



**ScreenCraft Works Cross-Border Conversation:
Creating supportive teams when telling emotionally tough stories**

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Our speakers, drawn from the ScreenCraft Works community, were:

Natasha Sofla (composer, UK)

Richard Edwards (composer, UK)

Ana Mlynarska (editor, Poland, UK)

Santiago Piqueras (assistant editor, Spain, France, UK)

Elizabeth McIntyre:

Welcome to our Cross-Border Conversation: Working across fiction and non-fiction in film and television post-production. How can you gain experience and recognition in both arenas? Thank you to our partners **Genelec** for supporting this series of talks and **Brunel University London** for technical delivery.

I'd like to hand to the first speaker, Ana, to take the conversation away.

Ana Mlynarska:

Thank you so much. I'm really grateful for having me, and it's always such an amazing topic that you don't have one answer for this, so it's really interesting. I'm a film and TV editor from Poland, based in London. I went to film school in Poland. I used to live in America for a little bit and in France, so I travel a little bit. I'm an editor who cut everything, so there's documentaries, feature films, trailers, short films, reality TV, everything. You can have amazing stories in documentaries, you can find amazing stories in the news, and obviously in drama.

Cross-Border Conversation: Working across fiction and non-fiction in film & TV post-production.
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Santiago Piqueras:

My name is Santi - Santiago. I'm originally from Spain. I was working as a freelance video editor for seven years since I moved to London in 2015, and in that time I did like more commercial, corporate I would say, live music. Then after seven years of doing that plus other artistic endeavours, I decided to focus more on film and TV because it's quite a different world. Now I currently work as an assistant editor, assistant operator in a post-production house, Evolutions here in Bristol.

Richard Edwards:

Hi, my name is Richard, my pronouns are he and him. I'm a Black man for those that need to know. I'm a composer and I've done work in corporate, art installations, documentaries, and started doing stuff with fiction, doing short films. The way I got started was a director that I met in uni let me loose on one of his documentaries which was about Carnival - specifically about people that make costumes for Carnival. That was the first thing I did, and then did a number of projects with him, some of them which were used by the Museum of London, and then recently started doing fiction.

Natasha Sofla:

I'm Natasha, I'm also a composer. My pronouns are she/her. I'm a white woman with a shoulder length brown hair. As a composer I started off actually in the classical world, I began as a clarinettist and pursued classical training and that avenue, and then moved into composing, and then later on into film and TV composition. I've worked mostly on short films in both fiction and non-fiction, but I still keep up my classical composition as well, so a wide variety of things.

Richard Edwards:

What I found with doing factual versus fiction - obviously the characters that you have are much stronger. Within documentaries there are going to be characters within that that are part of the storytelling process, but obviously within fiction they're much stronger and there's more of an identity around them, I mean definitely musically as to what you would do to identify with those characters. I went from doing - one of the clips that we'll see at some point is one called Tough Blood and that was about sickle cell, and so I was listening to lots of people talking about the pain of of this disease. Then the first fiction project I did was a comedy, so that was a bit of a baptism by fire, trying to work out how to go around that one. I must have watched every dark comedy there was to try and prepare for that. In the end it was like, you don't try and be funny with the music, you just try and tell the story and just lean into that more so than trying to be funny musically. So that I found tricky, going from one extreme of factual work to comedy and fiction. That was quite a challenge.

Ana Mlynarska:

I was working as an assembly editor on The Crown. It's fiction but it's based on documentary. So I thought that this was actually the best example that you can see totally different ways of cutting the scene, what you can get from the rushes.

The Crown, season 6 part 2 trailer - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtJLfEX8tKM&t=97s>

You can see the same stuff, very similar, from BBC archives that were captured by reporters and as a, I guess, news editor you would cut basically - you know, you have to tell the story. Okay, there is a prince, he's coming out, there are lots of his young female fans, and everyone is shocked. From the news obviously you would have some voiceover, you would

be probably more interested in these girls because this is what people are interested. But for a documentary you would still look for the emotions, right, so you would still look how he is, even if that was a documentary, because this is a fiction, right. But as a documentary editor I would still look to make some emotions, I would still try to find - even if I didn't have it because my DoP, cinematographer didn't catch it, I would look - maybe we have something later or something before or just one moment, or even in a different day, that he is really upset about it and shocked and just being lonely. I think this is the outcome of the scene, when you are trying to cut the scene, what you can get from the rushes. Of course the meaning of this was showing someone totally overwhelmed.

