

JUDY POSNER - A CONVERSATION WITH THE DIRECTOR

Not just a pretty face: a conversation with Kitty Green

*I was lucky to catch Kitty Green in New York via Skype before she makes her way out to California. It focuses on her perception of the way in which her controversial film has been received.

"Ukraine is not a Brothel" is an unusual and provocative documentary. Like the Femen movement it depicts, the film raises many questions and contradictions that make it an excellent case study for the classroom. It is appropriate for use in a variety of subject areas including gender studies, politics, social sciences and even documentary film itself. For those who are unfamiliar with the infamous Femen movement, Wikipedia tells us all we need to know for starters.

FEMEN (Ukrainian: Фемен) is a feminist protest group founded in Ukraine in 2008. The group is now based in Paris.[7] The organization became internationally known for organizing controversial[8][9] topless protests against sex tourism,[1][8] religious institutions,[10] sexism, homophobia[11] and other social, national and international topics. In October 2013 FEMEN had its largest membership in France (30 local activists in January 2013).[5][7] In October 2012 the organization claimed it had about 40 activists in Ukraine, and another 100 who had joined their protests abroad,[10] as well as twenty thousand supporters via the social network Vkontakte.[12]

The organisation describes itself as "fighting patriarchy in its three manifestations - sexual exploitation of women, dictatorship and religion"[13] and has stated that its goal is "sextremism serving to protect women's rights".[7] FEMEN activists have been regularly detained by police in response to their protests.[13][14]

Green's narrative unfolds gradually, through her gentle direction and editing which builds in suspense by means of her narrative structure. The film begins with a bizarre, Diane Arbus type image of a man sitting on a sofa wearing a paper rabbit mask. We have no idea who he is or what this is about. Green returns to this image in the latter part of the doc to frame her narrative in an elegant metaphorical manner. The man is Victor, and he is slowly 'unmasked' as the driving force behind Femen during the documentary filming. In our conversation together I learn that this mask was actually a random item hanging around the apartment, a recent leftover from a Femen protest at the Kiev zoo.* Victor just happened to pick it up. Moments like this provide priceless material for a doc. And Green is adept at incorporating these seeming random details in a cinematic and understated way. In another scene, one of the women is talking about her activities to her parents via computer while caressing a small, stuffed animal, reflecting the naivete underlying The Femen aggressive, bawdy, public persona.

* FEMEN's topless activists, wearing masks representing slaughtered animals, demonstrate at the entrance to Kiev's ZooPark and declared it to be a 'ZooMorgue', due to alleged high numbers of animal deaths. Kiev, Ukraine. 27th October 2011

Green is never on camera. Neither do we hear her much off camera. There is very little talking heads. Like the popular dictum, 'Show, don't tell' Green is not explicit about the political movement that she is documenting, but rather shows us glimpses, bits and pieces along the way. We see Femen's flamboyant protests, we hear from some of the girls' disapproving parents, and we listen to phone calls with Victor who strategizes and directs the Femen women's activities in detail. We also observe Femen members hanging out in their Kiev apartment. Because Green lives with the women she has access to their personal lives as well as their public ones. She expresses some annoyance at reviewers who suggest that she exploits this familiarity when depicting the women in various states of undress at home. It's just the way they hang out. And I agree with her. Green's filming of the women is always matter of fact, never lingering on body parts, and sensitively employing shadows and low lighting to mute potential erotic overtones. As for the topless, semi-naked protests themselves, they are more violent and surreal than sexual in any event. This feature is heightened by the choice of various classical music soundtracks. During our conversation Green calls my attention to one of her favorite cinematic details. While interviewing a disapproving father in his apartment, the camera scans a wall which is decorated with commercial, naked pinups. Green likes to play with these sort of paradoxes, so there is lots of good grist for the mill here for film students and observant social scientists.

As is true for many a documentary filmmaker, Green is a good Anthropologist! (I am one, so forgive me if I am over projecting here!) She is warm, personable and non-threatening and she knows how to handle people, even the abusive Victor. When arranging her final showdown with Victor towards the end of the project, she admits that she was frightened by him and chose her tactics accordingly. She meets him outside, eating an ice-cream cone in order to emphasize her harmless, sweet, little girl nature. In short, she is no amateur. Green has totally immersed herself in Femen for over a year, living with the women in their tacky apartment and traveling with them to foreign four star hotels in Turkey and elsewhere where they do their thing. In return, she has helped them immeasurably by documenting their protests. This is a nice example of the anthropological method of participant-observation (insider and outsider) and also reflects the ethical notion of mutual exploitation or anthropological reciprocity. Strangely enough, she recalls that journalists and others were constantly warning her about the pitfalls of getting too close to the women and contaminating her story. In anthropology this is called 'going native' and it alludes to the delicate balancing act between subjectivity and objectivity. Green ignored their warnings and managed this tightrope successfully. It is her intimacy with the women, her similarity to them (young, blonde and pretty) and her involvement in their personal lives as well as their public

protests that allowed her to get an authentic grasp of the issues at hand. She describes herself sitting with her language books at the kitchen table. The women insist that she learn Russian and Ukrainian. She already knows a bit of the latter because she is of Ukrainian descent which is how she got involved in the project in the first place. Likewise, we also observe the women on their iPads and computers watching Green's videos of their protests. Green understands that celebrity is a large motivating factor for the women. That and economics. Although she doesn't get into financial details, it is clear that the women are being supported for their political activities. One scene depicts a woman who is especially upset because her mother's apartment burned down so that she is no longer able to watch her daughter on the evening news.

