

# Amelia's Gift

Danny Mydlack

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## Abstract

Professor Danny Mydlack recounts the mysterious arc of his student's creative unfolding. Amelia, a middle-aged single mom, drops out of the personal videography production class before the end and yet her final assignment is delivered, posthumously, by her adult daughters. For the author, Amelia returned him to the core principles from his student days: the vast, wide terrain that is the true realm of art-making and an embrace of the fullness rather than merely the fineness of art practice. Mydlack proposes that with teaching there is more unseen than seen, more beyond our manipulation than within it, and that pedagogical satisfaction may be partly illusory.

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In the video, a stream of water shot straight down from the top of the frame in slow motion, a foaming column, writhing, twisting, curling in arabesques.

Nearly six months earlier, at the start of the fall, Amelia was the last to enter the classroom to take the one open seat in the circle of chairs I'd arranged. She looked closer to my age than the gathering of fresh undergrads.

We introduced ourselves and the first student decided to rattle off the name of their hometown, their academic major and whether they were a freshman, sophomore, junior, senior. The others followed suit. At her turn, Amelia, in a strong Jamaican accent, simply said, "Amelia is an Islamic name, means someone hard-working, diligent."

Every semester I lose one or two students in the course. They quit coming to class. At some point their name disappears from the electronic roster. If I search, I find their individual record with a 'W' (Withdrawn) next to my course number.

I like to think it doesn't affect me but, as the years accrue, I seem to carry with me these lost souls who have withdrawn. The successes, on the other hand, those students who complete the course, I have celebrated with them in their time and they've moved on from my concern. But the 'W's accumulate.

"I've taught this course for 15 years," I explained to them. When I was hired, I'd volunteered to teach documentary video even though the popular course was fiction film production. As I saw it, no student really *wanted* to learn documentary; some students wanted to side-step all the script-writing/rewriting, actor-auditioning, and crew-wrangling that the fiction course required. My class was the alternative.

From the beginning, I have wanted to promote reality videos as art, not just as information. I've wanted to show how juicy this ordinary life was, how fulsome yet fleeting - stranger than fiction. For me, life is writing its own script all the time nonstop. People everywhere are performing their roles, unrehearsed, exquisitely. The lighting, the sound, the angle of view is unfolding in super-high-resolution, moment by moment.

I glanced around the circle. A few students were looking at their phones. Amelia had filled the margins of my syllabus handout with tiny notes that spilled onto the backside.

The course is rough-sledding, gruesome at times. For the weeks we aren't reviewing the student's take-home assignments, we train up in the tools and skills. Nobody wants to show their work early on in the semester. Later on, most do.

In the early assignments, students partner. They practice interviewing each other, following each other with the camera to get footage, and then edit these bits together into short presentational pieces. Amelia did not live on campus. Amelia lived in her own home and continued to work the night shift as a lab custodian at the local hospital. After surviving the loss of her husband and raising her two little girls, Amelia had relented to give college another try.

Each semester anew, it is a big undertaking and I'd learned, painfully over many years, to break the course down into do-able assignments. We start with videography skills: meticulous hands-on instruction to master the school's state-of-the-art camera. The students refer to it as the hundred-button beast. There are shotgun microphones and lighting kits and there are also interviewing tricks and shooting strategies.

In assignment #1, students shot and edited together a sequence of footage evoking a sense of place and including revealing details (referred to as 'B-Roll'.) The students dutifully gathered the various bits of wide-shot exteriors, carefully-framed interiors, and select close-ups. The clips demonstrated proper lighting, correct exposure, and clean sound. The other students included glimpses into their personal lives - messy desktops, walls plastered with posters and art, and even footage of personal fancies: quirky hobbies, passionate causes, and alternate identities.

Amelia completed her assignments on her own, unpartnered. I recall she included an opening shot - a straight-on view of a hospital entrance, then a sequence of empty hallways leading to a closed door. The next shots included carefully composed views of a lab interior and a variety of details: gleaming just-waxed tile floors, a row of stools tucked under a workstation, and glassware arranged on shelves. It was well-lit, exposed properly, and framed immaculately. It looked like stock footage and I did not say out loud that it felt soulless to me.

