

An Interview with Jennie Livingston

By Dena Seidel

Jennie Livingston is an independent filmmaker and the director of Paris Is Burning, Through the Ice, Who's the Top? and the upcoming feature Earth Camp One. Educated at Yale, Livingston has taught at Brooklyn College, Yale, and the School of Film and Television in Munich. She has spoken about her work at dozens of American and international festivals, universities, and cultural institutions. Her films have received awards from the Sundance Film Festival, the New York and Los Angeles Film Critics' Associations, The Independent Feature Project, The Berlin Film Festival, and the Toronto International Film Festival, and have been seen on every continent, in theaters and on television. Known for addressing difficult topics (such as class, race, gender, sex) and making them accessible, Livingston is a recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the German Academic Exchange (DAAD), the Getty Center, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Livingston believes that good filmmaking is about synthesizing three things: 1) a commitment to the art and craft of cinema, 2) a passion for telling stories that are so specific they address universals, and 3) a dedication to the practice of thinking, looking, and listening deeply.

Seidel: Paris is Burning was such an incredible success in large part because the film sensitively and respectfully exposed what was at that time an underground subculture. How did you get access to this community?

Livingston: I had just moved to New York and my background was in still photography, and I was taking a filmmaking class, a summer filmmaking class at New York University, and was walking around with my camera, my still camera, in Washington Square Park. I met three guys who were clustering around a tree in the park, and they were dancing and were saying things like "Saks Fifth Avenue mannequins" and "butch queen in drag!" and sort of doing these poses, and I had no idea what they were doing. But I said, "Can I photograph you?" and they said yes. I asked them what they were doing and they said they were "voguing." I hadn't heard of that; I didn't know what that was... I was like "What is that?" "Well, if you really want to see voguing you should come to a ball!" That was kind of the start of it; I went to a miniball on Thirteenth St., and began to go to those balls and take still photographs, and get to know people.

Seidel: You had never made a film before and filmmaking in the late eighties and early nineties was very expensive because we were shooting in 16mm. When did you realize you had access to an important story and that you were going to make a documentary?

Livingston: After some time of getting to know people and going to these events, I felt like, this is an incredibly rich world that is fascinating in and of itself... because there were a lot of gender and lines being crossed and a lot of really interesting verbal eloquence in terms of what the announcers say when they're announcing the ball categories, and it just seemed like the balls were encapsulating the greater world but perhaps in a more interesting way. That people were both wanting to be in the center of society and actually wanting to be the things they were imitating whether it was a real woman or an executive, but also, to a certain extent, claiming their identity as separate, claiming their "specialness" as queer people or as transpeople or as people who have a subworld. There was this interesting tension between wanting to belong and wanting to claim separateness that really drew me in both emotionally and intellectually. And so I, after a time, thought that this really isn't a photography project. This is a film project. And began the long road of how do you raise money to make a film.

Seidel: Your film follows many characters over several years. How long did it take you to make *Paris Is Burning*?

Livingston: It took about seven years to make *Paris Is Burning*, between beginning to go to balls, photographing, beginning to raise money, continuing to raise money, and completing the editing—which is actually the average amount of time for completion of a documentary film so it's not unusual. I hadn't gone to film school and I hadn't really studied film so I was learning to be a filmmaker and learning to collaborate with directors of photography and editors and the people I was filming so it was the best graduate school for filmmaking.

Seidel: Did you meet the people represented in the film all at once or did you develop relationships with them over years?

Livingston: I met different people in the films in different ways. Willi I met pretty early on, Willi Ninja, because the initial voguers that I met said that if you want to see voguing you should meet Willi. So I spent quite a bit of time hanging out with Willi and watching him vogue. He had this dance group called Breed of Motion and I used to kind of watch him train and so I knew him early on.

I just had different relationships with different people. There were certain people I knew pretty well and then there were certain people I met later on in the film. There was someone who dropped out of the film, didn't want to be interviewed.... It was an older person, I needed an older person, so at the last minute Dorian and Pepper came in. And Dorian was someone who, after the film was done, I would go up and play Scrabble with her, because she was a really amazing Scrabble player. Willi and I stayed in touch and a lot of people in the film are now gone. You know, the group of people that the film portrays haven't

had great health situations, because obviously the healthcare here is not fantastic, particularly for people who have less money. So that's a very sad thing about making a film about people who don't have a great prognosis for health care that's going to keep them on the planet. Dorian is gone and Pepper is gone and Kim is gone and obviously Venus is gone, and some people are around. Freddie is around and I know Octavia is still on the planet although I haven't seen her in a really long time.¹ But I really miss Willi. He died two years ago, and I really thought he'd be around as long as I was. So I had different levels of connection and friendship with different people, both throughout the process of making the film and when it was completed.

Seidel: Can you talk a little bit about the process of taking hours and hours of raw verité footage and weaving it into a concise narrative?

