JANUS FILMS *presents*

CAMERAPERSON

A FILM BY KIRSTEN JOHNSON

A Big Mouth Productions and Fork Films production






A boxing match in Brooklyn; life in postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina; the daily routine of a Nigerian midwife; an intimate family moment at home: these scenes and others are woven into *Cameraperson*, a tapestry of footage captured over the twenty-five-year career of documentary cinematographer Kirsten Johnson. Through a series of episodic juxtapositions, Johnson explores the relationships between image makers and their subjects, the tension between the objectivity and intervention of the camera, and the complex interaction of unfiltered reality and crafted narrative. A work that combines documentary, autobiography, and ethical inquiry, *Cameraperson* is both a moving glimpse into one filmmaker's personal journey and a thoughtful examination of what it means to train a camera on the world.

United States • 2016 • 102 minutes • Color • 1.85:1 aspect ratio • In English, Bosnian, Arabic, Dari, Hausa, and Fur, with English subtitles • Format: DCP

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The joys of being a documentary cameraperson are endless and obvious: I get to share profound intimacy with the people I film, pursue remarkable stories, be at the center of events as they unfold, travel, collaborate, and see my work engage with the world. I experience physical freedom and the chance for artistic expression and discovery every time I hold a camera. No wonder I've been doing it for twenty-five years and love my life.

And yet, the dilemmas I face while holding my camera are formidable. There are the concrete challenges I must meet in the moment—how to frame, find focus, choose what direction to follow. The other troubles are implicit, and often unseen by audiences:

> The people I film are in immediate and often desperate need, but I can offer them little to no material assistance.
>
> I can and will leave a place I film—whether a war or a refugee camp—while the people I film cannot.
>
> I traffic in hope without the ability to know what will happen in the future.
>
> I ask for trust, cooperation, and permission without knowing where the filming experience will lead the subject.
>
> I shift the balance of power by my very presence, and act on behalf of one side or another in a conflict.
>
> My work requires trust, intimacy, and total attention. It often feels like a friendship or family—both to myself and the people I film—but it is something different.
>
> I know little about how the images I shoot will be used in the future, and cannot control their distribution or use.
>
> My work can change the way my subject is perceived by the people who surround him or her and can impact the subject's reputation or safety for years into the future.
>
> I follow stories the director I work for does not need and/or does not want me to follow.
>
> I fail to see or follow stories the director hopes I will follow.

I've been aware of these dimensions for most of my career, as is the case for most documentarians, and I have often discussed them with colleagues. What I didn't know until recently was how much the accumulation of these dilemmas would begin to affect me.

And what I didn't anticipate when this film began just five years ago was how many people in the world would be using their cell phones as cameras, communicating instantaneously, and seeing images from every part of the globe. Surveillance, political repression, censorship, and the possibility of worldwide distribution of images filmed by any individual on the planet have an effect on all of us and our relation to filming in shifting and unprecedented ways.

In making *Cameraperson,* my team and I decided to rely as much as possible on the evidence of my experience that is contained within the footage I shot. We know this fragmentary portrait is incomplete and are interested in the way it reveals how stories are constructed. Our hope is to convey the feeling of immediacy that comes with finding oneself in new territory with a camera, as well as to give the audience a sense of how the joys and dilemmas a cameraperson must juggle accumulate over time.

Like the film, this note is an invitation to you, and an acknowledgment of how complex it is to film and be filmed.

With thanks,
Kirsten Johnson

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Cameraperson originated in 2009 when Johnson traveled to Afghanistan on a Skoll Foundation grant given through the Sundance Institute to make a film about schools for women and girls. The resulting film and interviews were deemed too dangerous to the subjects, and that project was abandoned. However, the trip introduced Johnson to two Afghan teenagers, and she began shooting footage of them for a film that was given the working title *The Blind Eye*.

After taking a cut of *The Blind Eye* to Sundance's editing lab in 2013, the scope of the film was reimagined. Johnson expanded the project to include footage from more than thirty of her films to incorporate broader themes of human rights, surveillance, and the right to be (or not to be) filmed.

