

Episode 4: A Conversation with *The Mother of All Lies* Director Asmae El Moudir

Transcript

Animal-Vegetable-Mineral. A Podcast to think with and about documentary films.

STL: Welcome to Animal-Vegetable-Mineral. In this episode we are featuring a live interview recorded at the Sheffield Doc Fest with Moroccan film director Asmae El Moudir at her very last festival screening of her incredible award-winning film *The Mother of All Lies*.

You may have heard about this film, which won the top prize for emerging film makers at Cannes in 2023. She had shown the film all over the world by the time we caught up with her. And yet I feel like our conversation with her was very fresh. Maybe because we were asking her things that the usual festival journalists don't ask about.

AL: That's what we're trying to do here—trying to deepen the conversation about documentary, both by identifying extraordinary films to think with and asking film makers and film scholars to talk about the form, not just the content or the subject matter of their films.

STL: And this film, *The Mother of All Lies*, really blew us away. It's a very unique kind of hybrid or experimental documentary that combines using these small figurines and a large scale maquette placed in the middle of this atelier workshop where Asmae has brought her family members to live. So, the film combines this theatrical aspect of Asmae and her father using dolls to recreate a traumatic event in Moroccan history, what is known as The Bread Riots of Casablanca, and it's interspersed with her parents, her grandmother and neighbors, discussing in real time their feelings and memories.

AL: And the grandmother, right?

STL: Ah, the grandmother— amazing.

SL: This is El Moudir's first feature and it's a huge accomplishment. For me, it's a master class in how to engage the personal and the political, the individual and the collective, the factual and the fanciful. It is creative first person documentary filmmaking at its best.

STL: I couldn't agree more. Let's go to the interview.

2:15

STL: So, Asmae, I thought we could start out with asking you to describe your film a little bit. How do you how do you talk about the film? How do you describe it?

[2:24]

AEM: Yeah, thank you so much for having me. It's really nice to think about. Because we took a lot of time making this film and we need to talk. It's like a therapy. Yeah, so *The Mother of All Lies*—it's an intimate story about me, my grandmother, my neighborhood in Morocco, in Casablanca. It took place in Casablanca, but it's universal also because we are telling the story about memory, how we can tell the stories when we don't have any concrete or visual proofs of what has happened. So I start with one picture and just, I wanted to know why we don't have pictures in my family. Why we erase memory. Why my grandmother don't accept pictures and why provoking this question, I understood my little family stories were only symptom of other bigger ones. When I discover that this little lies grow bigger, when I discover that a big riot took place in 1981, Bread Riot, people went down in the street to protest against the price of bread. But, it's hidden. Lots of people are disappear and et cetera, et cetera. And, it's not a taboo today to talk about this. This is what I like in the new Morocco. I can just bring my family and my grandmother from this bubble. Because, they were living in this bubble, creating this bubble around them and thinking that walls have ears and if we will talk about the past, it's gonna be not OK for somebody, someone of us. So, I made this film to, to say if bodies were hidden, if the pictures are missing, memories still recall. And yeah, and that's why I took a very lot of time, ten years, making this film.

[4:12]

I grew up with my story. I was studying in La Fémis, in Morocco, cinema. And, in this, in the meantime, I was thinking about my film, how I can... It's like a... That's why I love the topic. It's like animal films. How I can, how I can shoot that tiger, or how I can approach the lion. It's, it's very, very hard to introduce your camera inside a house where pictures are forbidden.

[4:42]

STL: I'm really curious about how you came up with this extraordinary approach where you're combining this maquette—we're seeing the, your father building this set of your neighborhood and creating these little figurines that symbolize the different people in the storytelling. And, also including your family and all of their interactions, and yourself included. How did you come up with this very remarkable structure or approach?

