

# A STORY WILL ALWAYS MATTER

TO BEGIN WITH, WE CAN TRY TO CONNECT SOME FACTS: IN 2011 LEYMAH GEBWEE IS AWARDED WITH THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE. THREE YEARS EARLIER FILM "PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL" BROUGHT THE LIBERIAN WOMEN'S STRUGGLE FOR PEACE (LED BY GEBWEE) TO LIGHT. IN 2011 DOCUMENTARY "I CAME TO TESTIFY" WHICH SHOWED STORIES OF 16 BOSNIAN WOMEN CHANGED THE IMAGE OF BALKAN WAR. A YEAR LATER THE DISCUSSION ON FEMALE RAPES IN US MILITARY IS OPENED BY THE RELEASE OF "THE INVISIBLE WAR" DOCUMENTARY. THE FILM WAS NOMINATED FOR BEST DOCUMENTARY FEATURE AT THE 85TH ACADEMY AWARDS. WHAT LINKS THESE ISSUES? THAT WAS KIRSTEN JOHNSON, WHO WAS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CAMERA LENS OF ALL THESE AND MANY OTHER GROUND-BREAKING DOCUMENTARIES. THESE AND MANY OTHER FILMS, ON WHICH SHE WORKED BROKE MANY TABOOS. NOW SHE SPEAKS ON HER WORK, HER IDEAS AND HER VISION OF NEW MEDIA AND DOCUMENTARY MOVIES MISSION. DESPITE THIS SHE SUMS UP HER WORK QUITE ASTONISHINGLY: "PEOPLE ALWAYS TALK ABOUT THIS SOCIAL IMPACT, AND >>>HAVE YOU CHANGED THE WORLD?<<< ALL I CAN SAY IS: I HAVE BEEN CHANGED."

INTERVIEW WITH **KIRSTEN JOHNSON**  
BY ELIZA KANIA

You are travelling a lot, through different continents, different countries, often in war or unrest. Many of films that you make present stories of people who experienced trauma, violence and various sorts of other extreme situations. What do you find the most precious dimension of what you are doing?

I've always thought of a job as a form of privilege. In a lot of cases it feels like it is a great honor, to share some time and space with people who are willing to talk about what they have experienced. Sometimes it is just incredibly painful for everybody involved. I'm working on a film that I shoot in Afghanistan and it's sort of causing me look back at my work and to think about why so much that I have done has been connected with post-conflict or post-genocide or post war. I have felt as if I'm just thinking about these things and I don't really understand it by myself. In a lot of cases I feel like people have been through the period of powerlessness in their lives. That may be the war causes, discrimination causes or the different causes of their powerlessness, but in a certain moment in time the presence of the camera gives them back some power and gives them some agency. So they can tell what they want to tell, in the way they want tell to it.

What are your most vivid impressions from that kind of situation?

Sometimes this really surprises everyone involved, to find out how powerful a person can become through the act of telling. And sometimes it's almost like re-traumatizing experience and you don't really know when you're going into it, as a filmmaker, what an impact of your presence is going to be.

Can you recall some details of such emotionally complex circumstances?

I certainly have been a part of films where an overtimed impact has been very empowering for the people who participated. And then I've been involved in things when it's reminding people of their ongoing powerlessness. But I do think of myself as being in a relationship with the person in the moment of their sharing. That is a very peculiar and special moment and over time I've been interested in making it as a safer place for the person to be able to explore their own emotion as possible.

But I wonder if it's possible for you to keep some emotional distance from the people you are listening to. Theoretically you are behind your camera lens, is it possible not to stay emotionally involved?

I'm not interested in being distant or in not to be emotionally involved. I am actually interested in being emotionally connected. But I don't want to stop where someone is going emotionally. So a lot of times I think and I don't really know. But what I think what I'm doing is making it appear that it is OK for someone to continue.

What is the most complicated dilemma of such kind of situations?

I'm both a professional and a cameraperson, but I'm also a human being trying to gauge what is fair to the other person.

And what about you, have you yourself been put in some dangerous situations during filmmaking?

I would say definitely my life has been in danger several times. Sometimes you don't know it. When I was in Afghanistan I was filming in downtown Kabul outside of a building and I knew I shouldn't stay there long by myself, but I wanted to get a shot, and my translator was inside the building. He was busy, so we didn't have much time. So I filmed like literally for a 60 seconds. When I came home my translator was listening to the footage and she said: I hear someone talking, they must've been very close to you. I said: "Yes, they were standing next to the camera". She said: "Oh that's not good". There is that guy, who is standing next to you, talking in *pastho*<sup>1</sup> by the cellphone, and he says: "Oh my goodness, there's American woman here by herself, run across the road and we can take her and kill her together!" I had no idea. Things like that happen and other times you are actually directly threatened. I'm not the combat cameraperson. I don't try to go into warzones. But sometimes you are at the edge of warzone. You feel like you're facing a temporary threat, whereas people who live there are facing threat all the time.

