



Cameraperson Discussion Guide

Directors: Kirsten Johnson

Year: 2016

Time: 103 min

You might know this director from:

Deadline (2004)

Kirsten Johnson is a well known cinematographer in the documentary community with credits including:

Audrey and Daisy (2016)

Trapped (2016)

Citizenfour (2014)

Happy Valley (2014)

I Came to Testify (2011)

The Edge of Joy (2010)

Pray the Devil Back to Hell (2008)

Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004)

Derrida (2002)

and more...

FILM SUMMARY

In the past two decades leading up to director Kirsten Johnson's moving cine-memoir CAMERAPERSON, she's made a name for herself as the go-to cinematographer for politically incisive non-fiction projects. Recently she worked on Laura Poitras' Oscar-winning "Citizenfour" on Edward Snowden and her Cannes selected RISK on Julian Assange, as well as Dawn Porter's Sundance abortion-rights film "Trapped", Kirby Dick's "The Invisible War", and the a-list credits run back as far as camera operator on Michael Moore's Palme d'Or winner "Fahrenheit 9/11." The footage found within these films is always elegant and intelligent, but there is so much more wonderful, revealing, funny, and immensely tragic scenes to be found, if only given the chance to shine.

Johnson has rewatched all the footage and found images that—in her words—have "marked" her, as well as countless revelatory moments that acknowledge her presence as a filmmaker, witnessing moment-to-moment ethical and stylistic decisions while affirming the random technical glitches and impossible situations one might encounter while on a shoot. One might never consider how something as simple as a sneeze might completely ruin or wholly enrich a sequence. And at the same time, the film reminds us that each shot shown is a moral judgement—the "why show this?" left exposed for inquisition.

Settling somewhere between journalism, memoir, and an all-encompassing making-of documentary compendium, Johnson's film plumbs depths of emotion rarely explored with such formal freedom and complexity. Lacking voice-over narration and a traditional narrative arc, she's free to explore the full range of human experience, from the miracles of childbirth to the horrors of war, through the tragedies of illness and back again. Being a cameraperson means choosing what and how to bear witness, and CAMERAPERSON beautifully shows that Kirsten Johnson has the eye and ethical means for the job.

FILM THEMES

With years worth of footage from shooting a myriad of documentary projects for other filmmakers, Kirsten Johnson takes viewers through an incomparable odyssey of human experience.

BEING A CINEMATOGRAPHER IS MORE THAN HOLDING A CAMERA

Nowadays, with HD cameras in everyone's pockets, anyone can film just about anything, but that fact alone doesn't make them a cameraperson. Documentary cinematography remains an art, requiring immense awareness of both one's surroundings and the political implications for the subjects caught on camera, as well as an extensive appreciation for the aesthetics involved in composing each and every shot. There's so much more involved than just pointing and shooting.

CINEMA IS LIFE ITSELF

Documentary film has traditionally been made up of cinematic realities, but few films take up the entire breadth of human experience as one of their central topics of rumination with such success. While diving headlong into emotional ordeals in cultures around the globe and in her own home, Johnson's film reminds us of cinema's incredible ability to produce empathy within its viewers and encapsulate memories for those who can no longer remember their own.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS APOLITICAL

A large majority of films present themselves as apolitical, free of an embedded political worldview or morale message. Yet, with each frame, CAMERAPERSON reminds us that every composition, every edit, every second of documentary footage shown to the audience should be a moment considered on ethical and moral grounds. Each scene contains sounds and images that could affect the lives of those captured on camera, and should be treated with acute political deliberation.

CINEMA AS MEMOIR

The personal documentary, in all its formally varying facets, has been around for quite some time, delving into the intimate private lives of those willing to wield the camera and turn it on themselves. In opposition to this trend, Johnson's life story is mostly revealed through footage of others' stories—a collage of experiences she's had the pleasure of enjoying or the misfortune of enduring as participating chronicler. These events not only impacted the lives of those before Johnson's lens, but those behind it as well.

“The film of tomorrow will not be directed by civil servants of the camera, but by artists for whom shooting a film constitutes a wonderful and thrilling adventure.”

François Truffaut

“It is the photographer, not the camera, that is the instrument.”

Eve Arnold

“I've never made any picture, good or bad, without paying for it in emotional turmoil.”