On these days when students show their assignments, we carry out a form of feedback I've developed over the years through trial and error. I've adapted it from a chapter in Peter London's 1989 book "No More Secondhand Art." I refer to it as 'the believing game.' We refrain from the usual responses:

- 1) I liked it...
- 2) I didn't like it...
- 3) This part really worked...
- 4) Here's how you can fix it...
- 5) You should see this other filmmaker...

Instead, we momentarily 'believe' in each video as they are screened and we attempt to describe, moment by moment, what each of us noticed on the screen, where our attention was drawn, what we thought was going on, and what associations to our

own direct lived experience it kicked up - especially connections that are seemingly non-logical.

It's a very demanding task for most undergraduates but presenting it as a game seems to appeal to their appetite for a challenge.

To encourage a sense of reciprocity, whoever screens their assignment must, in turn, serve as the respondent to the other student who responds to their work.

Ben sat in the back row. He always arrived in shorts, (even in February) out of breath and propped his battered skateboard against the radiator. I called on Ben to respond to Amelia's B-roll assignment. He freely associated memories of the summer he'd filled in at his father's dental office, sanitizing the metal tools, restocking the medical supplies. He recalled the smell of isopropyl alcohol, the whine of the drill. He commented that as he watched Amelia's shots of the immaculate tiled lab floors that he fantasized skateboarding across their expanses alone at 2am, his urethane wheels squealing on their surface. It was all Ben, true to form, a reliably irreverent and authentic voice from that semester's course.

In turn, Ben showed his montage of skating footage. Ben deliberately had shot with a thrift store camcorder from the 1980s. The footage was grainy and color-smeared and it glitched and rolled out of sync. Ben's camera caught chaotic scenes of his pals, somewhere in a tangle of woods, where a crumbling concrete foundation served as a skateboard arena. One by one, the stringy-haired teens launched themselves across the concrete, bucking up, flipping their boards end-over-end. But Ben had edited out the sounds of grinding and scraping and dubbed in its place what sounded like 'elevator music,' the saccharine easy-listening strains of violins. The effect was unexpected, ironic and subversive.

When it came time for Amelia to respond, she was silent. We waited. I offered the suggestions I normally gave to respondents. She recounted the stream of questions that had flooded her mind watching Ben's video: "Who are these boys and is this a school day? What do their girlfriends think of all this? Whose property are they on and did they get permission? Did it hurt to fall so much?"

I was about to move on to the next student when she added, "...the music...it makes it seem like you are in a dream..."

Our mid-semester Assignment #2 focused on interviewing. In pairs, students took turns interviewing each other and then edited the best bits into a short piece. I'd prepared the class before this assignment with my 'mother of all lectures' in which I revealed that I thought that the secret of 'story' is 2, not 1. That is, a 'story' happens at the edge of two things. These things can be opposites in a life/death struggle. But, way more often, these two things are simply contrasting elements, realities, or forces. Sometimes the 'story' is a matter of one thing laid gently across another. I suggested interview questions like "tell me something that is mis-matched in your life..." or "what are two criss-crossed wants you have?"

On screening day. Bekka portrayed Ross as a 'bicycle-riding anarchist who loved his job at Ace Hardware policing the nuts and bolts aisle, maintaining strict order.' Brett portrayed Mark as a 'devout, scapular-wearing Catholic who was the biggest science-geek.' In Amelia's video, she spoke straight at the camera, detailing her daughters'

achievements at school, their current jobs, and even their dating/ marital statuses.

With three weeks left in the course Amelia went missing. I checked the electronic enrollment and saw the “W” (withdrawn from course) next to her name. On the final day, the students presented their finished Assignment #3, their two-minute and thirty second self-portraits and we celebrated with donuts and tea.

Early in the next semester I received an email request for an office appointment. I didn’t recognize the name but assumed it was an inquiring in-coming student. On appointment day there was a light tapping at my door frame and two young women walked into my small office. I unfolded an extra chair so the three of us could sit.

