

Still in Motion

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Finding Reflections for Our Lives

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My friends over at DCTV and Shooting People have some really great educational and social evenings planned this winter at their cool crib. Master classes with top-of-their-game indie executives and filmmakers, speed-dating evenings for both doc and narrative filmmakers (except this speed-dating is among peers, so it's a bit more fraternal, one hopes) and screenings and other fare planned. I'm doing the documentary "Hook Me Up" evening this week, so will report in on that--should be fun.

Winter has been very slow in coming, but the fall weather and early darkness still make for good cave-dwelling time. But people like Jennifer Fox get me out the door. Friday night, after a day of cave-dwelling, I ventured down to Tribeca to listen to her conversation with Ingrid Kopp in the second session of Shooting People's Master Class series. Jennifer had just flown in from Finland, but looked quite serene and elegant, as she prepared herself. A retinue of fresh-faced young girls peopled the front row--it was very cool to see young women like that idolize a documentary filmmaker. And they do idolize her a bit--they were giddy in her presence and, obviously, so proud of the work they're doing for the outreach arm of Jennifer's six-hour Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman, which I was lucky enough to watch before its New York debut back in July. My interview with Jennifer right before that debut is here on this blog. As in-depth and extensive as our talk was, I still learned quite a bit from her this evening as she talked about filmmaking, being a successful producer and businesswoman, and about having made a film about the intimate minutiae of her life in the midst of breakdown #39, so that she might explore the "red thread" that connects pretty much every female on the planet. There were just a handful of people in the audience that saw the film, or most of it, and so Jennifer showed lots of clips (both sample tape and finished pieces) to illustrate her intricate process in making this movie--with a lot of help from the Danes.

What Fox kept going back to in her talk were two things: creating presence on camera for yourself and your subjects, and our desire to find reflections of ourselves in others. Now, I know that Jennifer is a practicing Buddhist and I have studied and practiced Buddhism for many years--this is the linchpin of what makes a more "present" life, which is the main directive of the Buddha and what he, himself, strove for almost every day of his life (once he started eating and stopped locking himself in a lotus position beneath a tree and tripping all day long).

As soon as it's up, I'll link to Shooting People's recording of the talk so you can listen in, but here are some things I took away (as always, read at your own peril):

As a small digital (rolling) camera was being passed around the audience in true "passing-the-camera" fashion, Fox held forth about how to get your subjects to "show up on screen," knowing that just as you put a camera on someone, they might disappear altogether and then what will you shoot? She gets the word "presence" from the narrative or theatrical world where it means someone gave a good "performance," enough of a holistic one to create a transformed human being, so to speak. Himself, but. . . more. Hard to explain.

But she went on to explain how she learned the importance of creating presence for herself, which led her up the "Flying" path.

Whenever I hear a well-regarded or celebrated nonfiction filmmaker talk about filmmaking, it always amazes me that the way they describe doing what they do, sounds like an act of God. I mean that in a beneficent way, of course, but there are those out there that aren't so beneficent and use their "access" for abuse and entertainment. But if documentary is done right, there is an elegance to it, much more art than craft. I see many nonfiction films that suffer from less-than-stellar production values, but that never stops me from being moved by a story or a character and his or her journey. And the roughness, sometimes, only enhances the reflective element of what I'm experiencing. Because I'm watching a part of "me," the being that's part of the unified field. It's hard to be cognizant every minute of the day that what you do and say makes an impact; and, in turn, everything we're exposed to (the things we see and those we don't) impacts us in minute and gargantuan ways.

So we watch people that are hyper-aware of those things because they have a camera or two pointed at them pretty much every waking moment. You better believe it's a performance. How would anyone survive that mentally intact, otherwise?

As Fox teaches us with her life and her film, we become aware that this "passing the camera" concept is the true democratization of documentary filmmaking. A subject that I've threatened to come back around to, and just hasn't resurfaced yet, is the one of filmmaker as subject. Jumping the lens--that sudden, kind of jarring, shift of focus on story/subject and then filmmaker. So I film you, you film me, we'll all film one another and sit around the campfire with show and tell.

Unfortunately, it entails way more work than that to make a really good film. As Fox took us through her process from conception to current distribution scenarios, including a cross-country college tour, it was clear this was not just sharing campfire stories about making her film diary. This was a very detailed description of a journeywoman's existence and how she went about navigating the turbulent, dramatic, but quite beautiful, skies of her life.

And this is an experienced, seasoned pro, here, not someone just out of NYU or Columbia or USC or some idiot savant that happened to pick up a camera and shot a brilliant movie his first time out (and is now stumbling around Hollywood looking for the portal that brought him there so he can return from whence he came). And the seasoned pro works hard, sometimes harder, than the neophyte because they've done it for a really long time and can tell you some stories. Sometimes listening to your aunties and uncles that have conquered lands before you is useful! Not that Fox is an old lady (I think she's lying that she's closing in on 50, but that's between you and me). She's a vibrant artistic voice for my generation of artist and woman and, again, I feel so lucky to be able to sit at the knee of people like her and Al Maysles and Werner Herzog and all the other amazing filmmakers I've been in the presence of these past several years. The message never changes: the joy of this is in the work, not what comes before and not what comes after. While the documentary world can certainly attract its cult of personality-types, for the most part it consists of the hardier, more utilitarian types who can fend for themselves in a crisis, thank you very much. In fact, we usually film ourselves doing it!

Go to Jennifer's web site to learn more about where the film is playing, how you can find out the latest and greatest from the Flying camp and some "calls-for-entries" type of things on the site, as well, that might excite the seasoned pro and the neophyte, alike.

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