Livingston: I think making any film is a narrative and an editorial challenge. So, I had a lot in mind. I had in mind that there was this series of events that were incredibly dramatic and beautiful and telling about the culture at large even though it was a very small subculture. I also had in mind that there was a group of people that also had a lot to say, who were interesting, educated, funny, in many cases perceptive Americans. The idea was to integrate the presentation of particular personalities and stories with the presentation of a community, and suggest the ways in which the particular community commented on the society at large, and to weave *that* all into a seamless narrative.

Seidel: Your film has an ethnographic quality to it with all those title cards introducing categories of ball competition. Watching *Paris Is Burning* feels like an analysis of a subculture with much of the analysis coming from the characters themselves. Was it hard to structure the film in this way?

Livingston: So, that was an editorial problem: I have all these themes, which are about society and the construction of the family, and the construction of identity... and then there are all these people. How are we going to integrate these themes about say, houses and balls or houses and mothers and the way in which people of color and gay people and transpeople don't have a lot of power within this society?... How are we going to integrate that with presenting Venus and Dorian and Pepper?... That was the primary narrative question of how the movie was going to happen. And it was hard because there was seventy hours of footage, which now is a joke, because now people with video shoot like five hundred hours, so that's an even greater problem for them, but that was the challenge of making the movie work.

Seidel: How did the folks shown in *Paris Is Burning* react when they saw the final film?

¹ *Editor's note:* In May 2009, after this interview was conducted, Jennie Livingston expressed her sadness at hearing that Octavia had passed away.

Livingston: People were really excited to see the film. We did a couple of screenings just for people from the ball community and people were very excited and talked to the screen and I think were just very excited both to see the film and the incidents that were in the film but also, I would guess, to see the community and the events legitimized in the way that having a film legitimizes something. It was always our intention to give some kind of an amount of money—I mean we didn't know if we'd ever make any money—to people in the film, and so we earmarked quite a bit of money to divide up among the main people who were in the film and then at some point, as we were getting ready to do that, some people decided because the film was a success, and it was a huge success, that we had gotten rich and that they had not been paid. So a certain number of people got an attorney to come and claimed that we owed a lot of money, which they had signed releases that we didn't. The sad thing about that was that the people who had the attorney had to pay half to the attorney, because they had signed something with the attorney.

Seidel: And you had already spent 7 years of your own time and money invested in making the film and often a documentary has to do very well for us to just break even. It seems like the people who wanted money from you were not aware of how much you had already put into it.

Livingston: There was a perception, if you think about the ball world as being about riches and fame, that because the film got some notoriety, that that also meant that there were huge amounts of money associated with it. And even though *Paris Is Burning* did very well and had quite a good distribution, that didn't translate to the millions of dollars that would have come in had it been a feature film distributed very, very widely. So that was hard, having people feel that there was some chicanery going on. But basically the lawyer came, there was a release, and that was it. We gave the money we were going to give. And I think most people felt really good about the film itself and really good about the ways in which the film portrayed the community and portrayed the people. And I think, in general, the older the person the better they felt, because I think some of the younger people had big ideas about what the level of success of the film meant in terms of money. And I think now, people might have different ideas, like they might make a film and say we're going to share profits with you. But I'm actually wary of that because if I'm going to make a documentary about a disparate community and warrant that I could make them profits in a medium where you almost never make back your money, I almost think it's more honest to just say, you're not going to be paid, or if we make money there will be a little bit of money than to say you're going to get points!

Seidel: It's challenging, isn't it, when the story you are telling is someone else's story.

Livingston: I certainly understand the thought and the reality that if you're taking someone's words and someone's community, either as an insider or as an outsider, because in way it doesn't matter, because if you're an insider and you become a filmmaker, you've crossed a line and become a filmmaker. I wasn't an

insider. I was a queer person but I wasn't from New York, I wasn't black, I wasn't Latino, I wasn't trans, I wasn't from that corner of the gay community. But there are obviously big issues about making a film about a community of which you're not a part, and what it means for that community to become part of a mainstream discourse and become part of what became in this case a mainstream media production.

Seidel: Did the community you filmed change as a result of the success of the film? Did you ever consider how the film would affect the ball community if it was exposed to the larger world?

Livingston: There are issues that have to be considered. But I also felt that the people who were documented in the film were sophisticated New Yorkers, were savvy about the media, were very happy to have their say. Of course no one knew, least of all me, that the film would go on to have the life that it did, which was very significant for a documentary. But I think people knew what they were getting into and the people who decided to be in the film decided, and there were plenty of people who didn't want to be in the film for whatever reason. So that argument, you know you have to talk about the marketplace, you have to talk about who's in power to make a film and who isn't... you also have to give credit to intelligent urban people, that if they say they want to participate that they're not naive about what that means. What people have said to me, now that it's years since the film was made, is that it's a document of a community that's now very different, just as the particulars of any community are evanescent. People age, they die, communities change every twenty or thirty years. The community in that generation is no longer there. Of course there's a ball community now, there are balls, but that group of people, many of them are gone from the world, and that moment in the ball world has passed. And so that group of people and those particular balls were documented, and we can see them in the film, and we can see the brilliance of Dorian Cory and the wry humor of Venus Extravaganza, and look at them and know how beautiful that community is and how profound what they had to say about America is ... I'm very glad the film is there for people to know.

