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Interview: Sophie Muller

Emily Caston



Figure 1: Sophie Muller.

Since her early videos for Annie Lennox and the Eurythmics, Sophie Muller has grown to be one of the most prominent pop music video directors in the world. She has shot over three hundred music videos through her prolific and celebrated career. Her work has won numerous awards, including a Grammy, multiple MTV and CMT awards, a Brit Award, a Music Week Award, and the MVPA Director of the Year Award. Muller's extensive body of work includes music videos for Rihanna, Radiohead, Gwen Stefani, Beyoncé, Bjork, Coldplay, Bebe Rexha, P!nk, The Cure, Kings of Leon, Nelly Furtado, Maroon 5, Alicia Keys, The Killers, Morrissey, Blur and Beck. She has also shot stills campaigns and album covers for artist including Sade, Sophie Ellis Bextor and Gwen Stefani, and art-directed live tours, concert films and commercials.

Interview conducted in London on 19 April 2018.

I like people to be strong and unapologetic. I like them to be beautiful too, but not passive. I don't like women to project an "I'm going to be a little girl in your pocket" image. When I started directing videos in the 1980s, women were able to be quite strong without being deemed aggressive. I don't like the way so many artists are overtly sexual to camera these days, as if they are in a state of sexual arousal while they're performing—almost everybody does it now as if it's just normal and no one even bats an eyelid. I express myself through the way that I make the artists *be* in their videos.

It's also because I love music. One of my favourite films is *The Sound of Music* [1965]. I used to love watching the musical numbers over and over again. The sequence "Do Re Mi" is like a music video. The way it's cut hugely inspired me. *Gone with the Wind* [1939] too. I was obsessed by the magical combination of music and film, by the idea of people "expressing" music. I wasn't interested in stories and storytelling.

In the 1980s I did a graphics degree at Central Saint Martins [University of the Arts London] where I made a film called *Unquiet Days* with four sections about the four seasons. It was the first time I'd ever edited to music and the experience was amazing. From that I got the idea that I didn't want to just tell a story, I wanted to create *atmospheres*. After that I went to the Royal College of Art to do an MA in Film and Television—it was the freakiest time ever. Saint Martins had been all new romantics and post punk; it had been about going out and enjoying yourself whilst being creative and I'd had a great time. The Royal College was different: it was a real wake-up. The film course had become so political that virtually no-one made films because everything was too controversial! Suddenly I was literally alone: I was the only person who wanted to make beautiful imagery. Everyone looked at the pretty women in my films and questioned my feminism. It was pretty grim. But I had a very good degree show and won the J. Walter Thompson creativity prize.

After the Royal College I didn't know what to do. I knew I was this weird sort of art filmmaker. I wasn't a straightforward arty person at all, but I was *arty*. What do you do if you make art films? Someone said I should make music videos, and I was horrified because I was brainwashed and a complete art snob. I wanted to be an artist like Jean Cocteau and Maya Deren—people who made films that were beautiful pieces of art and weren't to do with selling anything or representing anything apart from an idea.

When I left the Royal College there weren't many women directors, so I never imagined myself being a director. My only role model was Kate Bush because she produced and wrote *and* performed her own stuff. Her work was entirely her own vision. She was the only person that I related to. I wanted to be like her. But I was very humble, I was happy to be a runner, which I can see now is a problem because it's bad to be humble like that. I think you need

arrogance. I've been very lucky in having a career despite the fact that I don't have that kind of "I have something to say, and this is how *I'm* going to say it" filmmaker arrogance.

Then one night, I went out to a pub in Soho and I had my bags stolen, driver's licence, bank cards, everything, and thought my life was over. The next day I got two calls: one from the police saying that they'd found my bag and everything was in it; and the other from Billy Poveda asking if I'd be a technical advisor for a video his company was making for Annie Lennox. I had already met Billy's business partner John Stewart who used to work at the British Film Institute and really liked him. By this point I had made a few videos and had not enjoyed it, but I liked John and the production company he ran with Billy called Oil Factory. The company had been started by John's brother, Dave Stewart, and Annie Lennox. It was different. It was like a dream after that. I literally felt like I'd come home.