[5:15]

AEM: I think process is a part of the film. I like obstacles. I like not to be always in the comfort zone. And I had a lot of obstacles to have the possibility to shoot in the real places. So, I remember, I start developing the film in 2012 without any pictures, just one fake picture. I start the film with that and with the idea that story is written by winners and I just, like, told myself I am the winner today I can write my part of the story with one picture and without any proof of what has happened. So, I was not looking for guilty people or denouncing anyone. I want to understand if I am able to

tell the story without having any proofs, only the memory of people. So, I came back one day to my father and I said, "I did everything I can do to have permit to shoot in the real places, but I cannot have any answer." So yeah, he said. "OK, you remember, when you was child? I used to create for you and your brother and sisters some, like, mini houses in paper and you can play inside." Because it's very hot in Morocco in summer, so we cannot play outside. He created for us things. So, we come back to this idea and I remember the first day we create the first figurine and the head was very big than the window because we are not professional and that's why my father and me, we went looking for young artist from Ouarzazate.

[6:52] And, we create a small team from Morocco to create everything, figurine, et cetera, et cetera. It took eight months of building this stuff. It was in COVID and the we went from Casablanca to Marrakesh in a very big place that I call laboratory and in this laboratory we created everything. I'm not sure it's gonna be OK or not. I'm just, like, trying. And I have also the idea that nothing gonna be OK and it's not a problem. We're just, like, trying. It's a laboratory, atelier. And, if it works, it works. It's going to be OK because I will bring these people from their houses, where walls have ears. I will put them in my laboratory where we're going to talk freely about the past, and I give them the promise that, then, walls are gonna not have ears. And, maybe, it's gonna be the therapy of somebody of us. I don't like to talk about therapy in cinema, because in cinema we don't give therapy, we just provoke, provoke, provoke. And, that's what I did. I provoke things with my hard questions.

STL: So interesting...

[7:54]

AL: You really do provoke quite a lot, right? So, you both recreate things through these maquettes, but you also reenact with the real people who really lived through these things. And you put them into their own memories so deeply that I wondered how you handled that. Because, it really looks, certainly like your neighbor, for example, looks like he's really going into quite a traumatic space and you manage this so effectively. They must have felt quite held by you.

[8:26]

AEM: Yeah, I think it was the idea. I remember, Abdullah want to tell his story seven years ago. Because, I start, in 2012, making my own archive, because I have no archive. So, I decided to create my own archive. So, this was the idea. Creating my own archive that I can use later in my film. And yeah, I had some co-producers that said, "oh, you have a lot of footage. Let's do the film now." And I said, "no, I'm sorry, this is not the film. This is just the development, and the film is gonna be our thing." I was making this film in a very savage way. There's no timeline, and that's why I was looking for money and freedom and not accepting any channel because I cannot give a film in six months because we are just waiting for things that maybe it's gonna happen, maybe not.

AL: Did you end up using any of the material from that archive, or really was it just research?

[9:22]

AEM: No, no, no. I really, the first, the opening sequence was from my archive. Me and my grandmother asking her about, if she hear me. Because, I want to start the film: "Can you hear me? I I need you to hear me today." So, this is metaphoric sequence that was from my archive, from my own camera—me and her in her room. And yeah, I also, I, I tried to create some spaces in the laboratory. So, when I need to talk about something outside from the laboratory, I just bring my footage, my archive, and I put it in the screen so we can watch it.

[10:00]

STL: So the film's title, *The Mother of All Lies*, is really interesting for a film that seems, at its heart to be about truth, and suppressed history. So, I'm curious about the role of lying. You know, I see that opening scene, when you're asking your grandmother, "why don't you allow photos, Grandma?" And she pulls out the hearing aid and she gives you this really dirty look. And then you say: "It works fine. Enjoy." Right? So, in a sense, you seem to be implying that she's lying about her ability to hear. And, I'm curious if you can talk about the role of lying in the film. How do you see the lies?