Seidel: *Paris Is Burning* is really an incredibly important film in American documentary history and is very respected by the academic community. Did you have any idea that your film would receive this kind of recognition?

Livingston: The outtakes are in residence at the UCLA film and television archives. So the larger archive of interviews and of footage of the community could be available to scholars of gay culture or of African American or Latino culture, or of dance culture, and that's a good thing.

Paris Is Burning was made and then Marlon Riggs (a gay black filmmaker) made a film called *Tongues Untied*... Those films were the first films of which I was aware that were really showing those communities and the perceptions and thoughts of the communities in film. When I made *Paris Is Burning* I had distributors say to me "no one will see this." I would say, "well,

what about John Waters? People saw John Waters and that was kind of freaky, you know, crazy stuff. People paid to see it....” “They won’t. No one will see it.” I literally had a distributor give me a lecture about how “people who are my age who have children don’t even go out to the movies” and... just like, basically, no one will see it. *Paris Is Burning* showed that people did want to see movies about gay people, about gay cultures of color, and that audiences, straight audiences were not as prejudiced or as unimaginative as distributors assumed. So that was important. In terms of social change, when I was researching *Paris Is Burning*, I felt entitled as a young filmmaker to do anything. I think it’s interesting because white male filmmakers never worry that they shouldn’t make a film. If a white male filmmaker hasn’t been to war, and he’s going to make a war film, he doesn’t feel like “uh oh, I wasn’t a soldier, I can’t tell that story...” or “no it’s a story about a woman, I’m a man, I can’t do it...” so white filmmakers don’t worry. And I thought as a female filmmaker people ask questions of you that they would never ask of a white male filmmaker. It didn’t occur to me that I didn’t have a right.

Seidel: You were admittedly an outsider to ball culture. What steps did you take to understand the community you were filming?

Livingston: I was aware I was documenting a community of which I was not a part, and I just wanted to immerse myself in all kinds of literature and ideas that would inform my filmmaking. So I read Alex Haley on Malcolm X, I read Toni Morrison, I read Dick Hebdige, who was a big writer about subcultures, and everything I could get my hands on. Certainly James Baldwin was a big influence in terms of how do you think about race in America, how do you think about the intersections of class and race in America.... It was very important for me to stuff my head with all kinds of ideas that would inform not only my making of my film as an outsider but just thinking, just good solid thinking about race and class and gender in America. “Camp” by Esther Newton is a fantastic essay on drag queens and on gender line-crossing. So it was important to think about those things. And certainly, social justice underlies all the writers—Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Alex Haley—all those people writing about social justice. I didn’t think, “Well, I’m going to make a film that’ll change the world or will change the film industry.” I just thought, “Here’s an important community, let me honor that community by making a film. We’ll see what happens.” I didn’t assume the film would have a life. Many transpeople have told me that the film was pivotal for them to see in terms of finding their trans identity. It’s been taught now a lot in colleges where people are trying to think about the construction of identity, race, class, and gender. So I think it’s definitely affected ideas. And I’m a little wary, honestly, of that idea that filmmaking is joined with social change movements only because I think a film is a separate thing from a social change movement, and I think social change and political action are separate from filmmaking. Now film informs a social movement, and goes along with a social movement—that’s good. But to me a film is to last five hundred years, and a social change tool is to last five years. So what you do to get Obama elected or what you do to stop global warming is different from what you do on celluloid or on video.... But on the other hand I think my film has been part of a

consciousness of gay rights and consciousness about correlations between how we look at the communities in front of us, and how we look at the intersections between race and class and gender and social structures that oppress people, and that's great. I would just never make a film to effect social change. I would go to a protest, I would vote someone in, but maybe that's a bit of a generational change.

Seidel: More academic articles have been written about *Paris Is Burning* than perhaps any other documentary. How do you feel about *Paris Is Burning's* place in the classroom as a catalyst for discussions on gender identity and performance?