I assume that such a feeling of adrenaline rush can be somehow addictive...

I don't like it. I felt very uncomfortable in Afghanistan. I felt very afraid most of the time. I went back twice in 2009,

<sup>1</sup> One of official Afghan languages (Editors' note - EK)

and once in 2010. And then I was like: I'm done. I don't want to spend any more time this close to this much fear.

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HONESTLY I THINK THAT YOU ARE OFTEN  
IGNORANT ABOUT THE IMPACT  
THAT YOU'RE MAKING

So what about the case of such states in which violence towards citizens is some kind of a routine: is it possible that by showing their stories you can put these people in danger? Do you feel some kind of responsibility?

Absolutely, I mean one thing you always have to think about is the fact that you can leave. So that your position is fundamentally different from the people who live there. They have to live with the impact of what they reveal. There's a category of people, who know they're living with their lives being threatened all the time and more exposure is going to mean more danger, but they understand the danger. For example in Liberia, where we were working on "Pray the devil back to hell"<sup>2</sup> we went home with a woman and filmed with her. That very same night she was robbed by man at gunpoint, because they assumed that white Americans who had come with their cameras had given money to her. So they came to get the money that we had supposedly given to her, which of course we hadn't. But she was terrified and threatened. Honestly I think that you are often ignorant about the impact that you're making. Even when people tell you that it's OK and they're willing to take the risk. There are times when you inadvertently put someone in an even more risky situation than you understood.

Did it happen to you?

I certainly did that in Afghanistan, accidentally asking people to do

<sup>2</sup> *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* is a documentary film directed by Gini Reticker and produced by Abigail Disney. The film premiered at the 2008 Tribeca Film Festival, where it won the award for Best Documentary. The film documents a peace movement called Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, organized by social worker Leymah Gbowee (awarded with Nobel Peace Prize in 2011). The Liberian peace movement led to the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf for the president of Liberia. Thus Liberia become the first African nation with a female president. *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* is the part of a groundbreaking special series *Women, War & Peace*. The film won many prestigious awards, including One World International Human Rights Festival award, Women's Film Festival, Tribeca Film Festival, Cinema for Peace and many Rother. More: <http://praythediavilbacktohell.com/> (Editors' note - EK)

things that I didn't realize how much risk that put them in. But then there are other times where I choose very deliberately – I realized “Oh, OK, I'm gonna be risky in the lives of all these school girls, and this teacher, and myself”. And is it worth it to get a shoot of little girls reading in the room? And I said: “no, it's not worth it”. So I didn't go and film that underground school. Even though it exists and people think: “oh, there are no underground schools.” But in fact there are.

So you decided not to publish this footage?

I didn't even go there although the teacher invited me.

But was she aware of this risk?

Yes, but for me I decided I could not handle the responsibility. I was not confident that I would use the footage in a powerful enough way for it to balance the risk being taken. Does it make sense?

Yes, definitely. In that point I wonder what is the key of your choice of film subject choices. Isn't it like that you often choose films that include feminist or gender perspective or they are connected with violence or war subjects?

What is interesting, from my point of view, when I came out to film school I was really interested in post-colonial history. When 9/11 happened I was pulled into more stories that dealt with the US military, with the Middle East. I really felt like history changed the places I was looking. It changed my point of view. In a lot of ways I have, as a person, been more interested in race and class, than I have in gender and feminism. But the fact is I ended up working with a lot of women directors, who have in some ways educated me about the fundamentalism of the different experience of being a woman in a world. So someone like Gini<sup>3</sup> sees the world very much through the lens of how women experience it. Over time, and working on all these different themes, you started to see patterns around the world. And the more pattern you see, the more you want to verify it or question it.

<sup>3</sup> Gini Reticker is an American director and producer. She is one of the world's leading documentary filmmakers. In her works she focuses on individuals, particularly women, engaged in struggles for social justice and human rights. Her films cover subjects often overlooked by mainstream media, such as women in war zones whose stories have largely gone untold. More: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/women-war-and-peace/about/about-the-producers/> (Editors' note - EK)

Maybe we can speak a little bit more about “The Invisible War”,<sup>4</sup> because it was quite controversial film, even in Europe because it destroyed some taboo. Are you able to measure the social impact of releasing this documentary?

