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Amie Williams Interview

By Ben Sampson

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Ben Sampson (BS): Can you describe [Global Girl Media](#)?

Amie Williams (AW): Sure. I guess the best thing to do is start with the origin of the idea. I went to film school here at UCLA and I studied documentaries. One of the first projects I did there was I went to South Africa and the film was focused on youth and the role that youth played in the overthrow of Apartheid; and I took a group of young people from inner-city Los Angeles to live in a township in South Africa in the year that Mandela was released from prison. And I've always been anthropological in my use of cinema, in terms of using the camera as an excavating tool to look at issues of difference and cultural difference and similarity, so I actually gave a camera to these kids to kind of deal with each other, talk to each other, interview each other. Of course at that time I really didn't know what I was doing, but I realized that I was part of a whole tradition of using the camera that dates back to the Flaherty years and using the camera as a tool to integrate cultures — break down barriers. So, that was years ago, and then just being in South Africa and watching the fall of Apartheid, I always wanted to go back. I always had it in my mind to go back at some point.

And as my career developed and I began making feature-length documentaries for broadcast, sometimes they would be centered around issues of women and youth because those were some issues that interested me, and many of them were in other cultures. I've shot in Japan and Russia and China and Africa quite a lot. And everywhere I went in these cultures, I mostly shoot my own stuff, and people would come up to me and wonder how a woman could be behind the camera. It was kind of an oddity for them to see that. We take it for granted here, although there aren't as many women if you just look at numbers in terms of the professional guilds (there are very few women in [IATSE](#)). But, again, this was starting to influence what I wanted to do with my work. And then, I guess what we call the "Digital Revolution" happened, and the breakdown of distribution for independent cinema and even Hollywood cinema, and how the Internet has started to rule our world. I started to think about a new way of making films, and distributing films, and using some of these experiences I had in other countries, and specifically wanting to bring my knowledge and ideas to young women and getting them behind the camera, getting them to speak out. And that's kind of the birth of Global Girl Media.

It's a non-profit organization with other women — filmmakers, journalists, activists — who wanted to bring the power of controlling your own voice, holding your own camera, telling your own story to the most underprivileged and underserved women around the world.



BS: Could you recount the story of your friend in Kenya and how that inspired the founding of the organization?

AW: Yes. I was sponsoring her school fees, and I was over there a little bit because I actually lived there between undergrad and film school, and I was writing a screenplay at the time about HIV orphans, and she was one of the many people I met during the research process. I befriended her and helped her to stay in school. She actually helped me with a piece I did for [Current TV](#) where we went out and interviewed young people in the streets about why it's important to go out and vote.

And it was a very heady time because there was somewhere around seven different political parties that were running, and democracy in Africa was "alive and well," you know. And I came and filed this story, and I'm so proud of her because she did so well interviewing people, and then I get a phone call two weeks later that she had been raped, and that this was going on as a result of political violence

in the aftermath of an election that was contested and basically stolen. And this violence went on for about three or four months and about 300,000 people were killed, over a million displaced and homeless, and she was one of the victims. And rape, as we know, has continued to be and has been historically a weapon of war and subjugation of women, and there are a lot of interesting films about this, but none of them told directly from the perspective of someone it's happened to — at least not that I know of. I mean, there are documentaries about it where someone is interviewing a victim, but this girl really wanted to make her own film.

So, we went over there, me and another person, and we helped her make this film. And it's been a long and difficult process in watching the power of the camera to both open up and close down the story. And like I said, I came to filmmaking from the perspective of looking at the camera as tool that breaks down barriers, but it can also put up a lot. And it's a whole other psychological discussion about the presence of the camera in a really impoverished community, and you take this really expensive piece of technology into this community and the kind of dynamics that come up. And then her position within her immediate family and community has changed as a result of her making this film — that's another story. But it also really helped to galvanize and sharpen my desire to break down that mythology of what it means to make a film, and to say it's not so rare to have a girl in a slum know how to operate a Sony HDV camera and it's not so rare to have a girl from a refugee camp get on national news and talk about what happened to her.