Livingston: I think what *Paris Is Burning* did, as far as I understand, is that it just put a lot of stuff together. And that's what I loved about the ball world. When you looked at a ball, you had to think about class, you had to think about race, you had to think about gender, you had to think about the extent to which we construct those identities. Gender is a construction, race is a construction, class is a construction. So I think even people who had not read any postmodern texts, which I hadn't so much either—you don't have to have read Derrida or Foucault to look at *Paris Is Burning* and to intuitively understand some ideas about the extent to which we are not intrinsically male or female, black or white, rich or poor. These things are signified and adopted and learned. And so I think that in magazines like *The New Yorker* or *The Washington Post*, or National Public Radio, people would talk about the film and they would talk about that issue of identity, which was not something I thought up, it was both in the air in terms of intellectual discourse and it was very much in the ball world. As a young feminist, as a young queer, as just someone who didn't so much feel fully connected to my gender or my race or my class, I felt much more expansive as a person and much more curious about not wanting to be typed as one thing or another. So my feelings as a human and certainly as a feminist—you know, very much there were huge correlations between my personal, intellectual lights and inclinations, and the ball world. And that really is primarily what attracted me to it. I mean also it was very visual but the people you met at the ball world, the Venuses, the Dorians, the Peppers, were fully cognizant of exactly what their culture was doing. They hadn't read Foucault but everything they said was in keeping with that question of "Are we what we are?" or are we *made* what we are to a certain extent by what's given us or withheld from us.

The fact that *Paris* is useful to people who want to talk about identity and race and class and gender and the construction of it is wonderful. I think that it lives on for queer people or transpeople, you know that it's a part of the history of queer and transpeople that's fantastic, and I think in terms of people who are straight or bisexual, just having different images of different communities is fantastic. I hate the word "tolerance" because it somehow implies that you're tolerating instead of accepting or embracing, but I think in terms of embracing the reality of different gender identities or different communities, different forms of expression, you know that it's out there for people to see or demystify prejudice, homophobia, hate, racism, you know so much of it is about ignorance or fear of who they are and what they do. I mean if you can sit and just talk to

Dorian Cory for a while, who's just like anyone's wise grandmother, maybe you might not feel so scared about a community or a person who's very different from you. So I'm very pleased that the film is out there for people to embrace, people who are different from them and people who are the same as them! One reason the film was a hit film and lives on is that the concerns of the ball community are how do we as Americans or as citizens of the world deal with a materialistic society in which we're expected to have wealth, we're expected to have beauty, we all want to fit in in some way, but none of us do. None of us fit in perfectly, none of us live up perfectly to the image that society would have us be, or perhaps the image in our own minds of what we should be, and I think what anyone relates to in *Paris Is Burning* is that pressure of culture to be something that advertising culture, consumer culture, tells us we should be. So I think that's universal, queer or not, white or not, young or not old or not, it's something that people hook into when they see the movie, whomever they may be.

Seidel: Your short feature film *Who's the Top?* also deals with issues of gender and sexuality and sexual performance. Can you talk about that film's evolution?

Livingston: *Who's the Top?* was a script, a feature-length script, and I used to pitch it as "Woody Allen's younger dyke sister goes to the SM dungeon with musical numbers," but it was basically a script about a couple who love each other but can't agree about what they want to do in bed. One member of the couple wants to have kinky sex and the other doesn't. So when I was writing this movie, this topic of who we are sexually and how who we are sexually affects our relationships in couples, was something that was very much on the minds of the lesbian communities in the nineties. I wanted to make a movie about it but I didn't want it to be so heavy. I didn't want it to be a horrid drama about *Sturm und Drang* because sex is ... you can't do anything about it, you have this reptilian brain and these hormones that make you a sexual person, and also you love people so how do you make that work? And how does eros fit in with loving and with family? It's a big question in human society, but it's a question that usually gets asked about heterosexuals and about heterosexual men. Female sexuality is not such a big thing in the movies, at least not from a female point of view. So I wanted there to be this character who was both a very sensual and sexual person but also kind of an intellectual geek, like a lot of women I knew. And so, that was a hard story to tell because Hollywood didn't want to pay for it. Woody Allen is kind of an intellectual but he's also a sexual guy.... What females in movies are both intellectual and sensual? So I wanted to create that. And so I wrote this movie, and couldn't get the money, so my producer at the time (Ruth Charny) said let's do what you did with *Paris Is Burning* with this. Let's go shoot some footage. We'll cast it, we'll put in a little money and we'll shoot some footage and then people will see what you can do, and then they'll fund the movie. So we went and we cast it and we cast Marin Hinkle, who is this amazing actor from Broadway and from shows like *Two and a Half Men* and *Once and Again*, and Steve Buscemi and Shelly Mars and Brigitte Bako. I found this amazing choreographer, John Carrafa, who's done a lot of Broadway, and we cast twenty-four dancers, and he worked on the

choreography. So what happened was we shot for a few days and cut this trailer, and got really close to getting enough money to shoot the whole feature, and didn't. And in the interim the movie wasn't coming together, my brother died, I became very depressed, so I was just like fine, I'm not going to make that movie.