In early 2015, this footage was edited into what the production team dubbed "the trauma cut": it featured a cavalcade of violent, horrific imagery from the impoverished and war-torn nations that Johnson had shot in. Although the cut accurately reflected the situations in those countries, Johnson did not feel that it was reflective of her overall experience as a cameraperson in either a professional or, more importantly, a personal sense.

That June, Johnson approached editor Nels Bangerter, who had won acclaim for his work on *Let the Fire Burn* (2013), a documentary composed exclusively of found footage, to help her complete the film. Bangerter and Johnson began to think more openly about the film, and they decided to include footage of personal interactions with her children and her mother, who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease, as well as other elements originally not considered for the cut, such as footage from the filming of *Fahrenheit 9/11*. This helped to achieve a fully realized portrayal of Johnson's work and life behind the lens.

This new cut was retitled *Cameraperson,* and it premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival. In a review published during the festival, *Variety* praised Johnson for creating "a uniquely insightful memoir-cum-critical-treatise on the nature and ethics of her craft."

BIOGRAPHIES

Kirsten Johnson (director/producer/cinematographer) has worked as a documentary cinematographer and director, and has committed herself to recording human-rights issues and fostering visual creativity. She has been the principal cinematographer on more than forty feature-length documentaries, and she has been credited on numerous others.

After graduating from Brown University in 1987 with a degree in fine arts and literature, Johnson traveled to Senegal to study with acclaimed filmmakers Djibril Diop Mambéty and Ousmane Sembène. The experience inspired her to apply to La Fémis, France's national film school, where she studied cinematography.

Following her graduation from La Fémis, Johnson served as cameraperson on a number of highly acclaimed and award-winning documentaries, including *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* (2006), *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (2008), and *The Invisible War* (2012).

Johnson has had a long-standing collaboration with Oscar-winning filmmaker Laura Poitras; she was the cinematographer on *The Oath* (2010) and *Citizenfour* (2014) and shot the upcoming film *Risk*. Additionally, she shot footage that appeared in Poitras's visual-arts exhibition on surveillance, *Laura Poitras: Astro Noise,* which opened at the Whitney Museum in the winter of 2016.

When not filming, Johnson teaches a graduate course in visual thinking at NYU's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute and a course on cinematography at the School of Visual Arts, and, working with the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, she often leads workshops for young camerapeople and documentarians in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia.

Marilyn Ness (producer) is a two-time Emmy Award–winning documentary producer. Most recently, Ness produced Dawn Porter's documentary *Trapped,* which premiered alongside *Cameraperson* at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival. Previously, she produced Katy Chevigny and Ross Kauffman's feature-length documentary *E-Team,* which premiered at Sundance in 2014.

Abigail E. Disney (executive producer) is a filmmaker, philanthropist, and the CEO and president of Fork Films. Disney's longtime passion for women's issues and peace building culminated in the production of her first film, 2008's *Pray the Devil Back to Hell,* which was shot by Kirsten Johnson. She continued her collaboration with Johnson by executive producing the five-part 2011 PBS series *Women, War & Peace,* on which Johnson was a cinematographer. Her executive producing and producing credits include the Fork Films–supported documentaries *Family Affair, Sun Come Up* (a 2010 Academy Award nominee for best documentary short), *Return, The Invisible War* (a 2012 Academy Award nominee for best documentary feature), *Citizen Koch, 1971,* and *Hot Girls Wanted.*

Gini Reticker (executive producer), chief creative officer of Fork Films, is an Academy Award–nominated and Emmy Award–winning director and producer with a distinguished career that spans over twenty years. Reticker has coproduced or executive produced such notable films as 2008's *The Betrayal* (*Nerakhoon*), which was nominated for both an Academy Award and an Independent Spirit Award, and the Fork Films–supported documentaries *Alias Ruby Blade, Citizen Koch, 1971, She's Beautiful When She's Angry,* and *Hot Girls Wanted.*

Nels Bangerter (editor) worked in a gold mine, lived in a redwood tree, and earned degrees in English and electrical engineering

before becoming an editor. He eventually worked his way through USC's School of Cinematic Arts, where he earned an MFA in film production; then he took a job editing for *Dan Rather Reports,* and in 2011 his work on the show was nominated for an Emmy in the news and documentary category. His credits include the found-footage documentary *Let the Fire Burn* (2013), which won International Documentary Association, Cinema Eye Honors, and Tribeca Film Festival awards for editing.

