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NEW YORK CITY CINEMA, FROM THE ART HOUSE TO THE RED CARPET

Sundance Features

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Jennifer Fox, *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman*

"It created a horizontal dialogue and kind of flipped the power balance... They just start grabbing the camera, and the dynamic totally changed."

A still from director Jennifer Fox's epic documentary series *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman*

(This feature is part of an ongoing series of Reeler profiles of New York films and filmmakers at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival. [Click here for a complete list of this year's interviews.](#))

For the record, what is *Flying* about -- if we can summarize the six hours?

It starts with a personal crisis -- my crisis -- about who am I as a woman. You know, entering my 40s, not married, no kids, multiple partners, several abortions and the whole kind of a typical modern woman trying to make sense of my life by talking to other women everywhere -- starting with my friends in New York to my friends on the West Coast, England, France, Germany, Africa, India, Pakistan, Cambodia. Trying to say what we have in common, how are we different, how can I find a mirror for my life when there are no mirrors. I don't have a difficult life, but at the same time, I'm constrained by typical things -- typical gender issues that have affected me my whole life. It's really an exploration about all of that, through an overriding storyline that's my own. I think there are 13 countries in this six hours. But it's very dramatically driven; it's not an ethnographic survey, it's not a sociological survey. It's a real story of me going on the road with my life.



A still from director Jennifer Fox's epic documentary series *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman*

I'd been making films already 20 years before this one, so I'm always looking to find a language that will fit the actual story and not just throw on cinema verite or throw on anything. In this case, I was stuck with a question: I wanted to capture these conversations that I'd been having with women all my life -- my girlfriends' conversations are beyond culture and class. Everywhere I go, I meet women and we always fall into these women's conversations. They're very intimate, very circular, and it seems like women all over the world are dealing with the same issue. So it's looking for a language and trying to figure out how do I capture these really intimate conversations, because I was sure once I put a camera person in the room, it would collapse.

So what I did was decide to play around with the camera and figure out if there was a way that the camera could be in the conversation in a way that would be similar to the circular way that women talk. So I decided to start passing the camera. I was experimenting with this with my girlfriends and even with my family, and then I took it on the road and it was working beautifully. It created a horizontal dialogue and kind of flipped the power balance; suddenly I meet a woman and I would say, "I want to ask you questions, but you can ask me a question." And they just start grabbing the camera, and the dynamic totally changed.

You mean literally passing the camera from subject to interviewer?

Except for I'm a subject, too, so there was no camera person per se -- it was just me and them. And when I first pitched this idea, I was told it wouldn't work. But you know, I started experimenting with it, and I cut a sample tape a few years ago, and suddenly it was a non-issue. It worked so beautifully. It sounds very, "Oh, it's an interesting idea, but I'll bet it looks terrible." But it functions so well! And what it does is create or reveal another level of intimacy on camera, where as most time we ask people to act for us as a filmmaker, but instead, because I'm both filmmaker and subject and they are both filmmaker and subject, suddenly the rules relax and a different kind of film intimacy happens. And what you see -- whether it's with old friends or some people I meet within five minutes -- they're passing the camera. There's such intimacy and presence it's hard to believe.

This is also your first entry into what might be most generally viewed as "personal filmmaking." How did you explore that dynamic and force yourself to remain honest as your own subject?

I teach a lot, but I don't teach ongoing; I teach workshops. I noticed that often, the most powerful stories happen between the filmmaker and the subjects, but we cut them out, or we didn't run the camera on them. And I wanted to do that. But it also became really apparent that to make a film about women, I couldn't pretend to not know about that subject -- I couldn't pretend to be out of the game. Initially I thought, "Oh, I'm going to make a film about other women, but how can I do that? How can I ask them to tell me about their intimate life if I'm not willing to go on the line?" And then it became even more, because I felt I had to go on the line because I had to figure this out -- it was really bugging me at a certain point in my life that I had none of the typical milestones to look at.