BS: Not that you have to get into specifics, but I am interested in the way this technology interacts with local communities. Is there any way to broadly talk about that?

AW: Well, you know, it's something that I'm constantly thinking about and blogging about and researching. Even the way the cell phone has revolutionized Africa because so many countries are just too poor to have landlines, and cell phones just exploded in the last five years. I often say that the way they used to test drugs on Africans, now they're using to test all kinds of new platforms on cell phones. Particularly in South Africa, I want to talk about a program called [Mix It](#), which we're going to leverage in Global Girl Media. It's a software platform that you purchase for very little money that goes onto your phone, mostly youth oriented, and unlike a texting program it offers file sharing and group chatting. They can share back forth emoticons and how you're feeling. It also opens up storytelling. Someone can start a story and people can add to it, and all the kids in South Africa do this. It also makes texting cheaper if you're a part of Mix It. It's a social networking media, sort of like Facebook, but it's only on the cell phone.

You know, we don't know how great we have it, or just how long it's going to last that we don't have to pay to watch video on YouTube. In many other places you have to pay for the amount of media that is crossing your cable and your broadband access. And because the Internet and broadband still has not reached many poor countries — specifically I'm going to talk about Africa because that's what I know — and you pay per bit rate, the kids are going directly to the cell phone and they're sharing video, they're sharing music, they're sharing photos of each other a lot more nimbly than... well, if you've ever seen an African kid in Nairobi text, you'd be amazed. You'd be amazed at how fast they are! And it's so funny because you can go into these rural villages and you can see goat farmers texting each other. One of the most innovative things comes from this company called [Safaricom](#) — it's run by an American, but it's a British owned company that is now the number one cell phone company throughout East Africa. They pioneered a technology call [M-Pesa](#) — "pesa" is Swahili for currency — which allows you to bank on your cell phone.



So, say your mom lives in a rural area and you have a great job in the city, and you want to send money home, you can just text it to her. Similar to the way people were texting money to help Haiti. That was pioneered in Kenya, that technology and software of being able to share money on the cell phone. And they text you a code, and you go into the local bank and show a code. Then you take your money, and the money gets transferred through the cell phone.

It's pretty interesting, so if you think about how technology can open up media and the ownership of media and the telling of stories and just where we're headed with that handheld device. I think it's really exciting, and it's completely driven by young people. Had I not been a mother, and had I not had a child that's not watching television, that's completely interacting on the Internet, and the way he does his homework and the way he interacts with his friends — you know they don't talk to each other. They could be sitting in the same room, and they'll play a video game no problem, but they'll text each other much more than they'll talk to each other. It's really interesting where our society is headed. And I know there's a lot of academic research about the negativity about it and the way our brains are being developed, but I'd like to think about ways we can take this technology and use it towards exciting new, creative ways of approaching, say, the structure of a story or the way we relate to each other culturally, sexually, intellectually. And so I'm always

looking for that one new thing that's opening up my brain and the way that I'm telling a story. And this Mix It program is just fantastic.

BS: Can you comment on ways that social media might be interacting with non-Western societies, which can be traditionally much more socially oriented than their Western counterparts already?

AW: I know, it's interesting. I'm trying to raise money for Global Girl, and in the developing world we're calling for ICT Education (Information, Communication, Technology), and that broadband access should be a right. And even within our own country, the Recovery Act had \$7.2 billion set aside for broadband access in urban and poorer communities. Computer literacy and things like that. And I wonder about that because, yeah, is it all taking away from sitting around a fire and having grandmother or grandfather tell you a story? And I would have to say that from purely witnessing kids on their cell phones in Africa, farmers, women going to market, there's still definitely an aspect of social interaction and color and laughter and openness that the cell phone doesn't diminish. Like I said, they're using phones as opposed to the Internet, so they're not locked in their room on a computer. They're moving around, and that mobility (it's called a mobile phone) may have something to do with being out in the open and able to interact. I don't know. It's just so new. We really don't know where we're headed in terms of this technology.

