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Women, Pain and the Documentaries of Kim Longinotto

Despite a long and prolific career in which she has produced a significant body of work committed to a distinct set of thematic concerns, Kim Longinotto’s documentaries remain under-theorised by film scholars. She has been producing films in the UK since the 1970s, however, Longinotto is most well known for the feature-length documentaries made in Japan, Iran and in parts of Africa. This chapter focuses on four of these works: *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998) and *Runaway* (2001), both made in Tehran and co-directed with Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *The Day I Will Never Forget* (2002) made in Kenya, and *Sisters in Law* (2005), co-directed with Florence Ayisi in Cameroon. Longinotto’s filmic subjects are almost always outsiders or the disenfranchised, principally women and children, and in this sense they share much with the marginalised identities of the previous chapter. While they may reference the tradition of the victim documentary, the rhetoric evident in Longinotto’s documentaries is markedly different from those discussed in Chapter 3. In this case, pain is not tied to a static self-subversion. This is, in part, due to the way Longinotto’s largely observational camera seeks out sites in which social change is already underway – the individuals in her documentaries are firmly posed as the subjects of politics. The pain represented here accompanies social antagonism and the endeavour to break with existing regimes. Women, specifically, are the subjects of this pain and their performances in the documentaries invoke this emotion in different ways. Yet they are also objects of pain, and thus objects of empathy, as these are frequently the emotions that shape the relationship between the viewer and
suffering depicted in the worlds of the documentaries. Longinotto is an important film-maker to focus on in this respect because her work is consistently interested in questions of marginalisation and agency. Moreover, the additional problems posed by making films in non-Western contexts for primarily Western audiences are also brought into view by these documentaries.

In all her documentaries set in non-English-speaking cultures, Longinotto consistently confronts the epistemological problematic of producing meaning around subjects who might be defined as the cultural other. Yet her work sits in contrast with ethnographic documentary approaches that codify their subjects so that, as Nichols points out: ‘They occupy a time and a space which “we” must recreate, stage, or represent’ (Blurred Boundaries 67). In this codification, the time and space of modernity, and European-derived humanism, is opposed to that of the pre-modern or the primitive, in this case Iran and Africa, respectively. In Longinotto’s film-making practices, the terms insider/outsider, modern/pre-modern, agency/passivity and the knowable and unknowable are constantly in play. The investigations and characterisations in her work frequently begin from the point at which these oppositions are thrown into question.

Such a destabilising of cultural discourse is most often sought in the documentary genre through the formal devices of self-reflexive or essayist styles, yet Longinotto’s documentary objectives are realised by way of realist conventions, chiefly an observational style. It is through these conventions that Longinotto orients the narratives towards collusion with particular individuals and a shared political agenda between filmic subjects and co-directors. In her discussion of feminist documentary practice in the 1970s and 1980s, Julia Lesage cites the effectiveness of ‘traditional “realist” documentary structure’ (223); while Longinotto’s work can be located in relation to a lineage of feminist non-fiction film, it is quite distinct from the consciousness-raising documentary to which Lesage is referring. Constituting a more contemporary phase of feminist practice, her work employs the conventions of realist documentary to seek a renewed understanding of the structuring of social relations, the dynamics of transformation and the different ways that women across cultures are finding to function in this dynamic.