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**'They said we were trying to show
reality – all I want to show is my
video': The politics of the realist
feminist documentary**

ALEXANDRA JUHASZ

A demonstration of contradictions I

The scene opens upon a gray steel door which itself then opens to reveal a middle-aged black woman: 'Hi, I'm Marie and I'm HIV-positive. Welcome to my home. I'd like to show you what has and has not changed here since my diagnosis. Welcome, and come in.' The camera follows Marie on an intimate tour of her apartment. For ten minutes of barely-edited footage, she moves from room to room, talking about eating with her family, cleaning the toilet, and not necessarily sleeping by herself in her double bed. In 'real time', she recounts to the camera her experiences and offers advice: 'Once I dropped AZT on the floor, and my granddaughter said "Here it is Mummy". Then I knew I had to be more careful'

We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected By AIDS (The Women's AIDS Video Enterprise, 1990).

Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality; it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of the cinema/the depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected.

Claire Johnston, 'Women's cinema as counter cinema', p. 29.

The 'legacy of misreading realist, feminist documentaries

In formulating a notion of a feminist 'counter-cinema' that would counter not only the stereotypes but also the very language of patriarchy, the British feminists rejected the cinema verite practices of the first generation of feminist documentary films.

Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, Linda Williams,
ReVision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism, p. 7.¹

The women's movement of the early seventies was enmeshed in a politics of representation. This inspired an unprecedented deluge of feminist films, the majority of which were documentaries.² In perhaps the only significant and coherent body of feminist film theory about documentary – the so-called 'feminist realist debates'³ – feminist scholars of this period used what Doane et al. 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 which would become Feminist Film Theory⁴ as we know it today.⁵ This has meant that as a feminist scholar of the media in the eighties and nineties, I have been instructed to believe that *realism* and *identification* – which are claimed to be axiomatic of talking heads, cinema verite, or realist documentary – are not sophisticated, or even legitimate, formal strategies. And then correspondingly, feminist documentary films and videos which use such strategies (like *We Care*, cited above) are *bad*, or at least naive, feminist projects. E. Ann Kaplan, in a chapter concerning the feminist–realist debates, concisely describes the position taken up by feminist film theorists in the seventies and beyond: 'realism as a style is unable to change consciousness because it does not depart from the forms that embody the old consciousness'.⁶ Realism masks the production of meaning, identification affirms the coherence and power of the individual. 'So what actually happens then', writes Eileen McGarry in an early contribution to the debates, 'is that those relationships already coded within the dominant ideology enter into the film unquestioned by the aesthetic of realism'.⁷ Instead, Kaplan concludes, feminists need to make and view films which do four things: focus on the cinematic apparatus as a signifying practice, refuse to construct a fixed spectator, deny pleasure, and mix the codes of documentary and fiction.⁸

Such pronouncements entailed a turn towards analysis of feminist avant-garde filmmaking and a concurrent denial of more conventional, political documentary practice for the majority of feminist film critics in the late seventies and eighties. This inspired a theoretical and practical legacy which is the subject of this paper: the legacy of a large and important body of feminist film work which has been inadequately and insufficiently theorized, and the simultaneous canonization and institutionalization of only one side

- 1 Since this essay is being published in a British journal, it seems especially important to consider how the history of US feminist film theory does and does not translate across the Atlantic. Although I am focusing upon the critical and film/video production of US feminists in this paper, this work is highly influenced by trends in British thought and film production – so much so that most of the Americans I will be referring to name the inspiration for the antirealist position that they articulate in the early seventies as being that of 'British feminists' in opposition to 'American feminists' who, at the time, had not incorporated critical theory into their theoretical analyses of gender and representation.
- 2 The Whitney Museum showed twenty-five of these feminist documentaries in its January 1992 programme 'From object to subject: documents and documentaries from the women's movement'. (See extended note at the end of this article.)
- 3 E. Ann Kaplan entitled the chapter on women's documentary in her book *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983). 'The realist debate in the feminist film: a historical overview of the theories and strategies in realism and the avant-garde theory film (1971–81)'.
4 I've capitalized 'Feminist Film Theory' to help signify the highly canonical nature of what is in fact, a very recent, and only a small subset of a much larger and contradictory body of critical writing. Throughout this essay, I refer to the few authors and texts which have been much anthologized as 'feminist film theory', even as I am aware that the tradition of feminist writing on film is more diverse than this body of selected texts would demonstrate.