Santi Piqueras:

I'm just curious on the documentary bit, how do you - because I guess in fiction it's more scripted, so you have a script to follow - do you have such a thing more with documentaries, or there are different kinds of documentaries, because I guess you have a general story that you want to tell but documentary is a lot more open, I guess.

Ana Mlynarska:

Yes, and that's why I think that editors, documentary editors are amazing storytellers, because very often they have it or not, they just have to make it.

Santi Piqueras:

Make it happen!

Ana Mlynarska:

The same also reality shows. Usually, yes, you have the script, you have an idea, but reality is you have no idea. Especially when you shoot something for a long time, you just don't even know the outcome, what's going to happen. If you were shooting as an observer, it's difficult to find out what's going to happen. But, yes, you want to have a story, and when you watch today's Netflix documentaries, they really look proper. I think the best thing that I learned in my film school was my documentary teacher, an old lady who was also working with Kieslowski, and at even at this time, a long long time ago, she said that you want to cut documentaries so that they feel like drama. I think this is such a good rule, good advice.

Richard Edwards:

One thing that I learned from doing documentary work, especially working with Stephen, was people assume that you get a picture and then you write the music to it and then you go back and forth a little bit and then it's done. But often they are changing things while you're writing it, and then that's always fun! We going to have a look at a clip of a project called Tough Blood. That was originally a kind of installation but live performance, and so I originally had to go and write with the people, so it was a collaboration. It's kind of part documentary, part performance. There was a dancer, choreographer and director, there were images projected on the screen. I had to write while they were creating the choreography, because they wanted it to be collaborative. So I did a lot of it that way and then I went off, wrote a bit more, sent it back, I'd seen what they were doing, and then they say "yeah, that's great, cool" and then they would then say "oh, we've just taken this little bit out that you just composed". So you'd have to kind of keep chopping things around and that was really good training for working on fiction where things are changing, and learning how to re-conform things and work in that way.

Clip from Tough Blood by Stephen Rudder.

When I did that one, Stephen tends not to like very overt emotional statements musically, so I kind of had to do emotion by stealth and sneak some strings in there. By the end it's like - where did that quartet come from? One of the things you look out for, you look out for little cues. It's the same thing with fiction, looking out for clues to help you when you're composing. One of the things was the young woman was talking about that she would want to talk about having sickle cell and people often wanted to change the subject. So I wanted to bring out that a bit more, make sure they were heard, and the emotion of it. So that was important to me. It's those little clues you look out for, storytelling points that you can use musically.

When we opened, we weren't able to get into the building until they opened it, and I went in there and there was no ceiling, so the acoustics in a hall. So I basically - luckily I'd brought in my laptop and had stems, so the individual parts of the music, and so I had to basically mix it again about an hour before the performance opened, because it just didn't sound right. It was one of those situations where you didn't have time to get stressed because you were just too busy trying to get on with it. That was an interesting one to do because with that one it was kind of establishing, I guess, what sickle cell is, some of the people that were involved, their experiences, and then looking at outcomes. Working in documentaries trained me to work with dialogue, because there was a lot of dialogue.

Natasha Sofla:

I found, whether I'm working on fiction or non-fiction projects, the main thing that I have in the forefront of my mind is what story are we trying to tell here, and also the emotional impact of that story. What's being conveyed? What would the director like to be conveyed or highlighted through the music? So that is usually how I approach projects in either genre to be honest. This is from a documentary called *The Blackfish Effect*.

Music from The Blackfish Effect.

That documentary was about the impact of another documentary, so a little bit meta, about the impact of the documentary *Blackfish* on the sea life industry - that's not really the right word, but you know what I mean, water parks and the keeping of killer whales in captivity. It included a lot of, as you said, Richard, there was a lot of talking. There are a lot of clips from experts, a lot of dialogue with images overlaid. There was a slight challenge there in terms of trying to still be expressive with the music but also not overpower the dialogue and not distract from the dialogue, so I also went down a bit more of an ambient route with that track. Most of the music to the documentary sounded quite like the clip, but I also wanted to incorporate, there are some waterlike sounds in there as well, to just capture that theme, and I tried to imitate as well the sounds of marine life, the calls of killer whales, in some of the string glissandos that you could maybe hear there.

