



UCLA'S JOURNAL OF CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES

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By, For, and About: The “Real” Problem in the Feminist Film Movement

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... the origin and development of feminist film work are largely unexamined. (B. Ruby Rich)¹

In 1972 when B. Ruby Rich saw Carolee Schneemann's film, *Fuses* (1967), for the first time at the Chicago Art Institute, she sensed a palpable tension in the auditorium packed with over 400 people. Rich describes the tumult that broke out in the auditorium when one audience member criticized Schneemann for allowing a man (and not a “sister”) to project her film. The 1972 Chicago audience was comprised of women deeply invested in the women's movement. In Rich's description, women's liberation had already exploded in Chicago, evident in the numerous consciousness-raising groups throughout the area; this was “radical feminism, early seventies style,” she writes.² Women's consciousness-raising groups were reading Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, Anne Koedt's “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” and the *Voices from Women's Liberation*, a movement newsletter that included essays, letters, and position papers and was based out of Chicago. According to Rich, Schneemann was assailed in the post-screening discussion by the audience for romanticizing sexual practices that some women argued secured women's subservience to men. The stakes of the discussion were high; acclaimed today as a film far ahead of its time, *Fuses*, in Chicago in 1972, created a heated atmosphere for debate about Schneemann's representation of female (hetero)sexuality.³ In her autobiographical collection of essays on the Feminist Film Movement, *Chick Flicks*, published in 1998, Rich muses with obvious nostalgia, “Is there any way to convey the sense of risk and courage that accompanied those early screenings, back when scarcely any films by women had been seen, or apprehended as such?”⁴



Fuses (Carolee Schneemann, 1965)

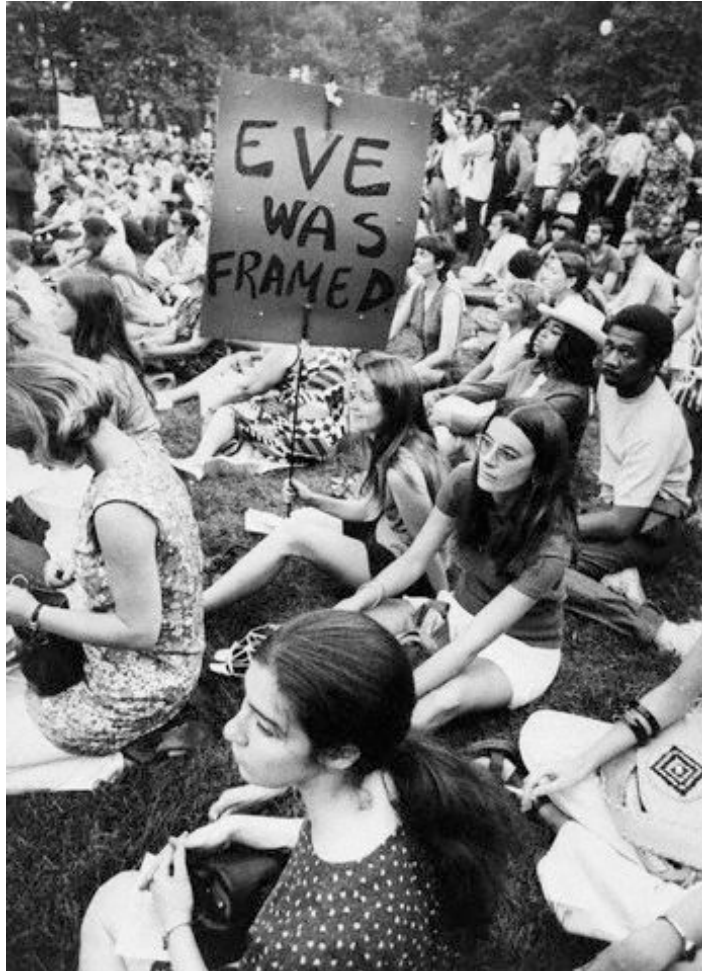


Eye Body #29 (Carolee Schneemann, 1963)

As my title suggests, the “real” problem in the Feminist Film Movement is the answer to Rich’s rhetorical question. Clearly a temporal problem, our inability to access the “senses” of the Feminist Film Movement is also more than just a fact of historical unbelonging. Today, of the hundreds of films that traveled on an international women’s film festival circuit, as well as throughout college campuses and community centers, a mere handful are available in digital format. Most of the distribution networks that carried feminist films folded decades ago. Libraries and museums are the present-day keepers of 16mm prints that no longer circulate in the public sphere. Exacerbating the problem of a real lack of material access is an intellectual history that has obscured the influence and significance of feminist documentary production in the early 1970s. Motivated by realism in both theory and practice, feminist documentaries emerged out of the political, social, and cultural revolution once referred to as the Women’s Liberation Movement. The “real” in the Feminist Film Movement thus marks both an aesthetic experiment and a political commitment. However, by the late 1970s, the “real” contorted into an aesthetic and conceptual “problem” throughout the humanities. By the 1990s in documentary film theory, for example, the “real” almost always appears in scare quotes – an elusive beyond the text that we struggle to acknowledge.⁵ The “real” problem in the Feminist Film Movement, then, emerges at the nexus of politics, aesthetics, and the intellectual histories of both feminist film theory and feminist theory, where a disquieting relationship to their origins in the Women’s Liberation Movement creates a hesitation to embrace cultural and theoretical feminist production from the early seventies.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to overstate the cultural and political impact of the collusion between the activism of the Women’s Liberation Movement and the practices of filmmaking and indeed, art making in general. Lisa Gail