- 5 The writings which participate in this 'debate' include: Christine Gledhill, 'Recent developments in feminist film criticism', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3, no. 4 (1978), pp. 458-93; Claire Johnston, 'Women's cinema as counter cinema', Claire Johnston (ed.) *Notes on Women's Cinema*. (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973); E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983). The aforementioned chapter is revised and expanded in the article 'Theories and strategies of the feminist documentary', in Alan Rosenthal (ed.), *New Challenges for Democracy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 78-102; Julia Lesage, 'The political aesthetics of the feminist documentary film', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Fall (1978), pp. 507-23; Eileen McGarry, 'Documentary, realism, and women's cinema', *Women and Film*, vol. 2, no. 7 (1975), pp. 50-57.
- 6 Kaplan, *Women and Film*, p. 131.
- 7 McGarry, 'Documentary, realism and women's cinema', p. 53.
- 8 Kaplan, *Women and Film*, p. 138.
- 9 Lesage, 'The political aesthetics of the feminist documentary', p. 510.
- 10 The video work of *Repro-Vision*, a feminist collective devoted to documenting the recent upsurge of reproductive rights activism, either consciously or unconsciously quotes many of the techniques and subject matter of seventies feminist documentaries. For instance, the group is currently producing a tape about feminist self-health.

of the 'feminist-realist debates', that which centred upon these early feminist documentaries. Perhaps the most disturbing consequence of this legacy is the loss of many of these films for reevaluation due to the economic relationship between film scholarship and alternative film distribution: only twenty years later, they are very difficult, if not impossible to find.

Manohla Dargis begins her review of the Whitney Museum's 1992 programme of seventies feminist documentaries, 'From object to subject: documents and documentaries from the women's movement', by contemplating her lack of exposure to this body of film work. Dargis and I, both products of NYU graduate Cinema Studies in the eighties, saw a great deal of Rainer, Potter, Akerman, and Mulvey in our classes. But I didn't see realist, feminist documentaries until I began teaching my own courses in women's documentary. However, when I tried to rent *Self-Health*, a film featured in Julia Lesage's 1978 'The political aesthetics of the feminist documentary film', the feminist distribution companies that had carried it were no longer in business, and the film could not be found. Lesage writes that the film shows women learning how to give themselves vaginal self-exams, breast exams, and vaginal bimanual exams, and then talking together about their 'feelings about and experiences with their bodies and their sexuality'.⁹ In our present climate, where women are reinventing the feminist wheel to fight yet again for our rights to health care and reproductive freedom, it is critical for feminist educators in film and other fields to see and show these realist accounts of how women approached similar political work less than a generation before. Meanwhile, without these films to guide us, women are continuing to produce films and videos surprisingly similar in form, tone and content to those realist documentaries of the women's movement of the early seventies.¹⁰

Equally frustrating is my feminist theoretical indoctrination which was dedicated almost solely to the critique of realism and the endorsement of formalism. Although research for the writing of this project has led me to many articles from the period which argued against the move towards formalism, critical theory and the avant garde at the expense of the political work coming out of the women's movement, I was not *taught* this intervention in college or graduate school (perhaps because very few of these articles have been anthologized in text books of feminist film theory).¹¹ This results in an unsettling experience: when I attempt to view, teach or make political documentary I find that I am unequipped (at least, if I use standardized feminist film theory as my guide) to evaluate or understand the past and ongoing reliance upon 'realist' representation by feminists, AIDS activists and the like, even as we 'know better'. When I view seventies (and eighties and nineties) realist, talking-heads documentaries by feminists and other

