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INTERVIEW WITH KIM LONGINOTTO

by Valerie Politis and Lys Woods
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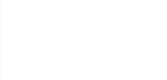


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Introduction by Lys Woods

Valerie Politis and I had the pleasure to chat with documentary filmmaker Kim Longinotto at the *Fencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal* (Nov. 14-23, 2003). The festival had programmed a retrospective of Longinotto's work, and she ran a master's workshop—discussing her films, showing clips, taking questions, and going far over the allotted time. She is a sort of fixture on the documentary film festival circuit, which is as much a tribute to her outstanding work, as it is to her completely winning persona. I am quite sure that I was not alone in wishing that if anyone did choose to commit my highly flawed, dysfunctional existence to celluloid, it would be Longinotto. Not only would she do my legion of flaws justice, but she would be a delight to hang around with.

In discussing the initial concepts for her films, the phrase, "Well, this friend of mine..." pops up a lot: her films often begin close to home, but she has literally traveled the globe—Iran, Japan, Kenya—shooting them. This local/global split points up the other boundaries Longinotto blurs: between the personal and the political, between ethnographic film and home movies, between social awareness and advocacy. Towards her content, she is never impartial; but she takes sides without taking cheap shots.

THE DAY I WILL NEVER FORGET (2002), her most recent film, is a strangely uplifting and hopeful piece that is to some degree focused on the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Kenya. The film is a concentrated look at the front lines of a growing grass-roots activism (a movement which the mainstream media has tended to overlook and ignore), featuring a range of Kenyan girls, teenagers, and women, who, in various ways, and from diverse backgrounds and training, are empowering their own lives and those of the women around them. And in doing so, they are radically rewriting the social landscape of the country. The film—like the rest of Longinotto's oeuvre—is fascinating, unique, critical, and consummately humane.

Some of Longinotto's other films include: *GAEA GIRLS* (2000), *DIVORCE IRANIAN STYLE* (1998), *SHINJUKO BOYS* (1995), *DREAM GIRLS* (1994), *THE GOOD WIFE OF TOKYO* (1992), and *UNDERAGE* (1982).

Interview

Val: So, I'd like to start with what inspired you to do this project on FGM.

Kim: Well, about 8 years ago, I made a film with an Egyptian friend of mine about her family. Some of her cousins had been circumcised and some hadn't, and it was something that the family never talked about. Safa, my friend, told me that it was a really defining moment in her childhood. She was 11 when it happened, and she said that it was the moment when she lost her sense of joy. It was her mother who held her down and it was her mother that she loved most of all. I thought after that that I would really like to make a film about it. I hadn't really know how to do it because I really didn't want to just go somewhere and make a film about victims. I wanted to film where there was some hope that something would change. When I read about these 2 girls in Kenya who were taking their parents to court, I thought that that would be a good end for the film and there could be some hope.

Val: And when did you make the decision to go to Kenya? How did that come about?

Kim: It was really weird actually, because usually I would spend ages and ages raising the money. This friend of mine was working at Channel Four and he was just about to leave. He had some money left in his budget, and he rang me and said, "Do you want to do this project?" and I said, "Yes!" It was one of those charmed moments, whereas, for example, *DIVORCE IRANIAN STYLE*, it took me about a year and a half to get the money. It was really hard to get the money. Just so you don't think that I have it easy. (Laughs)

Val: How do you normally go about acquiring the funding for your projects?

Kim: I have a proposal, and I send it to someone at Channel Four and someone at BBC, and if it gets rejected, I send it to someone else. I work through everybody that I can think of in those two broadcasting areas, and if they all say no, I'll wait until one of the people gets changed, because the commission gets changed a lot. It's just being really persistent, because a lot of my films need subtitles. Commissioning editors seem to think that they're not going to be popular, that no one is going to watch them.

Val: And when you first arrived in Kenya, how long did you plan to shoot and how did you make your connections with people?

Kim: Well when I first arrived in Kenya, my friend, Eunice, who works for an anti FGM organization, she'd gone there before for three weeks. She was sent ahead to find out what was going on and arrange to meet people. I think she was a bit daunted when she got there because it hit her how hard it might be to get people to talk. Often people are quite aggressively pro or anti and it might be quite difficult to film. When we got there, we had nothing. In Kenya there is really this sense of difference between different communities. Eunice had been taught from when she was little that the other tribes weren't as good as her tribe, so, when we'd go to a Somali area she'd be very afraid and she'd lock all the windows and say that "They're going to tear the earrings out of our ears". When we met Fardhosa, she gave up work for two weeks and she really helped us.

Val: How did you meet Fardhosa?

Kim: We met Fardhosa because her sister Lima works in London and is a friend of Eunice's, so Fardhosa just came around by chance and told us about her clinic and what she was doing. She'd come to a point in her life when she'd realized that a lot of the work that she was doing in hospitals was actually just patching up the effects that girls had gone through from being circumcised. She thought that it was really important to do something like a film and she said that it was really spooky that we'd come at the time when she was looking for some other way to work. And now she's become much more of an activist, going around and setting up meetings for people to talk. She thinks that one of the main ways for change is to just get people to talk and to get together and realize that there are alternatives and that people are not alone and that they are not the only ones who have doubts.