Collins describes both the black arts and feminist art movements as “cultural corollaries, or wings” of their respective liberation movements.⁶ Both movements envisioned new art forms that would emerge from new forms of consciousness and new ways of seeing instigated by the efforts of activists and artists. Lucy Lippard, whom Collins identifies as the feminist art movement’s chief critic and advocate, believed deeply in the vital link between art and collective politics, for both, in Lippard’s words, promised “the power to envision, move, and change.”⁷



August 26, 1970, New York City, Women’s Liberation Demonstration, Photo Bettmann, Corbis

Women documentary filmmakers, in particular, conceived of cinema as an instrument for social change. Filmmakers collaborated to create new distribution networks through which non-fiction films were mobilized in tandem with women’s political activism, and particularly consciousness-raising, as a way to incite reflection as a precursor to action. In their inaugural catalog/manifesto, *New Day Films*, one of the earliest distribution cooperatives for feminist films, describes what motivated feminist documentary filmmakers: “As independent feminist filmmakers, we could see that the women traditionally found on the screen were products of the experiences, imagination, and fantasies of male filmmakers. We were making films based on women’s needs and experiences.”⁸ In her interviews with women filmmakers of the Feminist Film Movement, Jan Rosenberg determines that the majority of young feminist filmmakers in the early seventies, such as Julia Reichert, Judy Smith, and Geri Ashur “began making films in order to communicate their feminist politics.”⁹ She quotes Julia Reichert: “We made [*Growing Up Female*] to bring about some of the new awareness about women’s oppression to a broad audience. We specifically wanted to reach beyond the women’s movement to housewives, poor women, black women, high school kids, etc.”¹⁰ Films like *Growing Up Female*,¹¹ *Anything You Want to Be*,¹² *Three Lives*,¹³ *Janie’s Janie*,¹⁴ and *The Woman’s Film*¹⁵ are some of the dozens of films that reveal this critical trend in feminist filmmaking in the early seventies.¹⁶

Perhaps a diffused and unwieldy concept today, in the U.S., U.K., and Canada in the early seventies, the notion of "women's cinema"¹⁷ was a breakthrough idea. For the first time, "women's films" denoted films made by and for, not just starring or about, women and emerging out of the political fever and radical demands of the women's movement. Exhibition of these films began in earnest on a new "women's films" festival circuit where it became readily apparent that the relationship between women and cinema was about to shift for good. The decade of the seventies witnessed a veritable explosion of what I would like to embrace as "feminist cinema" and the production of an unprecedented number of films by, for, and about women. One scholar of the Feminist Film Movement claims that before 1969 fewer than 20 "feminist films" existed whereas by mid-decade, in 1976, over 250 films by women circulated, and the number of feminist filmmakers had risen from less than 40 in 1972 to more than 200 in 1976.¹⁸ Quite unlike the increasingly solitary viewing practices that are taking hold in the twenty-first century, in the seventies, female audiences filled auditoriums, classrooms, and town halls as films made by women began to circulate as a result of newly forged distribution collectives such as New Day Films, Iris Films, and the Women's Film Coop.¹⁹

In addition to developing new filmmaking practices, distribution networks, and exhibition venues, feminists in the seventies, both inside and outside of the traditional academy, wrote prolifically on the subject of "women and film."²⁰ Programs at women's film festivals were among the first published writings on the topic, and were circulated among festival participants. As they developed written film programs and literature about both new and "rescued" women's films, women who organized the first festivals in New York (First International Festival of Women's Films, 1972), Edinburgh (The Women's Event at Edinburgh Film Festival, 1972), Philadelphia (Philadelphia's First International Festival of Films by Women, 1972), Toronto (Toronto Women and Film Festival, 1973), and Chicago (Chicago Films by Women Festival, 1974) quickly became aware of a scandalous lack of investigation into the subject of "women and film." Canadian Kay Armatage wrote in 1972 about the difficulties involved in organizing women's film festivals. Despite the overwhelming presence of women in "the movies" and even, occasionally, behind the camera, she explains, "scholarship on women's cinema is almost nonexistent."²¹ Journalists from serial publications such as off our backs, Ms. Magazine, and the Village Voice in the U.S. and Spare Rib in the U.K. covered the events, atmosphere, and discussions at the festivals for a feminist readership.²²

The canonical texts and anthologies of contemporary feminist film theory tend to group these events, films, and theoretical practices of the seventies as the period of "women's cinema." In "The Last Days of Women's Cinema," published in 2006, feminist film scholar Patricia White links the term "women's cinema" to published tracts, such as Claire Johnston's influential Notes on Women's Cinema, as well as to the festival circuit of the seventies, throughout which titles like "Festival of Women's Films" and "Festival of Woman and Film" were widespread. However, continuing to hold on to the nomenclature relevant to the seventies (albeit true to the heyday of feminist film and theory) may miss the present mark and suppress the political fever that inspired and sustained the filmmaking, viewing, and writing practices that defined that critical time.

In academic scholarship, two notable exceptions claim the name, "The Feminist Film Movement": Jan Rosenberg's Women's Reflections: The Feminist Film Movement and B. Ruby Rich's Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement.²³ To argue for the F-word is lay claim to a "movement" of practices and to emphasize the radical and cohesive politics of that period. It is also to engage a discursive tradition of feminist theory that critically reflects on the constitution of "the seventies" as a decade with particular contours and entrenched myths. And finally, it is to work against the dominant heading, "women's cinema" – a phrase that has been overly mobilized and rendered diffuse by feminists, film scholars, and Hollywood throughout the past several decades.