[10:40]

AEM: The title of the film in Arabic is *White Lie* كَذْبَةٌ بَيَضَاء (kidhbatun baydha'un). And, this white lie started in the house, when I discovered that my mother gives me a fake picture about my childhood just to tell me that you have, also, a souvenir. This is what I call white light because it's not hurting. Just like every mother in the world gonna try to appease the children. It's a, really, starting point for me to talk about when this little lies grow bigger. Exploded. Broke the walls of my house, escaped in this street. And, in that moment, I call the film, *The Mother of All Lies*.

[11:20] So, even if in the title from Arabic to English or French, *La Mère de tous les Mensonges*, there is a crescendo. I love to play with titles, even in my short film *Thank God It's Friday* in France was *Mémoires Anachroniques, ou Le Couscous du Vendredi Midi* and then in Arabic was different. I really like that the title also try to be in the process of writing because we are talking about documentaries, real life. So, when you start writing the project, it's not the end. The title can change. When I was thinking about my idea, it was about my own language, or Arabic, and so it was white light. But when I start to developing and pitching here and there and making a dossier in English, et cetera. I found also things interesting outside in the street and the title also changed to be *The Mother of All Lies*, yeah.

[12:12]

AL: This is a documentary. We're at Sheffield Doc Fest, and it's showing in the

documentary section. But, it's a film that really pushes the boundaries of documentary, and we were interested in hearing how you think about this form.

AEM: Documentary is another cinema, of course. And when it's well done, it can really be more interesting than fiction because we're talking about real people and we are following them in real time. We see the change in the real time and this is very, very organic. And, I think, I mean, there is no difference with the way that I take my camera and I decide to show you this part of this, this place. But, I'm not showing you the 360 degree of the place. So, it's my point of view. So, that means there is no a big difference. The difference is that if your character is died in documentary, he's gonna not come back to say hello to the audience, but if he's died in fiction, he can come back and say hello. It took times in documentary. Really, we need a lot of time to make documentaries. Because, we are following our characters in the real time and we are expecting everything and anything. And, I love hybrid format because it gives a very big space to try a lot of things. Because, what I like in documentary, that's *c'est un endroit vierge pour experimenter les choses*, a virgin space to experience a lot of things we can experience in the documentary field that we cannot do in fiction.

[13:46]

STL: Well, and I loved, like you are having a dialogue between fiction and documentary in the film itself. There's, like, the the part of the film where you're performing, you see your father and the other characters are performing the storytelling through the use of the figurines and then you're also documenting this process. So, it's like a dialogue between documentation and performance that a documentary of this kind of process of storytelling, itself.

[14:17]

AEM: Yeah, for me, the process is part of the film. I didn't change the fact. I only changed the way, how I tell the facts. And this way is free. It's mine. I assume that I am making a mise-en-scène. I assume that the day I decide to bring my family from the house and put them in the laboratory. This is my mise-en-scène. Nobody is aware about this mise-en-scène but me and my DOP (director of photography). We are working with the fiction ingredients, for example, birds, lots of birds, because I love the colors that we can find in some birds. And I said, "OK, our color intentions will come in from this bird. If God can create birds with this color and really have the courage to make, to mix these colors. Why not?" So we put lights in the laboratory watching birds. We will put blue there and orange here. And just like cold and hot. It's OK. And in the middle, no light. And, so we are expecting that this is the teacher. When our character's gonna move. And we will try to catch them everywhere they will be in the theater. It's our space. We control the space. We put lights for two months because we are, we're gonna not stop our characters. We keep the part of documentary. We're gonna not stop our characters. You say "no, no, no, the light is not good here." No, we're not. We try to say, OK, if my character is here, OK, let's put

this. And, if they go there, and we create spaces. And we try to tell our characters that this is the cemetery. This is the soccer field and this is the theatre. So, let's go to the theatre and they follow me.

[16:02]

STL: I'm so glad you were talking about the lighting too, because the lighting and the color is so remarkable, especially towards the end of the film where the colors become very bold. And I think that also lends a very theatrical aspect to the film.