BS: You spoke about the act of storytelling from their perspective on camera. What inspired you to give them the tools to tell their own stories, as opposed to the traditional method of Western filmmaking, which comes in and tells their story for them?

AW: Just because there's such an absence of their perspective in media, and particularly young women from these types of communities. You know, Precious was such a great film because people were just stunned by this subculture that she came out of. And that type of woman and that type of story has maybe been told already, but not to the extent of how authentic that film really felt.

So it's authenticity, really, and contextualizing the story that is important. And I want to talk about the news in a little bit and how this whole explosion of citizen journalism has encouraged people to report on their immediate environment and then send it into Fox TV or whatever. And so we are really riding on that bandwagon of citizen journalism as well, but I want to ask the questions regarding countries where to be a participating citizen is difficult — like, say, to be a Muslim girl in Gaza. A really good example was when the Iranian elections took place and there was this girl who was killed, and her image was taken on a cell phone and it went all around the world — this bloody, beautiful girl became the icon of the new Iran, you know?

But there's a fine line between using this technology to democratize your personal space or to endanger you. So, we've actually had to talk about that, and there's this whole new research going on around girl-oriented social websites. Like, Global Girl Media has to make sure that we don't expose certain girls in certain areas, where, you know, people have a membership website and you login and say that you want to be a member and then there's a comment like, "You look fat in that outfit," or whatever. So, there have to be some controls. You give them a camera, they do their story, you help them and train them, you take their story out into the world, but it can get misconstrued. And it can also put them at risk if they're coming from communities that are very fundamentalist. Like I said, if we had enough time I could tell you about the girl telling her rape story through the film and what I learned about it. You can't just take this camera into a community and expect everyone to just open up and tell their story. You have to be very, very sensitive to the impact of this new technology and how it is shaping and changing things, or even putting a young girl at risk.

BS: Can you give a general explanation of how Global Girl Media works on a practical level? What is the process?

AW: We're non-profit. We raise our money through private donations and through foundations.

We're very excited to be funded by the [Nike Foundation](#). What we do is identify a community that we'd like to work in — in this case, our first project will be in South Africa during the World Cup in Soweto. The age range is 14-20, high school girls. In many cases girls are in high school up to 20 or 21 in some of these communities. We do an intensive, rigorous ten day broadcast and print journalist training, and we've identified an organization to work with us on that who has been doing it for a number of years. And then, after that, we set them loose into their communities, and we specifically choose an event. We train prior to the event so that they can go out and cover the event. So, the World Cup is one event; we're looking to do something possibly in Morocco around the Sacred Music Festival; we might do something on the Common Wealth Games; obviously the Olympics in Brazil; we're looking at a world environmental forum; or micro financing — one of my biggest things is get the girls to be like Bloomberg reporters and let them go out and report on the financial crisis from a fourteen-year-old perspective. I heard something on NPR about a girl's view of the impact of watching her father lose his job and watching the family have to move, and just the minutia of how this girl would observe on the micro level a macro issue, from a fourteen-year-old girl's perspective, was unbelievable.

And this is what excites me. And when you talk about storytelling, the other thing I've learned from kids and their interaction with new digital technology is that some people might say they have a short attention span, or ADD or ADHD or whatever, but I think they have this unbelievable ability to absorb multiple story lines, and then synthesize the information, and then take it into the next story. So, to give you a very concrete example, I'll use my son. He loves to watch fixed-gear bicycle videos on YouTube, and when you watch them you notice that they're getting quite sophisticated on the narrative level. You'll jump right into the middle of a narrative, so you don't have any back-story about this kid and why he's on a bike or where he is or where he's going next — you just see what he's doing in that moment. And there's usually a little story element to it. He's not just doing a trick, so there's usually a joke or a trick or he falls or there's some kind of reaction. Then my son pops out of that video, and he goes on to the next video, so he's taking a little of bit of what he just experienced in that story and he's synthesizing it with the next story. And I've thought about that, and we've all talked about non-linear storytelling, you know? But this is almost like post-linear, or something like that. I'm not sure what to call it, but it's taking

