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(Ursula Biemann, 1999). In his serious treatment of the live television feed, however, Padilha treads upon new ground in the denaturalization of the mediated spaces that are themselves effects of the same rhythms of neoliberalism and globalization. The gift he offers is a multilayered vision of a future to come, democracy to come, justice. Its vehicle is a vigilant and clear assessment of the living present.

## Notes

1. Lynn Spigel, "TV's Next Season?" *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 85.
2. Akira Lippit, "The Derrida That I Love," *Grey Room* 20 (Summer 2005): 85.
3. Bernard Stiegler and Jacques Derrida, *Echographies of Television*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).
4. Personal conversation, Vancouver, B.C., March 2006.
5. Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches: An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, Md.: University Presses of America, 1983).
6. See Jerome Bourdon, "Live Television Is Still Alive," *Media, Culture & Society* 22, no. 5:531–56; Sean Cubitt, *Timeshift* (London: Routledge, 1991); John Ellis, *Seeing Things* (London: IBTauris, 2000); as well as the discussion in performance studies inaugurated by Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993) and continued in Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).
7. See *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real*, ed. James Friedman (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002).
8. Derrida in Stiegler and Derrida, *Echographies*, 24.
9. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 23.

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## Cinema Solidarity: The Documentary Practice of Kim Longinotto



by Patricia White

U.K. filmmaker Kim Longinotto has long been a practitioner of transnational feminism, though the term would probably sound too academic to her. Working primarily in cinema verité format, with funding from Britain's Channel 4, she has documented the stories of women ordinary and extraordinary—often both—in Egypt (*Hidden Faces* [1990]), Iran (*Runaway* [1991], *Divorce Iranian Style* [1998]), Japan (*Dream Girls* [1993], *Shinjuku Boys* [1995], among others),<sup>1</sup> and sub-Saharan Africa (*The Day I Will Never Forget* [2002], *Sisters in Law* [2005]) for exhibition largely (but not exclusively) in the West. She has also made numerous films back home in England, including her first, *Pride of Place* (1976), an indictment of her boarding school that helped close the place down.

The reception of Longinotto's latest film, *Sisters in Law* (a prizewinner at Cannes that was showcased in North America at the Telluride and Toronto film festivals

and released in April 2006 at New York's Film Forum to strong reviews), helps frame questions about feminism's claims to the public sphere in a reputedly "post-feminist" era and about how documentary film can facilitate this "publicity." While Longinotto's work has been available in the United States for many years through the nonprofit distributor Women Make Movies, *Sisters in Law* demonstrates the risks and promises of theatrical exhibition for her work and for the feminist media culture Women Make Movies' collection represents.<sup>2</sup>

The visibility of Longinotto's work is enhanced by its frequent engagement with Third World subjects. One of the clichés of postfeminism holds that while Western (white) women "have it all" (except guarantees of reproductive freedom, sexual choice, equal wages, etc.), women elsewhere still have "issues."<sup>3</sup> The very title of *Divorce Iranian Style* implies national and cultural differences in women's access to basic rights. And *Sisters in Law* frames questions about feminism's claims to the public sphere in a reputedly "postfeminist" era.

In her influential essay "Under Western Eyes" Chandra Mohanty critiques Western feminist social science practice and development work in which "third world women" are portrayed as victims, not agents of change—a strategy evident in a wide swath of well-meaning global social-issue documentaries.<sup>4</sup> Does the fact that Longinotto works in so many different cultural contexts similarly convey the sense that "what binds women together is a sociological notion of the 'sameness' of their oppression?"<sup>5</sup>

Longinotto's work scrupulously avoids this structure; her subjects, methods, and emphases are transnational rather than global(izing). That is to say, the films compare and connect gendered spaces and practices across cultures and borders without disavowing the power of the gaze (and of language, capital, state, religion, history, etc.), shaping these relations and rendering them intelligible. As Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan write in "Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Feminist Practices," "transnational feminism . . . is not to be celebrated as free of asymmetrical power relations. Rather, transnational feminist *practices*, as we call them, involve forms of alliance, subversion, and complicity within which asymmetries and inequalities can be critiqued."<sup>6</sup>

Longinotto's reliance on cinema verité practices in most of her work seeks to avoid imposing an interpretive perspective on the films, yet the forms of alliance and complicity that may be invisible in observational cinema are often foregrounded. *Divorce Iranian Style*, for example, avoids silencing the chador-wearing plaintiffs it follows, emphasizing their efforts to understand and use language that might help them navigate the legal system. The contradictions of Japanese gender and social codes are conveyed in the at-once nonconformist and rigidly regulated and hierarchal practices of the cross-dressing performers in *Dream Girls* and the female wrestlers in *Gaea's Girls*. It is the filmmaker's access to gender-segregated spaces and institutions in both cultures that allows her to tell these stories. Moreover, Longinotto works with collaborators grounded in each place and culture where she films. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, an expert on Islamic family law, is credited as codirector of *Divorce* and *Runaway*, and she was present throughout the shoot to translate and even to direct the attention of Longinotto, who serves as cinematographer, by a touch on

the arm. For *Sisters in Law* Florence Ayisi helped Longinotto make contacts in Kumba, Cameroon, her hometown, and she too receives codirector credit.