My need for the film, which I think is important for any documentary, is that the character needs the journey. I had a very strong need for it. But your question was how do I film myself and actually achieve the presence, transparency and honesty that I would hope for from my subjects. I thought about it, and I started to create some rules for myself. A) I need to learn how to live with the camera and relax with it. So I just filmed myself all the time. I'm used to dealing with large amounts of footage; *An American Love Story* had 1,000 hours of footage, so I knew that part of the trick, if you're really dealing with intimacy, is literally video more. I decided that I would just film everything, because if I started censoring myself, then I'd have lost. I picked up the camera in bed, in the shower, when I going to the bathroom, when I walking on the street, when I was in a plane or on a train. I had to make the camera a second skin, almost, and say to

myself: "You cannot prepare for it. You cannot put on makeup, you cannot look good. Wherever you are, you're going to be. And that's what happens."

This film has an international cast of backers and producers, and I know it's designed not just as a story but as a sort of outreach tool. What was your approach developing the project as something you could share in that regard?

Our big hope is that we're going to use the Web; we've been developing a Web site for a year and a half. It has a women's world section, with stories from all over the world -- 37 countries, all of which exists from my filming, though some are in it and some are not. We also want people to be able to contribute and have a dialogue section and all that. What I will do in many countries is take the film on the road and show it and have dialogues; we're creating a kind of outreach guide to promote questions. I hope to do that in America too. It opens at Film Forum in July, and we plan to do a small theatrical with it, which is mostly, for me, about dialogue and outreach and to the college campuses around America. But if I had the money, I would do it in multiple countries more than the Web. But that's our first thing.

The devil's advocate position might be to ask how a six-hour film can have the type of reach and social impact that a subject like this could and probably should have?

You see the length as an obstacle?

I guess if I were a viewer looking at the catalog, a six-hour film is --

Oh, you mean at Sundance?

Well, yes and no. Theatrically, six hours is an intimidating length for a viewer to get one's head around in general. Would you agree?

Yeah, but this film is like candy. It's not like taking medicine; it's like eating chocolate. You watch one hour, then you want to watch two and three and four. It's a little bit like a soap opera; you meet characters who reappear who are in different crises in their life and you want to know what's going to happen to them. So you need to think of it more like *Sex and the City* and less like... I don't know--

Fanny and Alexander?

Exactly.

But do you think your previous films have earned you the benefit of the doubt to some degree? I mean, six hours from a first-time filmmaker is one thing, but this has your name on it.

I appreciate you saying that, but you don't earn anything. If the film doesn't work, it doesn't work. The thing is you have to see it, and some people get hooked. I'm only telling you what people have told me; I don't know if it works until it's finished. What happened with the

Sundance team is that they said, "I can't wait to see the next episode." And it was at IDFA in Amsterdam, and we had people lined up on a waiting list because you get hooked on the characters and you want to know what the end of the story is going to be. I am very interested in social issues, but I'm also interested in my audiences and a good story, and I think this functions as a good serial story, and that is why you're seeing it at Sundance -- not because of my name.

Well, sure. I just meant that your name does generally mean it's a good film --

I love serial drama. I love Six Feet Under, and I love Sex and the City and I love The Sopranos -- I'm a junkie on that kind of stuff. So I'm trying to combine serial storytelling with social issues, but issues that are very sexy, also. It's female sexuality and what we're doing with men we're sleeping with. I happened to have a married lover and a boyfriend throughout most of the series, you know? What's going to happen? It's more like that. The difficulty is to get people to believe that -- to come see the first hour, and if they don't like it, they can decide to leave or if they want to stay. But I'm looking at that model, and that's the model that has a broadcaster involved in it. It isn't because it's interesting; it's because it's engrossing, it hooks you and you want to watch more. The game of having this many countries involved is a very hard game. We're lucky to have done it, because it means that the film has a lot of appeal for an audience. It's not medicine.

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