

# Tracing Women's Existence through Documentaries: *En Camino - México, Machismo and Clouds*

## Belgeseller Yoluyla Kadınların Varlığını İzlemek: *En Camino - México, Machismo and Clouds*

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### Abstract

For the 5th International Women Directors Film Festival, an interview was conducted with the directors of *En Camino - México, Machismo and Clouds* (2021), aiming to contribute to feminist film theory and practice. *En Camino - México, Machismo and Clouds*, a medium-length documentary by Isabella Cortese, Federico Fenucci, and Guiditta Vettese, addresses the issues of sexual harassment, kidnapping, physical and psychological violence, and the challenges faced by women and children in Mexico's public sphere. These issues are depicted through the testimonies of Mexican witnesses, highlighting the legal and ethical injustices that hinder women from fully experiencing life. The documentary seeks to reveal the struggles faced by Mexican women by presenting their voices and stories. The film concludes with images of resilient women smiling, symbolizing their strong existence and offering hope, particularly to female viewers, as evidence that women will not relinquish their fight against male violence. The documentary's significance to feminist film theory lies in its explicit portrayal of masculine domination over womanhood and the persistence of patriarchal viewpoints in contemporary society. By revisiting issues and concepts discussed by feminist film theorists, the documentary emphasizes the representation of womanhood in films. From this perspective, *En Camino - México, Machismo and Clouds* contributes to feminist film practice through its feminist approach in depicting women and reflecting on their ontological existence. The documentary notes that 801 women were killed in 2020, a 13% increase from 2018, underscoring the urgent need for women to unite and support each other amid rising violence. The women featured in the documentary represent the global challenges faced by women, with the hope that such representations will eventually become obsolete.

**Keywords:** Feminist film theory, feminist film practice, documentary film

### Öz

5. Uluslararası Kadın Yönetmenler Festivali için, *En Camino - México, Machismo and Clouds* (2021) belgeselinin yönetmenleriyle bir röportaj gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu röportajın, feminist film teorisi ve pratiğine katkı sağlaması amaçlanmaktadır. *En Camino - México, Machismo and Clouds*, Isabella Cortese, Federico Fenucci ve Guiditta Vettese'nin yönetmenliğini üstlendikleri orta metrajlı bir belgeseldir. Film, Meksika'da kadınlar ve çocukların kamu alanında karşılaştıkları cinsel taciz,

kaçırılma, fiziksel ve psikolojik şiddet gibi konuları ele almaktadır. Bu sorunlar, Meksikalı tanıkların ifadeleriyle sunulmakta olup, kadınların hayatı tam anlamıyla deneyimlemelerini engelleyen yasal ve etik adaletsizlikleri vurgulamaktadır. Belgesel, Meksikalı kadınların yaşadığı zorlukları, onların sesleri ve hikâyeleri aracılığıyla ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Film, güçlü varlıklarını simgeleyen ve özellikle kadın izleyicilere, kadınların erkek şiddetine karşı mücadeleden vazgeçmeyeceklerinin bir kanıtı olarak umut veren gülümseyen kadınların görüntüleriyle sona ermektedir. Belgeselin feminist film teorisi açısından önemi, kadınlık üzerindeki erkek egemenliğini açık bir şekilde tasvir etmesi ve günümüz dünyasında ataerkil bakış açısının devam ettiğini göstermesidir. Feminist film teorisyenleri tarafından tartışılan konuları ve kavramları yeniden ele

alan belgesel, kadınlığın temsiline vurgu yapmaktadır. Bu bakış açısıyla, *En Camino - México, Machismo and Clouds*, kadınları tasvir ederken feminist yaklaşımı ve kadınların ontolojik varlığını yansıtmaya feminist film pratiğine katkı sağlamaktadır. Belgesel, 2020 yılında 801 kadının öldürüldüğünü ve bunun 2018'e göre %13'lük bir artış olduğunu belirtmektedir. Artan şiddet karşısında kadınların bir araya gelip birbirlerini desteklemelerinin acil bir gereklilik olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Belgeselde yer alan kadınlar, dünya genelinde kadınların karşılaştığı zorlukları temsil etmekte olup, bu tür temsillerin zamanla ortadan kalkacağı umudunu taşımaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Feminist film teorisi, feminist film pratiği, belgesel film

### **Berceste Gülçin Özdemir: How long have you been directing documentaries?**

**Isabella Cortese, Federico Fenucci, and Maria Giuditta Vettese:** *En Camino - México, Machismo and Clouds* is our first experience in directing documentaries. Each of us had preview experiences in both commercial and humanitarian projects, but this work was completely different for us, as we decided to work as a group both producing and directing this film together.