Under the heading of the Feminist Film Movement, both Rosenberg and Rich include a diverse list of film titles, filmmakers, and influential texts. However, canonical publications in feminist film theory tend to focus on a small body of experimental, structuralist and avant-garde films, particularly Riddles of the Sphinx made by leading film theorists Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen,²⁴ Thriller,²⁵ the U.S. films of Yvonne Rainer, and the French-made films by Chantal Ackerman and Nelly Kaplan. The bias in feminist film theory towards avant-garde and formally experimental films as the most successful instantiations of "alternative," "counter," or "feminist" films emerged in the seventies and continues to hold intractable influence. As a result, the illusion of a consensus about what constituted "feminist films" in the seventies has developed in the academic discipline to the lamentable detriment of the rich variety of filmmaking practices that actually made their way to diverse audiences at that time.



Thriller (Sally Potter, 1979)



Kristina Talking Pictures (Yvonne Rainer, 1976)

The surprising fact is that the majority of films made by, for, and about women in the seventies were documentaries. The films centered on women and the issues they faced at home, at work, in the movement, in bed, and in doctor's offices—their quotidian experiences, in other words, and their struggles in a capitalist patriarchy (to use the language of the time). If this sounds quaint today, in the seventies this kind of filmmaking was innovative and radicalizing. The women featured in feminist documentaries were not expected to be glamorous, sexy, conniving, or even talented like the women in mainstream cinema. They were not femme fatales, smothering mothers, or bathing beauties. They were, in other words, women who had almost never appeared on screen before, telling stories that did not constitute escapist entertainment. On the contrary, the women portrayed in feminist documentaries told stories that were supposed to be kept secret: tales of abduction,

rape, and abortion, stories about domestic violence and abuse, analyses of patriarchy and global capital, considerations of forced reproduction and the stereotypes that restrict alternative visions of womanhood. Women also related stories about girlhood and motherhood, grandmothers and children, marriages and divorce. Documentaries made by women in the seventies captured the escalating sense of the gender role revolution at stake in women's liberation. And yet, today, the majority of these films are out of public circulation. Very few scholars of my generation are familiar with the titles or names of the filmmakers of feminist documentaries of the seventies and few publications have been devoted to investigating the films or their legacy in recent decades. How did these films become archival relics rather than living examples of feminist documentary practice?

Feminist film scholar Alexandra Juhasz offers one answer in her article, "They Said We Were Trying to Show Reality—All I Want to Show Is My Video: The Politics of the Realist Feminist Documentary."²⁶ She argues that what we know as feminist film theory today is a field of thought that coalesced in the mid-seventies around a rejection of realist aesthetics, such as those supposedly exemplified in women's documentaries. Juhasz contends that the insipid relationship between academic scholarship and alternative film distribution explains how distribution networks, in the wake of their dismissal by feminist academics, rejected women's documentaries. Juhasz makes an important intervention into understanding how feminist film theory generated a canon of "correct" feminist films, which were of course aligned with a body of "correct" feminist film theory – and even more problematically, how publishing and citation practices in the field created an illusory consensus about the failures of realism. This perspective continues to dominate in what we might phrase, riffing on feminist theorist Clare Hemmings, as the stories feminist film theory tells itself about itself.²⁷

"Realism," in other words, became a "style" of filmmaking in feminist film theory in the seventies and eighties—a problematic aesthetic to be countered both in theory and in practice. Authorized with sweeping powers of signification, "realism" encompassed both fictional and non-fictional texts in seventies film theory and became a strange sort of beast: code at once for transparency, verisimilitude, and illusionism, linked to ideological complicity and political conservatism. Annette Kuhn, thus, continuing this tradition into the 1980s in Women's Pictures explains that "the basic shared characteristic of all forms of cinematic realism is their tendency to transparency in representation ... that is, all realist forms have the 'appearance of reality' in common."²⁸ If dominant fictional cinema accomplishes the appearance of reality through conventions such as continuity editing, the close-up, shot-reverse-shots, and point-of-view shots, documentary cinema's realism is written into the text through the language of "naturalness" according to Kuhn: the use of hand-held cameras, focus shifts, and free-style editing. Following Kuhn then, documentary realism—as it strives towards transparency—mimics the ideological complicity of fictional realism: processes of signification fall into the background of film-texts and foreground their relation to the real world. As a result, spectators rest assured that being in the world makes sense, that representations can convey natural meanings, and that meaning-making is but a process of receiving canned messages from the text.

Thus, in the mid-seventies, emerging feminist film theorists such as Claire Johnston, Laura Mulvey, and E. Ann Kaplan were quick to dismiss women's documentaries as highly naïve "verité" films. Verité tellingly implied a collusion with the notorious Direct Cinema movement of the 60s and a belief espoused primarily by filmmakers such as Robert Drew, Richard Leacock and DA Pennebaker that documentary had finally achieved its goal of objective, immediate, and transparent cinema. Indeed, in professional and non-professional literature about women's documentaries, beginning in the seventies, "verité" was used in shorthand to denote the particular kind of aesthetic that dominated women's filmmaking, which emphasized the accessible, "real lives" of the filmed subjects, characterized for example, by women who spoke directly to the camera, or amongst and to other women beyond the frame. Indeed, much of women's filmmaking in the early seventies was driven by a desire to project images and representations that spoke to "real" women's lives and experiences. Radical feminists in the early seventies fomented activism through the premise that shared personal experience would reveal to women the need to unite and revolt against systematic oppressions. Films, thus, collectively participate in the radical feminist goal of linking the personal to the political. Yet, the formal and narrative techniques evident in feminist documentaries vary substantially.

