

## **“Pass the Camera, Please” Interview with JENNIFER FOX**

By ANETTE OLSEN

US filmmaker and producer Jennifer Fox is currently editing her new film “Flying”, which takes a universal look at the position of women in the 21st century, herself included. To do so, she has explored a new filming technique of passing the camera around among her and her subjects to achieve a higher degree of intimacy. DOX met her in Copenhagen during the editing of “Flying”.

The “Flying” project has been a four-year journey for the US filmmaker who visited 17 countries and met with more than 100 women around the world, discussing female life, sexuality, struggles and self-images with the intention of understanding different women’s life experiences through sharing with them.

The premise of the film is connected to the concept of being a free woman and Fox poses the hypothesis that a woman cannot gain control of her own life unless she controls her own sexuality. Fox interviews women and men alike, and she includes her own life story as a narrative theme of the film, relating her own experiences to those of the women she meets. Jennifer Fox has filmed friends, family, and women from different parts of the world and pieced together small and big slices of female life into a large mosaic.

### **Meeting Women**

“The idea was to film four concentric circles of women: myself, the women in my own family – because I was raised by three women – my girlfriends and the last ring: women I don’t know. I wanted to confront people and stories I’d never met before.

I already had an international group of friends, of so-called liberated women, and I was looking to cast my own free life against other ideals, so I met different cultures, African cultures, Indian cultures, Muslim cultures, to see what we shared and where we differed and whether I was right in my premise. The film is a lot about sexual freedom and repression because I don’t think a woman can be free unless she controls her own body. I know that my fight for the control of my sexuality can seem very small, so I’m constantly asking myself, ‘Is this is true or not? Am I really free and what does it mean to be free?’

“I met people basically through research and investigation, through friends of friends, through organizations, articles, etc. Some of the meetings didn’t work, although I would say 75% of the time they succeeded fabulously. When they didn’t work, people often led me to other people,” says Jennifer Fox.

“Literally the film is about the recurring themes in women’s lives. For a long time I thought my life had nothing to do with other women. I was convinced gender was not an issue in the 21st century, but the more I travelled and met women in other cultures, the more I realized we were living the same life, dealing with similar issues, despite culture and even often despite class – and this really shocked me. For example, when a friend in South Africa told me that she had been sexually abused, and I told her I had, too – by a teacher when I was 13 – she was shocked. She thought, ‘This is something that cannot happen to a white, middle-class American.’ I was affected by her story, too, because I had made it my own private pain. You have to ask why women are suffering similar things everywhere.

“Like when I went to Pakistan and met young women who were terrified to get married because they had seen their fathers dominating their mothers – and I began to laugh and cry because, as much as I love my father, he was so verbally abusive to my mother that very young I vowed never to marry. Or when I spent time with Somali women – and we started to discuss why female genital mutilation (FGM) is done by the older women to young girls. Why are women harming women? And I understood that these women were no different than my grandmother who treated me so cruelly in the name of ‘making me a good girl’, who would be eligible for marriage... And I began to understand that there are basic similarities in the way women are controlled in most cultures through the domination of their sexuality...”

### **Passing the Power**

For shooting the film, Jennifer Fox explored a new technique of filming. The camera was passed among her and her subjects during their conversation, shifting the roles of interviewer and interviewee. The aim was to break down boundaries between filmmaker and participant to obtain a more equal balance of power.

“The film is about the ways that women speak. In general, when women get together in private, we speak endlessly and in circles, but those circles have enormous impact, they get deeper, we learn more. Maybe it’s not solution oriented, but we walk away stronger. I knew that if I just put a camera up in a ‘third position’, let’s say on a tripod, the conversation would just die. We would feel that we were being observed and we would start performing for the camera. So the question became, how do I capture the way women really talk on film? And I decided to make the camera replicate that equality and that horizontal ability that women naturally have. The simplicity of it works so well in creating intimacy and breaking the boundaries and creating a cinema that is more egalitarian”, Fox explains.

“In the shooting, I use myself as a technique to make other people open up. In the past I always held back my story. Now I share my story, but then you learn that sharing your story immediately encourages others to share their stories at the same level, creating this subtle but unique level of openness. The camera completely changes the power dynamic: you’re as powerful as I am when you have the camera and we’re at the same level. Of course it isn’t as

aesthetically beautiful as other films but I think that the quality we gain in terms of presence and authenticity is incredible.”

### **Personal = Political**

The process of filming herself with the intention of being completely honest and open was in itself a challenge for the filmmaker, but it was during the editing that Jennifer Fox started to imagine the actual consequences of being so open about her own life.

“Shooting is about losing consciousness and about trying to include a camera in the most ordinary things, but the editing is a question of taking distance and seeing myself as a character, trying to see form and structure, and accepting that there will be consequences.

“In shooting I was purposely trying to forget that there was ever an audience, but as soon as you start editing, you must remember audiences and you say to yourself, ‘Oh my God! This is really going to cost me in my life and my family!’ As a woman, it could even be dangerous talking so openly about my sexuality depending on the context. So sometimes I have to struggle with myself and remind myself that I have to take the risk and show my life just as it is, because if I won’t, who will? For me, being honest about how I really live as a woman is a political statement. I believe that female life and sexuality must be talked about openly, and it’s a political stand to say that I’m not going to hide how a woman’s life really is – to say look I’ve been sexually abused, I’ve had abortions, I’ve had miscarriage, I’ve had several sexual partners and I’ve had to fight for my pleasure, but sex is important to me. I want to show a real female life and I take refuge in the idea that it’s important, but emotionally it can be hard,” Fox says.