Longinotto's unobtrusiveness grants voice and presence to the women on-camera. This delegation of authority is particularly marked in *Sisters in Law's* portrayal of African women as advocates for other African—frequently Muslim—women. Taking as its main characters state prosecutor Vera Ngassa and presiding judge Beatrice Ntuba and featuring several other women judges, lawyers, and officers, some of whom remain unidentified in this sparsely documented film, *Sisters* subordinates the film's evidentiary framework to theirs. This is not to say that relationships of power and authority—of who has the right to speak and the obligation to listen, of what can be said and in which terms or contexts—do not govern the film. Indeed they do (it is a courtroom documentary, after all), and they extend to its production and exhibition contexts.

Longinotto met Ayisi, who teaches in the International Film School at the University of South Wales, at a screening of *Divorce Iranian Style*, and they later traveled to Cameroon to explore possible subjects for a collaborative project. Longinotto, with longtime sound recordist Mary Milton, began filming in Kumba. After hours of footage were X-rayed and ruined in customs, a new focus on Ngassa and Ntuba, whose integrity and charisma had become evident to the filmmakers, was decided upon. In the course of the film several cases highlight these women's role in bringing justice to village women and girls who endure domestic violence and sexual assault. Sonita, a prepubescent rape victim, and Amina, a Muslim woman who has survived fourteen years of beatings and marital rape, both bring successful actions against their aggressors in Ntuba's court and emerge as courageous characters. Manka, a six-year-old girl covered in scars, is brought to Ngassa's office; her aunt is prosecuted for abuse. A scene at the end of the film shows Ngassa visiting the aunt in prison and delivering her medications.

Women are guaranteed equal rights under the law in Cameroon, but in practice spousal abuse and sexual assault often go unpunished. While an impressive 46 percent of judges and magistrates in the courts modeled after the English system are women, Longinotto notes, the labyrinthine legal system also relies on customary courts and Muslim Sharia, both of which tend to be more deferential to patriarchal authority.<sup>7</sup>

In a recent interview Longinotto asserted that explaining to the viewer matters of jurisdiction in this complicated and often corrupt court system would have taken over her film. Instead the film shows Ntuba and Ngassa, both of whom have earned a reputation for fairness with women in neighboring villages, in action. (Aptly, Ngassa's personal version of "judicial activism" was influenced by *To Kill a Mockingbird*.) The film begins in the middle of a complaint of kidnapping against a man who was married "country fashion" to the mother of the child in question. Ngassa tsks and scolds the man and the woman's father for thinking they could exchange a woman for some pigs. Turning to the young mother, she demands: "Madam, what should I do with these two?" Evident power and class differences, signified in dress and language (Ngassa moves between pidgin and standard English as necessary), divide her from the woman she serves, but she addresses her with the same honorific, madam, with which a series of suave male lawyers appeal to her. That said, she's not above

trumping the sisterhood invoked in the film's title with her characteristically tart tongue: when Lum Rose admits to beating her young niece and pleads for mercy, Ngassa snaps: "Don't 'sister' me!"

In the absence of details about court procedure and authority Ngassa's considerable charisma and outspokenness about women's rights give an extremely positive impression of the prospects for justice in Cameroon. Amina is granted a divorce in customary court, where the decidedly more patriarchal setting and crowd composition resemble an earlier "family meeting" in which male elders discouraged her from bringing her abuse suit in the first place. It isn't until the end of the film that we discover that Amina's victory and that of Ladi, another woman whose case is followed by the film, are historic firsts. Questions of authority are central to the changing gender relations of postcolonial West African society and to the court politics that are the film's subject; they pass beyond the frame to the politics of the filmmaking.

