

## Part One: My Interview with Documentary Filmmaker, Jennifer Fox

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Posted July 13, 2007 | 05:19 PM (EST)

Filmmaker Jennifer Fox's six-hour documentary [Flying: Confessions of a Free Women](#), represents the first time the acclaimed director has allowed herself to step in front of the camera, baring (almost) all about her family, friendships, and romantic relationships. She's already detailed [here at HuffPo](#) her evolution as a feminist, and the film takes the phrase "the personal is political" and mines it for all it's worth. Fox begins each of the six segments that make up the film with old movies from her childhood, setting the stage for her desire, above all else, to be "free."

Indeed, Fox's accomplishments in the film world are numerous: She has won awards such as Best Documentary Film and Best Cinematography from the Sundance Film Festival, and directed the PBS television series *An American Love Story*, which received a Gracie Award for Best Television Series. In *Flying*, Fox is shown flying around the world to teach, but the heart of the film is not her professional persona but her home life, from her upbringing with her mother, father, and grandmother, to her Tribeca loft, Swiss boyfriend, and married South African lover. Torn between the two, Fox dissects these relationships, as well as her own and her friends' sex lives, families, pregnancies, miscarriages, birthdays, births, divorces, and medical treatments, bringing the camera everywhere from bedroom to hospital to taxicab to airplane, then passing it around amongst her interviewees. Fox visits women around the world, talking to prostitutes, single moms, and women for whom the very act of being single is one of defiance, comparing and contrasting their situations.

Shot over the course of five years, Fox racked up over 1600 hours of footage, which she winnowed down to tell a story focused on women's intimate lives. The resulting talks come off as casual, unguarded, and highly personal, interwoven with Fox's observations about the women she encounters. While the story always links back to her ongoing conundrum about her relationships and whether to try to have a baby, the varied women (and occasional men) who populate the film are fascinating characters themselves, offering diverging opinions and examples of how to pursue what Fox calls "this modern female life." The film, which is currently showing at New York's Film Forum, will receive a national theatrical release and educational tour in fall 2007 and will air on the Sundance Channel in Spring 2008. A DVD release with additional footage will also be released in 2008. In Part 1 of this interview, I emailed Fox about identifying with her father over the women in her family, her rules for the making of the film, and those who refused to subject themselves to her camera's lens. Look for Part 2 next week.

**"I didn't want to be a girl," you start each segment, and then elaborate on the ways being female in your family meant the opposite of freedom. You identified with your father yet you then explore the ways he mistreated you and your mother. Did you come away having more empathy for the women in your family?**

It is hard to describe, but prior to embarking on the *Flying* journey, I think the way I saw the women in my life and women in general was terrible! Of course I cared about my friends, but femaleness just seemed like a curse. My vision was devoid of context and history. It was as if each person existed solo in the universe and acted out of her own individual psychology. I blamed the women in my family for being relegated to the home and for being so angry and controlling. I thought: "Why can't they just 'choose' to be more like men? Everything would be just fine!" It's amazing for me to see now how blind and naïve I was!

The journey of *Flying* was literally sewing myself—and my mother, my grandma and my aunt—into a fabric of history, way beyond our personal experiences. Suddenly, I understood that my Gram, for

example, whom I felt terribly hurt by as a child, was acting out very universal patterns of female life. Her role in life was prescribed from birth because of her gender. Part of why she hurt me was to make sure that I would become a "good girl," meaning prim and proper and essentially sexless—so that ultimately I would be accepted by society through a "good" marriage. During *Flying*, I understood that the tiny, suffocating role she was trying to shove me into was the role she had been forced to fit into when she was a child. It was the only role she could imagine for me—the role that women have been forced to play throughout history and in almost every society on the planet.

And suddenly, I felt a great sadness for my Gram. I was overwhelmed by the tragedy of her life, in which all choices were blocked. By the time I knew her in her fifties, my gram was full of a rage that she couldn't acknowledge or articulate. To her being "good" meant being happy and satisfied with the fact that she was regulated to the home as a mother, wife, grandmother and general caretaker. My gram, who was extremely clever and artistic, thought of herself as "stupid" and "silly," because those were the only acceptable words given to women of her day. Even in her own mind, she couldn't express her misery because that would mean failure as a woman! So her rage exploded in perverted ways at me—the girl child—when no one was looking. As I began to understand her more by talking to other women around the world and seeing that they suffered from the same imprisonment, I began to let go of my rage towards my Gram.

The irony is that in hating her as a child, I too had ended up with a bellyful of rage that I carried everywhere! During the making of *Flying*, I started to let go of my anger towards my Gram. I thought if I could break free of some of the shackles passed down generation to generation by the women in my family, than I could actually change history backwards. Suddenly I felt part of the tree of women in my family; my gram was my roots, my mother and aunt the trunk, and I the branches. If any one part of the tree could be rejuvenated than the rest of the tree would become healthier. I think my journey towards liberation as a woman actually helped my grandmother, mother, and aunt become freer. Although I suspect this idea must sound a little mad!