I think its impact is still being felt. And we don't completely understand what its ultimate impact is going to be. Certainly, all of the military people who spoke in the film who were still like the spokesperson for the military were fired even before the film came out. Because “you've done such a poor job, right?” And there was legislative change that has happened. There is some indication that numbers of military sexual trauma have gone up since the film has been released. There are some people who say that is because more people are reporting. And other people say the film has introduced the idea in the people's consciousness and the people are acting what they weren't acting before. So there's a case while you're like “wow, who knows what kind of impact you've had, right?” I was sort of disappointed that the film didn't go more into male-on-male rapes in the military. I think that's a huge taboo. Like man on woman rape in the military was a big taboo, now we're talking about a very big taboo. It means that this is happening in every army in the world. Rape. And it's not being talked about at all by anybody who has been in military. But in fact now people are starting to talk more about the male-on-male rape in the military. So that's the tiny opening of a discussion.



SOMETIMES YOU BETRAY THE SUBJECT OF YOUR FILMS WHEN YOU TRY TO MAKE THEM SERVE THE GOAL OF MAKING SOCIAL CHANGE

So was this impact predictable?

I think that it is fantastic, that films are getting to have the intention of making social change. But I don't think you can necessarily predict what social change will be made. Nor do I think you should make a

<sup>4</sup> *The Invisible War* is a 2012 documentary film written and directed by Kirby Dick. It copes with the subject of sexual assault in the United States military. It premiered at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival, where it received the U.S. Documentary Audience Award. The film was nominated for Best Documentary Feature at the 85th Academy Awards. *The Invisible War* presents interviews with veterans from multiple branches of the United States Armed Forces who reconstruct their trauma. The film opened the discussion on sexual violence towards woman in the US military (Editors' note - EK).

film necessarily to make a certain kind of change. I don't think it's such a simple relationship. Sometimes you betray the subject of your films when you try to make them serve the goal of making social change.

Yes, maybe that's the point. But can we assume that this film reshaped the perception of these issues among some conservative circles in US?

Absolutely! No question. Because it wasn't even been talked about at all at the highest levels of the Congress, in the US Government, in the military. I think it made it impossible not to talk about it. So I think that, in fact, it had a very significant impact. I think that, the most important is that they are changing within the military. It used to be like you had to report a rape to your commanding officer. So even in the case where it's your commanding officer who raped you, you were supposed to report it to that person. So that structure of accountability had changed. That's fundamental I would say.

And what about the female soldiers who decided to speak. Did you try to create some special atmosphere to make their confessions easier?

We went to a kind of a group meeting, and I honestly had rarely seen such traumatized people. A lot of them had dogs that they kept with them. They didn't like having doors closed. It was very extreme version of trauma. In general I'm someone who is pretty casual and relaxed and I found that I had to be more careful around these women. I felt that it has to do less with gender, than it had to do with just the level of trauma that they have experienced and how mistrustful people they have become as people. So in that case in particular I just had to slow down. I'm kind of physical person and I often touch the person that I'm filming and in this case it was really clear I shouldn't even like touch someone's arm. I do think it takes extraordinary amount of discretion and a quiet presence to work with people who don't trust you, for whatever reason. Sometimes their mistrust of you is well-founded. You have to earn their trust.

The film I came to testify<sup>5</sup>, devoted to Bosnian women has also broke some taboo.

<sup>5</sup> *I came to testify* (2011) „is the moving story of how a group of 16 women who had been imprisoned by Serb-led forces in the Bosnian town of Foca broke history's great silence – and stepped forward to take the witness stand in an international court of law.” More: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/women-war-and-peace/full-episodes/i-came-to-testify/> (Editors' note - EK).

Actually what I experienced more was the struggle that we had with making it. And realizing that we were pushing up against the conflict that still exists there. I was shocked by how much conflict is still there. We saw graffiti on the walls that said: Srebrenica let's do it again. Like it's crazy. It's cool that you said, that the film made some impact, because what I felt was like pushing against some kind of barriers. And it's hard. So it encourages me to say like when we are in a place where there is resistance and difficulty in making a film perhaps there is a value.

But the most difficult aspect of this film was the sexual violence towards women, because many other aspects of violence have been discussed somewhere.

This film was very emotionally challenging for me. When we were filming the land of woman whose family have been murdered, filming ruins of her home, visiting all those horrible places like rape-camps... There is one place where all these women had been raped that had been turned into a sports hall and a group of little girls was playing ping-pong there. And I filmed forever, filming these little girls paying ping pong. It was just one of the scenes, it didn't make into the film at all. It's a different film. This moment I found very significant. I didn't know how alive the conflict still was. So we faced a lot of hostility. You can feel it there and it feels bad. Yes, it feels very present. And also to film with women who are so afraid to show their faces. Who feel like their lives are in risk if they show their faces. This is terrible.