Like much of Longinotto's work, *Sisters in Law* is a strictly observational documentary, using no voiceover or explanatory text, experts, graphics, or talking heads. (A sole interview, with the two successful adult plaintiffs, comes late in the film, and none of Longinotto's questions are heard.) Whether observing institutional routines such as those of the Takarazuka school in *Dream Girls* or documenting women who help other women to empower themselves such as the health educators in *The Day I Will Never Forget*, Longinotto's films are characterized by empathy and nonintervention. Documenting court proceedings in *Sisters in Law*, Longinotto passes as a silent witness. Ntuba is sometimes shot from an extreme low angle when on the bench, a setup that, while probably necessitated by the layout of the courtroom, invests her with almost intimidating authority. It is in part this delegation that secures Longinotto's own seemingly invisible, yet strategic, position.

Longinotto also worked with an advocate (a community health care worker named Fardohsa) on-screen and "on the ground" in her previous film *The Day I Will Never Forget*, but the courtroom context in *Sisters* (a large proportion of the film takes place in the courtroom or chambers) makes this witnessing relation a structural one.<sup>5</sup> Questions of the camera's neutrality are necessarily foregrounded without resorting to reflexive techniques: justice is served in each of the cases in part because the camera's presence connotes that "the whole world is watching," even if the film receives only a modest number of viewers in practice (few of them in Africa; Kumba has no cinema).

Yet, paradoxically, this observational style is meant to give the impression—to us and the participants—that "no one is watching." The crew of two women works to make their subjects comfortable with their presence, effacing their actual shooting by communicating without words (a symbiotic production ideal whose specifically female coding is reinforced by Longinotto's reference in the interview to a "gentle" way of filmmaking).<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, I suggest, Longinotto's relation to the women's stories (and the viewer's relation to them, inasmuch as she, for infrastructural as much as formal reasons, is addressed as someone watching in the West) precisely follows the "feminist solidarity model" Mohanty advocates in her discussion of pedagogy in "Under Western Eyes Revisited." The film "suggest[s] the complexities of the narratives of marginalized peoples in terms of relationality rather than separation."<sup>10</sup>

If, watching *Sisters in Law*, we often have the sense that the cameras—and the female crew—help the film's female subjects achieve their goals through witnessing, it is the subjects, I have argued, who provide the film with its voice. A tearful Amina is reassured by her defense attorney, Veraline: "No one will let you die." A uniformed policewoman joins in as an eloquent advocate: "This case will stop them. . . . Men are still brutal, they don't know the law." While Ngassa is obviously in command of the language of justice from the start, in the course of the film Amina becomes the central example of empowerment. Her palpable fear and distress give way to relief when she wins her case of battery against her husband and then to trepidation during the divorce case in the male-dominated customary court. When she is granted the divorce, Amina is overjoyed and greeted with equally jubilant approval from her female friends back in the Hausa quarters, where she has been living since leaving the abusive relationship. She brags that she was the only woman in the courtroom, forgetting for a moment the women filming and recording—observers who, Longinotto believes, helped guarantee the positive outcome. Besides their camera and recording equipment, the filmmakers carried cultural power in their skin color, language, and national identity, which could not, in fact, ever be completely invisible or inaudible.

The scenes among the Hausa women are among the film's most effective; the women are so excited after the divorce is granted that Veraline has to remind them to speak a language she can understand. In conversation they somewhat self-consciously testify to gender injustices and what they've learned, telling Amina: "You've opened our eyes; we've been suffering in silence." Thus even women who are not directly involved are transformed, through the double "truth-telling" processes of documentary witnessing and court testimony, to the extent that they themselves become advocates. The film may well place its spectators in an analogous position.

Documentary relations of authority and address—of authorship—are themselves inflected, though by no means determined, by gender. Longinotto has successfully adapted cinema vérité filmmaking as transnational feminist practice over her career. She manages to be unobtrusive because she builds a relation of trust with her (mostly) female subjects and because her presence is "authorized" by that of the advocates she often puts at the center of her films, women like Ngassa, Fardohsa, and, though she remains off-screen in the Iranian films, Mir-Hosseini. (Longinotto never appears in front of the camera.) Her position as cinematographer quite literally displaces her directorial position (from beside the camera), an authorial construction that would rely on connotations of women's supposed egolessness and empathy. On the other hand, it might be seen as consolidating her authority by approximating the (presumptively male) authorial and observational ideal. However gendered, any presumed "neutrality" must be seen as marked (or precisely "unmarked") as a white European and, in Cameroon, a former colony, specifically English gaze.