In Growing Up Female, directors Julia Reichert and James Klein interview young girls, adolescents, and adult women as well as teachers, psychologists, and mothers in an effort to expose how culture and ideology indoctrinate girls in America into pursuing an oppressive and subservient model of femininity. The film is formally comprised of conventionally-staged talking head interviews as well as observational scenes that lack direct intervention by the filmmakers, classic "verité" conventions. Throughout, the auditory track consists of popular

songs, conversations between filmmakers and filmed subjects, and a scripted, didactic voiceover by the filmmaker/experts. The final woman interviewed is a young, white suburban mother bemoaning the "brainwashing" she felt she was subject to as she matured: getting married and having children, she explains, was all she was ever supposed to want. Sitting in her kitchen, reading parenting magazines after her domestic chores are complete and her children snug in bed, she sounds full of regret: "If I had it to do over again would I do it again? Oh god. I doubt it." Stitching together six portraits of girls and women at different stages of "womanhood," the film argues that American womanhood is a sham. The only solution for "the American woman" is solidarity with other women. Urging women to unite, the film clearly operates in tandem with women's liberation activism and the program of feminist consciousness-raising, both thematically and aesthetically, as it tries to convince women that they need each other and a movement to change the course of their collective future.

If Growing Up Female can be read as a conventional verité feminist documentary, Liane Brandon's Anything You Want To Be maps an alternative aesthetic. Rather than offer true stories of American womanhood, Brandon's short film features a single female character meant to stand in metonymically for all women. Anything You Want To Be treats the subject of role indoctrination with humor, irony, and simple trick photography. A young woman reads a book on politics that becomes a cookbook in her hands; from a scientist experimenting in a lab, she morphs into a harried young mother preparing bottles in the kitchen; from a high school graduate she transforms first into a bride wearing a veil then into a wife donning an apron. The message of the film echoes the call to arms in Growing Up Female, but the filmic techniques differ considerably. As the film closes, the voice-over goes haywire repeating, "You can be anything you want to be..." and the subject of the film goes mad; her piercing scream penetrates the final frames with a warning: American women are on the verge.



Anything You Want to Be
(1971)



Growing Up Female (1971)

In The Woman's Film, a project conceived and executed by California Newsreel filmmakers Judy Smith, Louise Alaimo, and Ellen Sorin, no formal voice-over explicates the images of racially and economically diverse women as they clean house, exchange views in consciousness-raising groups, demonstrate at rallies, plan the revolution, and reflect on filmmakers' questions in their living rooms. The auditory track is sometimes synchronized with the image, as in the scenes of women in consciousness-raising groups, when we hear what we see on screen. But often, the film pairs women's reflections about work, love, and politics with relevant, but not necessarily synchronous images. The film features dozens of women. Some of these women flesh out their individual lives with gripping anecdotes about life "before the click," and some of the women are never identified by name, place, or history. In the tradition of early newsreel films, The Woman's Film emphasizes collective experience and downplays cinematic artistry. Camera movement is often shaky and rushed and the film bounces between subjects and themes hastily. Nonetheless, The Woman's Film radically focuses on women of color and working class women at a time when many criticized the women's liberation movement for neglecting their concerns and silencing their voices. Writing of the women in the film, one reviewer remarks, "They do not, in the wildest stretch of the imagination, fit anyone's image of militant supporters of Women's Liberation."²⁹ The film uses interviews, archival footage, staged segments, and observational techniques to weave together a radical take on women's liberation.



The Woman's Film (1971)

Constructed around personal narratives, the film exemplifies the radical trajectory of consciousness-raising, which takes these women from personal lament, through shared experience, to political action. In the opening sections of the film, black and white welfare mothers, Chicana activists, white middle-class professional women, and working class women spell out the details of their oppression at the hands of their fathers, then their husbands. In the opening scene a white woman shares her girlhood fantasy of married life, "I used to think when I got married I was going to buy me a whole bunch of Pepsi Colas and candy bars and just lie on my couch." In similar medium shots, the next scenes feature a black woman and a working class white woman echoing shattered visions of married life: "My marriage was going to be completely different"; "My husband thought I was just a foot rug under his feet. For 16 years I was like a slave to him." As the film proceeds, the medium shots of individual women zoom out to long shots that reveal rooms full of women supporting each other with corroborating tales of subjugation. In these scenes, women arrive at the realization that their oppression is systematic rather than individual; "the only way things are going to be livable is for a complete change over to be made," explains one young black mother; "change has to come through changing minds," echoes another. In the film's final shots, the women featured throughout the film appear at rallies and demonstrations, galvanizing other women to resist and revolt. As the accompanying sound track makes clear with the repeating refrain, "I woke up this morning..." by sharing their experiences and uniting their energies, women have finally woken up. The filmmakers hoped that women viewers would "identify with the experiences and feelings of the women in the film" and embrace the idea that "women are strong when united, and when they work together and support each other, they have the power to bring about meaningful and necessary changes in this country."³⁰ The film both demonstrates and executes the politics and aesthetics of consciousness-raising; by following a progressive trajectory from the personal to the political among a group of diverse women, The Woman's Film stresses the power of identification, empathy and the action these have the potential to ignite.

Like The Woman's Film, Joyce at 34³¹ also insists on the power of "true" stories about "real women" to convey the multiple oppressions women face, in order to convince women of the need for women's liberation. Yet, as with most feminist documentaries, the cinematic techniques the film deploys vary far more than the "verité" designation attached to them implies.



Joyce's primary struggle in the documentary revolves around the problem of trying to pursue her filmmaking career and meet the demands of motherhood and spousehood. These concerns, limited to the ruminations of the (here: white, heterosexual) middle-class, nonetheless resonate with reflexive obsession about the work of cinema, both within and beyond the text. Indeed, many women's documentaries from the seventies exhibited self-reflexive film techniques, which work to expose rather than conceal filmic modes of production such as shot set-up, lighting, and editing.