little bits of stories and piecing them together in your mind. For him it's a great experience and maybe at the same time he's got another window open and he's looking at that particular handlebar from the video that he wants to buy — and then he comes and asks me for the money to buy it. But it's just fascinating to me because his brain is in all these different places synthesizing all this different information. Of course, he doesn't like to read a book because he can't sit through to the end and wait for the payoff. Can he still sit through a two-hour movie? I don't know anymore. But I just want to caution everyone that's lamenting the fact that our kids all have attention deficit disorder or whatever, and that it's all the cause of the Internet. I'm just still at the point of fascination with it and hoping that I can, with Global Girl Media, really look at where we're headed. In my case and my background, that I can take these tools and use them to make the world a better place for these kids to live.

BS: The videos on your website really struck me because I think we're trained in the West to see the Internet as this kind of democracy of ideas and a world-wide free flow of expression, but you really point out how much the Internet is still a socio-economic hierarchy.

AW: Well, if you think about access to the web and broadband and computers, all of that is really just access to opportunity. So what used to be access to traditional education and higher education, poorer communities and countries just didn't have that. So really the Internet and new technologies are part of that same metaphor. It's opportunity and getting out into the world.

But because there's been this almost lightning speed evolution from, you know, no landline to a cell phone, and now African young people are texting faster than any kid I've ever seen in the states, I do think that from the perspective of the corporations it's for sure an opportunity for all of those who don't have access to have access. And it is happening at a faster pace than you might think. For instance, there is this broadband cable that has just come across the Indian Ocean and has arrived in Kenya, and that's like a really big deal. I think they just had a really big conference about it. And during the World Cup, South Africa's broadband access will obviously be a lot faster. So, while I don't know what the percentages are, I'm sure it's like hunger, you know? What percentage of the world is hungry? Should we say 70-80%? That's probably similar to what percentage of the world can't get on the Internet, but I do think it's really interesting to look at how fast these things are changing, and why. You know, what is the motivation? What is the economic incentive behind getting all these cell phones into the hands of all these kids? I'm not an economist, I'm a filmmaker, but I do think it's kind of fascinating that the cell phone industry is probably making its most money in Africa.

BS: Turning to the media, do you feel that new media and citizen journalism is filling the void left by the traditional media institutions?

AW: I don't know because the only void I'm seeing is a lot of people out of work. People consume more media now than ever, and people now just have so much more choice. You have the television, you have the Internet, you have the cell phone, you have texting, you have going to the cinema. So, gosh, we used to think that the move to cable was going to kill cinema. Nothing's really died; it's all just shifting. Everything's shifting, which is why I always feel kind of nauseous. It hasn't really settled yet and we don't really know where we're heading. And a lot of independent filmmakers, media makers, are finding it really hard to make a living. And they're scrambling, right? And I have to say, I think that making a documentary film, spending two to four years raising money for it, another one to two years making it, and then another year before it hopefully finds a home with a broadcaster or in a traditional theater setting — that model is dead. I even think traditional film festivals are on their way out. Of course the online film festivals are on their way up.

So, I'm looking at: what are the trends? What are kids watching? That's really the only way I'm looking at it. And it's short form, and it's niche, and it's also having a sense of controlling it yourself. So that you know enough about this particular channel, and you feel comfortable with it and have a relationship with it. A personal relationship with it. That's why gaming is so big, because people getting really into the rules of the game, and they get addicted to the game, and they have a personal relationship with it where they're drawn to it and want to go onto that site and play that game. So the challenge for Global Girl is to get girls to be drawn to Global Girl Media and to want to wake up in morning and want to check what's going on in the world from a girl's perspective, before she combs her hair and puts on her little outfit for the day and worries about her boyfriend. That the Global Girl site is something that you have a personal relationship with; something where you're really excited about finding out what that girl you talked to last night is going through. Like, say, you knew there was an election going on in that country. I have to say that, because my background is in politics and my reputation at UCLA was kind of as a rabble-rouser, I think that Global Girl will be focused on current affairs, current issues, political issues, and specifically making a girl's life better.

