

Women on the Other Side

Week 4: Women and Documentary

FILM NATIONAL
MEDIA TELEVISION
RADIO MUSEUM WEB
PHOTOGRAPHY

Introduction

In previous weeks, we have considered types of fiction film: the family saga and the melodrama as the 'woman's picture'. One key element has been the notion of a power discourse attached to this i.e. that these terms have been used pejoratively to label an inferior type of film.

This week, we return to women filmmakers, but combine it with the central element of the woman's picture, the female protagonist. Working in the different medium of documentary, I have chosen the main case study to be *Sisters in Law* (2005), by Kim Longinotto. Whilst documentary, as a television form, has a number of women directors and producers, the re-rise of the form has been accompanied by the 'celebritisation' of the documentary maker. Thus, the real protagonist in a Michael Moore or a Nick Broomfield film is the documentarian himself.

Sisters in Law (2005)

(Director: Kim Longinotto; collaborator: Florence Ayisi; cinematographer: Mary Milton)

This documentary follows the work of a campaigning prosecutor, Vera Ngassa, and judge, Beatrice Ntuba, in Cameroon. Both women seek to redress the balance of endemic injustice by pursuing groundbreaking prosecutions of husbands for rape and violence and adults for abuse of children. Despite the grim nature of this material, which the documentary makers give unflinching coverage to, what emerges is the triumph of people's humanity and a female drive for justice.

Watching the extracts, we can address these questions:

- In what ways does *Sisters in Law* appear to function as a fiction film?
- Can we apply some of the generic features (or 'repertoire of elements' from Roy's notes) of a woman's picture to this film?

Longinotto's stated intention is to stand beside those in the culture and to film their stories as truthfully to the emotions as possible. "The women we're following know that we're there to tell their stories. We're part of their fight, we're on their side. And the amazing thing is how they make use of our presence. Suddenly, there's a witness and that gives them confidence." (www.redpepper.org). Longinotto is appealing to the universality of these emotions, of the connectedness of all experience (an idea we will return to later).



Vera Ngassa and Beatrice Ntuba – *Sisters in Law*

A Woman's Film?

Coming back to some ideas from previous weeks, can we look at this film and decide whether it had to have been made by a woman?

Longinotto herself rejects such a focus on her work, although only a woman could have the access she had for some scenes (as in *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998)). Her stated role is to give back an identity, a named identity to the faceless and the powerless: "I just thought I'm so glad that I'm making films because I'm giving those little girls names... Really, I'm just balancing it a tiny bit." (www.dfgdocs.com). Therefore, she intends a celebration of her subjects and their bravery, using film to give them an identity rather than herself.

Woman vs. Women

As we saw in Mira Nair's *The Namesake*, women filmmakers can be part of our experience and debate about cross-cultural identities. In this, they look at how racial and cultural identities interact with gender identity. Ashima's experience of America, and her resistance to it, is defined by her gender.

In the late 1980s, feminist critics (such as Jane Gaines and bell hooks) challenged the previous feminist assumption of speaking for all women. This, for them, failed to recognise the different standpoints for women who are neither white nor Western.

Feminist writers, subsequently, have tried to grapple with the problems that an unthinking, Imperialist gaze can create. As early explorers mapped the world, as if it was unnamed, so (argue some) modern Western creations can 'textualise' the world, as if it had no

existence before they brought these representations into life. Some feminist writing has sought to redress this imbalance.

These theories are from a wide range of writers and are complex, but I have attempted to pick out some ideas that are useful for us to apply.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, a Vietnamese scholar and filmmaker living in America, challenges the idea of constituting the world into a 'dominant' culture and the 'Other'. She identifies a new type of criticism where the speaker does not attempt to 'speak about' but rather is 'speaking nearby' the culture they are commenting on. By this, we are recognising the gap between people, rather than attempting to universalise or define.

We can relate some of this back to the films as follow:

- How aware are we of where we are looking from? (Our geographical location and our cultural context?)
- Does the film allow the protagonists to speak from their own world in their own language (relating to our ideas of naming and identity)?

Claire Denis and *Chocolat*: Finding the 'In-Between'

What can be women filmmakers role in post-colonial relationships and the gender politics in these territories? If we return to *The Piano*, we can see how the film is open to more than one discourse (i.e. set of ideas or ideological framework). It may have universal appeal as 'romantic fiction' but it has also been discussed in its representation of colonial New Zealand i.e. the treatment of the Maori characters, who are represented as not more than a "production value", a backdrop in telling a story that is a white, Western fantasy.

Claire Denis's first film, *Chocolat* (1988), tackles this concern with inter-racial relationships and how far we can claim to know a culture. Denis's approach is very different, since she incorporates the difficulty of the colonial and the post-colonial relationships in her representations in *Chocolat*. France, the little girl who has partly grown up in Cameroon, returns to the unfinished business of her relationship to the country, and to the people she knew there. This is characterised particularly by her relationship to the family servant, Protée, who she has been close to.

Denis's film chimes with E. Ann Kaplan's work in respect of the 'interracial look', examining the power of the Western gaze on the developing world. Drawing on Mulvey's theory (which we considered in week one), Kaplan characterises the Western gaze as having the same controlling and devising force as the 'male gaze' was once thought to have. Power is located

in the right to look and to 'map', to represent and to make visible.