**Figure 1:** Isabella Cortese, Federico Fenucci, and Maria Giuditta Vettese

### **B.G.Ö.: How did you start this project?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** We wanted to shoot a documentary, and we decided to do it together. We knew that for our common beliefs, it would have been a humanitarian project, but we did not have a story yet. We had conducted some research on the condition of women in Mexico, and we were very curious to investigate this theme closer. We discovered that fortunately, we knew one person working in Mexico in some humanitarian projects, so we got in contact with him and he gave us some important advice that made us choose to go there and start working.

**B.G.Ö.:** You are of Italian origin. However, in this project, you are approaching the difficulties faced by Mexican women. Is there any specific reason for this? Why did you choose Mexican women?

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** Unfortunately, Mexico is a country renowned for the problematic conditions of women. And that's a reason. In Italy, as in all the world, the problems the women face are very similar, but sometimes being very close to a certain problem makes it difficult to see it clearly. That's why we thought we would have understood better the problem from far away, going to study it in a foreign country, and especially one renowned for being one of the worst concerning the condition of women.

**B.G.Ö.: How did you design your project? Can you explain the process in brief?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** We actually didn't know how we would have done it when we started. We have tried to think about our previous experiences to choose the cinematic language that we wanted to use and the right equipment for this work. In the end, because we were producing the documentary on our own, we went for the lightest equipment possible and we chose to discover our method of research and the language we wanted to use as we went along. We decided for sure not to anything "pretty". We did not think that the theme needed that. On the contrary, we wanted our documentary to be as bold as possible, choosing also in postproduction to cut 1 hour of the documentary in order to make it essential, saying only the most important things, and leaving only the true voices and stories of the women we interviewed.

**B.G.Ö.: How did you contact the women who spoke in your documentary?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** When we arrived in Mexico, we had only one contact with an association that works for the rights of prostitutes and helps them with health issues, the Brigada Callejera in Mexico City. However, since the theme of our documentary is a very sensitive issue in all of Mexico, we easily found a network of feminists, organisations, and politically active women who wanted to speak with us. So, we started to interview the Brigada in Mexico City, and they gave us the contact of the activist Lidia in Oaxaca. We reached her and interviewed her. She gave us some more advice and contacts, and we continued like this since we found it was a really good "improvised" method of research that brought us very close to these women.

**B.G.Ö.: How did you persuade these women to speak for the documentary?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** If some of them were probably scared of the reaction that their words could cause in some criminal community (Cartel), we did not need to persuade

them since in the end they all wanted to speak publicly about the problems they were facing and since they all wanted this struggle to be as strong and global as it can be.

**B.G.Ö.: Did you contact any government institution in Mexico to receive information about the cases?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** Government institutions in Mexico generally do not study these issues. If he does, the data are generally wrong, either because the government wants to avoid these issues or because their analysis is superficial and unprofessional. All the government data we studied were rejected by other non-governmental institutions, both local and international, that study these issues in the field, also thanks to some departments of their universities and colleges.

**B.G.Ö.: When you were shooting the documentary, did you encounter any violent reactions?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** No, thanks to God, we didn't encounter any violent reactions. However, we found ourselves in trouble when interviewing some men. Some of them had strong reactions to our questions, not wanting to answer or even denying that there was in fact any issue.

**B.G.Ö.: How do these women endure the difficulties in their lives? What can you say about these women and their problems? The reason I am asking this question is that we are observing their lives very closely.**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** Almost all of the women we interviewed dedicate their daily lives to activism. This implies a sacrifice—of time, energy, security—but on the other hand, we feel we can say that it is through the effort of being the spokesperson for a fundamental struggle that these people encounter a great strength, satisfaction, and pride that makes them happy, despite everything.