Lys: The young women who had congregated at the school and were *en masse* deciding to get a court injunction, was that something that came about from the women talking amongst themselves?

Kim: Yes. The girls talked to a lawyer and explained that if a girl tried to run away, they were jumped on and held down and it was done forcibly. They'd grown up with the thought that there was no escaping it, that that was their destiny, and then you would get married and then you would have 15 kids and there's a whole future mapped out for you. And so it's an incredibly subversive, revolutionary thing to suddenly say, "We don't want this." I think it had to do with that school and all the girls because they weren't all from one village, they were from communities scattered around that were quite sparsely populated.

Lys: So it was the first time that they had a meeting place.

Kim: They were in the school and they had a teacher whom they could say, "Look, none of us wants this to happen, can you contact somebody who could help us", and that teacher knew someone who came and talked to them and said, "Do you really want to take your parents to court? If so, I'll arrange for a lawyer". So it was the school, really, that saved them. But what I find so interesting is that there are all these different communities and there were all these girls there, during the short eight weeks that we were there, girls hundreds of miles apart from each other saying 'No' for the first time. They were actually running away or standing up and confronting their mothers, saying "We want a different life. We want control of ourselves". Because if you think about it, the film isn't about FGM at all, really, it's a kind of springboard for a rebellion. Simla had already had it done and had kind of come to terms with it. It was the marriage that she was running away from. Fazir had it done, but wants to protect her sister and wants to actually make some kind of statement to the world, which is why she wrote her poem in English. So there's this sense of all of them actually reaching out beyond their communities and trying to make a difference.

Lys: It was a nice change, too, from other movies that I've seen dealing with FGM, insofar as you don't want to map a sort of Western feminism onto any sort of female oppression that you may encounter, because that raises problems of its own. It was nice in this film to see a grass roots activism happening with these young women who had such a sure sense of their self and their self worth which seemed to be coming from within these sorts of communities and their friends.

Kim: It's very much their voices and their stories and them wanting to be in the film. There was a woman last night, I thought a lot about what she said, who said she wished that she could have known more about us and our problems making the film.

Lys: A more self-reflexive film?

Kim: Yes. If anyone says a criticism, I always worry about it. I thought about it, and then I thought really strongly, from the heart actually, that there's so much about us in the world and there is so little about girls like that, the girls in the film. It's their film and it's their voice, and I don't want people to think about me and what I'm doing there. Hopefully I could be anybody. I think it's too easy to put people into these kinds of categories. When there's something as life and death as this, when those girls are outside the court, and their fathers are saying "You should be ashamed and you're bad", or "You don't obey tradition, you don't obey me", and we're standing there, they're feeling us as their support. They know we're there for them and we're filming their moment at the court. So I think that we can often make things too cut and dried and too polarized.

Val: Or complicated in a way that is not necessary and has nothing to do with where you are coming from.

Kim: I think so, but I still worry about what the woman said.

Val: Are you still in touch with people in the film, and what's happened to everyone since?

Kim: Simla is still at school, and she's really struggling and really trying to learn. It has to be really hard for an eleven year old in a class full of six year olds, and they all speak English and you don't. I think she's feeling very separate and isolated, and I think that she's an incredibly brave girl. Fazir saved her sister, and she wants to be a doctor like Fardhosa, and the 16 girls have completely changed their village, and the next lot of girls growing up are saying that they don't want it done either, so it was a really great victory.

Val: That's remarkable.

Kim: Yeah, it is.

Lys: There are moments in the film when it's difficult to watch, because you want these mothers to do more for their daughters, you want these mothers to speak up, and you don't always get it, and it can be frustrating.

Kim: You're right about the mothers, but what I found very encouraging was that the sisters that are standing together. Every single time, in all of those stories, it's a sister who is trying to save her sister. When Simla ran away, the first place she ran to was to her elder sister who hid her and gave her that little bit of breathing space to decide what she wanted to do next. That's quite a dangerous thing for someone to do. At the court, there were sisters there supporting their younger sisters. I think it would have been very hard for the younger sisters to go if the older sisters had not gone there with them. And then you've got Fazir, who had her mother on the defensive, saying, "I'll only forgive you if you don't do it to my sister". She didn't say, "I'll forgive you if you buy me a bicycle", or, "I'll forgive you if you let me become a doctor, or you don't make me get married". What she was concentrating on was saving her sister, and I find that absolutely breathtaking and an extraordinary act of generosity.

Lys: There was a funny sense though, too, when the mothers were with each other, when the husbands weren't around and they were outside the family unit, that they were very outspoken, very blunt even. There was an outspokenness there that the daughters could re-contextualize and take outside of the all-female community into the community at large.