We went to this this amazing chateau in France where Mick Jagger, Dave, Annie as well as a few other people including Siobhan from Bananarama were staying. I remember I got lost trying to find the toilets, because it was so big, but eventually I found myself in this room where Dave, Annie, Mick and the engineers were sitting, and they all said, "Oh we're waiting for you to play the track".

I thought, "You were waiting for *me*? *You*?" They played me this track "I Need a Man" [1988], and I thought, "This is really weird, because if I'm just the technical advisor, why are you playing me the track?" Then we had dinner and hung out. The next morning, Annie said, "This is the idea: I'm going to come out once and sing it. And you've got to catch it." I said, "You're only going to come out, and you're only going to sing it once?" She said, "Yeah". The idea was that she should look like a man dressed as a woman, but she was actually going to be a woman dressed as a man dressed as a woman. It was amazing. I loved it.

I said, "Well I guess you have to have a handheld camera, and you have to have a handheld light." She said, "Hm, okay. I want to do it in a white studio with simple curtains." I said, "A white studio? No, no, no, you should do in a dark place because then you'll be much more powerful coming out in the light, because it will light you." Annie said, "Okay." I remember thinking: "God, I actually do know what I, I know what I think. I *can* direct." And that was the last of being the technical adviser. I was the director. It was the most profound thing.

Annie was really amazing. I worked with her solidly for five years from 1987 to 92. I didn't really work with any other artists at that time. We made something like twenty-seven videos in five years. Annie always reinvented herself. She was always trying to do something different. She would unleash a mad colour of energy when I turned on the camera. I'd put the camera in position, and this weird, magical chemical thing would happen—as if she were experiencing an animalistic transition. I was always blown away. I'd think, "Where did that come from?" I'm still in awe of Annie as a performer.

Why [1992] was the first single of her solo career. It was from the *Diva* album [1992] and we were going to make a few videos for that album. I can't remember exactly who came up with the idea, but I doubt if I wrote a treatment and there was certainly no commissioner. The photo already existed for the *Diva* album cover so I decided *Why* would be about her getting ready to be that "diva" character. It was about her becoming this person. Because she isn't a diva at all: she was a shy little person. She used to have to put her warpaint on to become

that character. Having been away and had a baby and come back, it was like she was saying, "Here I am."

Why was such a simple film, but it was so hard to do because as a director I was saying nothing: there was no text; it was all just about the feeling underneath. It was a magic moment. I don't think anyone else could have done that because I had worked with her before, and I had always been so impressed by her becoming someone else. It came from our relationship. I was always trying to find out: "Why are you changing? How did you change? What happened? Did you feel it? Did you feel yourself changing into this person?" She couldn't even answer those questions. She didn't know. My favourite bit is at the end when she comes right to camera. Dan Landin (the focus puller) was freaking out saying "I can't keep it in focus, there's not enough light and it's wide open..." He was really trying to keep her in focus and he couldn't. I like it because it showed how wild she was.

I wanted to film it in a real place with atmosphere, not a studio, so we shot it in an old synagogue in the East End of London. We shot on both 35mm and 16mm. I think we had both 16mm and 35mm cameras on set because we were shooting some other videos for the *Diva* album at the same time and 16mm was cheaper. If I watch *Diva* now I would be able to tell you which was shot on 35mm and which 16mm. I think we'd run out of time, so I said, "Let's shoot two cameras." I remember people saying, "No, you can't cut 16 with 35!" And I said, "'Course you can! Don't be ridiculous." I've always thought you can't tell the difference if something's been well shot.

Annie was my benchmark because she was the first person that I'd ever worked with. After her, videos disappointed me a bit because in the years 1991 and 1992 women could do kind of almost anything they wanted in the media without being oversexualised and without being repressed. It's not like that now. The feminism of the Royal College must have eventually soaked into my consciousness. I would never ever treat a woman as an object in my films. Women must have a personality in my films. They must not just be sexy and beautiful: they have to have an opinion. You had to feel something about them. They had to *do something*. I would never ever show a shot of a woman's body without the head being seen in the frame.

