

PULL FOCUS

JESSICA YU, DIRECTOR, "LAST CALL AT THE OASIS"

Inside "Last Call At the Oasis":

Jessica Yu

So, I was approached by Diane Weyermann at Participant [Media, Inc.] about making a film about water and of course as a filmmaker I was excited because I thought water, you know, it's so visual and beautiful and I was imagining all of the fountains and waterfalls and droplets we could film but then, of course, my second thought was if Participant wants to make a film about water, then whatever's happening with the resource must be much more dire than what I am assuming.

Video SOT

It's the third week in a row without any water. The Army has been called in to protect the capital's water pumps.

Jessica Yu

This perception we like to have about water as this pure unlimited resource and then the reality, which is pretty shocking. So, when I was thinking about how to do the film I realized that I had so many questions and so it wasn't just about scarcity or about issues of contamination or about issues of conflict. I wanted to see how those pieces fit together. So, this is my very ambitious approach to try to figure out is there a way to make a film that can connect the dots where we get a sense of what is it that we're really facing. I guess that was the bottom line. What I wanted to know and how do we make this an issue that people feel urgent about doing something about when we still live in a country where you can turn the tap and water comes out. Whenever it rains people think whatever drought is happening is over, you know. You have this kinda insurmountable psychological, you know, obstacle because it's very hard for it to feel real and that was a big challenge in the film - to make the potential for the resource being unavailable; to make that sort of viscerally understood. So, that's what we tried to do in the film.

Video SOT

Production of oil reaches a peak and then inevitably starts to decline. Like peak oil, there is peak water. We're reaching the limits of what we can use.

Jessica Yu

Everyone in the film needed to be a character, not just someone supplying information and I remember thinking we need an Erin Brockovich. You know, we'd talk about we need an Erin Brockovich, and finally I said, "What about Erin Brockovich?" We're like duh and so, you know, we looked into what she was doing and sure enough she is still

very much on the ground, in the trenches, across the country dealing with communities that had very serious water issues and there were more and more popping up all the time. So, it was one of those situations where we started filming with her and then things naturally came up like Hinkley, the original case from the movie Erin Brockovich, popping up again with further contaminations. So, her story became not just a touch point but something that was evolving on its own. I personally like the idea that the resource can be...that the situation can be managed. That, you know, if you talk to people about "Let's just fix this problem." people get overwhelmed. They say, "How can we do this?", but if you say "Look there's ways that we can manage this. There's things we can do about efficiency. There's things that on a personal level will make a difference over a lifetime." So I think that's a much more graspable way for people to approach something as difficult and fundamental as feeling that water might not be as infinite as we've been able and privileged to expect over our lifetimes. Our experts in the film, they have had their work and their continued struggle and I do use the word very intentionally...has taken a real personal toll. I mean, you know, it's like that lull, "Now this time it's personal." I mean they're really invested in a way that I think makes them really sympathetic and I really see the scientists in the film as heroes, but my own personal view is probably closest to Tyrone's. When in the end of the film he says, "You know, no species lives forever and maybe, you know, humans, we can sort of imagine the end but we don't have to speed along and, you know, hasten our demise." There's ways that we can honor what we've had by trying to, you know, mitigate the damaged that we've caused.

Video SOT

Water is everything. The single most necessary element for any of us to sustain and live and thrive is water.

Jessica Yu

When we were making *Last Call [At the Oasis]*, especially in talking to Jay Famiglietti and Peter Gleick, occasionally talking about conservation and efficiency, but then there was always the asterix. But, of course, you know, population growth, that's the thing. That's the elephant in the room in a way. When we finished with *Last Call*, every Q&A it seems somebody would stand up and say, "Well, why are we talking about conservation when we can't control population? I mean, why aren't you making a film about population?" They said it nicer than that but we had already been thinking about the role of population growth and so that led to the film that we've currently just finished with Participant called *Misconception* and I love that this film came out of *Last Call* because it seems like kind of a continuing inquiry but the other thing I love is that my expectation about what was really happening with population was constantly up-ended in the research, in the filming of this film. So, I feel like the unexpectedness of it is what kind of motivates the storytelling in the film.

Latest Projects and Storytelling Techniques:

Video SOT

We're living in a new world and we are interconnected in a way we have never been before.

