that's what I did.

(Clips from Perfect trailer)

**Alexandra:** And off I went and well, not surprisingly it turned out I was a very good interviewer because I had many years of practice interviewing people. So I was a hell of an interviewer, got incredible responses and I didn't know what I was doing with a camera. So the film is fine, it's interesting, the responses are so fascinating, it's in English, it's in Spanish. I love it and I also hate it, because it sounds bad, it looks tacky. Yes, it looks like someone picked up a camera and made a movie and had some decent instincts and also had no idea what she was doing. What that film taught me is that I did have some strengths and those strengths were wonderful, but that I needed to figure out the technical stuff and that it was going to be a rough road. And that unlike writing, which had always been my gig, you can't fix bad footage, so you can actually take the stuff that you wrote and be like, oh god that's really bad prose and then 12 hours later walk away with good prose, that is impossible to do with footage. Like now that I know more, I know we could've fixed some of it, but we could have never made it great.

**Megan:** Lucky for us, Alexandra shares the knowledge she acquired as she made mistakes in her new book, "Cámara Retórica: A Feminist Filmmaking Methodology for Rhetoric and Composition," where she includes a section on the basic fundamentals of shooting film.

**Alexandra:** It's funny because I was somebody who had seen a million films, I have always loved films, I have watched films. I'm a very visual person, I like photography. I have taken a lot of great photos, so I continued to be quite surprised when I started editing the footage that somebody with that type of a background would shoot footage that was so awful (laughs), and that I fixed some of it, but ultimately it's not great. I think that happens to a lot of us and I feel like if we at least are made aware that these are pitfalls that we can trip ourselves over we'll be more likely to not do it. I made that section for my younger self, like I was like, oh Alex if you could have seen this, if this existed before you went to Venezuela and you could have seen it then "Perfect" would have been a much better movie.

**Megan:** I asked Alexandra what her best advice was for people who want to create films but have no experience using a camera or editing video footage.

**Alexandra:** There's a few things that one can do. One of my favorite options is to go out and do something for your family or for the dog kennel that you volunteer for, so you're going to be like oh we're all getting together for the book club that I'm a part of, let me make like a little video about this conversation and you know if it didn't work it doesn't matter because it's super low stakes, there's nothing to worry about and I'm going to have some fun and sort-of make something. So that's one approach to do some low-stakes, but even with the low stakes ones you should watch some videos online, they give you tips for filming and know that you're going to watch the videos and you're going to think that you got it and you're not, you're going to be like oh no actually I didn't listen to that right or I didn't do that right, but next time I will because it was so painful to see it all go to hell.

But then you still have to learn to edit footage and this is where I don't know if my advice is popular or not, but I would just learn the best software, so I would learn Adobe Premiere, because that's the software that will work at all levels and there's a little bit of a higher learning curve, but I've had to go from Final Cut 7 which took me about 80 hours to learn, to Final Cut X which took me about 30 hours to learn to now Premiere which took me about 30 hours to learn and I'm like no, just spend the 80 hours on the Premiere because the difference is just a few more hours the first time around.

And how did I learn? I did Lynda.com, they have wonderful tutorials. I don't need those now, now I just bug my filmmaker friends. I'm like, okay how do you set it up and how do you...? And then I write down questions for stuff that's driving me nuts and I'm like give me 15 minutes of your time and answer these questions for me and I take notes. But there are enough videos out there, and always use video tutorials, not written tutorials because the video tutorials you can literally follow through as opposed to sit around and if a tutorial seems kind-of lame, don't use that one use another one. The other thing is to collaborate with somebody who knows.

In terms of gear, there are the basics and the basics are, you need a camera. I have a Lumix camera that's wonderful, it's a Panasonic it does 4K footage, it does incredible photography and that was like 700 dollars, so that's actually not bad. You have to have a shot gun mic, the minimum, the bare minimum is a shot gun mic on top of your camera, because the cameras come with Omni mics and those pick up everything, the shot gun is unidirectional so that will at least pick up what you are pointing at. So you need those, you definitely need an extra battery, you just do. And you need a camera bag and you need a tripod. That investment to a really nice set-up with those things, that's about 1200 dollars. And what I always tell my students, what I tell people, I'm like, all Christmases, all birthdays, you say can I please have cash because I am saving up for this all those times you were like at Starbucks, no, no, no take that money and save it.

**Megan:** In addition to the pragmatic advice about making films, I also talked to Alexandra about the significance on feminist filmmaking.

**Alexandra:** Filmmaking is like other interesting industries, profoundly male dominated. It wasn't, mind you, like in the 20's the studios had a lot of women writing, editing, directing, Alice Guy-Blache was running the studios. There was all sorts of activity by women and then once film started really making money, women got pushed out because that's usually how it works. It's about 90 percent of the film stories, which are very powerful stories, being created by men is an issue because these stories shape us, we all know this, they shape who we are and how we think and how we want to be and what think the world is like. Women are 50 percent of the population and 50 percent of the films should be made by women just because that would provide a great variety of perspective that we desperately need and I think we would be a much more egalitarian and kind world if that was the case. So for me part of feminist filmmaking is, I am going to support women making films because we need those stories.

So I have mostly, except for my husband who is my cinematographer and a great feminist, I try to work almost exclusively with women and I work a lot with students which means that I can actually afford to work with them. I write grants and I'm able to pay them, but I'm not able to pay at the level that a studio would pay, so there's a trade-off. I work with them and they are more affordable but I also have to do a lot more mentoring and hand holding than I would otherwise, but I love it. I love that feeling of, "okay, I made this movie, but I also created these beautiful relationships with these people who taught me a bunch of stuff and then I taught them stuff and then I get to see their careers grow. So I think especially for people who are working as independent filmmakers or people who are academics making films, working with the younger, less experienced filmmakers is a great deal. And then I also feel like my sets, once I learned how to run a set and now I know how to run a set, are pretty sort-of feminist spaces where your opinion is listened to your needs are taken into account, that doesn't mean that every single thing you want will happen on the set because a set is not like that. But I try really hard for everybody to feel valued and to have a voice. And I'm like oh so these students work in these sets and then they go on to have their own sets and it spreads, this more humane, and I think it makes the films better any way. So when I run a set and I run it with young people, I have a feeling that I am also helping to shape sets of the future that are not mine, that are theirs.

I think filmmaking is hard and I think filmmaking is fun and it's exciting and it's a direction in which the culture is going. Video consumption keeps growing and growing and growing and growing in the Internet, so for us as a discipline to not embrace it fully, is folly (laughs). I think, yes it's hard but there are more and more of us and there's plenty of places to publish and your first couple of things don't have to be great, but you'll get better and you'll learn how to collaborate with others and you'll learn to write to grants so that people will cover the cost of

what you're doing. It's a very complex and full way of engaging with the ideas of others and with your own and I think we need to do it – go make movies!