Richard Edwards:

Yeah, definitely got that.

Natasha Sofla:

So that was the atmosphere that we were trying to create with the score to that one. Again, it was an interesting project to work on, the edit kept changing. As composers we can be brought in at various different points in a project, and for this one I was brought in while they were still finalizing the edits, so there was a cut that I originally started working on and then a new version would arrive and maybe some scenes were changed or added or removed, and you have to be very flexible then with the music.

Richard Edwards:

I was going to say, how long did you have to work on it?

Natasha Sofla:

In the end that one was pretty tight. Let me think - sorry, it was a few years ago, I'm trying to remember. I think I had a few weeks, about a month in total to work on that, and it was about 15 minutes long and there was music throughout most of the film.

Ana Mlynarska:

How do you usually work? Do you like to do it on your own and have some ideas or do you like sometimes the editor to have some ideas for you? What's your favourite style? Because I know that sometimes I put lots of temp music, and then I prefer to give it clean to the composer, and this way they can come up with some ideas. Or sometimes I know, okay I love this, can you just change something?

Natasha Sofla:

Honestly, I kind of like a bit of both. It's always useful to know, I think, where the director might be coming from in terms of their inspiration for the music, and if there are any particular ideas or if there is a particular temp track that maybe a scene was cut to that might give idea of the focal points. But also it's important to have creative freedom as well. I've had the experience before where a director's been very very wedded to a temp track to the point where they've basically just wanted me to copy it. That can be an interesting dynamic to then navigate as a composer, trying to put your own creative voice in there as well. Honestly, I think the ideal is somewhere in the middle, right, because also if there's very little guidance, I find that can be tricky as well to come up with something that everybody is happy with and that really conveys the intended impact of the film.

What would you say to that, Richard? Do you have a way you prefer to work?

Richard Edwards:

I know what you mean. It's tricky if there's nothing there at all. Is there too much of a blank canvas? One time someone said, "Oh, just do what you feel. I'm not sure."

Natasha Sofla:

I've had that too!

Richard Edwards:

And then it turns out they are sure. But sometimes what they want is something to rule out almost, so your little experiment might help them to decide what they want, if that makes sense, so that can be helpful. But, also like you, I've done some stuff which has been remote, and I find it's completely different. When you play something when someone's in the room, you're just kind of feeling their energy, but it just feels different. You hit play and you're like, oh this is not working, because you can just get a sense, you know, their body language and anything a little bit more. But definitely, yeah, a little bit of temp is not bad, like you say as long as they're not wedded to it too much, then it can become a struggle to work around that sometimes. It's good to know some kind of direction at least, anyway.

Ana Mlynarska:

Yeah, that's why usually it's really good to have those music spots, I think. I find them really amazing, because this is actually - then I really struggle with my English and it's hard for me to express what I need sometimes in emotions, but I find them just watching the scenes with

everyone in the room, director, producers, assistants. And then, oh we should do this, and the composer comes up with ideas. Usually they are like - I know, I know exactly what I want. I just always find it really amazing.

Richard Edwards:

I find it helpful. I remember someone was trying to describe musically what they want, and he was struggling a bit. I said, "Well, tell me how you want people to feel when they leave". And then he started giving me some words which brought out some emotion in me, and then I was able to feed off that, so we did a little back and forth in terms of just describing the emotion of what they wanted, and that helped.

Ana Mlynarska:

I guess understanding what outcome do you want, what particular scenes - I think this is very important - what particular scenes mean, what you want. If it's just the beginning, what do you want to highlight? What is important when the story is actually developing, when you don't want a repetition? I think once you guys, composers, understand this, I think this is much easier, and for everyone to follow the story.

Music: Souffle by Natasha Sofla

Natasha Sofla:

That was from a fiction project that I worked on recently which was called *Souffle*. It was about two best friends, one of which had just gone through a bad breakup the other one was supporting her. The friend who had gone through the breakup was panic-baking souffles, hence the title. It had a few more serious themes but also there was a light-heartedness to it. You really got the sense that these two characters were very close, they had a kind of easy, jokey manner between them, and it was a very intimate setting - everything took place within a flat, just two rooms of a flat, and just the two characters. I really tried to emphasize that with the music, it's a much smaller scale, especially if you compare to my last track, there are nowhere near as many instruments. It's a lot more pared back, a lot closer. But I think, in terms of approach, I really did approach it in a similar way to my other projects. I don't think the fact that it was fiction necessarily informed that. It was more the actual story that was being told that brought about those differences in the score, rather than whether the story was true or not. But then I suppose in the case of that film, while the film was fictional, the actual scenario is something that many people will have experienced, so I suppose there's a bit of a blurred line there as well.