**You haven't been a subject of your own films before; what led you to decide to focus so much on your personal life? Did you have any qualms about that as you were filming? Were there any rules you set for yourself about what you would or wouldn't discuss on camera?**

Putting myself in *Flying* wasn't a decision; it was a necessity. For a long time, I'd been thinking about making a film about women for many years. It all started with a desire to investigate the way women talk and why the best conversations always happen when men aren't around! But I didn't have a story; the idea of "women-speak" was just too thematic. Still, I kept thinking of how to do this? I knew I wanted to talk with women around the world, because the more I traveled I realized that I was having the exact same conversations with women everywhere—about the deep stuff of life like love, sex, longing—no matter what their culture or class background. What was this gender thing that went beyond borders? Why did I only have deep conversations with men when lying in bed after having sex? Why did women seem ready to engage instantly with me even when we were strangers? As I was mulling these ideas over for a while—a few years actually—I began to question whether I could make a film about women and pretend that I wasn't part of the story: How could I ask other women to open up if I hid myself? Still, I wasn't ready.

The last straw came when I hit my own "middle-age-single-woman-crisis" in my early forties. For all I had accomplished, I felt none of it mattered because I hadn't married and didn't have kids. Now the complication was: I didn't ever want to marry or have children, but that didn't stop me from feeling I should have these things! And even more I felt that because I didn't have a family, my life was invisible. I kept thinking of all the relationships I had over the past 20 years that had come and gone, yet I was the only one who carried my history. The whole crisis made me realize that I had never faced the issues I had as a result of being a woman. All my life I had rejected all the traditional female values, only to be stabbed in the back by my own conformist subconscious mind at age forty! I had to do something to understand myself as a woman! After 20 years of psychotherapy, suddenly filming myself seemed like the only way out of my depression. What's a more perfect mirror, but a video camera? Beside which, it was the only tool I knew well.

This could not be some fancy puff piece, where I made myself pretty—what would be the point? I had to make it a real journey, so I gave myself rules—the first one was that I couldn't hide anything; I called it "radical honesty." If someone asked a question, I vowed that I had to answer truthfully to the best of my ability. The second rule was "no preparation:" no makeup, no fixing up my clothing, no adjusting my state. I vowed to film myself "as I was." The third rule was that I should film all the time and reduce the importance of anything I was filming. I encouraged myself to roll lots of tape as a kind of self-deception. I knew most of it would be crap but I had to get over my critical mind and just make the camera part of my life. I called it my "filming practice." Every day I got up and I practiced filmmaking. So no matter what happened I was obliged to pick up the camera—whether it was good or bad without censorship.

There were more rules too—technical rules—to reduce my preparing for each image. One rule was that I had to use a small video camera that afforded tons of automatic settings, which I relied heavily upon. Another rule was no tripods—the camera should be thrown on a chair, a table, the bathroom sink—I shouldn't take time to "fiddle." The other rule was no radio mikes, again to reduce prep time and work faster, making the camera more of a relaxed part of my life. If the camera required too much prep I would have stopped integrating it into my daily life, so it had to be simple, easy, fast. That's what kept me filming over years.

**Was there anyone aside from your lover Kai who refused to be filmed? If so (and for him as well), did you simply accept their decision or did you try to talk them into being filmed?**

You know, it's funny why people don't end up in a film—and why they do. In *Flying*, people assumed that my lover Kai didn't want to be filmed, but in fact I never asked him. He was married, he had a family, and I never thought to expose his face, because that would be a complete act of betrayal. Whereas with Patrick I pushed quite hard to let me film him as you see in the film. It's not very nice of me to have done that, but I wanted you (the audience) to know that I can be a very driven woman—a woman for whom work is everything. But the stakes for filming Patrick were much lower than if I filmed my lover, Kai. I couldn't live with myself and reveal his face on screen.

Film is amazing, because it makes you feel that you know my life after six hours, but in fact I have several close girlfriends who don't appear in the film because they didn't want to be filmed at all. I tried to film them several times but the two I am thinking about in particular made it quite clear that the relationship would be at stake if I pursued the filming. One of them in fact was the inspiration for the film itself. She lives in London and she is about ten years older than me. When we became friends in the early nineties, she took me under her wing and became kind of a mentor to me. She was in the film business and she was always giving me advice about what to do with this commissioning editor or that one. We would spend hours sitting around her table talking and drinking tea. She's the one who taught me about "girl-talk." It was because of her that I became aware of the importance of female friends.

When I finally started making *Flying*, I always thought she would be in the film—naturally she had to be! She was my muse! But when I brought out the camera I could see her discomfort—and when I tried to keep filming her she got really angry. She didn't want her story on film; she wasn't comfortable with how others would perceive her life because she was in her fifties and didn't have kids. No amount of cajoling would change her mind. I had to put the camera away, but it changed our relationship, because as I pursued the film I had less and less time for her. The only woman I began to spend time with were the ones I was filming. It's so ironic, don't you think?

For more information about *Flying*, visit [www.flyingconfessions.com](http://www.flyingconfessions.com).