A couple years passed. I was at Sundance with a friend, we were watching shorts, and my friend said, "Your trailer for *Who's the Top?* is better than most of these shorts. You should make it into a short." I said, "I don't want to make it into a short. I'm not a short filmmaker, forget it." She was like, "No, you really should," and I was like, "Fine, you produce it." And she did. So we made what was a trailer for a movie into a short, did one more day of shooting, which was hard because Marin Hinkle had moved to Los Angeles and had a baby, and had to fly back to New York for a day to do it. Rather than a whole feature about this couple and their journey, it became a short about a couple and their journey, and we had to take the elements of what we'd just shot for the trailer, make it into a short. At the time I thought, "Oh, this is terrible, this should've been a feature"—shoulda, coulda, woulda—and then we finished the short, it went to Berlin, it was in a hundred festivals, it had a run at the ICA in London, it had a run at the MFA in Boston, and it's had this whole life. It's just this little short story meditation on sex and sort of the heaviness and lightness of our sexuality. The musical numbers are very much about, let's take something that we're all scared of, that our culture is scared of, that you know we think kinky sex is, like, going to kill you. There are so many movies like *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. If a woman has sexual agency or if a man is ... I don't know, a sadomasochist or something, he's going to be a murderer, she's going to get murdered. What people do in their bedrooms is really varied and the world of fantasy in the bedroom, as the world of fantasy is on the playground, is a really varied thing. And it's as varied as the movies we make and it's generally not dangerous, so let me take that idea of you don't know what to do with your own libido, and take the lightest most wonderful Hollywood convention, the musical, and take this potentially heavy topic and put it into this light form. So that's *Who's the Top?* Your question was about form, and how you find the particular aesthetic tools or narrative ideas for a particular project. The idea was to shoot it in 35mm because it had to be beautiful, you had to see the skin of the dancers, and really feel the movement. So, let's do as close as we can to a Busby Berkeley or a Hollywood musical with no money. That was a challenge. We did shoot in this huge amazing space, which was a former synagogue on the Lower East Side, we did have twenty-four dancers and we did have amazing costumes for no money, and the film had this whole life. It's crazy. You can make a short, and even more so today, there are all these film festivals, and the short will go all over the world, and you'll go with it, sometimes, and so that's great.

Seidel: It seems that with each film project, you try something new. Can you talk about your other films?

Livingston: I made another film called *Through the Ice*, which was made for WNET television for a show called *Reel New York*, and they wanted ten filmmakers each to make a five-to-six minute piece about New York City for their

tenth anniversary show. That was a digital piece in DV, because they had no money, it had to be done quickly, and I ended up doing a film about this man named Miguel Flores who tried to walk across the ice on the lake in Prospect Park—he died. He tried to walk across the ice, he fell in, a group of dog walkers who were out there saw it, they tried to call the authorities, they tried to save him, they couldn't. So that was pretty simple. With a DV camera, we went out and shot half a day of stills in the park, we went out and did a half a day of interviewing the dog walkers who had lived through that day and tried to save this man, and it was cut together over a month. And that's another thing, you know you have a little bit of money, you have a story you want to tell, you have a TV entity paying you a little money to tell a story, and, you know, DV, Final Cut Pro, short piece.

Seidel: And you've been working on a new documentary. Can you tell us about that?

Livingston: The film I'm making now is called *Earth Camp One*. It's a meditation on grief and loss. It's a true story about how I lost four family members in five years, and it's also about a hippie summer camp in the seventies in Northern California, the connection between those two things being when you're young you often want to break away, find different cultural markers from how you grew up, you want to leave your family. So what happens when they leave you? The film will also have animation, about different conceptions of the afterlife. It's an essay film, it's a meditation; it uses a lot of archival footage. My parents took 16mm home movies, the hippie summer camp took 8mm home movies, there's an audio archive of a hundred hours, and there are also interviews that I've done with people who knew my family and with people on the topic of grief and loss. It's really meant to be both a meditation on my experience of loss but also, as Joan Didion says in her book *The Year of Magical Thinking*, about how in our culture death itself has become forbidden. Death is the great truth of our lives, we can only love because life is impermanent and we value the preciousness of what is in front of us—both the people and the world in front of us. That's at the center of all religions. If we live in a culture that pretends that death isn't there, not only are we psychologically and spiritually cut off from the great truths of our life, but we're apt to go to war and kill a couple million people and think nothing of it because in fact death doesn't exist.