Richard Edwards:

The next clip we're going to look at was again another installation which was then made into a short film called *Black Men's Minds*. Stephen is - I'm going to get his title wrong - is he a psychotherapist or psychologist, I forgotten the actual one. He got qualified later, and so one of the things he wanted to look at was specifically mental health with some young Black men, because men generally don't talk about it, and the Black community wasn't really talked about much at all, it is a bit more now. So he focused on that area. But this was pretty much wall-to-wall dialogue, so it ended up being very very textual, because it was just trying to find ways to do something without doing too much and drawing attention away from what was being said. This guy is talking about when he was going through a schizophrenic episode and having this out of body experience.

Clip from Black Men's Minds

I think I might have got a little bit of help from Stephen there. I think he might have cut some things to what I did, I think we went back and forth, which was a bit of luck, and then I used a very very long reverb at the end, because I had these cluster chords happening, doing these rises, and I think there was a choir that came in at the end, and then just used a long reverb to transition between that and the sea. In fact I heard an actor talking about this, talking about being bipolar, and he said that's the wrong word, because he said it's not like bi-anything. He said for him it's like he can only really experience extreme highs or extreme lows, and so having that contrast, again looking for those clues to guide you musically were kind of helpful to think about that. That's why I had that big transition between that big riser and then to that sea rushing at you, but very very calmly.

Santi Piqueras:

Right now, at the moment, I'm doing a lot of assistant work, so I'm not maybe working in particular, I haven't been editing so much. I had this really big sense of I want to try and make documentaries and I wasn't sure how do I get into editing documentaries, how do I make documentaries, what do I do? So I just got my camera and found two friends that really inspired me that were living in a boat in the London canals, and I just did a little film portrait of them.

Extract from Life on a Boat - <https://lifeonaboatfilm.com/>

I filmed that with them, so that was my first work in terms of diving a little bit more into actually directing it, or interviewing them and deciding what I want to film, and then also editing it after, and then the music as well, because she's a composer herself, Lucy, the girl in the video, and we just recorded the music all together in a music studio in Valencia back in Spain, because she was studying there and I just went to visit them. So it's all really, I don't know, handmade, made at home like we would say in Spain, but I really liked it in the end, it was really lovely to make it, and it really taught me a lot. It was actually quite difficult because you don't have any directions, as you said, Natasha. It was just me wanting to make a portrait of them, but I didn't have anyone telling me, oh this is what I want or this is the feeling I'm going for. I remember having a lot of time just in front of the computer once I was going to edit and being like, okay, what do I do now? It was a bit overwhelming but it did help me a lot to learn how to make decisions and get rid of things, like sometimes you get attached to certain parts of the film and at the end you have to be really strong and be like, well, it's actually not working with the whole thing, so even though I really like it, it has to go.

Santi also shared the trailer from Attenborough and the Giant Sea Monster - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m001txg2/attenborough-and-the-giant-sea-monster>

Richard Edwards:

So when you say you did that one on your own, when you came to work with a director, did you find that you really appreciated having somebody else to help you?

Santi Piqueras:

Yeah, I mean that's something I always had working in corporate or even live music. There's always a story as well - a promoter that wants to tell a certain story as well or things like that, or just the musician itself or the band, so I was more used to that. So suddenly going to a project that is like - I filmed it, I'm going to edit it, I interview them. It's a bit like where do I want to go with this? It makes you ask yourself a lot of questions.

Now I'm working more in a technical role as an assistant, so I'm learning loads, and I'm learning a lot about the process of film and TV and how it works. Assisting actually is helping

me a lot to see, which I guess I can see everyone told me, when I wanted to go into editing, I was like "I want to edit film and TV", they were like, you're going to have to assist. I was like, why? I've been editing. And now assisting, I'm like, okay, yeah, there's more stuff that is useful to see before you actually jump and dive in, which I'm sure you can do and then struggle in the first project or two a lot, and then get better.