Amanda Laws (coeditor) is a Brooklyn-based independent filmmaker working in both documentary and narrative film. Her recent editing work includes the romantic comedy *It Had to Be You,* directed by Sasha Gordon and executive produced by Chris Columbus.

Danielle Varga (coproducer) has been working in documentary film and television for the past eight years. She was an associate producer of Johanna Hamilton's film *1971,* which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2014 and won an International Documentary Association award for its use of archival footage. She was archival producer of Matt Wolf's *Teenage,* which premiered at the 2013 Tribeca Film Festival, and served as researcher for the feature documentaries *Particle Fever* and *E-Team*. For television, Varga has been an associate producer of the PBS series *Makers* and has worked on a number of episodes of PBS's *American Experience* and *Frontline* series.

2016 FULL FRAME DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL INTERVIEW

This interview with director Kirsten Johnson was conducted by Emma Miller, programming manager of the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, during the 2016 festival. It is printed with permission.

Emma Miller: How did you come to filmmaking? You spent a number of years living in Senegal, and then you went to film school in Paris. How did that path unfold?

Kirsten Johnson: As an undergraduate at Brown University, I was interested in global politics, and I was studying painting. I only started to discover film at the very end of my studies. I had this wonderful professor named Anani Dzidzienyo who taught a course on Afro-Brazilian history. He is one of those people who thinks about big ideas like boundaries and identities, and I thought, "This is the way I want to think." Brown offered a postgraduate fellowship, and I applied with the idea of going to West Africa, Brazil, London, and Paris to see how black filmmakers in those places thought about their identities. It was a very young vision of what I could do and what was possible. As a kid of the 1970s, I'd always been interested in race, and this felt like the next step in pursuing my questions.

I didn't get the fellowship, but I got close; I got down to the final group of people. At that point, I'd made no other plans for after graduation, and I'd gotten myself so worked up and excited about traveling to these places that I decided I was going to go to Senegal anyway and try to meet Ousmane Sembène and Djibril Diop Mambéty, these African filmmakers whose work I'd somehow managed to see. I went to Senegal in the most American, optimistic, naive way you can imagine. I landed in Dakar and realized I had about a week's worth of money. But I hustled and figured out a way to get an English-teaching job, and I stayed and met all of these great Senegalese filmmakers.

I literally went and knocked on Ousmane Sembène's door. He asked, "What are you doing here?" and then said, "Well, if you're still here in about a year and a half, we're making a film." So I resolved to stay in Senegal for another year and a half. I worked as an intern on this film that Sembène had written, and I just loved it.

By that time, I had a Senegalese boyfriend who was a photographer, and he told me about this French film school that was free—if I could get in. I wanted to be a fiction director at that point, but I was told that I was the first American to apply to the French national film school, and that I wouldn't stand a chance of getting in if I applied in the directing department. So I applied in the camera department, and I just fell in love with holding the camera. While I was in school, I got involved with Amy Ziering on the documentary *Derrida,* and I had a Brazilian friend who offered to take me to Brazil to shoot her documentary film. I immediately found that I loved the process of documentary work.

EM: What do you think the impact of that international experience has been on your career? You've truly traversed the globe; that's evident in *Cameraperson.* There's also a powerful social-justice theme that runs through many of your films, and I wonder how much of that, too, has been informed by your travels.

KJ: I think if you're interested in history and global politics, you become interested in injustice—it's just so flagrant. Coming out of college, I had a strong interest in postcolonial African history, Brazilian history, and the African diaspora. And the more time I spent in France, the more I started to think about the Francophone world and the histories of colonialism. It was almost like putting together the pieces of a puzzle. There were vast gaps in the way I understood the world because I hadn't grown up in a political family. I came from a very religious family. We were Seventh-day Adventists. It was a world in which being a missionary was something one aspired to. I was raised to believe that "doing good" in the world was fairly simple. And then I began to see the ways in which those beliefs needed to be pulled apart and re-examined. I became captivated by the antiapartheid movement in South Africa and the civil rights movement in the United States, and then I started to encounter the complexity of the world.