AEM: I'm thinking about my audience. They took the audience by hand in the beginning. But I say, "OK, don't trust me a lot, because after one, after 30 minutes, we're gonna fly. I will let you go, and you're gonna not be lost. I'm sure, because I created for you lots of things that you can follow me, even if I am not with you." But I really like to tell stories.

[16:38]

AL: And, you really do that, you take us in by the hand very slowly, as if we're going into one film about a little girl who doesn't have images of herself. And you paste it, right. So, within half an hour, we go deeper and deeper and deeper. And it's as if this film doesn't stop giving more layers and depth. It's really a remarkable structure. So, how did we get to this structure?

[17:04]

AEM: It was just a try for me. I didn't expect the result, but I'm happy that you, you get it. Because, I was thinking that the spectator have to start watching a film and at the end, coming like this...

AL: Like, leaning in.

AEM: Yeah. For me, films are emotions. I have to follow the story to get in, in the story a lot as a filmmaker.

STL: You have to feel emotionally engaged.

AEM: Yeah, because cinema is emotions, really. It's a balance. I have a traumatic story and I didn't show anybody crying because I'll come coming from Arab region. So we are used to laughing at ourselves. And, how to transform trauma in a soft situations. This is what I tried to make, with having, laughing a little bit and having a trauma in this balance, it's very important. Also to, how we balance emotions in the film. The question is very hard. To tell a story. To make also feel for the audience, and to make a film for festivals. It's a very hard equation.

[18:11]

STL: I think that the moment that feels like an emotional climax is that moment when your grandmother breaks the glass of the the drawing that's just been made by the artist, of her.

AL: With her cane!

STL: Yeah, with her cane! It comes out of nowhere, in a way. You're surprised and it breaks, it literally breaks the vibrations.

AEM: I wish to talk a little bit about how I convinced her to come in this film. I remember, I tried to move them from the house in Casablanca to the laboratory I created with my father in Marrakech. So, bringing her from her house, that means that we will sell the house. I mean, if she will go out, we will sell her house. This was what she think. So, I showed her three Moroccan actresses by, in photos, and because she was "OK, not OK, OK, not OK." And for me....

STL: You mean, you were showing her potential actors that would play her character in the film?

AEM: Yeah. Because, yeah, if she will say "no, I'm not going to Marrakech," I have to bring an actress. So, she said "this ugly woman will be you, me in your film," and she pick one and she said "this ugly woman will be me in your film." I said, I have no solution, really. I'm so sorry because I have to finish this, this film. I mean, 10 years, it's a lot. And then, she said "I will go with you, but I'm not guaranteed that I will stay." And when she come to the laboratory, she was the director, the dictator. I lost control on everyone 'cause everybody wants to become an actor. They are not more in the house. So, I give them the space. I give them two weeks. That they can do everything they want. I'm losing money, but I am just trying to, that they become tired, that they can catch the behind the scenes.

AL: You tired them out.

[20:07]

AEM: Yeah, so, I give them this space to become, uh...

STL: So, their defenses are down.

AEM: Yeah. So the experience the space. I tried to feel, like they start to forget about the space. I start making my film in behind the scene with my DOP. And just, there is no industry language, cuts, action, no nothing about this. We are just watching each other and because we worked a lot, two years before in the intentions, et cetera, when we we will ask this question. I had no script, but I had this board with ideas, with photos and with questions. And I know that if I ask some questions in the beginning, everybody gonna come back and there's no film. So I start to ask the very soft questions in the beginning, to just give them the space, and give them the confidence. That I'm not looking for guilty people or denouncing anyone. I'm not looking for putting anyone in danger. I'm protecting you with my art and I want just you to talk freely about your past and to understand that Morocco of today is different and nothing gonna happen to anyone. And, it will be good to have the premiere at Cannes with my grandmother who never was never in a theater before.

AL: Did she go?