Ana Mlynarska:

Or get fired!

Santi Piqueras:

Yeah, probably! You'll have quite traumatic experiences at the beginning, if you survive! So yeah, I'm really liking that as well, and it's a different way of seeing things. You see them working and you catch up on things that they're doing. I can see myself watching it now and being like, oh - and also because I've been familiarized with the footage and I've been ingesting it and I've been labelling it and I've been doing all that, I'm like, oh, they went for this but not for this, this didn't make it in there, and I kind of wonder the decisions why.

Ana Mlynarska:

If I can add something, the best example, we spoke about it, *The Zone of Interest*. It's a new movie. The cinematographer, who is Łukasz Żal, is a Polish cinematographer. He was a documentary cinematographer and he had a break on *Ida*, the Oscar-winning Polish film directed by Pavel Pawlikowski.

Advice for other people

Every break, when you try to achieve something new, you just have to go with the flow and just follow your passion. I think every story is amazing, and no matter if you are working on corporate or documentary or short films, just do your best job, just tell the best story you can, and hopefully this will pay off because your director who just cut this short film is going to get another break and then they will take you with them. So I think no matter what, just doing something, just cutting - or composing music, I guess - makes you more experienced. I think you can learn from every little thing, so just don't give up. And follow your dreams - I mean it's easy to say!

Santi Piqueras:

Right now I'm in an assistant place so I'm still wondering about where should I go next or how will I manage once I start editing and working in different kind of genres. But I would say just be open and don't be scared. Sometimes you even need to push yourself a little bit more because it's easier to stay with the same thing. Sometimes, even if someone comes and says, oh, you want to do this thing and it's really different, sometimes it's a bit like, I don't know, but just jump.

Natasha Sofla:

I'd just say lean into the versatility. I think it can be very easy to think that in these industries everyone has to have one thing that they specialize in, and that that's the only thing that you're allowed to do, but actually I think being able to work across lots of different genres and areas of the industry is a strength. So I think it can be important actually to embrace that and emphasize that there are lots of transferable skills across many different areas of the industry. Embrace it! Lean in!

Richard Edwards:

I try to put - so if I contact someone, what you want to do is do a specific reel for whatever project that they're going for, so try and find something within what you have that is

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appropriate for their project. So you could have different reels, or initially what I did was where I've got my private page with things I can't share publicly, I put certain things at the top, so I contact someone and I go in there and reshuffle things so whatever was most suitable for their project appeared at the top. Oh right, he does that. That kind of thing can help. If you can get on a short film as well, then no matter what you do, treat it like it's *Oppenheimer*. Do you know I mean? Just throw everything at it, because then that is your calling card for the next bigger thing. That's one way of doing it.

How has it been working across fiction and non-fiction?

Natasha Sofla:

In my experience they've been pretty open, to be honest. My credits are actually quite balanced. I've done two fiction and two factual projects exactly, so at least there's something to show there for me that I am capable of working across both. But then, as Richard said, I think just really spelling it out can be helpful in your application or in your communications with directors and producers, even if it is as obvious as literally saying, I have done this, therefore I'm capable of doing this. I think sometimes if you've got a bit of an eclectic CV, as I know I have, especially with the classical stuff in there as well, it can be helpful to just be as clear as you possibly can. But then I've found that once the conversations have gotten started that people have been fairly open.

Richard Edwards:

When I've been teaching, that's taught me a lot of patience and managing different behaviours. That has all been very helpful in dealing with people when they're super stressed. Everything that you do is useful in the next thing that you're going to do, I would say.

Ana Mlynarska:

You work as a documentary editor, it wins BAFTA, and your short gets nominated, and then people get you're already credited, you're amazing, but it's just very much dependent on luck. I really think that things are changing. Knowing that it's not a long time ago we had - that is documentary and this is fiction. And now we are just used to just watching so many different things, and people are trying to find out different formats of telling the stories to make people interested. I was approached and I was working on a documentary-drama hybrid. I was just working for drama elements but I think I was chosen because of my experience. It can be that I was the right person because I wasn't scared of going through the factual rushes and also doing my drama bits, because that was a mixing. Just do a good job, just tell a good story.

Elizabeth McIntyre:

Thank you to our speakers for such a fascinating and informative talk. We look forward to seeing you at the next ScreenCraft Works event.