So, she's going to be talking about rape, she's going to be talking about violence against women, women's rights, gender/justice issues, reproductive rights, and I'm hoping that enough teenage girls in this country will see that. I mean, one of the really exciting things that we're doing — and we just launched this — is that we have a Los Angeles program that will be working in conjunction with the South African girls in Soweto. So girls in an inner-city high school, either Roosevelt or Bell High School in LA, will also be trained and kind of connected to the girls in South Africa. And they'll be doing their own stories about the World Cup from here in LA. So, it's kind of exciting; it's really global.

And it's interesting because I've also been looking at statistics of how they say that women are the ones predominantly on Facebook — they're more social, gossipy, they put the kids to bed and then it's their time to, like, have a glass of wine and find out what all their friends are doing. So it's interesting that the social network websites have a lot more women, and it's the gaming websites and funny websites, like Funny or Die, that are all more guy focused. And one of our partners is ESPN and they're launching a women's channel. And they decided to launch it focusing on teenage girls first, because ESPNW is going to launch in the fall after the World Cup. And it's because I think people are looking more and more at what I call the "Non-analog Generation," or the "Post Analog." They are the digital

generation, but they're also interpreting analog through their parents; like my son is listening to my LPs because he likes the sound and he plays the bass. So, even though they're way ahead of us in terms of how fast they text, they're still going back and they're absorbing all of the technology. So, they're analog and digital. I guess I'm the "Analog Generation," even though I'm trying to learn all this stuff.

BS: Do you see media and documentaries as a form of social memory?

AW: You're sounding like Teshome Gabriel. Well, his idea was that cinema is a repository of memory, and cinema as a ritual. It's interesting to think of that and to think of the Third Cinema of Ideas that he's come up with, and then to kind of transplant them into media and social media as a ritual. Certainly, it's a meme; things like Facebook and YouTube are social memes. But do I see it as a form of cultural memory?

I mean, it's kind of two-fold, right? It's definitely destroying memory in a way. Because you're constantly on to the next moment, on to the next moment, on to the next thing. And you've totally forgotten what web page is even open, you know? You have to go back and see what program is still open before you can quit them — you know what I'm saying? It's sort of so immediate. But then ... I'd have to think about this. What I find so interesting is that when I'm working with kids outside of American culture and I'm training them and they're, like, watching a film — especially experimental cinema or like the other day when one of board members was teaching Stan Brakhage to a bunch of tribals in India — and you know, kids here could never stomach that. God, Maya Deren? No way. But you show it to somebody that doesn't have the background of MTV, ESPN, and kind of watching television all the time and the Internet all the time, and you show them something like that, they immediately kind of respond to it differently.

I just went to Morocco and showed a film of mine that was all about memory and the loss of language, indigenous language — it's a really interesting film — I remember the responses were that the images spoke much more to them than the actual interviews with the people who were talking about losing their language. So one person picked up on one image from the film of a house that was falling down and he said, "That image is like the entire tribe, and the add-on to the house is what the tribe tried to do to survive, and even that's crumbling." And I thought, "Wow, I'd never even thought of that." You know, they say cinema is a universal language, but it's completely interpreted differently depending on where you are.

So, is new media going to be interpreted differently? Are people going to be using these tools differently? And I think that would be a really fascinating study or film to look at. Can you extrapolate from Facebook and the way it's used in Western culture and then...? I mean, certainly my Kenyan friends use Facebook and Twitter, even the kids in the slums, and I get really funny stuff from them, but they're using a shortened version of the language there; they mix in a little Swahili. But they also use it to really support each other; use it as a support system.

There was a really great article recently in [The New York Times](#) about how the Internet is creating a loss of social capital, but I would say from what I've seen — specifically the kids in the slums using the Internet in cyber cafes — they're using it to build up social capital. And since they don't actually have any "capital" capital — they don't have any money, sometimes they're going hungry — sometimes they'd rather spend a couple of shillings to go to the Internet café and reach out to someone in New York than to eat. I'm serious. That girl used to email me and it cost her money to email me and she'd rather do that than... eat. So, for them it's sort of survival, right? That email is survival. It's really interesting.