11 Some of these articles which contest the antirealist position include: Julia Lesage, 'The political aesthetics of feminist documentary film'; Barbara Halpern Martineau, 'Talking about our lives and experiences: some thoughts about feminism, documentary and "talking heads"', in Thomas Waugh (ed.), *Show Us Life* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1984); B. Ruby Rich, 'The crisis of naming in feminist film criticism', *Jump Cut*, 19 (1979); Christine Gledhill, 'Whose choice - teaching films about abortion', *Screen Education*, no. 24 (1977); and Lesley Stern, 'Feminism and cinema-exchanges', *Screen*, vol. 20, no. 3/4 (1979/80).

disenfranchised producers, and perhaps more significantly, as I make video with groups of political women, I am struck by two things: how often political producers are drawn to realist strategies and then, in contradiction, how often such work is evaluated by academics in an overly critical and sometimes simplified manner.

Where many critics have seen 'naive realism', I see and make videos that utilize a variety of 'realist' techniques with a variety of effects, only one of which is the dreaded psychoanalytic grip of 'identification'. Yet, it seems that some early feminist film theory - which has since become a kind of received wisdom - utilized relatively direct translations of Marxist concerns about 'realism' and 'bourgeois ideology' and psychoanalytic concerns about 'identification' and the 'individual' to analyze a body of political work without carefully interrogating how these terms, when applied to political documentaries, are themselves dependent upon a variety of extratextual conditions including intentionality, viewing context, economics, power, and politics. Take 'realism' for example: are the effects of the so-called realism of the narrative Hollywood film identical to those of the realism of a cinema-verite documentary? We make and view such films in noticeably different contexts and with strikingly diverse intentions. How is realism used and interpreted in either PBS-style documentaries or activist videos which quote, parody and deconstruct this style (often within the same video)? How are many of the accepted codes of 'realism' dependent upon access to funds, equipment, 'professional' formats, and the conventional ideological positions which often align with power and capital?

Such questions point to the largely overgeneralized ways that the term 'realism' (as well as a host of others including 'documentary', 'cinema verite', 'identification', 'political film', 'feminism') is used in feminist film criticism towards the valuable work of making sense of the ideological effects of the filmic apparatus. While such work has been immensely important, it has often also resulted in obscuring the *distinctions* allowed by the always unique extratextual conditions which define the production, reception and form of nonindustrial film and video, especially when film and video are primarily motivated by political urgency. If, in fact, it is true that the 'realist' style of many of the early feminist documentaries confirmed for the feminist viewer some sense of herself as a unified subject in a manner similar to how this is enacted through identification with the Hollywood film, how do we figure into this analysis that this was, simultaneously, a radical, new and politicized reinterpretation of that female subjectivity, one which mobilized vast numbers of women into action for the first time?

In the service of creating a feminist, formalist film theory, some articles were written, later to become an orthodoxy, which did not adequately describe the documentary films that they critiqued, nor

¹² Several of the articles which participate in the 'debate' conclude by suggesting that practice rooted in political struggle must have some connection to the 'real'. For instance, Kaplan writes: 'But if we want to create art that will bring about change in the quality of people's daily lives in the social formation, we need a theory that takes account of the level now usually referred to scornfully as "naively materialistic"', *Women and Film*, p. 134. Similarly, Claire Johnston suggests: 'If a radical ideology, such as feminism, is to be defined as a means of providing a framework for political action, one must finally put one's finger on the scales, enter some kind of realist epistemology'. 'Women's cinema as counter cinema', p. 389. However, these realist-forests were somehow missed for the semiotic-trees. The legacy of these articles centres upon their criticism of realist practices.

the experience of making or viewing politically engaged films.¹² Feminist film theory was founded upon a misreading of two integral features of feminist realist documentary: the fact that there are usually *multiple* film styles and theoretical assumptions masked by the conventions of 'realism', and more importantly, that realism and identification are used as viable theoretical strategies towards political ends within these films. Thus, for the sake of this article, I will define 'realism' and 'identification' in ways that are indebted to, but necessarily more complicated than, the way these terms have been used by many feminist film theorists in the past twenty-five years. I think my definitions point to the way I am both moulded, and frustrated, by feminist film theory in the face of directly political representational work.