In terms of form, the film mixes different genres like the personal film with a survey approach, and although it wasn’t the easiest thing to explain to financiers how personal narration and a personal story would combine with conversations involving many different women from a variety of ages, cultures and classes, Fox stuck to her original approach.

“One of the things that makes it really exiting is to merge the genre of the personal narrative with what I would call a survey film. I haven’t seen anything quite like it and when I talked about it, people looked at me quite blankly like ‘How can you compare yourself to women around the world?’ Increasingly people think that you have to sort people according to groups whereas the idea was to say that we share beyond class, culture, occupation and even sexual preference. Then on top of it, I mix genres and languages in terms of aesthetics using self-observation, the diary form, passing the camera, and observational and cinéma-vérité.”

### **Sex and the City: Inspirational Reference**

With 1400 hours of material the editing process is a challenge. The film has received Danish funding and is being edited by Danish editor Niels Pagh Andersen who has a long professional track record. To Jennifer Fox it was important to have a male perspective on a film about women and as an editor

Pagh Andersen is someone she felt could relate to the subject and the narrative approach.

"We knew it would be narrative and obviously there is a chronology," says Fox. "I always look for an image to organise around. For 'Beirut' ['Beirut: The Last Home Movie'] we very much looked at fiction films. With 'An American Love Story' I was looking a lot at these family sitcoms of the '70s, and for me the real hook came in finding a principle that comes from 'Sex and the City' of this ensemble idea of a group story and a central narrator which is equal. We knew quite early that it was both a personal film and a survey film. It had an ensemble cast and new characters."

Niels Pagh Andersen comes from fiction and takes a character-driven approach to editing. He and Fox first worked together on a test project, a ten-minute pilot they did together before engaging in the actual process of editing the film and the series.

"It's something special to do personal films where you have to give a lot of yourself. And the personal films I've cut before were with directors who I consider to be my friends. I didn't know Jennifer, but we worked well together and I thought it would work out well," says Pagh Andersen. "It was a very important point for me when Jennifer came up with 'Sex and the City' because, as she explained, you have a motor in the personal and the ensemble aspects, as well as a kind of lightness. Jennifer and I are both very serious people and we had that lightness of the TV series as a kind of counterweight all the time and during the writing of the narration."

"I must admit that as a storyteller, I had a problem with the genre of personal film. It often starts with 'poor me', and filmmakers can have a sad, hard life, but it has problems in storytelling. So here we took the approach to build up Jennifer's character with some strength and sexiness, something attractive, because otherwise it would be hard to identify with her," Pagh Andersen explains.

### **Claiming Female Values**

"Flying" has been a personal quest and an experience that has shed light on the filmmaker's own life and self-image. Having struggled most of her life with existential questions of how to be comfortable as a single woman in a life that did not follow the traditional path of getting married, having children, etc., Jennifer Fox had reached a point where she felt disconnected from female values. Making the film was a way to confront her personal quest with other women's lives and values.

"In my family, to survive I think I really took on my dad's values and his identity. I was afraid to have children, I was afraid to be a wife. Both because they were undervalued in my family but also because they were controlled by men. It wasn't until my forties that I started to realize, 'Oh, my God, I've behaved like a man!' I'm a 'commitment phobic' like the classic male and my work comes first. It was a shock to realize that if I had been a man I probably would have had kids by now, whereas as a woman, I couldn't see how I could

work with the kind of intensity I do and have a child, and I didn't want to be married."

"I think a lot of where the film comes from is that. At the same time, ironically I was caught in the typical modern female trap of judging myself by the same traditional values that I had rejected. Secretly, in some way, I didn't even feel that my life had started yet, because I wasn't married and didn't have kids. I couldn't conceive that I could create my own model of family. Somehow the old models still haunted me. It was a kind of very schizophrenic reality."

Jennifer Fox believes the film has benefited her in many different ways: "In the past when I made films, I always knew that storytelling was valuable for my subjects, because it allowed them to see the structure and meaning in their lives. But in fact it's been the same with me. I think the four years of making this film has been a process of seeing the narrative of my life and coming to terms with the fact that I'll never play the traditional female role, nor do I want to, but I do play another female role that's just as valuable. And in the process, for the first time I can identify myself as a woman, connected to all women.

"When I understood that much of what had hurt me in my life was because of my gender, which is the same as for most women around the world, I changed. And I think the other women around the world who participated in the film process were also deeply affected by the same realization. Suddenly they understood that their private story was really a universal, female story. It's a powerful realization that makes you angry but it also wakes you up and makes you no longer a victim. It means you can find a way to take action. I can see my life better than before and I am no longer alone. While I don't have the traditional female trappings like a husband and children, now I can appreciate that I have carved out my own special life that has its own unique feminine qualities."

"Flying" is a US-Danish co-production supported by the Danish Film Institute.  
Producer: Claus Ladegaard, Easy Film  
Director, co-producer, camera: Jennifer Fox, Zohe Film Production.  
Editor: Niels Pagh Andersen  
The project will be released in January 2007 as a limited series and feature film and will be aired on BBC, HBO, ARTE, TV-2 Denmark, YLE-1 Finland, SVT Sweden, SABC South Africa and SBS Australia.

In collaboration with organizations, Fox is conceiving an outreach programme that will include a website ([www.RepublicOfWomen.org](http://www.RepublicOfWomen.org)), seminars, screenings, panels, discussions, etc.

### **Jennifer Fox - Filmography:**

"Beirut: The Last Home Movie" (1987, director)

"An American Love Story" (1999, director)

"Love and Diane" (2002, producer)

"On the Ropes" (1999, producer)