

Kim Longinotto – a strongwoman of documentary cinema

'A filmmaker's task is to rouse empathy in such a way that the viewers can forget that they are watching foreign culture or another country and feel instead that "oh, this could be my sister or my mother or friend"'. These were the words of one of the most eminent documentary filmmakers of our time when she was once asked to define her role. For fifty years, she has remained faithful to this conviction.

Her cinema, regardless of whether it is set in Teheran, Nairobi, Tokyo or Uttar Pradesh, stands in opposition to what sells best today, i.e. sensation and superficiality. She does not allure spectators with exotics or shock them with violence to achieve a cinematic effect. Kim Longinotto travels with her camera across four continents searching for closeness to the weakest ones or those pushed out to the margin of society. In particular, she advocates for people (usually women) who try to break the vicious circle of injustice and oppression. She is most interested in fugitives or rebels trying to change the world from the inside. This is why her films, although capturing harsh reality as it unfolds, are the opposite of the so-called misery porn. Nearly from the start, before it became trendy, they exposed female courage, solidarity and sisterhood. What is more, Kim Longinotto, focused her lens on 'others', on persons who failed to conform to rigid social norms.

This British director with Welsh and Italian roots often stands behind the camera herself and, taking the role of a cinematographer, respectfully enters the world of otherness in a broad sense. It may include sexual diversity, which she explored in films about queer communities in Japan ('Deam Grils', 1994; 'Shinjuku Boys', 1995), or the undermining of gender stereotypes in sports ('Gaea Girls', 2000). Her recent work 'Dalton's Dream' (2023), which touches upon similar issues, is a portrayal of the winner of a British talent show – an openly queer vocalist from Jamaica.

Above all, Longinotto navigates the culturally diverse areas in a very tactful manner. She observes local traditions with interest but without any

tolerance for archaic or harming practices. Intent on not letting the Western perspective dominate her approach, she often invites to close collaboration women directly linked to a given culture, as it happened with Ziba Mir-Hosseini, a co-director of 'Divorce Iranian Style' (1998).

A breakthrough in Longinotto's career, the film was at the same time a daring portrayal of closed society governed by ayatollahs. With her camera, the director entered an Iranian family court where women tried to end their marriages for different reasons. It is hard to believe that by recording the everyday work of the office in numerous scenes, so many social and cultural nuances could be captured. What is characteristic of her work, i.e. interference into the surrounding reality reduced to a minimum, total concealment behind the camera and patient observation instead of provocation or voyeurism, has been fully expressed here – also when she tracks down the absurdities of everyday life in Iran.

Longinotto has vetted institutions since the start of her career. In 'Pride of Place' (1976), her diploma work developed at London's National Film and Television School, she portrayed a British boarding school where many a time she fell victim to humiliation and repression. She exposed the functioning of this institution so accurately that soon after the school was closed. She entered the school yard once more in her documentary 'Hold Me Tight, Let Me Go' (2007), but this time it was an entirely different facility, which offered care to children with terrible experiences. These two depictions, one of systemic oppression and the other of individuals who are its polar opposite, delineate Longinotto's broad sphere of interests. In this way, she paved the way for many filmmakers, in particular documentary film directors, who sought more than exotic curiosities in cinema.

Among others, she has demonstrated the significance of mutual trust and the director's intuition in documentary film. She has proven that being close to her characters does not need to convert into chumminess, to the contrary – discreet presence is the most valuable. In this manner, Longinotto shot the struggles of Chicago's activists trying to help women doomed to semi-slave sexual work ('Dreamcatcher', 2015) or the heroic activity of the humanitarian organisation Operation Bobbi Bear, which takes care of the youngest victims of sexual violence in South Africa ('Rough Aunties', 2008). The director applied

similar mindfulness when observing women at work in extremely anti-women Indian society ('Pink Saris', 2010; 'Salma', 2013) or within the Cameroonian legal system ('Sisters in Law', 2005). Her documentary 'Shooting Mafia' (2019) only apparently stands out against this backdrop. This portrayal of Sicilian photojournalist Letizia Battaglia, who for many years documented the crimes of the Cosa Nostra, becomes a story of a fearless woman with a camera and a testimony to great courage and female strength.

In documentary cinema, it is Kim Longinotto that becomes such a strongwoman, a person who is not afraid of addressing the most difficult issues and showing them from up close. One such example is the circumcision of Kenyan girls in 'The Day I Will Never Forget' (2002), an impossible-to-forget documentary created without going easy on the viewer and far from any idealisation of female guardians of cruel patriarchal traditions. Eventually, the film focused on those characters that might become advocates for real change.

Having said this, it needs to be added that Longinotto's work cannot be reduced to intervention or human rights issues only. Her films derive from social responsibility and empathy, but they also capture exciting journeys where inhumane harm incessantly clashes with truly superhuman strength. And it is the latter, faith in a driving force against all odds, that saturates the cinema of this year's laureate of the Dragon of Dragons.

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