By 'political' documentary, I refer to any film or video that espouses an explicit opinion or position whose articulation contributes towards some manner of change. A great deal of political documentaries use 'realist' form to do this work. By realist form, I refer to any of a number of always-changing conventions which signify for the maker and/or the spectator a condition, experience or issue found in the 'real world' or in the 'real experience' of a person or group of people within the world. A variety of realist forms can be used within any particular film and video, and often their play against each other serves as an (intentional or unintentional) critique of the use or legitimacy of mimetic style. 'Realism' can function in any of a number of ways, including, but not limited to, the confirmation, perpetuation and reflection of bourgeois, patriarchal reality. It can testify to alternative, marginal, subversive or illegal realities; it can critique the notion of reality. To portray the world with a realistic film style does not necessarily imply that one believes that the reality portrayed is fixed, stable, complete or unbiased, although it probably means that one has an opinion about what this reality means, feels like, how it functions, or how it can change. To see a representation of something that occurred in the real world is not necessarily to confuse that image with reality. In fact, politically-motivated realist documentaries are usually at great pains to show that theirs is a politicized, opinionated vision of some reality. In the same vein, I use 'identification' to refer to the unconscious psychoanalytic processes that are the function of viewing any film or video text, many of which confirm our sense of ourselves as gendered, unified individuals. Yet, I also acknowledge the many *conscious* forms of identification, misidentification, and refusal-of-identification which also occur when viewing political films or videos (which are rarely the mass forms of media – Hollywood film, broadcast television – upon which so much of our theory is based, but are, more likely, organizing tools of grassroots or activist organizations).

As a feminist, AIDS activist, media scholar and videomaker, it disturbs me that the theory I respect and use is often at odds with the media I make and watch. This essay attempts to reconcile the contradictions between my practical experience as teacher, maker, spectator and scholar of political documentary by women and the critical and theoretical knowledge I have amassed in my academic work. Must I feel embarrassed, stupid or apologetic for liking and using these formal strategies? Why did many of the intelligent, highly-educated, political women who invented feminist film theory simplify, and then disown, these complex films? I do not want to suggest that this occurred as some evil, poststructuralist, feminist conspiracy but rather as the result of particular economic, intellectual, historical, personal and political motivations, including the translation of high French theory into English and the need to legitimize and authorize the highly suspect work of feminist interpretation and the deeply troubling fact of feminist scholars in the academy. In the service of such understandable ends, feminist film critics misread or simplified a body of film practice to make other legitimate points, loosely applied sets of terms from a variety of disciplines to a political documentary practice founded upon other schools of political theory, and thus most certainly used an inadequate theoretical lens to interpret what such films actually *do* accomplish.

Thus, in this article, I attempt to retrieve seventies realist feminist documentaries from their devalued position in feminist film history by looking more closely at what these films did accomplish and by using other theoretical grids, beyond feminist film theory, to do so. This is not to suggest that the antirealist position was without any warrant whatsoever; nor is it to deny that we have learned from this critique. For, in fact, many current feminist documentaries about AIDS use 'realist' styles in highly self-conscious, even self-critical ways (although some do not) which are indebted to the feminist theoretical legacy of the past fifteen years. Yet even as I hope to note the 'deconstructive' uses of realist style, I will continue to emphasize that more conventional uses of these forms are not without importance, sophistication, or effect.

In fact, I am arguing several (sometimes contradictory) positions about the use of realist style in the service of feminist political film or videomaking. First, that a careful look at the formal strategies of many of the feminist 'realist' documentaries of the seventies, eighties and nineties allows us to see what many earlier critics missed: that there is contradiction, antirealism, many realisms within specific 'realist' texts. But second, that even the most 'naively realist' moments within such films can function in ways more viable than many criticisms of realism have allowed for. And third, the reason for this is the political efficacy of realism (the power to convince, document, move to anger and action, and the ability to take control

of identity and identification within systems of representation so as to move towards personal and collective action). So, even as the problems with realist form which were identified by antirealist critics remain valid, I believe that when makers and viewers are moved to use film or video as part of a political project, the benefits are often evaluated as strategically more important than the limits of such form.