Joyce at 34 in particular comprises multiple self-reflexive references to Joyce as a woman filmmaker. Numerous scenes show filmmaking technologies such as cameras, microphones, and film stock. In one scene, Joyce, in a voiceover matched with images of editing equipment and film stock, describes how frustrating it is to try to work at home with her daughter present. Sound and image support each other in these scenes and the voiceover suggests a kind of access to the unconscious that deserves (and has received) critical attention.³² However, the voiceover also disrupts the synchronicity of sound and image, calling attention to temporal disjuncture between the pro-filmic event (mom editing here and now) and the final film product (mom talking about editing then and there). Over the series of shots that comprise the opening sequence, Joyce's voiceover describes how throughout her pregnancy, she has felt like her life is a movie; she has the sense that some day the director will call her and tell her it is time, the movie of her motherhood—indeed the film we see—is ready to be born. With constant references to the material conditions of its own production, Joyce at 34 lays bare the mechanisms of cinema. Of course, that the film is self-reflexive does not imply that it is not also dependent on maintaining a direct reference to the real. However, trapped by terms like "realist" and "verité," the actual workings and techniques of the text are obscured and indeed, misunderstood.



Filmmaker Joyce Chopra

Growing Up Female, Anything You Want to Be, The Woman's Film, and Joyce at 34 all reflect on the collective stories of women's lives, drawing attention to the way seemingly individual struggles actually speak to systematic problems, which require women to unite in a political movement of liberation. Though the films clearly insist on the power of "true" stories about "real women" to convey the multiple oppressions women face in a capitalist patriarchy, the cinematic techniques they deploy vary. If women filmmakers, several of whom, incidentally, started as "sound girls" for the fathers of Direct Cinema, deployed some of the codes and conventions of so-called documentary verité, they clearly set out to make their own kind of films, which could speak to, and account for, women's gendered experience in a world run by men and, most urgently, that would serve to convince women that they needed a women's liberation movement.³³

Yet, for rising feminist film theorists in the academy, urgently seeking a new language of feminist cinema, the use of the "verité style" signaled a regrettable naiveté among women filmmakers. E. Ann Kaplan refers to the "verité documentary" as the exemplary aesthetic of realism.³⁴ In her overview of the debates about realism in seventies feminist film theory, Kaplan describes this kind of film form as "one of the simplest and cheapest," suggesting that economics and lack of expertise drove filmmakers' choices to make realist documentaries.³⁵ How can we in contrast, assume that women filmmakers chose to make realist documentaries, not because they could not afford to, or did not know how to, make other kinds of films (although this may in part be true), but rather because something about the visual immediacy and impact of the so-called "verité style" converged with their visions of what women's films could and should achieve.

Writing in Jump Cut throughout the late seventies, Julia Lesage made precisely this point. Lesage was one of the few film scholars who championed feminist documentaries.³⁶ For Lesage, realism was a mode reflective of the films' political desires and mirrored the activist practices of women's consciousness-raising groups. Realism made feminist documentaries relevant, accessible, and political—and these were good things. But Lesage also insisted, as Kuhn will too in the 1980s, against the thrust of feminist critique, that feminist filmmakers did not simply import a conventional form of realism from Direct Cinema, but rather redefined the aesthetics of verité because of their particular relationships with their subjects, their activism in the women's movement, and the results they wished to effect with their films. For Lesage feminist filmmakers used the codes and conventions of realism to meet the demands of a new political subjectivity. That they would feature "real" women in ways that made them seem "natural" did not necessarily imply that they assumed audiences would transparently accept the "truth" of the image. Rather, for Lesage, feminist filmmakers hoped to forge a sense of collective identity that could galvanize women to act.

Although Rich, Christine Gledhill, and Lesage lauded the political and aesthetic efforts of women's documentaries against the wholesale critique of realism espoused by Johnson, Cook, Mulvey, Eileen McGarry and other feminist film theorists, women's documentaries hold a place in the narrative of origins of feminist film theory as a stage quickly surpassed, a springboard that landed the discipline in the higher ground of experimental cinema. In 1979, in "Feminism, Film, and the Avant Garde," Mulvey delineates a by-now familiar trajectory of feminist film criticism, which begins with theory and praxis directed at "The Attack on Sexism," and moves to "First Feminist Films," eventually landing at "The Search for Theory" with subheadings: "Ideology," "Semiotics," and

"Psychoanalysis." She describes the former as a "first phase of thought" that has "been surpassed" and the "search" as "directions for the future."³⁷

In her discussion of "the First Feminist Films," Mulvey attributes their intention and vigor to the activism of the women's movement and feminist consciousness-raising and agitation. Despite these strengths, she writes, "their weakness lies in limitations of the cinema verité tradition."³⁸ Echoing Johnston's critique of documentary, Mulvey writes,

While as documents they can have an immediate political use, their aesthetics are bound by a concept of film as a transparent medium—reproducing rather than questioning—a project which reduces the camera to a magical instrument. There lies behind this a further assumption, that the camera...can grasp essential truths and by registering typical shared experiences can create political unity through the process of identification.³⁹

For Mulvey, early feminist documentaries were, in other words, not exactly a dead end, but a limited way of beginning to explore the possibilities for feminist cinema in order that it fully exit the realm of dominant cinematic practices and leave behind the magnetic pull of identification. The way forward demanded a commitment to creating a new language of cinema informed by a new engagement with semiotics, psychoanalysis, and Althusserian Marxism.