What does this signify for Longinotto as a documentary auteur? Clearly, she confounds an auteurist model to some extent and is rarely spoken of in this way. While her filmmaking persona could not be more different from that of Michael Moore, Ross McElwee, or classmate Nick Broomfield, male filmmakers whose strong on-camera personalities have shaped theatrical documentary's recent revival,

it is due in part to the perceived viability of the genre they epitomize that *Sisters in Law* has theatrical exhibition prospects at all. There are advantages to the kind of publicity—in the sense of both PR and the claiming of public space—entailed by theatrical exposure. Quite literally, theatrical exhibition garners national reviews, a realm of public discourse that feminist cultural production too rarely accesses.<sup>11</sup>

To date, *Sisters in Law* has been justly served by prominent reviewers. J. Hoberman calls the film “an immersion in applied feminism,” and *Variety* pronounces it suitably “upbeat” for television and specialty markets. Nathan Lee concludes his brief, perceptive *New York Times* review: “Who are these women and can they please take over the world soon?” But Lee’s comment reflects a potential liability of the film’s limited contextualizing of what we see. Not knowing where these women come from enables him to exaggerate and even gently mock their power. While wishing they could “take over the world” is a wonderful clincher for the review, it invokes the global at the expense of the local and the particular forms of women’s solidarity that the film takes such care to convey. Is a lack of cultural specificity the price of the (art house) ticket?

Theatrical exhibition also alters and, ideally, can be altered by the distribution context Longinotto’s work has previously known in the United States. Longinotto’s films’ nontheatrical promotion through Women Make Movies, while bringing less mainstream exposure and press access than a theatrical release, means that her work has been used in teaching and other contexts that are often deeply informed about the places and issues she addresses. In the Women Make Movies catalog *Sisters* appears in the context of Longinotto’s body of work and amid hundreds of documentaries and experimental works using a range of formal and enunciative strategies with an emphasis on films by and about women who come from the particular cultures highlighted. Much of this work is shot on video, including DV, a format that, while it no longer preempts theatrical release, at least at the higher end of the technological scale, is generally associated with educational, grassroots, and television venues. While art house exhibition can decontextualize a movie like *Sisters*, it also has the potential to bring greater (historical, geographical, political, formal, institutional) exposure to the women’s film and video culture that fostered it.

Longinotto works consistently on 16 mm and notes that certain scenes of *Sisters* make claims on the public experience of cinematic viewing that would be diluted by television reception (although she is quick to point out that her work wouldn’t exist without its television financing). This interest in the public, shared experience of cinema, puts Longinotto’s work for me at the intersection of the public claims of women’s media and of feminism today. However, without a significant presence of feminist documentary in the public sphere or any significant discourse around feminism in the news and in cultural journalism, the nuances of Longinotto’s strategy of solidarity may be flattened by the “niche” models of commercial art house exhibition and cable narrowcasting.

In *Sisters in Law* we applaud the outspokenness and very conscious advocacy strategies of Ngassa and Ntuba and feel feminist solidarity as they encourage women who have experienced domestic violence and sexual assault to press charges. We are also made aware, by the trappings of the court and by Ntuba’s being addressed consistently as “My Lordship,” that these women inhabit positions within the institutions of law



Figure 1. Vera Ngassa and Beatrice Ntuba, featured in *Sisters in Law* (Kim Longinotto and Florence Ayisi, *Women Make Movies*, 2005.)

and state that have historically been oppressive to them. The women's assumption of a traditionally patriarchal authority steeped in the English colonial legacy to condemn traditional (African) male power is a paradox that transnational feminism can help scrutinize. The women don the powdered wigs of English judicial tradition over their black hair in the film's publicity image (and in scenes in Ntuba's court; it was only after shooting was completed that Ngassa was assigned a position as judge and given the accoutrements that signify it). The wigs represent layers of irony; the uncanny image of the uncomfortable alliance between these women and former colonial power is also one of the film's most delightful. But do North American audiences simply see barbaric African men chastised and chastened by women's over-the-top moral righteousness, a "you go, girl" style of comeuppance? Such a reaction is a risk, I've suggested, of the marketing of documentary humanism and of the effacement of feminism in the public sphere.

The viewer's potential to see beyond the frame to ask questions of historical and political context depends on the strategies of enunciation I've detailed and on the politics of exhibition. Even *Women Make Movies*' billing of the film as "a cross between Judge Judy and the No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency," while drawing on cultural commodities whose cross-cultural populism certainly resonates with the film's tone, can be appropriated by reviewers to universalize these African women's



representations. Such risks of reception are worth taking, however, if we find ways to read contemporary women's documentary along with, in this case, crucial questions of class, religion, and political reform (the structures and struggles within which African feminism is embedded). Longinotto's film is an indisputably rare and valuable portrait of empowered contemporary African women, and cues within the film encourage a viewing consistent with Mohanty's model of transnational feminist solidarity.

