
Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies

Camera Obscura at Thirty

An Archive for the Future

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Courtesy University of Alberta archives

The Future Was Then: Reinvesting in Feminist Media Practice and Politics

Alexandra Juhasz

The future of feminist media scholarship begins with a return: a homecoming to the feminist media community and movement from whence it was born. Sure, we can stay as we are, mourning the exuberant, organized, mass feminist movement and media community last seen in the US in the 1970s at women's centers and film festivals, all the while creating an increasingly self-sufficient intellectual culture. And yeah, I (like you?) missed that glorious moment and have spent a significant part of my academic energies documenting and theorizing its memory.¹ But such nostalgia obscures the feminist organizing and media work that is happening now. Back in the day, there were scores of women's film festivals and an active feminist community supporting them, one that included feminist film scholars who created context, theory, and analysis for the films and their feminist audiences. Currently, feminists make mainstream narrative films and HBO documentaries, they run distribution companies and film festivals (granted, usually gay and lesbian or experimental; the American women's film festival is largely a thing of the past),

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Women's Film Festival in Seoul, 2005. Courtesy of WFFIS

they teach media-production skills to younger feminists, and they show their media work at festivals, college campuses, and on the Internet. Yet this substantial activity occurs beyond the sight lines of dominant feminist media scholarship. Outside of feminist television studies, there is decidedly too little feminist scholarly attention paid to, or in solidarity with, the makers, viewers, programmers, distributors, and institutions that support a thriving contemporary feminist media community.

I have written elsewhere how this is an outcome of three understandable moves made by the field as it matured and faced the increasing requirements of professionalization: a marked turn to and embrace of theory in isolation from practice, a preoccupation with mainstream forms, and a detachment from feminist politics.² However, if we scholars are to reclaim a place in the feminist media future, we will have to rethink our responsibilities and relink to media practice and politics with the following quick and incendiary thoughts in mind:

(1) *Practice.* While the turn to theory granted academic and intellectual legitimacy that in turn allowed for tenure and programs, and while it did irrevocably alter film, cultural, and visual studies toward the feminist, it also had the effect of separating us from others who matter: those women who practice and engage with media-making outside academe. There once was an accessible feminist critical writing about current films and festivals; there once were informative and intelligent interviews with contemporary makers. Such writing is easy enough to do but harder to publish. The vagaries and standards of academic publishing and careers force feminist scholars to attempt to publish theory-bound writing in prestige periodicals with long lag times in production. Thus a kind of analytical, even theoretical writing that engages in a timely manner with contemporary feminist media and its makers has become increasingly difficult to publish. That is, of course, if critics can get to the films, a task made more onerous by the dearth of women's film festivals in the US.

Outside these questions of access and publishing, there is the matter of commitment. Feminist film theory was initially conceived to help feminists make sense of how visual culture is structured by things patriarchal. Its use and form has steadily transformed into an expert's

language that speaks almost solely to its own and other academic disciplines. While we should continue to engage in scholarly dialogue with the varied intellectual traditions that best allow us to understand feminist media concerns, we must also engage more broadly in scholarly writing, teaching, and publishing practices that make these rarefied, though enabling, traditions available to other audiences, including our (undergraduate) students and the feminist media community (makers, curators, distributors, funders, etc.) who are most eager to learn from, and engage with, our ideas. Like many of you, I teach courses in women's cinema and feminist film theory to undergraduates. Here, I learn that many of the foundational debates in feminist film theory are woefully out of step with both contemporary cinema and young feminists even as they remain provocative and productive for us "lady scholars." For example, it is no longer the case that only a handful of women direct films or that most directors (or viewers, for that matter) are unaware of feminist theoretical traditions and concepts. In our scholarly work, we must dare to interact with present-day films and real-world feminists, not just the field.

