

Women's Cinema

by Margarita De la Vega-Hurtado (1997)

Women have always been involved in film. Their place had been denied and obscured, particularly within the history of mainstream commercial cinema. The eruption of feminist criticism some thirty years ago has unearthed the excellent work of pioneer women filmmakers all over the world and their importance has been recognized so that they have now become part of the standard historical perspectives. Thus we are now being able to see the early films of women directors in Mexico, Canada, France, England, and Hollywood and to appreciate their efforts, thus changing our historical perspective on the development of cinema. The recognition of these women as creative filmmakers has empowered other women to become directors and producers, to tell their own stories, to express their ideas and to create their films.

It is impossible to present any overview of contemporary United States cinema without including films made for and by women, in diverse styles, types of production, generic categories, and formats. Films made by women are generally subversions of the established narratives and images of society since they present a different perspective, from a clearly feminine point of view. All films made by women, even within the most commercial of enterprises such as the Television Movie of the Week, clearly resonate with specific concerns and exhibit a marked difference from similar productions. There is a distinct approach and a particular gaze that clearly marks films by women which is evident not only in the thematic choices but also in the formal devices used to narrate those stories.

This overview, however, will not analyze mainstream cinema, but rather focus on independent cinema, where women's creative and innovative power has flourished. Women have been an integral part of the development of experimental cinema, contributed to animation, and provided us with energetic and dynamic documentary perspectives. Women directors may still be scarce in commercial cinema but they have radically intervened in the area of independent cinema. Their vision, their strength and their creative power have completely changed the way that we see experimental and documentary cinema.

Since the development of feminist consciousness in the late sixties, women have been engaged in telling their stories in their own manner, searching and creating different modes and specific genres. These women filmmakers have written their screenplays and taken their (video) cameras in hand to radically transform even the definitions of film and video as well as the subjects and shapes of the stories that they tell. Women's cinema transcends the rigid boundaries that have separated the various types of films combining all kinds of techniques and resources; not only transforming the content of the films but altering the formal rules and crossing the boundaries between genres. Women's films have created their own new categories, fusing the personal and the public, the experimental

and the realistic, animation and cinéma vérité, poetry and banality. No topic is too small or too large, and they have approached all the problems of contemporary society, breaking all previous taboos and restrictions. They have boldly created their own space and generated their own public, by giving us works which are full of energy, sensitivity, and innovation. Women directors have not limited themselves to feminist issues but have brought out political, personal, social and historical subjects that had not been touched previously, expanding the scope of independent cinema.

It is impossible to trace the history of experimental cinema in the United States without mentioning a pioneer of the avant-garde film movement: Maya Deren, frequently, called "the Mother". This prolific Russian-born artist, theoretician, dancer, and director struggled to make a cinema freed from the traditional barriers of space and time. In the six films that she made, from the 40's to the 60's, Maya Deren chose different ways to express her inner perception of images, movement, light and shadow and the poetic reflection on our psychological makeup and our intellectual imagination. The style ranges from surreal experimentation (*Meshes in the Afternoon* , 1946) to a poetic documentary related to her anthropological investigation of religious practices in Haiti (*Divine Horsemen* , 1946-51). Deren combined her cinematic experiences with organizational and theoretical work in her struggle to subvert the constraints imposed on filmmakers by dominant cinema practices. Her life, her art and her intellectual commitment were radically enmeshed with her films; thus she opened up new ways of expression for many other directors, whatever their gender. She is also a precursor for the many women working in film and video, trying to express the richness of a complex life and imagination, and searching for innovative forms of expression.

Since then several women have continued to explore the possibilities of avant-garde cinema, confronting the form and material of film itself as well as exploiting female subjectivity. These directors have used film in different ways and have explored different formal possibilities, through the use of the camera, by altering the editing process, manipulating the film stock, using the optical printer, combining different sounds and music, and so on. In short, they have transformed radically the shape and the subject of experimental cinema.

Looking back at these avant-garde women filmmakers, these are some important contributions. Abigail Child has explored traditional film genres to unpack their social and latent content as well as to break apart their conventional form in her series *Is this what you were born for?* , and later continued to explore female representation in her more recent work. Holly Fisher has combined her poetic vision with powerful montage to create unique films that become indescribable experiences where the concrete and the abstract mingle, such as *Rushlight* , and *Bullets for Breakfast* . Leslie Thornton has recreated enigmatic historical women to evoke their mystery in films like *There Was an Unseen Cloud Moving* . Frances Salomé España has redefined the mythical land of Chicanos in her

videos which combine the different elements of a different aesthetic, such as *Anima* and *El Espejo/The Mirror* .