BS: Are you optimistic about the breakdown of traditional media outlets, and these kinds of monoliths of old media that controlled the flow of information everywhere? Because now there's so many options.

AW: Yeah, but with the FCC ruling with Comcast recently pointed out how the monoliths are finding their way in. With this recent ruling—and I don't know enough about it and I was trying to bone up on it for this interview — but, apparently, they're going to be able to block certain websites and make their connections that you pay for streaming fast. So a non-profit like Global Girl Media, which can't afford to upload at a certain pace, is going to take so long to download that people will just get frustrated with it and they won't read this great report from this girl in Soweto. They'd rather get the report from Fox television. So I'm really concerned with the way the old, traditional media hierarchies, driven by corporations and conglomerates, will sneak their way onto the Internet. And because they have the capital, their stuff will just be easier to download. And all of us bloggers out there be damned, you know, unless you can pay what they can pay — and you can't compete with Comcast. So, who knows? But I think that there needs to be some activism around that and some awareness around it.

BS: Do you think that citizen journalism is affecting global awareness? Do you think it's reaching people?

AW: Well, I always use the example of the Obama campaign, and I think something like 75% of Internet users went online to participate in the political process, which was huge. I mean, what was our percentage of people voting in the previous election? And I think that 75% of Internet users means that about 55-60% of adults were using the Internet to participate in the political process. I don't have statistics from other countries, but are we having social dialogue? Are we organizing using the Internet as an organizing tool? Yeah, absolutely.

I mean, that's what is so exciting about it. But I think the danger, and we discussed this danger, is that it will become just another form of corporate space, especially concerning that access and speed of downloading and uploading. Obviously uploading is where they're going to try to make their money because they want you to download so that you'll look at all their advertisers. The advertising machine is migrating from traditional print and going to the Internet, so we'll be able to download no problem, but as citizen journalist or people

with their blogs or people wanting to get their voice up, we're going to probably start seeing a lot more financial control.



About Amie Williams:

Amie Williams founded her own production company, Bal Maiden Films, in 1992, graduating from UCLA's MFA program in Film Production at the dawn of the "digital revolution." Taking advantage of these new technologies, her award-winning work has focused on giving voice to the margins, exploring new ways of telling stories, and developing projects across many cultures. From labor unions to African women's micro-finance collectives, AIDS orphans to environmental truckers, Bal Maiden Films is interested in driving creative ideologies shaped for the unique challenges facing a world in constant flux. Never content to stay put when there is a rally, protest, election, or uprising to follow, Amie has been excavating stories from Siberia to Soweto, Tokyo to Nairobi, crossing borders, building bridges and pushing boundaries, as well as her art to activate dialogue and debate.

Her credits include [No Sweat](#) (2006) about bad-boy clothing manufacturer American Apparel, which premiered at the AFI Film Festival and was broadcast on KQED and Current TV; [Fallon, NV: Deadly Oasis](#) (2004) about a childhood leukemia cluster, an ITVS-funded film broadcast on PBS; [Stripped and Teased: Tales from Las Vegas Women](#) (2001), broadcast on Canadian television; [One Day Longer: The Story of the Frontier Strike](#) (2002); and [Uncommon Ground: From Los Angeles to South Africa](#) (1994). These films have won numerous awards, including the International Documentary Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Media Grant, the SONY/Streisand Award for emerging female filmmakers, Pioneer Fund, Paul Robeson Fund, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Prior to her film career, she lived and worked in Kenya as a teacher and health-communications consultant for the Ford Foundation and CARE, International and recently founded the non-profit organization, [Global Girl Media](#), which nurtures the voice and self expression of young girls in under-served communities and developing nations with a goal to inspire and empower a future generation of female "citizen broadcast journalists" around the world to speak out about the issues that affect them most.



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