The film has a natural, organic flow because Green constructs the film in a way that mirrors her own journey. This is what tinges her narrative with a kernel of suspense. The universally acknowledged highlight of the film involves her 'outing' of a man named Victor, who Green claims is the founder and real leader of Femen. She refers to this as her big "scoop" and clarifies that it took her some four months to fully understand that he was really at the helm of the movement. Likewise, the viewer is slowly introduced to his role. This fact was so disturbing and depressing to her that she practically abandoned the project altogether, but later decided that this story needed to be told. Towards the end of post-production she became increasingly worried that another filmmaker or journalist would break the story before she did. Other filmmakers with greater resources than hers also filmed Femen, but none of them were able to get beyond the headlines. We agreed that this partly attributed to her gender, age and looks which allowed her to develop identification and trust with her subjects. On the other hand, her youth and good looks may also have worked against her. She suspects that People google me and see that I am young and blonde and I know that they say to themselves 'what luck', as though the story just fell into my lap. Nothing could be further from the truth. She continues, At least three other filmmakers missed Victor altogether. After the debut screening of 'Brothel' at the Venice film festival, the other filmmakers had to go back and add the story of Victor to their own films. Other filmmakers took things at face value, which I well understand. It is tough not to fall in love with the Femen women and miss what is really going on. In this way Green appears to suffer from some of the same criticisms as the Femen women themselves. She is not always taken as seriously as she would like. And as important as Victor's outing is to the structure of the film, Green believes that her doc has more to offer than just a good 'plot'. More recently, she is mildly irritated that her film has been rejected by the Human Rights documentary film festival on the grounds that she does not take a 'political' position on her subject matter. She says it's ludicrous for her film to be excluded for its non-ethnocentric, even-handedness.

Green is never flippant about the effect her film has on the movement and the women. She takes seriously the ethical implications of presenting her doc, especially the outing of Victor. And she conferred with everyone before the final version of the film was released. Femen is no longer based in the Ukraine, it has moved to France. One of the women has just been married, and

Green describes a sudden flurry of emails between the Femen women. She is even able to give credit where credit is due, to the intelligent but egomaniacal Victor. But mostly she is concerned about the Femen women, and is delighted that many of the core activists have improved their lives considerably, continued their studies and now live abroad where some of them still participate in feminist activities. Finally, Green is proud of the fact that her biggest fans are students of gender studies. They are enamored with the film. And that I lived with the girls for so long and even got arrested by the KGB.

There are numerous reviews and commentaries on "Brothel" on the internet, but most of them are brief and superficial. One exception is an intelligent interview on CBC radio.<http://www.cbc.ca/q/blog/2014/04/30/filmmaker-kitty-green-on-exposing-femen/index.html> Filmmaker Kitty Green agrees. She expresses frustration that most writers fail to focus on the nuances of the film and end up discussing the Femen movement itself as opposed to her doc narrative. However, she also understands that it is easy to conflate the two because Femen is such an enticing subject in its own right that it tends to dominate our attention, a fact which is disappointing for her as a filmmaker. During our conversation she repeatedly refers to the attractive, seductive nature of the Femen activists and the fact that they almost always steal the show. People can't help but be besotted by them. Not that she is any less attractive than the women she is documenting, but as I have already suggested, this is a fact that works both for and against her. Another one of the many paradoxes inherent in her project. Green also exudes an air of wholesome innocence, reflecting her suburban, Melbourne upbringing, the daughter of progressive parents, both artists. Part of her fascination with the Femen women is clearly related to her privileged, gender free background. She is obviously intrigued by the main premise of the Femen movement, the use of "cunning", to use Green's own description, to attract attention to the feminist cause, by turning sexism on its head. On the other hand, it is probably useful for students to view her film *tabula rasa*. Due to the surprise denouement of her doc, the outing of Victor, it is definitely more emotionally powerful to come to the film without too much prior knowledge. In fact, from an educational perspective, this is what I like best about the film. It never beats you over the head with ideology, but rather confuses you with a variety of contradictory messages that should send any student with a modicum of curiosity scurrying to the internet to find out more. The film, like the movement, is just so damn peculiar.

Of course, it goes without saying that after viewing the film, gender studies and political science students should be encouraged to look at other similar current movements on the internet (Pussy Riot, Slutwalk, etc) although Green is quite adamant about the fact that Femen is the first of this genre of protest groups and she is protective about seeing that it receives due credit. It may also be useful for students to look at other feminist groups which take a different strategic stance. Groups like La Barbe, beard in French, is comprised of women who interrupt high power meetings donning beards to draw attention to the lack of gender equality at high professional levels. La Barbe offers an interesting comparison in terms of political/ideological strategy.)

<http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/26190-from-fake-beards-to-sweeping-new-laws-french-feminism-is-lively-and-visible>

Finally, it is only fitting that Kitty Green should have the last word on her own film:

"The film has all these questions. I would love for someone to analyze it all for me and tell me what it means. I'd be grateful. It's bewildering. I want someone to dissect it and tear it apart. I gave the bait. Now it's time for others to make sense of it."

Written by: Judy Posner.

epilogue-

Just after sending my article to Filmplatform for publication, I happened to come across a disturbing news article about Jian Ghomeshi, a popular Canadian radio host. It is relevant because I mention that his cbc interview is one of the more intelligent interviews with Kitty. So how ironic and symptomatic of the patriarchal context of Green's film, that Ghomeshi has recently been fired for repetitive allegations of violent sexual abuse.

<http://www.alternet.org/culture/we-have-all-had-jian-ghomeshi-our-life>