So that's the film I'm working on now, and the sort of aesthetic imperatives behind it are to unify all this stuff, to take all this old footage and this new footage and this animation about what do Jews say and what do Christians say and what do Buddhists say and what do the San people in South Africa say about life after death, and weave it all together in a seamless essay really about what it is like to lose people and what was that like psychologically and what the intellectual musings are that come from thinking about how difficult it is to deal with loss in this society and how damaging that is to our society as a whole and to the individuals in it. That's in progress now and that's something I'm really trying to figure out as I go. But there is a tipping point after which there is just too much information and too many thoughts and too many ideas. It's not dissimilar from creating *Paris Is Burning* in that although *Paris Is Burning* was

documenting a particular community, incorporating particular individuals, into the story... I mean *Earth Camp One* is about a certain number of individuals, a certain number of stories, a certain number of ideas, a certain set of kinds of footage, and kinds of aesthetic explorations including different styles of animation that have to be integrated and bring the audience in emotionally and intellectually to, in this case, my story, and other people's stories, too. So for me, the aesthetics, or the tools, or the medium of a particular project follow the story. So, with the lesbian sex comedy with musical numbers it had to be one thing, with the short visual piece it has to be another thing, with *Earth Camp One*, the one I'm making now, it has to be another thing.

Seidel: And you have another feature film in development?

Livingston: The other project I'm working on now is a script that I wrote set in East Berlin and New York in 1989. It's a story about a group of artists from East Berlin who come to New York on a cultural exchange just before the wall comes down and they meet up with a group of New York artists—so it's very much about people trying to make art in very different systems. One is a communist totalitarian state, and the other is the hypercapital, hypertestosterone-driven capitalism of the late eighties, and where in New York you can kind of say anything you want as long as you work sixty-eight hours a week to pay your bills. In East Berlin, you had a lot of time and a lot of space, but if you said the wrong thing you'd go to prison. It's about these two groups of people, and the intention is for that to be a feature, either shot in HD or 35mm, with an ensemble cast of like twelve people, so that will demand a whole different aesthetic sensibility. It doesn't have a lot of fantasy numbers, it doesn't have a lot of dancers, but on the other hand I'm thinking of movies like Robert Altman's *Nashville*, where there's some sort of fluidity to the camera and some sense that you're seeing several parallel worlds at once. That will have another set of aesthetic and technological problems that go along with it.

Seidel: Film is such a complex medium that allows for a wide range of expression. Can you talk about why this is your medium and how it works for the kinds of stories you want to tell?

Livingston: I definitely think film's a great medium because with each project, you can explore different technologies, you can explore different surfaces; the surface has to follow from the inner inherent idea of the story. It can't be the other way around, I don't think. I don't think that works. It's a gratifying medium to work in when you can get the money, but any filmmaker's scourge is how do you raise money for a particular project and does the money come in a timely way, and you know that's why it's probably better to be a novelist than a filmmaker, but if you have to be a filmmaker, so be it.

Seidel: Can you talk a bit about the role of women in filmmaking and perhaps the unique perspective women bring to the screen?

Livingston: It's tricky to talk about women and film because if you simply look at the statistics, 4 percent of films are made by women. That statistic tells you a lot. If you look at television, I think about 10 percent of network TV shows are directed by women... and that statistic has actually gone down since when I started in the mid-eighties. So it's a challenge. I think it's tricky because as a woman filmmaker (and I'm sure this is true for nonwhite filmmakers as well, although there are more of them than of us), I don't want to get too thwarted or too focused on that inequity and that difficulty because then you kind of take it in, and you feel like it's a given that it's hard. And it is hard, so you have to just say, okay I understand I'm in a really tiny minority, I understand that people who are hiring or people who are conceptualizing who a filmmaker is do not have an image of somebody who looks like me in their heads, and I have to deal with that. On the other hand you have to kind of throw it away and forget about it, and just say "I'm making a film!" Because otherwise you'll just be overwhelmed with how difficult it is. And it is difficult. I would tell any young women thinking of being directors, really know what you're getting into. It has not changed, as have professions like medicine and law. We have 50 percent women doctors now; you do not have 50 percent women filmmakers. And I think part of the problem is women ourselves.... If you're seen as too combative or too oriented toward complaining about your problems as a woman filmmaker then you can't work. But what I think is interesting is if you look at say, a guy like Spike Lee, and many other black filmmakers, they aren't shy about talking about the place of African Americans in the industry. I wish women were a little more like that, just willing to stand up and say "yeah, it's tough for us and we don't get to tell enough stories and it's hard to tell our stories...." It's something people are wary of doing and I think we've been living in a very conservative country. The sort of blessing and curse of growing up when I grew up, in the seventies, was seeing the sort of new wave German films, and new wave Australian films, and filmmakers like John Waters.