There's no question that 9/11 was a huge turning point for me. What happened to this country, and our response to it, felt so personal. I then became involved in working with Laura Poitras and traveling

to the Middle East; having a relationship to the Arab world was a major shift for me. Pre-9/11, I was very much thinking about the postcolonial South, but afterward I began to think about the various Arab and Muslim worlds, the military's presence in the world, the United States' changed relationship to the world.

EM: You've directed several films, but the majority of your work has been as a cinematographer. When you're working as a cameraperson, what is your process of collaboration with the director?

KJ: I get an enormous amount of pleasure from camera work—seeing a story unfold in front of me and making decisions about how to follow it. It's deeply satisfying when a director has a desire and vision for the film she wants to make, and that vision connects to my own interests but is presented and imagined in a way I never would have thought of.

I've always loved the idea that the camera offers an entrance into new worlds. There is always the risk that we abuse the entitlement that such entrance affords us, and we have to work against that in every way we can. But I love the unknown of shooting. And I think there is always an unknown—some part of the director very much knows why he or she is making the film, and then there's this other part that's a mystery. I love being supportive in nurturing that mystery and trying to follow it and figure out what it is.

My process with directors is to talk a lot with them about why they think they're making the film. We talk about what it means to them, what themes they see. We watch movies and talk about visual references, and about what they hope will happen because of their film. I'm in conversation every night with the director about what happened during the day, what happens next, and what's going on with our relationship to the people we're filming. I get very emotionally involved in the process. But I also know that I get to collapse into bed at night and go to sleep, because I don't have to live with any of the anxiety that directing creates. I think there's a level of self-doubt and worry that goes into being a director; it's a heightened state in which one is necessarily very hard on oneself.

When you're a cinematographer, you're freed from that. You share responsibilities and obligations and joys with the director, but it's not you on the line in the same way. For me, that's freeing and pleasurable.

EM: Do you think directors want to work with you because they're after a particular aesthetic sensibility, or because they want someone who can talk with them and help them find and execute their vision?

KJ: It's so interesting to me. I'm at this place now where people say I have an aesthetic, and yet it was only while working on *Cameraperson* that I began to be able to see some of the ways my "eye" operates. But I haven't really had a sense of that over the course of my career. I've had much more of a sense of myself as a collaborator people like to work with. I'm very supportive and engaged and curious with the director. I'm really not interested in being in their territory. I don't want to be the director. I want to help them figure out how to make the movie they're trying to make.

Over the course of doing this work, I have seen the ways we as cinematographers can use our knowledge about the technical aspects of our work to intimidate. We can hide our questions about what to do next with the camera by pretending that camera work is hampered by incredible limitations, saying, "Well, we can't do that with this lens," or, "We can't do that in this light." Camerapeople can hide what we don't know how or don't want to do by excluding other people from our process. That's not who I want to be. I don't always know how we can do things better, but I'm willing to try to figure it out and be open about it. I think I empathize with directors who might not know everything about some technical parts of filmmaking but who hope and deserve to be treated with respect as collaborators, because I've felt that myself when I've worked as a director.

EM: You've captured so many intimate, wrenching moments on camera—people really seem to open up to you. What do you think you do while filming, consciously or unconsciously, that gives people the feeling that it's okay to be vulnerable and emotional?

KJ: Well, I'm physical. I'm present. I'll get on the ground to be at someone's level or sit where someone's sitting. If they're open to it, I'll touch them. I get very close. And I'm a sight to behold in a lot of ways—I'm sort of gangly and usually have cables wrapped around me. It's a little bit of a mess when I'm shooting, and I think it's sort of funny to people. In many places where I shoot, the fact that I'm a woman, the fact that I'm so tall, the fact that I'll crawl up a tree or get under a table, is unusual; it's transgressive but in a playful way. I think that humor about being in the world and being physically near and present translates as, "It's okay to show these emotions. It's okay to let this go in whatever direction it goes."

There's a scene in *Cameraperson* with Kathy Leichter, the director of *Here One Day*, where she gets angry and throws papers across the room. I remember her saying to me, "You made me feel like it was so okay to do whatever I wanted to do." I was so fascinated when she told me that, because I wasn't aware I was sending her that signal. I think maybe it's that I'm just so interested, so curious about people that I'm trying not to make judgments—I just want to see what's going to happen.