Kim: When you think about it, this has been going on for thousands and thousands of years. It couldn't have continued if all the mothers had said "No, I'm not going to do it to my daughters". It's completely dependent on the whole community being part of it. If all the sisters say that they don't want it, then it can't continue either. That's what's so extraordinary about it. If their mothers are saying, "Well, you're not going to get married, nobody is going to want you if you're not circumcised", and the daughters are saying, "Actually, we don't care", then they've won, because you can't have a society that's split like that. If all the sisters support each other, then they're going to win, and I find that very exciting really.

Lys: It actually alters the social fabric with the entire community and the system within it.

Kim: Once you fight for some form of control over your own body and you have it, then the next step is to say, "I'm eleven and I don't want to get married, I want to stay at school". And as you stay at school and get educated, then you'll want a job, and the whole thing starts changing. And you're not going to have 15 children, and you are going to have more energy and more power to do other things, so, I really do think that it's a revolution. The things that have happened in our communities, the fight for abortion, the fight for contraception, the fight for divorce, all those things are going on in communities all over the world, and they're all connected.

Lys: It was hard not to watch the film and think of struggles that are going on here even as we speak in terms of control over women's bodies.

Val: What was the filming of the circumcision scene like for you?

Kim: It's still something that I feel really uncomfortable about. Fardhosa said before we even started filming that "You mustn't do anything to try and stop it" because Fardhosa had been working in that community for a long time and had convinced that family to do it in the less severe way. What she said was, "If you're going to get too upset, then put the camera down and go out quietly. Don't make a fuss, because if we are not there that circumciser's going to do it in the extreme way and sew the daughter up and the husband isn't ever going to know because he's not going to check." The two operations lasted about 5 minutes, whereas Fazir's lasted about 25-30 minutes. That's the difference. So I had it in my mind that we shouldn't do anything to try and stop it, but at the same time, filming it you felt like it was an incredible betrayal. It felt like a violence to be there and not do something about it, so it's a very strange mixed thing.

Val: Yet at the same time by being there it had the effects of being less severe.

Kim: Yes, so it's sort of strange. Because they struggled so much and they screamed so much, we just assumed that when we went back the next morning the girls would say, "I'm really angry at Mom". There's this one point when the girl calls for her mother and her mother comes in and holds her down, and that was the thing that haunted Safa for the whole of her childhood. The fact is that the daughters said they wanted it afterward, that they were going along with it and were so keen to be part of and accepted by the community. The circumciser did about 100 girls that day. To say "No" would have meant that you'd become a kind of outcast, and they would have had to have gone the way that Simla went, really.

Lys: Do you have time to answer some questions about your own background...

Val: ...like where you studied and what your experience was like?

Kim: I studied at the National film school, which is just outside of London. It's really quite amazing. When I went there, there were no rules. I suppose I treated it like a therapy thing. The first film I made was about my boarding school, a place where I had been really unhappy. I was very much on my own, one of these weird loners and outsiders. When I actually showed people what it was like, people would look at the film and go, "Oh my god, what a weird place!" That made me feel better. (Laughs)

Lys: (Laughing) Yes, like, oh, it wasn't me, it wasn't me....

Kim: It was such a relief. The second film was called *THEATRE GIRLS*, and it was in a hostel for homeless women. That was another sort of therapy thing because I had lived on the streets a bit when I ran away from home. I sort of feel that I was putting something back. Those were the two films that I made in film school, and then I left and couldn't get money to make films and so I did camera work for a while. That's what I do between films anyway; it's how I make money. I really love doing it.

Val: And what are you working on now?

Kim: Well, there's lots of things that I want to do. Zeba, who I made the two films in Iran with, and I want to go back and do another film. We want to do a film about change. The films that I'm interested in at the moment are films about change, about people standing out and being rebellious, because too often we see films about women being very submissive and knocked down.

Val: Are you interested in doing anything fiction related?

Kim: What I love about documentaries is that it's always more extraordinary than ever writing a script. If I had written a script about Fazir, a nine year old girl from a Somali community, writing a poem in English and thinking about it for some form of audience when she is 8, and holding this poem until this strange woman comes into her life and she grabs her and says, "Come here, I want to read you my poem", I wouldn't have written a script like that. I wouldn't have thought that a girl like that existed, and I would have thought that if I had written a script like that, people wouldn't believe it, do you know what I mean?

Lys: Completely.

Val: It would have been contrived.

Kim: Life always seems to be more extraordinary than you can ever imagine. Nothing really frightens me in life, apart from getting lost while making a film. I don't like documentary films that are just a series of interviews. I like films that are stories, and sometimes it seems impossible. Sometimes it's just by luck you get the story and it leads you to another story. So far I've been lucky enough that the films have worked, but there's always this fear that this is the one that won't work. That's the bad side of documentary, but then the good side of it is when something happens like Fazir. That's what makes it so exciting and compelling, it's like a kind of drug, and you want to do another one. It's a kind of mixed thing; a love/hate thing really. []