The emotions we most often perceived from the interviewees is anger, frustration. Violence against women is so extreme in Mexico that anger grows exponentially, and observing it was, in some cases, a very powerful experience. But anger is also a search for courage to act, and in that sense, it is probably necessary for these women to continue to fight.

**B.G.Ö.: Are you still in touch with these Mexican women?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** Yes, although only by email. Because of the pandemic, even if we had intended to return to Mexico, it would have been complicated. For the moment, therefore, we occasionally contact each other via email to exchange news about their activities and about the film's festival distribution and the awards it has received.

Once the festival cycle is over, we plan a series of screenings of the film and debates in various Mexican socio-cultural centres. This will perhaps be a good opportunity to review them.

**B.G.Ö.: When you compare Italy and Mexico, what can you say about the situation of women in these countries? What are their rights in each country? Do they feel safe in their daily lives?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** We believe that the difference between Mexico and Italy with respect to violence against women is a quantitative rather than a qualitative issue. Women's problems are common to both countries, because their roots are common and are called patriarchy. For this reason, even though we are Italian, we decided to make a documentary on the Mexican situation, where the exponential rates of violence against women make its dynamics and gravity more evident, finding correspondences in Italy.

With respect to women's rights, the biggest difference between Italy and Mexico concerns the right to abortion. To date, abortion is free only in the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Mexico City, as well as in the rest of the Central and South American continent, only in Cuba, Uruguay, Guyana, and Argentina. In September 2021, the Mexican Constitutional Court decriminalised voluntary abortion, which in the rest of the Mexican states was limited to a possibility reserved for victims of reported rape and only in the first 12 weeks of gestation, in cases of foetal malformation or serious risk of life for the woman. Having achieved a judicial victory, it is now up to Congress to approve the laws that give it full coverage and break down the state barriers that still exist.

In Italy, voluntary abortion has been legal since 1978, but the socio-cultural obstacles to the full disposition of one's own body by women are still many: suffice it to observe

that the percentage updated to 2018 of doctors who are conscientious objectors (i.e., who refuse to practise voluntary interruptions of pregnancy for religious or cultural reasons) in the country is 69%.

**B.G.Ö.: After this project, have you thought about any solutions for these women? What can you talk about Mexican women's rights and their existence? What do you think the government could do to solve their problems and improve their lives?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** It is difficult to propose solutions for a country where we do not live. Ours was a survey, a collection of testimonies and information that can be as useful in Mexico as it is in Europe and the rest of the world to get a picture of violence and the socio-cultural position of women in Mexico. Certainly, all of the activists we interviewed, as well as all of the women we spoke with on the street, denounced the almost complete absenteeism of the Mexican government in the issues that affect them. The first step to achieving an improvement in the status of women in Mexico should certainly be the full accountability of the state with laws that promote women's protection and gender equality in education and work, awareness raising of state employees and law enforcement, incentives and increased controls that these laws are respected throughout the country as well as that all women have access to primary education, rather than the widespread and stagnant 'normality' that this does not happen.

**B.G.Ö.: What advice can you give to new female directors about shooting their projects?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** As in any area of life and work, our advice for new female directors is not to be afraid to occupy all the spaces that can be occupied. The environment of the cinema—as indeed the majority of professional spaces in the world—still sees women in the second line, forced to make much more effort to emerge and to be recognised for merit and skills. Fortunately, things are changing, thanks to the many female directors who strive to make this environment more inclusive and horizontal, or to the professionals who give life to festivals dedicated to feminist issues and produce projects based on the transversal questioning of patriarchy. Do not be afraid to expose yourself, to launch into projects that interest you and that you feel urgent, even if you are alone, because the truth is that you are not. There is an active, free, constantly

moving community that is ready to accept your work and spread it. Through that community and the breach created by it, it will be possible to challenge the solid masculine rules that dominate every field of our life all over the world.