EM: How do you think working as a cameraperson and filming the things you've filmed have changed the way you look at the world when you're not behind a camera?

KJ: Oh, just radically. In every way. I certainly don't totally understand how it works. I think that it's about being granted access to other people's experiences that you would never have otherwise, whether in a prison in Rwanda or a polo match in the Hamptons. I almost got killed by a polo ball because I was so into the game that I didn't realize there was no net. I'm constantly reminded that I'm alive in the world. What is it to be in a place?

I also think that the transience of the camera—the limited time I have with people when I'm filming—forces me to be in the moment. It's sort of like this conversation that we're having; there's nothing else but this exchange. It's very vivid in the present for me. I think that's part of what the camera does.

FOOTAGE SOURCES AND SHOOTING LOCATIONS

Women, War & Peace:
"I Came to Testify" (2011)
Bosnia and Herzegovina
Writer/Producer: Pamela Hogan

Audrie & Daisy (2016)
Nodaway County, Missouri
Directors: Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk

Cradle of Champions (2016)
New York City
Director: Bartle Bull

The Edge of Joy (2010)
Kano, Nigeria
Director: Dawn Sinclair Shapiro

Derrida (2002)
New York City
Directors: Amy Ziering and Kirby Dick

Women, War & Peace:
"The War We Are Living" (2011)
Colombia
Writers/Producers: Pamela Hogan and Oriana Zill de Granados

Pray the Devil Back to Hell (2008)
Liberia
Director: Gini Reticker

Citizenfour (2014)
[Location withheld]
Director: Laura Poitras

This Very Life (2016)
Myanmar
Director: Kim Shelton

Very Semi-Serious (2015)
New York City
Director: Leah Wolchok

Throw Down Your Heart (2008)
Nakisenyi, Uganda
Director: Sascha Paladino

Two Towns of Jasper (2002)
Jasper, Texas
Directors: Whitney Dow and Marco Williams

The Oath (2010)
Sanaa, Yemen
Director: Laura Poitras

Trapped (2016)
Huntsville, Alabama
Director: Dawn Porter

Happy Valley (2014)
State College, Pennsylvania
Director: Amir Bar-Lev

Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004)
Washington, D.C.
Director: Michael Moore

The Joy of Extreme Possibility (forthcoming)
Austin, Texas
Director: Meg McLagan

Buffalo Returns (2015)
Pine Ridge, South Dakota
Director: Gini Reticker

Wide Angle: "Ladies First" (2004)
Rwanda
Director: Gini Reticker

Born to Fly: Elizabeth Streb vs. Gravity (2014)
New York City
Director: Catherine Gund

Darfur Now (2007)
Zalingei, Sudan
Director: Ted Braun

Virgin Tales (2012)
Colorado Springs
Director: Mirjam von Arx

Here One Day (2012)
Westport, New York
Director: Kathy Leichter

1971 (2014)
Philadelphia
Director: Johanna Hamilton

Original footage: scenes with Johnson's mom, dad, and children; various moments in Afghanistan; Johnson's return to Bosnia; lecture with Syrian filmmaker Charif Kiwan

AN INCOMPLETE LIST OF WHAT THE CAMERAPERSON ENABLES

For the cameraperson:

—Access and a reason to stay in worlds not of one's own
—Permission to behave, ask, do in ways that are transgressive/outside social norms
—Complete distraction from one's own life
—The creation of evidence of experience
—The chance to be closer or farther (through the lens) than is physically possible
—Emotional connection
—Trauma (vicarious, secondary, and direct)
—Enhanced influence and power
—Sense of invisibility
—Sense of invincibility
—Magical thinking
—Suspension of time

For the people filmed:

—A chance to speak of things they have never spoken of and hence say things they never expected to say
—An invitation to think of a future when they will no longer be alive but what they say and do will be preserved in another form
—The chance to see him or herself as a subject (worthy of time and attention)
—The chance to imagine different outcomes
—A change of status in the community (family, village, profession)
—Increased risk to one's own safety and/or reputation
—The creation of an image of self, the distribution of which one cannot control on a global scale in perpetuity
—The opportunity to see oneself from a different perspective
—A shift in perspective about which transgressions are possible
—Emotional connection with film crew
—Hope that being filmed can change one's fate or might impact a situation in the future