W. Eugene Smith

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What was most striking to you about CAMERAPERSON? The formal structure? Kirsten Johnson’s personal struggles at home or on the job? The situations she found herself in? Did you find it to be successful as a film?
2. After getting a look into the decision making process of being a documentary cinematographer, do you think you could perform the job of cameraperson? What were your thoughts on Johnson as a filmmaker?
3. While ruminating on ideas for CAMERAPERSON, Kirsten Johnson spent a lot of time considering the political implications of promotion, complicity, and access in the current digital climate of instantaneous sharing and viral videos. What do you think about how the film handles these issues?
4. Much of the footage used in CAMERAPERSON are outtakes from other documentary projects that featured Johnson framing and focusing the camera, or in situations where she’s forced to make the ethically complex choice of whether to shoot a scene or stop filming. Why do you think she chose to center her own project around these outtakes?
5. Though untraditional in its formal presentation, CAMERAPERSON certainly qualifies as a cinematic memoir. In your mind, how does this memoir compare to others you’ve seen? What makes it different?
6. Have you seen any of the documentaries that make up the whole of CAMERAPERSON? If so, how did you react to these new scenes viewed in a new context? If not, are there any scenes that stuck out to you and compelled you to seek out the film they were sourced from?
7. Are you among the majority of people who are compelled to record the happenings in your life and those of your friends and family? If so, do you find it difficult to appear, or to get others to appear on camera? What do you do with what you record?
8. If you are a parent, do you find yourself trying to capture your kids on camera? As these images multiply, have you considered how these images may affect their lives in the future? Do you share images of your children on social media?
9. A large majority of the sequences featured in CAMERAPERSON are embedded in high stress, intense situations. How would you deal with having to confront such extraordinary circumstances and visceral imagery on an ongoing basis?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Following its Sundance world premiere, CAMERAPERSON has been showered with critical praise and festival awards, including the Sheffield International Documentary Festival's Grand Jury Prize, DOXA Documentary Film Festival's Feature Documentary Award, and Traverse City Film Festival's Founders Prize for Best US Documentary, among others.
- When not filming, Kirsten Johnson teaches a class in "Visual Thinking" at the NYU Graduate Journalism Department, a course in cinematography at SVA, and leads workshops for young camerapeople and documentarians under the auspices of the Arab Art and Culture Fund in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia.
- After graduating from Brown University in 1987 with a BA in Fine Arts and Literature, Kirsten Johnson travelled to Senegal to study with acclaimed filmmakers Djibril Diop Mambety and Ousmane Sembene.
- Kirsten Johnson studied cinematography at the French National Film School, commonly known as La Femis. Notable fellow alumni include François Ozon and Louis Malle.
- After three years of shooting a documentary on the lives of two teenagers in Afghanistan, what was to become a feature-length project entitled "A Blind Eye" was drastically reworked after one of the subjects retracted her permission to use the footage for the original film. The event left Johnson with deeply rooted questions about the nature of promotion, complicity, access, and what filmmakers can do with footage once they have it. These questions were the seed for what would become CAMERAPERSON.
- An early two-and-a-half-hour long rough cut of CAMERAPERSON, affectionately dubbed the "trauma cut," centered around five genocides, rape stories, a baby dying, and had voiceover narration. It wasn't until editor Nels Bangerter was brought on to re-evaluate the massive cache of footage that a more playful format was found and a lighter tonal balance was reached.
- CAMERAPERSON is composed of footage from 24 other documentary films on which Kirsten Johnson served as cinematographer, including "Fahrenheit 9/11," "Citizenfour," "Happy Valley," "1971," "Pray the Devil Back to Hell" and "Audrie & Daisy."

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** the film and track down [all the other films](#) CAMERAPERSON is composed of, such as [CITIZENFOUR](#) and [PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL](#).
2. **Donate** to [Chicken & Egg Pictures](#) or the [Independent Filmmaker Project](#), both of whom helped fund CAMERAPERSON and many of the documentary projects Kirsten Johnson and other talented filmmakers have worked on.
3. **Become** a thoughtful cameraperson. Head out into the world with camera in hand, an ethical state of mind, and mindfulness of aesthetics, bearing witness to whatever happenings you encounter.
4. **Visit** [Documentary.org](#) for a variety of resources dealing with the ethical complexities of documentary filmmaking.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.