(2) *Mainstream Media.* The significant influence and value of feminist media analysis of Hollywood film and dominant television need not be debated. However, feminist media scholarship has been stunted by not asking similar questions of work that starts from a feminist position and circulates where it may (largely in alternative venues) due to these politics. So, while we may have successfully drawn a useful guide to how dominant visual systems and institutions picture women, gender, and sexuality, we have missed answering such questions about a small, but certainly quite vital, component of media culture: the independent, alternative films, videos, digital work, and media culture of feminists. Currently—and in the future this will hold even truer—feminist media culture hits against, speaks to, resists, and alters dominant media. Yet feminist media scholarship rarely considers how this feminist work impacts mainstream media or, in turn, how the conditions of alternative visual practices—structured by progressive histories, economics, and aesthetics—differ from dominant forms. Outside the fact that our feminist "sisters in cinema" always need our support (to better understand their work, to contribute to its circulation and archiving), our myopia has meant that we are not accurately describing or theorizing feminist media culture in its real complexity.

(7) *Politics*. Sure, they're in decline, they're post, they have become something else. But that is a cop-out. There is plenty of organizing—fighting AIDS, the prison industrial complex, or globalization; supporting gay marriage or peace—where feminist media analysis can be a key component of the project. Scholars' voices need to be heard here, where people—where *we*—are contributing to social justice with and through the creation and analysis of media. A significant majority of contemporary activist media is and has been motivated by the ideas of feminist media scholarship—our reach has been impressively deep—but feminist scholars are largely unaware of the practices and politics to which our work contributes.³ I am not suggesting that teaching, learning, and thinking are not political in their own right. Of course they are. But such political work is even more effective when holistically linked to real struggles and actions, through praxis: the integration of theory and practice.⁴ Join a group; speak your specialist knowledge about feminism and media there, in a language your comrades can understand; use this experience to rethink theory and relink it to concerns on the ground; use these political goals to locate or even produce new and relevant texts.

In point of fact, what I have called the past and hoped for the future—an integrated feminist media community committed to alternative media and its practitioners and political applications—is alive in the present, albeit in Korea. I have been lucky enough to attend, as an invited artist and scholar, the Women's Film Festival in Seoul. For the past ten years, this yearly social-political event—run by feminist film scholars, community activists, and a devoted horde of young feminist volunteers (many of them graduate and undergraduate students in film production and in film studies)—has used national and international contemporary feminist film to create both community and the possibility for intellectual/political education and conversation. Throughout the festival, women use feminist films to better understand their lives, history, and the role of cinema in these matters. Feminist scholars participate throughout—by curating, translating, explicating, and distributing. Furthermore, the festival is the only one I know that has a yearly section devoted to activist video. Therefore discussion about media form, access, process, and politics—not just the increasingly conventionalized images by and of women—is kept central to the event.

Back at home, I imagine a future where an increasing number of feminists will make, consume, and support feminist media culture. I will mourn the past I never lived only if we continue on our current path, one that is increasingly isolated, professionalized, and obsolete. Feminist media scholars could return to a relevant and even prominent position in this lively field if we dared to reconnect our thriving but stand-alone culture with the world and work of nonacademic women and alternative feminist media.

Notes

1. Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); *Women of Vision: Eighteen Histories in Feminist Media* (dir. Alexandra Juhasz, US, 2000).
2. Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); and Juhasz, *Women of Vision*.
3. See Alexandra Juhasz, "No Woman Is an Object: Realizing the Feminist Collaborative Video," *Camera Obscura*, no. 54 (2003): 71–98; and Juhasz, "WAVE in the Media Environment: Camcorder Activism and the Making of *HIV TV*," *Camera Obscura*, no. 28 (1992): 135–52. I list two of my own articles on the subject of activist video published in this journal to indicate that the field and *Camera Obscura* have supported scholarship on alternative feminist media; however, this body of scholarship is a decidedly minor one in the field.
4. My most recent, as yet unpublished, work, "Media Praxis: A Radical Anthology Integrating Theory, Production, and Practice," considers the hundred-year history of the theorizing of media by those who make it themselves as part of a struggle for social change.

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