The most prolific and most anthologized feminist film theorists, particularly Mulvey and Johnston, apprehended women's documentaries as verité films that problematically deployed and depended on the myth of realism to secure spectators' identification with the text. And yet, evident in the comprehensive dismissal of all films deemed "realist," a collapse in theoretical rigor occurred. The inattention to "realism" as a concept, an aesthetic, and a kind of politics made it possible for a host of different films that demonstrated varied cinematic techniques and conventions to be thrown together under the designation of verité and then discharged.

In her 1978 survey of the debates in feminist film theory, Gledhill enumerates the influences on feminist work on women and representation in the cinema: Barthes' notion of myth, Althusser's concept of ideology, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. The confluence of semiotics, a certain strain of Marxism, and psychoanalysis constructed the rich terrain of feminist film theory at the moment of its emergence. Without a doubt, feminist film theory and the debates that enriched and challenged the discipline in the eighties and nineties have provided the contemporary field of visual studies with its most incisive methodological and rhetorical tools. And yet, "feminist film theory" also designates a canon of theoretical texts and films, which coalesced and took form, as is the case with all canons, through a process of exclusion and differentiation.⁴⁰ As a result of the developing trends in the field, particularly the rejection of "realism," a vibrant and intriguing body of feminist documentary film work was left inadequately theorized and underexamined.

Diane Waldman and Janet Walker, in their 1999 anthology Feminism and Documentary,⁴¹ point out that feminist film theory initially focused heavily on documentary throughout what Kaplan calls "the realist debates"; women's documentary, after all, provided a potential alternative to mainstream, narrative film.⁴² However, Waldman and Walker note that the publication of Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure" helped direct theoretical attention to counter-strategies of the avant-garde and the dominant structures of narrative film. As a result, the authors suggest, an untimely end came to the productive engagement between feminist film theory and documentary studies. In her article on feminist documentaries, also from 1999, Juhasz argues that the rejection of realist documentary films formed the foundation for the school of thinking we have come to know as feminist film theory.⁴³ According to Juhasz, although not all feminist film theorists categorically rejected the aesthetic strategies of realist documentaries, the other side of the so-called "realist debate" has been less often cited and only rarely anthologized in collections of feminist film theory. Since US feminist film theorists, following the tradition of British cinefeminists,⁴⁴ championed the critique of realism with unmatched vigor and, as Waldman and Walker point out, turned their attention to narrative and avant-garde cinemas, the relationship between feminism and documentary has been left unattended. In the past decade, in tandem with the growing field of documentary theory, scholars have begun to challenge the hegemony of the critique of realism and redirect attention to the political desires of documentary.⁴⁵

At the outset, I suggested that Juhasz had one answer to the question of why feminist documentary films of the early seventies have become archival relics – that is, because of a particular politics of canon formation in

academic feminist film scholarship. There may be something more, however, which has to do with what Clare Hemmings has identified as the two approaches that feminist theory has developed when looking back at the seventies. Hemmings argues that feminist theory attends to its past in the framework of two equally limiting narratives: nostalgia or progress. The nostalgia narrative mourns the loss of urgency and activism on behalf of "real women" that characterized feminist theory of the seventies. In the progress narrative, a steady march away from the past assures a future free of exclusions, blind spots and essentialism, which allegedly plagued previous decades. Both stories, each with their own affective structures, contribute to what she calls a flattening out of past decades.

In what Hemmings identifies as the "progress narrative" of feminist theory, the "second wave" embarrassingly connotes a movement of white, middle-class women who erroneously and irresponsibly claimed to represent all women. Indeed, many of the documentaries of the Feminist Film Movement reflect the class biases and mainstream concerns of this white, middle-class "sisterhood": marriage, love, divorce, and careers. My contention is that feminist scholars have hesitated to return to these realist documentaries—and other cultural products, events, and theories of the seventies—out of an ethical resistance to restaging what has been narrated as the racial and economic discrimination and heteronormativity of the politics of the second wave. Writing off the seventies as a naïve decade allows contemporary theorists to strategically claim superior and advanced sophistication in the realm of present-day feminist theory. However, the race to dismiss seventies feminism as misguided also sets up a recession that is prey to foreclosing on a productive encounter with potential counter-narratives about previous decades.

Among the documentaries of the Feminist Film Movement, for example, there exist films that offer alternative imaginaries of the politics of the second wave. For example, *I am Somebody*⁴⁶ features the collective story of black hospital workers on strike in South Carolina for over 100 days. In *The Woman's Film*, a collective of filmmakers put women of color and poor women at the center of the women's movement. In *Janie's Janie*, the filmmaker unravels the story of a white, working-class woman who finds empowerment through welfare rights groups in her neighborhood. *The Politics of Intimacy* by Julie Gustafson⁴⁷ constructs a conversation about sex and sexuality between ten women whose experiences, desires, and backgrounds vary significantly. These early films, as well as many more, lend key insight into the politics of race, sex and class in the emergent women's movement, challenging the charge of the second wave as the decade of "essentialism." A sincere and comprehensive return to the documentaries of the seventies may create the possibility to open up new lines of thinking about narratives of origins throughout feminist and documentary theory.

Feminist documentaries have long been demoted to the archive, both figuratively in the discursive tradition of feminist film theory, but also literally in the basements and storage facilities of a few institutions. To reconsider realist feminist documentaries might mean to quite literally rescue them from oblivion. Finally, to reexamine these films is to allow them to continue to do vital political work: by asking new and probing questions of the established fields of film and feminist theory; by reasserting the voices and stories of feminist activists; by resisting the cultural processes and theoretical gridlocks that would have them forgotten.