AEM: Yeah, she find herself for the first time, watching her own story, in Cannes, DBC Theatre, sold out. I was afraid that she would stand up and say “stop it!” Everything happened in real time in this film, even if the screening, and that was a very sensitive moment to have this premiere with everybody present in Cannes and then in Marrakesh. In the film, once the first time, after 20 years of this festival, international festival, we won the first prize for Morocco.

AL: That’s beautiful.

AEM: The first Golden Star, yeah.

AL: For those who have yet to see this beautiful film, Asmae’s grandmother is a unique character. She, she’s really, I mean, called very early on in the film the dictator and she rules the family with an iron cane. And, and, nobody crosses this grandmother. It’s almost as if you have, like, I wondered at moments if that was an actor because she’s from central casting. I mean, she’s such a strong presence, obviously in your family, but on screen, it’s, it’s uncanny to watch her. Especially somebody who, who hates images, and wants nothing to do with images, is participating in a film. I thought, how did this small miracle happen? But, now you’ve explained. I wanted to talk a little bit about working with family, because this is what we would call a first person film, a film very much about your own story and your family’s story. And within that, we might call it in in documentary studies, we might call this a domestic ethnography, like, exploring with your family. And that has to be one of the hardest things to do, because, exactly the directorial authority is not there. You have prior relations, there are hierarchies in families. There are dynamics. You need to have future relations with these people. They are your family. They don’t go away. So, I was just really interested in hearing the dynamics that you were dealing with in terms of the family. You’ve already said a little bit about, like, losing directorial control. But, you also have your father, who becomes your collaborator.

[23:43]

AEM: My accomplice, yeah. My father was with me from the beginning. And. Yeah, thanks to him. Because he gave me this force to, sometimes, I let him manage the conversation with the, with the family. I mean, this is what was very hard, introducing my camera, putting it in the head of people and, just “tell me your story now.” Yeah, like a gun. “Tell me your story now.” And, I feel that, also because I find myself a part of this story, I am in front of the camera and I try to, to hide myself in the mirror. And, I told my DOP, I don’t want to see myself like they them. So, he said, “yeah, you too, you are afraid of, from the gun. I said “Yes. Yes, maybe, yes. But, I don’t want to see my face as much as we can see them.” And, I tried to put some mirror here and there. And I said “If you can catch me in mirrors, but never really two, two times. And, it is I, I was editor also with consultation. For two years, I adapted a lot of ways to

how I can edit 500 hours of rushes. It's too much, too too much. I try to get editors, but editors asks me to translate for them. So, as I am editor I can do it, but how?

[25:03] The way was like making coloring papers and giving titles for my footage. For example, the beginning, have the potential to be in the beginning. I give it the blue, and the green is the climax, and the end is the red. And I give titles, and I found myself putting colors in the whole my apartment. I have no place to sit there. So, it was a very, very hard process of editing because I want to watch everything. And I found a lot of things in our organic conversation in sound. Because sometimes we need one word, two words, one sentence to create a transition. While we were talking about the intimate story. And, now we're gonna talk about the national story. What is the transition? So the transition gonna be one word from organic conversation. And, then I was listening to everything, and there was also creating voice-over in the laboratory, not at the end. I'm not a journalist, I'm filmmaker. As I said to my grandmother, I'm not a journalist, so I'm just... I was trying to, writing voice-over in the meantime. Sometimes I find the, something's really, really interesting, and I write it as a voice-over while we making the film in the process, yeah. And the editing room, I was like 500 hour, and I just like get five hours, like a rough cut of five hours and I start to looking for consultations. Because, I did a lot of writing session in the like, IDFA Academy, EuroDoc, Atlas Workshop. So I have a lot of contact with lots of people in the industry. So, I called Nadia Ben Rachid, which is Tunisian friend, the editor. She did all of the films of Abderrahmane Sissako. She can understand Arabic, and that was great. And, I said yeah, she was very happy to work with me. And, I give her this five hours and what I was thinking, that it was a *chef d'oeuvre* (work of art). For her, it was a garbage. And, I spent, I mean, I spent a lot of time to make a sequence. Everything in this film, I created it in the editing room, also. So, sometimes I spend a lot of time to make a sequence. And, she said, "it is a garbage." Because, I like this distance, she has more distance and I have no distance. I'm just like stuck in my footage and I love everything. And for me, the film is gonna be three hours and, "No. Ninety minutes, it's already too much." Ha, ha.