The blessing of growing up in the seventies is that there was such an emphasis on freedom of expression, on different kinds of stories, on breaking up narration, if you think of like, Fellini and stream of consciousness and dream spaces... Bergman and the same thing... and Herzog and Fassbinder, and a whole sort of political consciousness that was happening in Germany in the sixties and seventies or in Australia in the seventies with Peter Weir and *The Last Wave* Those were the things that I grew up with that made me think that cinema is about revising how we tell stories and it's about revising who gets to tell stories. I made *Paris Is Burning* and thought, "Great! Now I've made a film about a subject that no one thought anybody wanted to see, and actually people want to see it and now I get to make any movie I want about any topic. ..." Oh well! You know it doesn't really work that way. Essentially, the business side is that people do calculations of what people want to see and that's what gets paid for. The independent film movement definitely breaks that up a bit, but it's still rather male, it's rather white, and perhaps even more crucially than the identity issues, it's rather genre. For filmmakers who want to break up genre it's not so easy. Even for somebody like Todd Haynes, it's hard to make movies that play with genre. This isn't a western, it isn't a romance, it isn't a crime noir-ish thing, this is somewhere in between those genres. That's a hard thing to get funding

for. And what I always tell my students when I'm teaching is that you can't study movies without knowing that movies are a medium that takes money to do. Even digital filmmaking costs money. If you don't have someone to pay your rent and feed you and give you the basics while you're making your digital film, which will take all your time and more, you can't make that digital film. I'm not saying there aren't people who move heaven and earth to work full time and make their movie on the weekends; that can work for a first film, but it doesn't sustain a life in filmmaking. So we still have the questions that *Paris Is Burning* started out with, and that all of my films ask—who do we want to tell our stories, who do we want to give the means of production to, what stories are important to be told, how many stories are we, in this incredibly diverse nation and globalized diverse world, how many stories are we open to seeing, how many different kinds of filmmakers? Do we want women to tell their stories, do we want people who are poor to tell their stories? Should we hand them cameras? Is it just at the behest of one filmmaker who comes in and says “I'd like this disempowered community to tell their story”? Could somebody with no money go to film school and grow up to be a filmmaker? Not so much here in America.

Seidel: Do you think that the narratives women tell are somehow different than those men tell?

Livingston: I would guess women for the most part will tell not just women's stories differently, but everybody's stories differently because our experience is different. We're trained to be different kinds of humans. I mean you could argue till the cows come home our hormonal or our brain structures make us different.... I don't know. Can't make that argument either way, but I think traditionally we do see the world differently. If you look at Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, there's a difference. Both are great writers. But one thing that Virginia Woolf does in her fiction is to tell a lot of parallel stories and give us the impression that she's going many places at once. She's going through the brain of this man and this woman and this man and this woman. Obviously male filmmakers, say like Robert Altman, are making films like that. So it's not just a female way of viewing, but it is in a sense a more feminine way of viewing the world, because I think a more masculinized way of storytelling is more directed. You know, it's genre, it's three-part, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. If you look at stories like Altman's or you look at something like P.T. Anderson's *Magnolia*, which has a bunch of characters, if you look at Agnès Varda... there is a way of telling a story that implies that you could be in many places at once.

There's an essay I love to read and I love to have students read that Ursula K. Le Guin wrote called “The Hand the Rocks the Cradle Writes the Book.” It's about how male writers often feel they need to be in an ivory tower. They need to be in a quiet office all by themselves where they can make art. Many women artists have raised children and have had to negotiate all the noise and the craziness of running a household, and having children running around and screaming, with being creative people. And even if you're not a mother, that is a more female way of being in the world. Multitasking and juggling and combining your compassion with your more functional tasks. And so there is a question. And it's not so much just about women, per se, but about ways of

being in the world... being compartmentalized as opposed to being open. And I would argue that the cinema benefits from women making films because women often do have a different experience of the world. But also the world benefits from men having access to more feminine or more female narrative structures. That benefits all of us, to be able to think more openly about identity and to be able to think more fluidly about putting ourselves in the skin of somebody else, and the fact that stories and worlds interrelate. I'm not saying there aren't plenty of great movies by men who do that, or novels—of course there are.

There's this filmmaker, Kelly Reichardt, who made this film called *Old Joy*, and her new film is called *Wendy and Lucy*. I don't know if it's a female film, ask a scholar, don't ask me. But it's just a film about a girl and her dog; the woman is a young woman and has no money and is trying to go to Alaska to work in fish canneries, and it's very understated. It's really just about the things that happen to her in the course of a few days stuck in this town when her car breaks down. And it's so understated, I'm not saying a man couldn't do it, but I do feel that her being a woman, that we women tend to be socialized to be focused on small things: fixing a car, taking care of a dog, interacting with someone in a community. I do feel that perhaps a man might not have made that film. And that the subtlety and openness with which films like that are made... The cinema benefits from letting all genders have access to the means of production, just as literature has benefitted. So I'd like to see more men feel free to think in nongenre ways as say a filmmaker like Todd Haynes does. And I'd also like to see all kinds of people have cameras and tell stories. I think that's happening more but it's not happening enough. And we need to do what they do in Europe and make film school free. Anyone with talent should have their tuition, their expenses paid. And they can go to film school and become filmmakers. Today to go to film school you need money. I didn't go to film school. I didn't grow up poor; I'm a very privileged person, but I still didn't have money to go to film school. And I think that's a mistake. We should take our money and educate more artists, and then we're going to get more Junot Diazes than we have now.