In my videos I tend to go to the dark side and draw on the darker emotions that are more interesting. My videos for Shakespear's Sister were very dark. What I found so fascinating about them was that they were different. So many girl groups all look the same and they all sing as one. Even Bananarama were like a group of girls who all sang as one. But [with Shakespear's Sister] there was a clash of elements: they looked totally different, acted totally different and were from different countries. Marcy [Marcella Detroit] had this amazing operatic voice, and Siobhan [Fahey] had ideas and was quite feisty and sort of punk. The combination was really powerful. So I made their videos all about that conflict.

I went back into all the gothic horror films like *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* [1962]. I explored the idea of *women's tensions*, which are *real*. Everyone else thought like, isn't it great that they [Fahey and Detroit] are getting on so well? But I thought it would be so much more interesting if there was *tension*. If you look at early Shakespear's Sister's videos before *Goodbye Cruel World* [1991] they were quite bland. They just look like pretty girls singing. I took them into the realm of the dark arts. French and Saunders' genius homage to *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* led into me doing *Goodbye Cruel World*. I took elements of *Baby Jane* and *Sunset Boulevard* [1950] and the darkness of Gothic Hollywood and put

those elements into Marcy and Siobhan's relationship. By the time we did *I Don't Care* [1992] we'd gone properly dark and it didn't matter to me whether they both tried to kill each other!

The first video I made for PJ Harvey was *Good Fortune* [2000]. She was such an iconic figure. I love that video. After that we did *A Place Called Home* [2001] and then *This Is Love* (2001) was the third video we did together. We decided to do *This Is Love* as a performance video. It was as simple as that. We shot on reversal stock. Using reversal stock was very scary because you couldn't have any latitude, but she really loved the look of reversal. The outfit was her choice. It was tongue-in-cheek and meant to be a joke because of the way she's posing. I liked doing things in-camera back then so the lighting changes were all done in real time. I took pride in doing things in camera and not adding them afterwards in post. I also took pride in not planning my shoots. It was very low budget, and we shot it in a tiny weeny little studio in Camden.

Sade and I were friends before we started working together. We were at Saint Martin's together. She was a fashion student and I was a graphic student. We used to hang out at the library and chat. *Stronger Than Pride* [1988] was the first video we made. By then I was already directing for Annie. Where the idea for *No Ordinary Love* [1992] came from, I don't know, it could have been Sade. I just remember someone suddenly saying that people never portray black women as fantasy characters and thinking that was so true: people *never* put black people in those roles. So we decided we would do it. I shot it in LA with the same crew I usually worked with—the director of photography Steve Chivers and art director Alison Dominitz.

I loved the idea of making a film about an unusual love story, so I asked myself, "What can we do about a love that's not ordinary?" If she was a mermaid, she could never get back together with the guy, so it was perfect for the idea of a love that wasn't ordinary love. The guy in the film is a sailor from another world. I was partly basing it on *The Little Mermaid* [1989]. We just came up with scenarios for Sade to act. Sade is very creative, having been at art school, so she was very involved in everything. And I pushed her to go further than she might have done on her own. I've always loved the romantic but tragic image of someone in a wedding dress running down the street. It was the first time I'd ever used the "dry for wet" look in a video, too. I think that was Alison's idea (the art director). "Dry for wet" is when you make things look like they're underwater, and they're not.

I've always said that I can't make people look good if they don't look good. If they look good, I can make them look good in the film. But I can't make someone who doesn't look good, look good. And I can't make someone stylish if they're not stylish, and I can't make someone great if they're not great. I've worked with great artists: trust me, I can't. If they are great already, I can bring out the best in them, but I cannot make someone who's not good be good. I learned that early on.

With the video for *Song 2* [Blur, 1997] there are certain songs that are just amazing. That was one of them. When you have a good song, like that, there's nothing that's going to not make it good. I was in Jamaica when the record label sent me the track. There was a whole load of kids there, and I put the track on and all the kids started singing along. So I knew it was going to be a huge hit. The idea Damon [Albarn] and I had was to "take the piss out" of rock videos. Why do bands in rock videos stand in a set whilst lights move, wind comes on and there's smoke? Why are they in the room with smoke? We made it as a joke and were surprised when it was nominated for the MTV awards.