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- Fuses. Dir. Carolee Schneemann. 16 mm. 22 minutes. 1965
- Growing up Female. Dir. Julia Reichert, James Klein. Prod Reichert Klein Productions. 16mm. 60 mins. Dist New Day Films, 1971.
- I Am Somebody. Dir. Madeline Anderson. Prod The American Foundation on Nonviolence, 1970. DVD. 30 mins. Dist First Run/Icarus, 1990.
- Janie's Janie. Dir. Geri Ashur, Peter Barton. 16mm. 24 mins. Dist Odeon, 1971.
- Joyce at 34. Dir. Joyce Chopra. Prod New Day Films, 1972. DVD. 28 mins. Dist New Day Films, 2005.
- Riddles of the Sphinx. Dir. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. Prod British Film Institute, 1977. 16mm. 92 mins. Dist British Film Institute, 1977.
- Three Lives. Dir. Kate Millet. 16mm. 70 mins. Prod The Women's Liberation Cinema Company, 1971.
- The Politics of Intimacy. Dir. Julie Gustafson. Videotape. 58 mins. Dist Electronic Arts Intermix, 1972-1973.
- Thriller. Dir. Sally Potter. Prod Sally Potter, 1979. 16mm. 14mins. Dist Women Make Movies, 1979.
- The Woman's Film. Dir. Judy Smith, Louise Alaimo, Ellen Sorin. 16mm. 45 mins. Dist California Newsreel, 1971.

NOTES

- 1 B. Ruby Rich. Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement. Durham: Duke UP, 1998. 63.
- 2 Ibid. 21.
- 3 By starting with Carolee Schneemann, I highlight the contributions made by the early pioneers of feminist cinema, something Schneemann says has gone completely unrecognized: "You owe me the vulva... You owe me heterosexual pleasure and the depiction of that pleasure. And you owe me thirty years of lost work that's never been seen. That's what you all owe me. I guess what I'm also owed is a living, an income. I'm owed the chance to produce the work that I've envisioned and that I've never been able to do. I'm owed the chance to preserve the works that already exist. And I'm glad you've asked. Nobody has ever asked me. And you can see, I'm fuming underneath" Alexandra Juhasz. Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- 4 Rich, 21.
- 5 See Stella Bruzzi. New Documentary: A Critical Introduction. London: Routledge, 2000. In her Introduction, Bruzzi links Bill Nichols, Michael Renov, and Brian Winston to the overwhelming distrust of the real in the field of documentary studies. She writes, "Continuously invoked by documentary theory is the idealised notion, on the one hand, of the pure documentary in which the relationship between the image and the real is straightforward and, on the other, the very impossibility of this aspiration" (3).
- 6 Lisa Gail Collins, "Activists Who Years for Art That Transforms: Parallels in the Black Arts and Feminist Art Movements in the United States," Signs 31.3 (Spring 2006): 717-752.
- 7 Collins here is quoting Lucy Lippard in From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art (1976).
- 8 Quoted in Jan Rosenberg. "Women's Reflections: The Feminist Film Movement." Studies in Cinema 22. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983. 86.
- 9 Ibid. 43.
- 10 Ibid. 42.