I'm making this film now that is this first-person documentary. And I'm trying to think about how you present a community that's considered marginal in a way that translates as universal. I don't come from a famous family, it's not a story that is about history with a big 'H,' so can you relate the memoir... is there a parallel acceptable form in film as in a literary memoir? Is a woman's story of something that happened in her family an acceptable story to tell? Is the story of a black and Latino gay and transgender community an acceptable story to tell? I think there are questions about what stories are important to tell, who gets to tell stories. If you think about what gets paid for in Hollywood, there's often a sense that it needs to be historically important, it needs to be a man, it needs to be a big story. Even the phrase that people use in Hollywood, it's a little film or it's a big film, which usually has to do with budget, but it also has to do with a sense of what's important, which is odd because if you want to make a story about say, a woman and her child, that's considered very domestic and very little. Whereas if you want to make a space drama, that's considered big. But a space drama is fiction, it's out of a storybook, whereas a woman and her child is happening all over the world in every society. There's a very skewed idea of what's important,

of what is an authoritative way to tell stories, and where money should be put. I think many of my female colleagues who've had successes would say...you make a film as a woman. And often, if a man makes a little film as his first film, and it makes money, he's sort of swept up into the film industry. You know, oh, he has an authoritative voice, let's give him a few more opportunities.

If a woman makes a film, it's often seen as kind of flukish, that the tiny little film she made, made money. And I think there's a perception of who are the authoritative speakers. But I grew up in the seventies when there was an idea that cinema was evolving to the point where voices that weren't being heard, were being heard. The Australian new cinema was a lot about white people taking over Australia and diminishing or oppressing the aboriginal people. The new German cinema was looking at a post-war Germany and dealing with the repercussions of the horror of what had happened in the forties. John Waters was making cinema that was about freaks and homos, just doing crazy, over the top things, and calling that cinema. Calling that something worthy of putting in the cinema and also very much mocking the straight world, and by the straight world I don't even mean the heterosexual world, I mean the people who live in little tacky tacky houses and think you have to do things a certain way.

Seidel: You have made both fiction and nonfiction films. What is similar and what is different when working with documentary footage versus working with actors and a script?

Livingston: For me in terms of making fiction or in terms of making nonfiction, it's not so much that it's all about social issues or telling the stories of the oppressed, although I'm interested in that too, but it's about shaking it up and showing that there are many ways of seeing power and powerlessness and many ways of seeing identity. We should listen to other people, we should listen to ourselves. The story I'm making about grief and loss and myself, the end point of it won't be "oh, what a story I've had, Oh how hard my life is," but that if we live in a society where death and loss are forbidden, as Joan Didion says, and where we're phobic about talking about the fact that we're going to die and everyone we love is going to die: we live in a cut-off way. And any rabbi or priest or Zen master will tell you that, that assimilating and knowing the truth and impermanence will make your life richer and more beautiful. But we live in a society that completely denies that. So, my story is in part about me having lost four family members in five years, but it's also about us, as a culture, as a world, assimilating the truth of mortality and impermanence to make our lives more real. I don't know if that's a female or a male story. I think that's a human story, but it's interesting to see how when people perceive it's a "personal story," that becomes thought of as a smaller film, whereas in fact, it's the biggest film there is. So graphic novelists like Alison Bechdel and shows like *This American Life* are legitimizing first-person narration and the family story. I still think it's a battle to legitimize anything that isn't big battle film, big historical film, big film with big stars... I'd like to see more integration. And I think the independent film market has partially created that. We're coming out of a very socially conservative era. And I hope coming into a more open era, and I think that's going to affect what gets made.

For me, I'm interested in making fiction and making nonfiction. When you make nonfiction, you have to listen, you have to be a listener, you have to be attentive to the world, you have to be very open to the kind of aesthetic and emotional and narrative moments of grace that occur when you're filming the world and when you're working with "real people." When you're making fiction, you have more control. You can cast, you can come up with aesthetic ideas, you can make a dance number with twenty-four dancers, you can do what you want with it. But you're also working with the unpredictable stuff of the world. Even a cast and a crew is the unpredictable stuff of the world. So to work in both fiction and nonfiction is a wonderful thing. Because your nonfiction work, where you're working with the stuff of the world, makes you more open to actually being more attentive to the chance and the grace that occurs in creating fiction, and your fictional work where you're arranging things and creating stories and constructing stories is in fact the way you make nonfiction because the real world is completely amorphous, and nonfiction film is a closed system that has to work, that has to have a beginning, middle, and end that you create. I intend fully in the next twenty years to be like those directors who work in both fiction and nonfiction and let the consciousness and tools of working in one feed the process of working in the other.