But there was a heritage for *Song 2*. In 1994, after I had made videos for all of these interesting women including for Bjork's *Venus as a Boy* [1993], I thought, I'm really sick of being myself, I want to be someone else; I want to make films that aren't just about glamour. I was worried I'd be put in a box and only commissioned to make beautiful-women-in-dresses-videos.

In the winter of 1994 when Jeff Buckley's album *Grace* came out, I was in an airplane going to Guatemala and Belize. I never listen to the radio on an airplane. Never. But oddly on this trip I did. I heard a song that was absolutely beautiful. I couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman singing or whether the track was modern or old. But it was beautiful. I spent the rest of the flight trying to find out what the song was called. Eventually I found out it was Jeff Buckley singing "Corpus Christi Carol" from *Grace*. When I got back, I bought his album and I thought it was incredible.

Then, out of the blue, I got a call saying, "Jeff Buckley wants to meet you in Paris." I couldn't believe it; I didn't imagine he'd even know who I was. The coincidence was amazing because I felt so drawn to him and his work. It was another magical moment. It felt like magic that he was drawn to me at the same time. So I went to Paris to meet him and his band. We all came up with these crazy ideas for *So Real* [1994]. I said, "Look, it'll work if everything's fitted together." We ended up making this video in New York. It was weird and dreamy and nightmarish. The night before, they cut the budget in half, but I said, "Don't worry, we're doing it because I'm here now." I loved him. He was incredibly talented and tortured, but a lovely person. We had a real laugh, and it turned out great. I was really proud.

But nobody ever played the video. I think it was on TV once. And then he died. Having not made another music video since—apart from a couple of live ones. They showed it at his funeral. I never would have got into rock videos without him. His video was on my show reel and it got me so much work. It gave me such kudos. It completely changed my career. I became someone who could work with anybody, because I'd made this Jeff Buckley video and everyone loved this video so much when they saw it on my reel. I couldn't understand why they didn't want to show the video on TV.

I did a video for Hole, *Miss World* [1994]. It was the first band I'd ever directed a video for apart from Shakespear's Sister. They were a real band, they were rock, and they were hardcore. After that I did a video for Weezer's *Say It Ain't So* [1995], which is one of my favourites. It's a precursor for films I shot later. *Say it Ain't So* has got the most unbelievable performance by anyone I've ever done; and it's a man with no make-up on, looking completely normal, with hardly any lights. I worked with a female DoP on it. After that I started working with great rock bands like The Jesus and Mary Chain and had a whole new career.

I've had all these stages in my career. I've always tried different things. I've had a country career. I try not to do what people expect of me. Just when you thought you knew what I was going to do, I'd go, no, I'm not going to be who you think I am; I'm going to go do something different. I've learnt that you can't stand still because once they define you, you're done for.

I've edited ninety-five percent of my own films. Because when I direct I don't do storyboards. I like to leave it as open as possible for things to happen that I hadn't planned, because the most magical things I've ever filmed have been accidents. I like to create a world where these accidents can happen on my shoots. That means I just have to edit the videos

myself. I see editing as the second stage of directing. It's the most creative bit because music videos are not scripted: they are the perfect film form. As the editor you are working with the image, and the relationship between an image and the music. You discover things when you edit that you didn't see when you filmed it. Making music videos isn't storytelling, it's something else. The editor has so much control that they can absolutely affect the meaning and how you perceive the shots. I did work with an editor early on, but I was too impatient. I'd be sitting next to an editor saying: "No, try that. Put that frame there. And then, no, no, three frames back, like that..."

I'm enjoying myself now. I used to be so frightened on shoots, so fearful. I couldn't eat or sleep before them. I used to worry that my idea for the video might be wrong. I would constantly ask myself the question, "Is this the right idea for the video?" Of course, it wasn't an answerable question. But as the director no one questioned me, and no one would ever dare say, "This is the wrong idea, I think you should do something else." So I'd ask myself, "Is Sade being a mermaid the right idea? Should this be a completely different idea?" After about ten years that changed. Now I just love shoots.

I have worked with amazing people. I would have loved to work with Kate Bush because she was my inspiration. But I love everyone I've met and worked with.

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