[27:42]

AL: No, it's perfect. But, how did you work with Nadia then? Like, what was that process at the end, when you had this five hour cut, and you bring in this professional, really talented editor to work with? But, it's, you're so close to the material. What was that process?

AEM: Yeah, the process I sent her one hour, for example. She said, I mean, we are talking about sequences. And then we will find transition later. So, as you said, for example from three minute to 15 minute, it's a garbage. From 20 minutes to 25, it's a garbage, you know. We talk like that. So, I just like try, from the beginning, I tried not to make everything in the garbage. But, yeah, it was hard for me to accept that it was garbage. Because, for me everything is interesting, but, I have to make a choice. And, I sent her again, two hours, and again two hours, and then we make the same

process. OK, now we have 230. But we don't have the film. We don't have the story. We don't, we have only sequences. For me, the beginning was this opening sequence because, it's metaphoric to ask my grandmother "can you hear me?" I want to talk about everything. I want you to pass another level of thinking about things, but, not before talking about the past. And, talking freely about what happened. Creating this reconciliation and maybe this confrontation, and interaction also with this family, and not only in the house, finally in the country. So, yeah, that was the process. Editing room for me it's another writing process.

[29:29]

STL: You know, it's interesting to know that you were working with Sissako's editor because when you said Sissako, I thought of *Bamako* as a little bit of a similar kind of hybridity, in that film. And, that makes me curious about your influences and your inspirations.

AEM: I really love Iranian cinema. I did my bachelor degree, my *thèse* (thesis) in Iranian cinema from Khomeini to Makhmalbaf family and Abbas Kiarostami and the Farhadi. I also love Nuri Bilge Ceylan, yeah.

AL: Turkish

AEM: Yeah, Turkish director cinema. I really love the cinema that give time and don't care about the how we can develop the characters and how we can let the characters move inside the frame and not moving a lot the camera. And that's what I like *Le Goût de La Cerise*.

STL: Taste of Cherry.

[30:25]

AEM: Yeah, Kiarostami. For me, it's a very big lesson of cinema. How we can watch a boring story, but without getting bored? *The Taste of Cherry*, that I really love. And also, a lot of films of Farhadi, that I really like the way that Farhadi works. He said that he works with situations. Sometimes we don't hear about the characters. And this is the documentary. We don't care, who is this person. But, we care about the situations, and the stories, sometimes. And this is what I like in cinema of Farhadi. I really love how we can tell stories behind the naivety of things. With Abbas Kiarostami, *Où Est La maison de L'ami? Where is the House of My Friend?*, yeah. *À Travers les Oliviers*, also.

AL: *Through the Olive Trees*, and *Close Up*, I would think might be.

AEM: Yeah. And, *Salaam Cinema* also, for Makhmalbaf. I really love this hybrid format. How we can— cinema in cinema. I really love this, yeah.

AL: Exactly. And you do it beautifully. So, when we watched your film, the film that came to mind, first, was a film from 2013 by the Cambodian director Rithy Panh. *The Missing Picture*, where he's also talking about this very traumatic period from his

past, where he survives the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge, but his family doesn't survive. And he has no pictures of it. There are no images. There's propaganda films from the time, but there's nothing that really expresses his experience. And he uses these clay figurines. I mean, you animate yours a little bit more than he does, but really, you know, it's like an animation of a very dark period, which is almost a mismatch, right? You almost think, "how can you use little dolls for such a dark period?" And I didn't think I would see a better use of them until I saw your film.