Although it is clear to us that in some geographical areas female directors are forced to face even more dangers in order to be able to talk about sensitive and urgent issues, we invite you to never consider yourself a minority, a sub-category of the cinema industry. Let's gain the space we are due, and fill it with uncomfortable questions, irreverent projects, and a plurality of voices capable of shaking the dominant system.

**B.G.Ö.: Do you have any other projects related to women and their existence?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** We are all involved in issues that affect politics and society in general, with several other projects not specifically about cinema. We participate every year in global demonstrations promoted by the "Ni Una Menos" group which is fighting to end violence against women around the world. An interesting project linked to feminist themes, of which Isabella is part, is a caravan of international cooperation in the Gaza Strip, where she is responsible for creating workshops and spaces for discussion with the women of Gaza, in particular also bringing them closer to sport and skateboarding, practises that are still not very accessible to girls in that area of the world. In Gaza, we shot some frames of female faces that appeared in the final minutes of *En Camino*.

**B.G.Ö.: What is the definition of feminist cinema? What are some examples of films and directors that you consider to be feminist cinema and why do you think they are feminist cinema?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** We believe that feminist cinema is the kind of cinema that engages with its role in denouncing the injustices of the society in which we live and that affect women in particular. Feminist cinema fights for a better world, free of inequalities, violence (physical, psychological, economic), and femicides, using his method and artistic possibilities to address these issues. Not all cinemas produced by women is feminist cinema, just as it seems fair to say that a man can also produce feminist cinema. Feminist cinema can be, for example, even feminist pornography, which questions and undermines one of the most male-shaped and directed media categories in the world.



Precisely because of this plurality that feminist cinema represents, we do not feel able to quote one director above others; we only feel like pointing out that our European point of view often tends to exclude and marginalize very interesting and capable female directors only because they come from geographic areas, and very little is taken into consideration in the western film community.

**B.G.Ö.: What is gender equality and how can we equalize the patriarchal codes in a social order?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** Gender equality occurs when people of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. Gender equality is a human right, and everyone would benefit from it, even heterocisgender males.

Unfortunately, we are still a long way from achieving gender equality. As long as there are inequalities between genders with respect to freedom of movement, economic independence, access to education, security and safety, and much more, we cannot be satisfied.

We must continue to fight actively, both on a practical and material level (with direct actions, demonstrations and street uprisings, introduction into institutional legislative channels) and on a cultural level of imagination and education. We must teach men not to consider themselves superior to other genders, we must free men themselves from the performative role of supremacy to which patriarchy weans them since they were children, and we must guarantee the women of today and tomorrow safe and free spaces for self-determination. We must fight the machismo that surrounds us within our families, our work spaces, and our group of friends, without being afraid of hurting some sensibilities. We must fight the internalised patriarchy within ourselves, men and women, in the millennia of social and cultural hegemonic dominance. We must question ourselves, starting from our inner awareness, to redesign a new, colonial and depolarised future society. As men, we have the duty to expose ourselves in defence of all marginalised subjectivities and to question our privilege by exchanging and listening to them.

**B.G.Ö.: Could you write a manifesto for all women in the world in terms of their security and existence?**

**I.C., F.F., & M.G.V.:** We firmly believe -and the documentary *En Camino* helped us to understand this assumption even better- that it is not possible to determine a feminist manifesto valid for all women throughout the world. If we are certainly convinced that there are universal problems that concern all women, such as the need to stop violence and femicide once and for all, we are nevertheless also certain that there are ethnic, cultural, geographical, and religious differences that do not make possible a total flattening of practises, tools, and solutions when we approach feminist issues. There is no magic formula for all women, and we believe it is right not to want to find it. Instead, we are aware that every woman, with her own particular uniqueness, must feel free to self-determine in a single and specific way that she deems appropriate for her.

As white and western activists, we cannot feel authorised in any way to define solutions to the problems that plague oppressed women in other parts of the world. However, we can use our privilege to create a listening network, a solid and safe community for all women who want to cross it. This network can become the necessary empowerment to act plurally on their individual problems locally, from the perspective of intersectional, internationalist and decolonised transfeminism.