They explained that their mom, Amelia, had taken my course. I immediately saw Amelia’s likeness in their features. Amelia had passed suddenly after a brief illness last fall. One of them rummaged in her backpack and produced a scratched-up smart phone. She clicked on an icon and scrolled until she found the video clip.

Her daughters leaned over me from behind, their mom’s phone on my knee. From what I could discern, Amelia had positioned the camera at the lip of her kitchen sink, facing the faucet spout, and had turned on the tap full-volume. She’d set the camera to record super slow-motion. The same daughter suddenly grabbed the phone saying, “wait...” She drew the phone to her face, fingered the buttons, and then set it back on my knee, tapping ‘replay.’

It was the same clip and yet it was completely new. The daughter had unmuted the audio. Fading up from black, the foaming alabaster column appeared but this time preceded by the first delicate piano notes of Debussy’s ‘Claire de Lune.’ In the waterfall, one could follow the emergence and follow the trajectory of individual bubbles, dropping in at the top of the frame, carried in a rush, falling, tangled with others, some overcome in the spume, falling, down into a braid of bubbles, and then, gone, out the bottom of the frame.

After two minutes and thirty seconds the image faded and the last chords of Clair de Lune hung and a title screen appeared: Assignment #3, Amelia.

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How did Amelia make the leap from what I had seen as the dry listing of her daughters’ accomplishments in Assignment #2 to the deft poetic evocation of her Assignment #3 self-portrait? Was her final assignment a display of her mastering the course materials or just luck? Did Amelia herself wonder about that as she edited the final piece and played it back to herself? Was she making art or was art making her?

Was there, perhaps, something much more potent going on in her previous class assignments - the almost antiseptic footage of her workplace interiors, and the self-aversion and refocus on her daughters...? How does the final project of Amelia’s fit in with the projects from the rest of the students? Was it a facile short-cut. Would anyone else viewing the piece recognize its poetic merits?

Clearly, Amelia’s adult daughters (one an engineer, the other a dental technician) saw enough to seek me out and present the lost video. In that moment in my office nearly everything went unsaid. I had a lump in my throat even after we’d clasped hands and said

goodbye. I didn't ask for them to send me the video and I resisted following up.

Was she making art or was art making her? Since that event (a few years in the past now) I find myself considerably less sure when assessing a student's progress in my course. I feel I know less, not more. I feel less capable as a salaried instructor. I more acutely feel the shifting valence between the student and the assignment and I am more suspicious of the outward appearance of results.

I know some of my students pick up on this. At the end of each semester, student's feedback on the course evaluation now regularly include a couple of comments complaining that they would "prefer more hard criticism" and more clarity regarding "good or poor work." I believe now there is more unseen than seen, more beyond our manipulation than within it, and that pedagogical satisfaction may be partly illusory.

For me, Amelia's gift was an eye-opening return to core principles from my student days. My studies with two mentors returned to the fore. Among many, many things I learned from him, Dr. Peter London unbundled for me the vast, wide terrain he proposed as the realm of art. I took as my personal mission his embrace of the fullness rather than merely the fineness of art practice.

My later studies of Allen Kaprow's work and writings helped articulate for me the art/life conundrum. Between 1971 and 1982 Kaprow published four essays in prominent art magazines that were eventually published in the book "Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life." A phrase Kaprow coined returned to me, "art in the service of life." I would like to think that, near the end, that was how Amelia employed her brief videography instruction.

## References

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Kaprow, Allan, and Jeff Kelley. *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. University of California Press, 2003.

## Author's Biography

Danny Mydlack has received proper training and a thorough vetting by widely-recognized institutions among them the Massachusetts College of Art, The University of California San Diego and the Boy Scouts of America. In conspiracy with his students, Danny explores the finer arts of creative pursuits along with the nuances of its tangled history. Towson University manages Danny's access to their students in an arrangement where provocation is traded for college credit; he is formally listed on their faculty roster as 'Professor.'

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