Jessica Yu

Well, with *Misconception*, we knew we wanted to do something a little different and we had the support creatively to go in a slightly different direction. So, the film is extremely story based to the point where there's three main stories that are almost, might seem, stand-alone but that they reverberate against each other. So, we only have one expert in the film, Hans Rosling, who's a really fantastic personality as well as someone who really understands data and what we can get from it. So, he is a thread that goes through the film but I guess the idea is to find ordinary people who are kind of on the front lines of these demographic shifts whether they realize it or not and to find the universal in the personal. I guess that's the way to say it but we found really strong stories. I'm really happy with the balance and the difference between them and the most painful thing and the process was just trying to trim them down so that they could live together in the same film.

Video SOT

New Scandal, next Thursday 10/9 central on ABC. All you have to do is say yes. Grey's Anatomy farewell to Christina, new next Thursday on ABC.

Jessica Yu

There's been a lot of more creative freedom that you can see on TV right now just looking at the different kinds of shows that are produced. The strength of the writing and just stylistically there's so much more openness. So, as a documentarian primarily going into that world, it feels more comfortable to know that there's not just one-way that you're supposed to do things cause, you know, in documentary you're constantly shifting the way you tell stories based on whatever it is that is in front of you. So, I find that that's a very exciting thing and it's helpful but what I also like is that in TV oftentimes, you get to play with toys that you don't get to usually do on documentaries but it makes you think in different ways - just visually how you can tell a story and non fiction story using kind of more narrative techniques whether it's...I mean I've used animation quite a bit but I've also, you know, used different lenses and types of equipment and jib arms to just create mood more in a way that I might not have thought of so much if I didn't have the opportunity to work in the narrative side of things so much. Maybe narrative is the wrong word because...

Interviewer

Cause everything...

Jessica Yu

...Everything's narrative right?

Interviewer

Yeah, fiction and non-fiction.

Jessica Yu

Yes, scripted, not, you know, non-fiction. Scripted, maybe is the way to say it.

Video SOT

I do meet people who are scared about population growth but they haven't understood. You don't need to control Population numbers. This is a myth.

Jessica Yu

I think music in some ways and like when I first got it started in documentary, it was unfortunately kinda almost the afterthought because you ran out of money. You ran out of time so you'd kinda cut and then look for music to put on top and kinda make it work. If you were lucky, you had a composer that could come in for a little while. Now it's at the point where on a film, as soon as I have material to show I try to bring in the composer and so it's much more of a back-and-forth. I love cutting to music and I think audiences too expect more out of documentaries in terms of not production value in a slick way but just in a thoughtfulness and how the pieces have to be part of a whole and so with music too there's so many chances to get really talented people who will be able to really bring something to the table. So, I enjoy that in the same way I enjoy, say working with animators. You're working with another independent creative mind who is, you know, coming in and when you get, like a new cue, it can be like oh my god it's Christmas, you know. It's very exciting to see that new thing kinda bring life into whatever you're working on and I also love the back and forth of being able to say, you know, I want something here and then trying to cut to that and then being able to really work back and forth so that you know you get something in the end that you wouldn't have been able to imagine at the beginning.

Social Action & Filmmaking

Jessica Yu

Well, what's interesting and great about working with Participant [Media] is from the beginning they're thinking about when the film comes out, everything that comes from it, so all the social action opportunities of the filmmaking. That [being] said it's not that that will dictate how you make the film. They're thinking of how do we use the film as a launching pad for action that actually can be taken to help address the issues raised by the film. So, it's kind of a parallel thing that's happening. We were allowed a lot of independence in making *Last Call* and also with making *Misconception* in other words we didn't have someone hanging over our shoulders saying, "What are you gonna film next?" We were really able to focus on the storytelling and then knowing that there's

this team ready to pick up the ball and to say, "Okay, you know, now we have the film. How do we engage different groups, different people to keep the conversation going?" I love the idea that a film is kinda the entry point for different discussions, different... even different, what they call, you know, shoulder content, you know, shorter pieces that again can reach and engage audiences in different ways. So, like with *Last Call At the Oasis* there was the Change the Course Campaign to try to restore water to the Colorado River. I've met people who knew about that campaign first and then came to watch the film and of course vice versa and that is [a] really interesting way to integrate the creative side of things and the activists side of things I guess you could say.