Kaplan comments that Denis catches that moment in a child when they are learning 'difference'. France, the character and the nation she allegorically represents, are being made to feel their exclusion, their inability to 'speak from within.' However, the issues are different for women than for men, since women live more intimately with the native community, sharing their domestic lives and coming to 'know' something of their lives and perspectives. They become together "subjectivities-in-between", sharing a space that is neither imperialist nor colonised. The male colonisers remain 'different' as they bring the values of their nation state to the colonised nation, and remains, always somehow, outside of it.

Interestingly, in Denis's film, the spectator is identified with Protée and his desire to be visible, to be seen. Denis raises questions about the relationships through a fragmentary narrative; Denis lays out the scene of various relationships, but does not aim for narrative closure. France, arguably, ends up 'in between' French and African culture.

Laura Poitras: *My Country, My Country*

Working alone in Iraq, between June 2004 and January 2005 (when the first elections were held) Laura Poitras filmed this illuminating documentary, which was Oscar-nominated in 2007. Inspired by an article in *The New Yorker*, Poitras knew she wanted to make a film about the people involved. Much of the action centres around Dr. Riyadh, who works within a Sunni neighbourhood and was an active political leader. Poitras lived with the family over the seven months, and filmed their discussions and lives intimately. In addition, she counterpointed these scenes with footage of American briefings and of an Australian private security firm working throughout Iraq.

Poitras's poignant portrait of all the different people caught up within these terrible times is all the more powerful, I feel, for its contrast to Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). Despite that film's power to reach a mass audience with its strong political message, Poitras's film raises the question, again, of accessed (privileged) voices. In Poitras's film, we hear directly from those involved, reflecting the many different attitudes in the melting pot Baghdad has become. There is certainly still a political message and an ideology embedded here, but the style of presentation is entirely different. Emotion is brought to bear through our interpretation and interaction with the protagonists as Poitras appears, simply, to lay out a series of juxtaposed scenes for us to view. In addition, there is the powerful music of Kadhum Al Sahir, forced into exile by Saddam Hussein, who sings his specially composed, 'Oh My Country.'

My Country, My Country had a limited release in America, and is available as a Region 1 DVD. It has an official website: <www.mycountrymycountry.com>.

In conclusion, we can summarise some of the questions these films ask us.

1. Do these films, by women, allow access to voices that may not be heard otherwise?
2. Is there a sense of a Western view on these post-colonial situations?
3. Can women's experience be universalised?
4. Do the filmmakers 'speak about' or are they 'speaking nearby'?
5. Is there a different gaze, a 'female gaze', operating in these texts?
6. Are there similarities in these non-fiction texts with the fictions texts we have examined?
7. Can we explain the limited release of these films to a mass audience?

WOMEN ON THE OTHER SIDE: BLOGSPOT
WOMEN AND DOCUMENTARY: Kim Longinotto
Entry: 17th October 2007
www.womensfilms.blogspot.com

Divorce Iranian Style can be found at the Channel 4 On Demand site.

You may not have heard of Longinotto. She has been making documentaries for a number of years, building up a body of work that addresses controversial, even harrowing, topics: female circumcision in *The Day I will Never Forget* (2002), the difficulties of divorce within the Iranian system in *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998) or tackling domestic abuse in Cameroon in *Sisters-in-Law* (2005). Her latest documentary, *Hold me Tight, Let me Go* (2007), returns home, examining the relationship between staff and pupils in a school for traumatised children in Oxford.

A signature style is the intensity of the 'performances' she obtains from her subjects. In *Divorce Iranian Style*, we follow a number of women through the cruel bureaucracy of a Tehran divorce court. Women seeking separation from unhappy or abusive relationships, demonstrate several, separate acts of resistance and 'individual' solidarity, since they, somehow, separately stand together in the same battle. They have few rights under the law, but their emotion and determination is used to powerful effect. What emerges, I think, is the humanness (but constrained humanity) of those there, both men and women. The women's spirit is undaunted. Longinotto's style in this is neither obtrusive or absent. In *Divorce*, the filmmakers are often applied to for opinions, both by the women and by the judge. However, she tends to use a self-effacing style of camerawork, avoiding a variety of shots, she tends to use the middle distance to show all the interactions whilst keeping us at a spectator's distance. Commentators have spoken

of her "restrained gaze" that can still "radiate such warmth" (www.redpepper.org).

Longinotto also states that her aim is not to lead with argument; instead, to allow viewers to find their own way through the material. In interviews, Longinotto comes across as being incredibly humanistic and focussed on the subject matter. She makes an interesting comparison with fiction narratives: "I like it when documentary has the same constraints as fiction, when it doesn't have to give you a lesson or teach you what to think it's just an emotional experience." (imdb.com)

Longinotto won *Screen International* magazine's British documentary competition at Britdoc (UK documentary festival), with *Hold me Tight, Let me Go. Sisters-in-Law*, from which we will watch extracts, won the 'Prix de Art et Essai' at Cannes Film Festival. Stunning that no significant attention was paid by our prize-obsessed media. *Sisters-in-Law* and *Divorce Iranian Style* are very similar in structure, following three/four stranded narratives. My final quote could apply to both: "Longinotto's deeply humane, but quietly unsensational portrait of African women struggling for self-determination defies received notions about . . . women." (www.moviesgoa.org)

References and background reading

E. Ann Kaplan (1997) *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*, Routledge
Alison Butler (2002) *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen*, Wallflower

Rona Murray 23/10/07