[32:20]

AEM: I really loved the work of Rithy Panh. I really like all his films. *S 21*, even the fictions. The last one also in Cannes. So, I think Rithy Panh really gives a lot of inspiration for us because I was studying in La Fémis when Rithy Panh made his film. It's really nice to see how the form can help a new generation to make films. And, when I found that my my characters are here and the their memories still recalls things, I found that I have to find a way. As I said, I love obstacles and sometimes obstacles push you to create things to have a solution. I really love *Missing Picture* and we grew up watching, in cinema school, watching films of Rithy Panh, and Raul Peck also, and the French cinema, Jean Rouch.

[33:16] Yeah, you know, tagine, Moroccan tagine? This tagine, we can put inside the fish. And my mother can, after two days, she can put meat inside, and after two days, she can put chicken. So the tagine. This is the form that we can use. But, what we're gonna put inside this tagine...

AL: That's beautiful.

AEM: ...this is, this is the most important. And if my characters are not here, I will never try to tell the story because I was not here. Yeah, I think it's good to watch first *The Missing Picture* and then *The Mother of All Lies*. And, say, OK, this is the version when we you have your characters, and when you don't have your characters. I really love what Rithy Panh did. And he sent me an e-mail. We are a friend and he really loves the film. He watched it. Yeah, yeah.

AL: I'm sure, I can imagine him being very impressed and inspired by where you took it.

AEM: He (name, unintelligible) is our common friend and he really told me how Rithy Panh was very happy watching the film.

AL: So happy to hear that.

[34:17]

STL: Well, and speaking about the use of the figurines and the human body, I was very struck with the way that you dealt with the scale. Your face comes into the maquette of the neighborhood, and this, always the hand moving the dolls around. And, I thought about the way you're using scale as a kind of incongruity between the real body, or the human form, and these models. And, I was thinking that scale is

kind of a symbolic of the relationship between the past and the present. And, that you seem to emphasize a relationship between the lived experience and the imagined past. And so, I was wondering if you can talk about the idea of scale and how you think about it.

[35:07]

AEM: Yeah, I really love the way you see it. Because, it was that, it was how we can ridicule, make ridicule the past, make a friend, these people. Put them in fear for years and years is nothing. Look at me. I will just take it with my hand and remove it. And I have the *baguette magique* (magic wand) to appear and disappear the past, the, bad things from the past and appear the good things from the future. Just don't be afraid from your past and just come out from your bubble Gramma and Granny and come enjoy, enjoy the life today. Walls have no ears. And that's why I really put this *ridicule* skill. I mean, yeah. There is no fear today. You can just remove it with our hands and that's why, yeah. That was the real, I mean, thank you for your sensitivity to see it in my footage, in my film, yeah.

STL: Well, and also, I love how your the people in your film describe your grandmother as a kind of dictator and that she's oppressing them. And, there's a way also that you get referred to as the director, right? And, so there's a way that, I think, you're feeling, at the end, you feel this gesture of—you are taking the control, like you said, with the magic wand. You are, kind of, resting control from your grandmother, to take, and I think of it as a kind of healing gesture, that you are looking to heal the past in a new generation.

[36:45]

AEM: Yeah, the way to say it, to my grandmother, today I'm the driver. I will take, I will take the reins. Yeah, I will take the reins. By the way, I am a horse rider.

AL: Oh wow.

AEM: I will take the the the reins, and I will try to show you that you put us in this bubble for years and years for nothing. And, I'm just, people asked me, “why you didn't take actors and you make another film?” Yes, but I need to make this film with these people, because I live with them. And I need them to understand that talking about the past, gonna not hurt anybody. It's our own past, and it's gonna be really crazy that we tell our own stories and somebody else gonna be upset. It's their problems. So, I cannot make this film with actors and come back to live with the same people. We need to go for this therapy. I really know that people don't like to say this film is therapy. It's not therapy. But provoking things. Yeah, hiding things, that means, there is a problem. But, talking about things, it's, there is no problem. Now, we can talk. My grandmother can watch series, can talk about Leipzig, can talk about the dress of the actresses. So, things are changing. And this is what I like here. After months and months of making documentary films, we cannot fix things, not in direct way, but *indirectement*.