For example, as I've noted, the film's subjects consciously use their presence on-camera to educate and network among village women and beyond. In addition, the complexities of language and address are audible on the film's soundtrack in the contextual shifts from standard English to pidgin. Such codes establish "mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests" in place of the "enforced commonality of oppression," to invoke Mohanty's words.<sup>12</sup>

In its concluding scene in Ngassa's class on women in the law, *Sisters in Law*, while remaining "observational," takes on a didactic cast. Her students represent a new group of women and a new audience (the presence of a few men is also heartening). Ngassa introduces Amina and Ladi to her class to applaud their extraordinary court victories—it's the first time in her seventeen years of practice that convictions have been won in spousal abuse cases. Donning a head covering out of respect for their religion, she emphasizes the significance of Muslim women having achieved this historic victory. Ngassa may here serve as the "voice of documentary," in Bill Nichols's terms, speaking words the filmmaker does not. But the film's rhetoric is also powerfully visual: Ngassa's head covering contrasts with the powdered wig, representing two strategies at work in this film: an identification with patriarchal forms of authority within which advocacy can be carried out, and a gesture of solidarity that lets other women claim their own victories.

## Notes

1. These two films were made with Jano Williams, a British producer and long-term resident of Japan, as was *Gaea Girls* (2000). Claire Hunt was codirector of *Hidden Faces* and of Longinotto's earlier Japanese projects *Eat the Kimono* (1989) and *The Good Wife of Tokyo* (1992).
2. Both *Dream Girls* and *Divorce Iranian Style* were released theatrically in the United States by Women Make Movies. Karen Cooper, programmer of Film Forum, where these works were launched, has played a significant role in the visibility of documentary by women.
3. See "In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies," edited and with an introduction by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 107–32.
4. This important 1986 essay is reprinted as chapter 1, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse," in Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 17–42.
5. *Ibid.*, 22–23.
6. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, "Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Feminist Practices," *Jouvert: A Journal of Post-colonial Studies* 5, no. 1 (Autumn 2000), <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v5i1/grewal.htm>, accessed August 31, 2006.
7. Much of the background on the film is gleaned from an interview with Kim Longinotto, April 12, 2006.

8. *The Day I Will Never Forget* was made in conscious counterpoint to documentaries on FGM (female genital mutilation) in which the girls are portrayed as voiceless victims. The film is very usefully contrasted with Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar's *Warrior Marks*, the politics of which Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan have scrutinized in "Warrior Marks: Global Womanism's Neo-colonial Discourse in a Multicultural Context," *Camera Obscura* 39 (1996): 4–33. *The Day I Will Never Forget* presents a remarkable occasion to discuss what Sobchak and Nichols have called "the ethical gaze." In a scene depicting a clitoridectomy that Longinotto characterizes as "the only time I ever disagreed with Mary [Milton, sound recordist]" a girl cries out "No, no." The camera rolls on (the cinematographer in tears) because Fardohsa, the health care provider at the center of the film, had enjoined them not to intervene lest her work be undermined. She had gained the confidence of the community, persuading these girls to have a lesser and safer version of the customary procedure. Had it been stopped during the shoot, she assured Longinotto, the girls would have undergone a less sanitary and more invasive operation. The next day Longinotto films the girls, who, as Fardohsa had promised, reiterated that the decision to undergo the circumcision was their own and expressed no regrets. Interview with Longinotto, April 12, 2006.
9. Interview with Longinotto, April 12, 2006.
10. Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anti-capitalist Struggles," in *Feminism without Borders*, 221–51.
11. The writing of this section's editor, B. Ruby Rich, for a whole spectrum of publications over a considerable span of time is particularly significant, bringing feminist work to the public.
12. Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 7.

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## Rethinking Documentary in the Digital Age



by Faye Ginsburg

In March 2005 the United Nations inaugurated a long-awaited program, the Digital Solidarity Fund, meant to underwrite initiatives that address "the uneven distribution and use of new information and communication technologies" and "enable excluded people and countries to enter the new era of the information society." What this might mean in practice—which digital technologies might make a significant difference and for whom and with what resources—is still an open and contentious question. Debates about the fund at the first meeting of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in December 2003 are symptomatic of the complexity of "digital divide" issues that have also been central to the second phase of the information summit held in November 2005 in Tunisia.

In this essay I consider the relationship of indigenous people to new media technologies that people in these communities have started to take up—with both ambivalence and enthusiasm—over the last decade. Why are their concerns barely audible in discussions of new media? I would like to suggest that part of the problem has to do with the rise of the term the "Digital Age" over the last decade and the assumptions that support it. While it initially had the shock of the new, it now