Barbara Hammer has gone from the documentary tradition of her first lesbian political films into experimental forms exploring history, homosexuality, science, aging and personal memories in elliptic and poetic films such as *Optic Nerve* , *Endangered* , *Santus* , and others. She has carried on her probing experimentation into video, where she has left her mark of originality. Focusing also on the lesbian experience, Su Friedrich has also produced some powerful films, such as *Sink or Swim* , *Dammed if You Don't* , *Hide and Seek* , reappropriating previous material to create highly personal stories crossing experimental documentary, autobiographical, and narrative boundaries. Cathy Cook uses humor, amateur footage and parodies of established genres to capture her audience in *The Match that Started my Fire* . She had already combined documentary and drama in her explosive attack on women's health in *Underexposed* . Sadie Benning uses a toy video camera to create some of the most memorable stories of women as center of parodic generic narratives in *Jollies* . The list of women who have created their own films and videos that cannot be easily classified within the traditional categories is inexhaustible. They have radically changed the way in which film and video are used as modes of artistic, social, and personal expression.

Historically the movies have been divided in two broad categories: fiction and fantasy versus fact and reality. In spite of many debates and arguments on the relationship between "reality" and its representation on the screen, documentaries are constructed fictions, not slices of reality. Tradition has defined films based on the depiction of supposedly "factual information" as opposed to those films based on imagination. Documentary images, however, do not hold a purely indexical relationship to the real events depicted; they are mediated by the conceptual perception of the filmmaker and by the complexity of the cinematic apparatus. Documentaries are thus another set of narratives, more closely related to events that are taking place in the world than fictional films. Until the seventies documentaries had been dominated by men who gave us their perception of the Other.

The secondary importance of women as subjects within the traditional documentaries provoked an outpouring of feminist documentaries in the seventies, parallel to the development of women's awareness and political activism. The documentary could make visible the hidden aspects of women's personal and collective experience, thus becoming a tool for consciousness raising. In the words of Julia Lesage "feminist documentary film-making is a cinematic genre congruent with . . . the contemporary women's movement." These women directors deliberately used a traditional realist documentary style because they had the urgency of representing women's lives, problems, and struggles and to voice their concerns so that they could validate their participation in the public sphere. Such titles as *Growing up Female* by Julia

Reichert and Jim Klein, *Joyce at 34* by Joyce Chopra, *The Woman's Film* by the women of the San Francisco Newsreel, *Janie's Janie* by Geri Ashur, *Union Maids* by Julia Reichert, Jim Klein, and Miles Mogulescu, and many others focus on women's personal experiences as a way of exploring the structure of patriarchal domination in order to challenge it and provoke change. These films focused on expressing their political content and communicating their objective, without much concern about altering the documentary form. This brief period was quickly followed by a search for new ways of documenting women's experiences. Michele Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1978), played with *cinéma vérité* style, mixing it with recreated material, home movies and other elements to give us the portrayal of the painful relationship between mother and daughter. The puzzling frame of the story challenged the traditional scheme of providing the space for an individual experience and instead gave an expressive form to a complex psychological women's conflict. The film provokes a painful and confusing reaction and brings out a confrontation with its subject, instead of offering the sharing of a particular experience. That specific mold of breaking the boundaries of documentary by introducing collages, association, improvisation and dramatization opened up a vast array of film and videos that deal with "reality" from a psychological and subjective perspective. The autobiographical recollections provide a fertile base to explore some of the most complex problems in contemporary society, such as racial discrimination, sexual exploitation, aging, physical handicaps, rape, abortion, death. These women's films deal with their subjective experience as an expression of the types of oppression encountered and have enlarged and enriched the perspective of documentary and experimental cinema so that the field has redrawn its focus and widened its scope.

The importance and the number of women directors has transformed independent cinema and the criticism of it. Some of them work with the camera and also with their writing, realizing new works of art while theoretically demonstrating the shifting definitions of form and substance. Their creative force and their originality have made women an integral part of any description of analysis of film movements so that they will not be forgotten as the pioneers once were. If we look at the works presented in the Black Maria Film and Video Festival, the number of the works by women is one more proof of the role that women play in the advanced development of creative expression in film and video. Women have drastically changed the ideas and forms that are expressed in music and sound, projected on a screen, deeply affecting the feelings of the audience and challenging our comprehension of ideas.