- 11 [Growing Up Female](#), dir. Julia Reichert and James Klein, 16 mm, Reichert Klein Productions, 1971.
- 12 [Anything You Want to Be](#), dir. Liane Brandon, 16 mm, dist. New Day Films, 1971.
- 13 [Three Lives](#), dir. Kate Millet, 16 mm, The Women's Liberation Cinema Company, 1971.
- 14 [Janie's Janie](#), dir. Geri Ashur and Peter Barton, 16 mm, dist. Odeon, 1971.
- 15 [The Woman's Film](#), dir. Judy Smith and Louise Alaimo and Ellen Sorin, 16 mm, dist. California Newsreel, 1971.
- 16 The most recent screenings of feminist documentaries took place at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City from January 7-26 in 1992. Titled, "From Object to Subject: Documents and Documentaries from the Women's Movement," the program consisted of 26 films produced between 1970 and 1978. Lucinda Furlong writes in the program notes, "Women chose documentary, a genre revitalized in the 1960s, as the most direct vehicle for revealing their oppressed condition" (Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, New York: Archives Whitney Museum of American Art).
- 17 Allison Butler, in a recent collection titled, [Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen](#). London: Wallflower, 2000. thus begins with a disclaimer about the unmanageable category she takes on, " 'Women's cinema' is a complex critical, theoretical and institutional construction, brought into existence by audiences, film-makers, journalists, curators and academics and maintained only by their continuing interest: a hybrid concept, arising from a number of overlapping practices and discourses, and subject to a baffling variety of definitions," 2.
- 18 Rosenberg. 17.
- 19 Of the three, only New Day Films has survived. However, new distribution networks have emerged. Women Make Movies is perhaps the largest and most vital. For more details about the distribution networks, costs, and exhibition circuits of feminist films see Rosenberg.
- 20 Several thorough chronologies detail the key festivals and major events of the Feminist Film Movement. See B. Ruby Rich's *Chick Flicks*, 64. Also Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams provide a chronology in [Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism](#), 3.
- 21 Kay Armatage, "Women in Film," [Take One](#) (1972): 46.
- 22 Among the first full-length books published on the subject of women and the cinema were: [Women In Focus](#) (1974), Jeanne Betancourt's examination of films made by "filmmakers with a feminist consciousness" (xx), which includes details about how to rent and exhibit 16mm prints; and *Women's Films in Print* (1975) a directory of over 800 16mm films made by women, similarly intended to provide programmers and educators with details necessary for film exhibitions and discussions. These early texts stand out today for two reasons. First, because they do not assume a shared knowledge about feminist and women-made films, but rather estimate the need to generate interest in the new media and provide information about accessing the new materials. Secondly, these two texts in particular share the assumption that educators and film programmers will take steps to acquire and screen the newly available films. This focus on exhibition and shared viewing practices, without assumptions about shared knowledges, speaks to the activism and consciousness-raising enterprises of the Feminist Film Movement in the early seventies.
- 23 Significantly, Rosenberg's text –the first (and last!) empirical study of the movement is rarely cited. Rich is a curious and fascinating figure in feminist film theory. She conducted much of her work outside the university as a widely published film critic and programmer; yet she has produced some of the discipline's central contributions. In the heady years of the Feminist Film Movement, there was a concerted effort to bridge the perennial divide between the "ivory tower" and "the street." Take, for instance one of the earliest serial publications devoted to the subject of film and gender, [Women & Film](#). The West Coast collective that founded the journal notes that they "dare" to put together such a publication, despite their amateur status, because they found no such perspective in writing about women and the media. The journal, which ran successfully for less than four years, marks a moment when the critique of media among feminists was paramount in the liberation efforts of the women's movement.
- 24 [Riddles of the Sphinx](#), dir. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, prod. British Film Institute, 16 mm, 1977.
- 25 [Thriller](#), dir. Sally Potter, 16 mm, prod. Sally Potter, 1979.
- 26 Juhasz, Alexandra. "They Said We Were Trying to Show Reality—All I Want to Show Is My Video: The Politics of the Realist Feminist Documentary." [Collecting Visible Evidence](#). 190-215.
- 27 Hemmings, Clare. "Telling Feminist Stories." [Feminist Theory](#) 6.2 (2005): 115-139.
- 28 Kuhn, Annette. [Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema](#). London: Routledge, 1982. 132.
- 29 McKinney, Joan. "The 'Quiet Women' Speak Out." [Oakland Tribune](#) 24 Feb 1971, 16A.
- 30 "The Woman's Film" Notes.
- 31 [Joyce at 34](#), dir. Joyce Chopra, prod. New Day Films, 1972, DVD, dist. New Day Films, 2005.
- 32 Kaplan focuses on this in her analysis of [Joyce at 34](#) and [Janie's Janie](#) in [Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera](#). New York: Methuen, 1983.
- 33 Joyce Chopra took sound and co-produced Richard Leacock's [Happy Mother's Day](#) (1963) and Nell Cox also worked with Leacock and D.A. Pennebaker. See Rosenberg's chapter, "The Filmmakers" in [Women's Reflections](#).
- 34 And realism, she argues, is a dangerous capitulation to dominant ideology: "Realism as an artistic style is designed to perpetuate [the] illusion of a stable world; and within realism it is of course the verité documentary that seems most confidently 'a window on the world through which ... the world is clearly visible' and 'where the signifiers appear to point directly and confidently to the signified.'" Kaplan here is quoting Derrida in [Of Grammatology](#), 131.
- 35 [Women and Film](#), 125.

- 36 In the late seventies, Christine Gledhill and B. Ruby Rich also resisted the wholesale dismissal of women's documentaries. See Rich, "'In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism,'" [Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism](#). Eds. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar and Janice R. Welsch. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1991; and Gledhill, "Recent Developments in Feminist Film Theory." [Quarterly Review of Film Studies](#) 3.4 (1978): 457-493.
- 37 Mulvey, Laura. "Feminism, Film, and the Avant Garde." [Framework](#) 10 (Spring 1979): 3.
- 38 Ibid. 4.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Janet Staiger's 1985 essay, "The Politics of Film Canons," [Cinema Journal](#) 24.3 (Spring 1985): 4-23, is particularly helpful on this point.
- 41 Janet Walker and Diane Waldman, [Feminism and Documentary](#). Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- 42 See, in particular, the "Introduction," 9-13.
- 43 "In perhaps the only significant and coherent body of feminist film theory about documentary—the so-called feminist realist debates—feminist scholars of this period used what Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams refer to ... as the 'rejection' of the 'cinema verité practices of the first generation of feminist documentary films' as the foundation for the critical discourse-based theory that would become Feminist Film Theory as we know it today" in Juhasz, "They Said," 191.
- 44 See Kaplan, "Interview with British Cine-Feminists" in [Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology](#). Eds. Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary. New York: Dutton, 1977. Kaplan discusses the "verité" tradition in American feminist documentary with British film theorists Claire Johnston, Pam Cook, and Laura Mulvey. Johnston, for example, explains, "I have often been very struck by [cinema verité](#) movies and am convinced of their importance to the women's movement. But to people outside, what a lot of [cinema verité](#) movies do—women talking endlessly about their experiences—often has no effect at all. It doesn't do any work in terms of presenting ideas or actually engaging the audience at any level. It encourages passivity," 396. Cook expands, "It's the idea of realism which we're trying to question rather than saying that [cinema verité](#) is realist and the entertainment film is nonrealist. We tried to interrogate the notion of realism in the cinema" (396).
- 45 Other recent examples are: Stella Bruzzi's [New Documentary: A Critical Introduction](#); Jane Gaines in "Introduction: The Real Returns," and Juhasz in "They Said We Were Trying To Show Reality"; Waldman and Walker's [Feminism and Documentary](#); and Christine Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs' [Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary](#). Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- 46 [I Am Somebody](#), dir. Madeline Anderson, The American Foundation on Nonviolence, 1970, DVD, dist. First Run/Icarus, 1990.
- 47 [The Politics of Intimacy](#), dir. Julie Gustafson, videotape, dist. Electronic Arts Intermix, 1972-1973.



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