

Observe, Think, Take Action

Mónica López-González



As with any series focusing on the plights of human beings, [the Human Rights Watch Film Festival](#) leaves behind a bittersweet taste as it concludes its 24th edition on Sunday June 23rd at Film Society of Lincoln Center and the IFC Center. The twenty visual narratives presented from around the globe fearlessly remind us that we have a long way to go to achieve the universal mindset that all human beings are created equal. Girls and women continue to be seen and treated as inferior objects, migrants are merely disposable threats, and just about anyone who looks and/or thinks differently from the established societal norm is not treated with respect. For society, individuality, the very core of human beauty, is a fault. For cinema, it is a requirement. Below is a discussion of several of the films presented.



"Salma" (Kim Longinotto, 2013)

"Everything happens so quickly before I can feel it. I keep trying to feel something before it's too late. It all happens in my name without me being there. Flowers, people. The world is so much bigger than me. Should I carry on breathing if I'm not really here?" asks Salma, India's most celebrated contemporary female poet, in her poem "Breathing." Locked up upon reaching puberty, pushed into marriage, and forced to write in secret, Salma is the protagonist of "**Salma**" (2013) by Kim Longinotto, who narrates her lifelong struggle for gender equality and artistic independence. With rural Muslim India in the background and interspersed photographs of very young women in their marriage garb, we can't help but breathe her emotional pain and cling to her steadfast motivation to follow her passion for writing. Although Salma has fought and won, and still her husband only reluctantly accepts that he misjudged her abilities, the future for other women appears dim. In one of the most poignant scenes, Salma reads "Breathing" to her two teenage sons. They sit on their beds playing on their phones and laptops, unresponsive. Where are we really headed if today's generation is so oblivious to even their parents' realities?



"Going Up the Stairs" (Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami, 2011)

Hope, we could answer. Hope that people will eventually respond with empathy and collectively push for change. Two other interesting films addressing woman's rights are Karima Zoubir's "**Camera/Woman**" (2012) and Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami's "**Going Up the Stairs**" (2011). In Morocco and Iran, respectively, we observe two women fighting daily against societal lashes of discouragement and blatant discrimination: divorced Khadija, who is suspected of prostituting herself because she works evenings as a camerawoman shooting weddings, ceremonies, and parties to make ends meet for her son and mother, and Akram, who fulfills her husband's every whim and remains at home to be able to paint her canvases. Part of the problem is that they quietly fight by doing what they want to do, such as filming or painting, and other women sympathize with them, but their surrounding community doesn't fight with or for them. Akram luckily finds good fortune only because her children clandestinely organize an exhibition for her in Paris. Granted permission to go by her husband, Akram returns happy and even more inspired. If there is enough hope in enough individuals, maybe a collective will arise.



"An Unreal Dream: The Michael Morton Story" (Al Reinert, 2013)

The importance of many to seek change and action is the underlying argument for four movies that will leave you shedding even more tears of anger and disgust. Two particularly interesting courtroom cases are presented in "**Anita**" (2013) by Freida Mock and "**An Unreal Dream: The Michael Morton Story**" (2013) by Al Reinert. In "**Anita**" we return to 1991, when law professor Anita Hill went before the Senate Judiciary Committee and testified to the verbal sexual harassment she endured from Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas while working for him years before his nomination. Listening to Hill and her supporters talk today about women's rights, morals, and self-confidence in the workplace will make you flinch at how backwards things still remain. Watching humiliating archival footage of Hill being repeatedly asked to describe what Thomas said to her or requested of her will make you cringe in disbelief. It's a game of "he said, she said." And who gets discredited? The woman.

The "unreal dream" of Michael Morton was a devastating reality. Morton was convicted of murdering his wife out of sexual rage in front of his only child in 1986. As Morton recalls the questioning, the trial, and the media rumors, and reflects on his time in prison and estrangement from his son, explicit retention of key evidence on the part of the judge and the police in support of Morton's innocence is discovered. While the United States' criminal justice system falls apart as deceitful, incompetent, and unjust at the hands of a team of attorneys fighting for DNA tests to be performed, Morton's apparent intrepid demeanor of guilt is criticized, challenged, broken down, and finally redeemed upon his being proven innocent.



"In the Shadow of the Sun" (Harry Freeland, 2012)

Like Anita Hill and Michael Morton, Josephat Torner is a man of unquestionable resilience. "**In the Shadow of the Sun**" (2012) by Harry Freeland, introduces us to Torner's tireless campaigning to teach Tanzanians that people with albinism like himself deserve respect, protection, education, and opportunities like everyone else. "I have learnt to love my enemies," he says with compassion. "So even when someone mistreats me I forgive him. Look for the positives. You say I'm nobody, I will stay strong. I won't say anything back even if you insult me. The day is coming when we will all sit at the same table. I hope that in my life, I'm a good person. I hope I am patient and I don't judge you." In a country where witchdoctors have spread the word that body parts from people with albinism bring strength and wealth to those who possess them, Torner risks his own life every day to save the children and adults in danger of being kidnapped and murdered.



"Undocumented" (Marco Williams, 2013)

"Undocumented" (2013) by Marco Williams is valuable for the people it documents. At times unnecessarily long and staying away from providing a full perspective on all sides of the issue of U.S. immigration, "Undocumented" focuses on the countless sick migrants and cadavers discovered by humanitarians and Border Patrol agents throughout Arizona's vast scorching desert. One by one, skeletal remains are picked up, zipped into bags, and taken for medical investigation. Some are identified, some are not. Families are informed whenever possible through the Mexican Consulate. Exhausted but healthy migrants are offered water, handcuffed, and pushed into white vans like animals. Where they are taken is left unknown. Is there a solution? No one provides one. Only suffering remains as one Mexican man admits with incredible stoicism: "Without a doubt they are very difficult moments [when hearing about deceased loved ones]. Very very very difficult. You don't know whether to scream, to run, to cry, to throw yourself. You don't know what to do, you don't know... how to react. And it's very very very painful.")

Some advocate for change through manifestations, some through public policy. Documentarians here have told their stories by presenting the unheard voices of others. We are reminded of just how empathetic and creative we can be when we open our minds and acknowledge our potential. So when is that day when we will all sit at the same table as equals?