[38:14]

AL: Yeah, indirectly. It's a filmic repair.

AEM: Indirectly. So, this is so nice to say how the change go in my relationship with my mother. Because I'm working also in a trilogy about my mother. The first film was *The Postcard* where I decided to go to this mountain where my mother was born. She spent just one week. I was sure that I will not find the story of my mother there, but I just wanted to go there and they found another story. And I did this film with my own camera. And, it was a way of healing that I could come back again with more energy for *The Mother of All Lies*.

AL: I'm very glad that you mentioned your mother, because that was the last thing I thought we need to touch on, you know. We talked a little about the neighbors. We talked a little about your father. We talked a lot about your grandmother. And your mother is, actually, a kind of anchor, in this, in this film. But almost a silent anchor.

[39:07]

AEM: Yeah, because there are three generations in this film. There is the generation of my grandmother, who is, *shoosht*, just like no word. And because of this *shoosht*, the generation of my mother are really *shoosht*. So, I'm not changing anything in this film. I'm just, like following this, these characters in their lives. And, my mother is like that. So I cannot push her. But, she talks at the end of the film, when she said "no, stop it." I was very happy to get this, because yeah, we we have to stop this pressure and to say no, there is something that hurts. If I get this picture for my daughter because of you and we understand also that the grandmother, because of her past, it's like *l'effet domino*.

AL: The domino effect.

AEM: Yeah, the domino effect. And, then my grandmother. I mean, we are the victim of this woman. I was happy, also, to show for the first time Arabic women strong.

AL: Very strong.

AEM: Very strong. But, she's not the victim. We were the victims of this grandmother. Because, if I come back to think, why I made this film, and it's also good for me to make this film, to tell this story. Because it's also about me. I'm part of this film. So I'm not making a film about them. I'm making a film with them. And it's different and my mother, my relationship with my mother changed, also. I was looking for this interaction with her. And just like, to have a hug with my mother when I need that. And, before, it was very hard. How I can express my emotions without being shy, that my grandmother is here. My father. Yeah, now we can really say I love you. I miss you. And things that we couldn't say before. And I can hug her and I can kiss her, just like. Yeah, this film changed a lot of things and I really love the, the force of cinema. Documentary can do that, and that's why we need more documentaries in life.

[41:12]

AL: Well, I know your next film is, you're planning a fiction film. But I hope Asmae El Moudir makes many more documentaries in this lifetime. Thank you so much for speaking with us. This has been a delight.

STL: Thank you so much.

AEM: Thank you.

STL: And thank you to the Sheffield Doc Fest for hosting this conversation.

AL: Thank you so much, Asmae.

AEM: Thank you.

STL: In closing, we want to say how grateful we were to catch Asmae at the end of her festival run and talk with her in person. And big thank yous to the Sheffield Doc Fest for hosting us.

AL: Thank you to Sheffield Doc Fest creative director Raul Niño Zambrano, the podcast program producer Lieven Heeremans and to Doc Fest board member Gali Gold. All of them, for not only making this conversation possible, but for providing a space, the equipment, and even a sound engineer for this recording.

STL: And we wanted to remind listeners that we've got transcripts to all our shows on the website. That's reframe.sussex.ac.uk/avm1.

AL: Animal-Vegetable-Mineral is produced by Samuael Topiary Landberg, myself — Alisa Lebow and Ritika Kaushik. This episode was edited by Topiary. The sound mix was done by Nick Gørtz. And AVM is published by Reframe University of Sussex. Our website URL is [reframe dot Sussex dot AC dot UK slash AVM1](https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/avm1).

STL: Thanks so much for listening to this episode of Animal Vegetable Mineral. Bye for now.