Are you able to point out one film that was the most important for you?

It's too hard, but I think making a film about Derrida<sup>6</sup> changed me. In one point in making the film he was destructed by having a crew there, and he really needed to think, and he needed to work, and he wanted us to leave. The director was begging him saying: we have to stay and film. Finally he said: all right, if Kirsten just stays with the camera and she doesn't say anything, then she can stay. At that time of life I always was trying to talk a lot, talk to the subjects, I wanted them to know me as a person. In this case I really wanted Derrida to know that I was smart. I really cared about him. And

<sup>6</sup> *Derrida* (2002) is a documentary film directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering. It is devoted to French philosopher Jacques Derrida. It premiered at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival (Editors' note - EK).

then I ended up spending entire day with him in his house and I didn't say a word. I realized what I could communicate through the camera and through the scene. I realized I didn't have to prove anything through talking. The evidence of my presence would be in the way that I filmed. I feel it was the lesson at the beginning of my career that has carried me through many of films that I have shot.

On another topic: what is your opinion on open-source access?

It's work to make a film. And when it's treated as work and not dilettantism then you value the work and you value the collaboration. Throughout my career I've worked for free on projects that I understood that would never get any funding because of what rave projects they were. But this is the way I earn my living. And it's hard work, I work long hours, I don't want to do it all by myself. Often a lot of people making a film make it so much better. I think that people's work needs to be understood and valued. I think when films are simply free, people won't understand the value of work that has gone into them.

Recently media have changed profoundly, so what is your idealistic vision on what you are doing or what should be the documentary filmmakers' mission?

I want more people to be able to see the highest quality of work. I want them to be able to see it in conditions where they can appreciate it. I'm oldschool in that, I love to go into movie theater and get sink into the reality of a film, in the dark, with the shared audience. But I understand that that's a luxury that does not exist everywhere in the world. I would much rather that more people have access to work that moves them and helps to understand the world better. To some extent I just want people to have the chance to be changed by what they see. And I think the new media is making this happen in ways that I don't even understand. I think a story will always matter. Sort of human emotion, the connection of peoples' emotion to each other is what's going to matter the most. People always talk about this social impact, and "have you changed the world?" and whatever. All I can say is: I have been changed. Me. Kirsten. By the films that I worked on and I know that to be the case. I know that I behave differently, that I've grown in ways that are impossible and strange. I appreciate this. And this

is what I hope for anyone Involved in filmmaking or film watching.

Are you able to point out the most important issue of new media now and the most important challenge of this.

There's no question, that quality work can get lost in world in which the more powerful, cheaply made, less interesting work has more advertising power or reaches more people. I always have felt everywhere I've gone I find family. I find people who care about the world in the way I do and they have a kind of sensibility, that means they are interested in incredible quality of filmmaking and they find the way to find it. And as I'm traveling more and more – I'm going to Saudi Arabia, I've been recently to Cairo, to Damascus - in a last 5 years certainly all those people have seen documentaries that I worked on. That would not have been true 20 years ago. At all. Something is changing for the better in terms of a certain group of people. I think it's still an elite group of people, who are figuring out how to find these movies. And it's thrilling that more people is seeing more great work from all over the world. But I'm an optimist.

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**Kirsten Johnson** is a director and camera person, one of the most acclaimed filmmakers working on documentaries today. She crossed the world many times bringing to light very crucial, politically important topics, often connected with human rights and the struggle for people's dignity. She worked on widely recognized films including controversial and groundbreaking Academy Award nominee *Invisible War*. She co-created the 5 part PBS series *Woman War* presenting women stories in very dangerous zones, and the times of extreme violence. A part of this series *Peace Pray the devil back to hell* approached the Liberian women peace movement, with Leymah Gbowee and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf at the forefront, I came to testify highlighted the traumatic experiences of Bosnian women. She also worked on *The Oath*, *Darfur Now*, *Election Day*, *Virgin Now* and many other docs, with such directors like Raoul Peck, Gini Reticker, Barbara Kopple, Michael Moore and Kirby Dick. She won many awards including 2010 Sundance Documentary Competition Cinematography Award for *The Oath*, in which she was the winner of 2008 Tribeca Film Festival Best Documentary. She started her film career from the trip to Senegal. After which she attended La Fémis, the French national film school, receiving a degree from the Cinematography Department.



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