This, in turn, serves my more selfish ends of understanding and affirming recent political documentary work by feminists (including myself), specifically the vast numbers of alternative AIDS videos by women, which continue to rely upon 'realist' strategies to accomplish their political goals of ending or altering the course of the AIDS crisis for the real women and men who daily suffer because of it. While I understand how the feminist documentaries of the early women's movement and those of the second decade of the AIDS epidemic remain distinct (in their intended audience, formats, and understandings of political action and representational politics) I am most interested in their shared reliance upon realist strategy, even as a decade of critical theory advises against it. In this article, I will first look at realist political documentaries from the seventies and will conclude with a discussion of my own AIDS video production. I will be attempting to understand both what the antirealist position missed and how it then also contributed to a critical vocabulary which has pushed many makers and viewers of realist documentaries in the nineties towards a more noticeably self-aware theoretical/political practice.

A demonstration of contradictions II

'Hi, I'm Cathy Elaine Davies, a patient here at Woodhull Hospital. I'd like to inform you on safer sex.' A young black woman faces the camera with a blackboard behind her. She draws a picture of a woman's vulva, highlighting the vaginal opening and the clitoris ('the man in the boat'). She then cuts a condom open, and places the sheet of latex over her drawing. 'I'm sure you wouldn't want anything to happen to yourself, or the person you're with. That's why you must always use one of these: a dental dam.'

HIV TV (The VIP Video Group, 1991).

The sort of direct mode of address in both films [*Janie's Janie* and *Joyce at 34*] encourages us to relate to the images of Joyce and Janie as 'real' women, as if we could know them. Yet, in fact, both figures are constructed in the film processes of camera, lighting, sound, editing. They can have no other ontological

existence for the spectator than that of representation

Underlying all of the above is the key notion of the unified self which characterizes pre-semiological thought. Both Joyce and Janie, as subjects, are seen in the autobiographical mode, as having essences that have persisted through time and that reveal growth through individual change outside of influence from social structures, economic relations, or psychoanalytical laws.

E. Ann Kaplan, 'The realist debate in the feminist film', p. 128.

A little feminist film history

The unity, discovery, energy, and brave we're-here-to-stay spirit of the early days underwent a definite shift in 1975, mid-decade Overall, there is a growing acceptance of feminist film as an area of study rather than as a field of action. And this may pull feminist film work away from its early political commitment, encompassing a wide social setting; away from issues of life that go beyond form; away from the combatative (as an analysis of and weapon against patriarchal capitalism) into the merely representational.

B. Ruby Rich, 'In the name of feminist film theory', p. 343.

While I do not wish to simplify the specific conditions of the writing of early feminist film theory by a diverse group of women, there do seem to be certain historical, political and theoretical imperatives that may explain their shared simplification of feminist documentaries. Feminist film theory was born out of a unique historical and intellectual conjuncture during which women began to gain a foothold in the US academy, while the newly translated-into-English theories of the mostly male French poststructuralists, semiologists, and psychoanalysts were also gaining a foothold there. Meanwhile, work by feminist critics from Britain and France which focused upon this theory was itself providing a legitimizing discourse for US scholars. Thus, before Kaplan critiques *Janie's Janie* (Geri Ashur and Peter Barton, 1970-71), she devotes six pages to 'the theoretical sources for such arguments', schematically citing the work of Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Metz, Barthes, Kristeva and Althusser.¹³ In their introductory chapter to a 1984 collection of foundational essays on feminist film theory, Doane, Mellencamp and Williams look back thirteen years to construct a brief, teleological history of feminism and film. They describe a transition from 'film festivals which were an integral part of the activism and consciousness-raising of the women's movement' to 'the introduction of new critical theories and methodologies of semiology and psychoanalysis by British feminists; and finally, the rise of feminist film criticism as an academic field that has already begun to

¹³ Kaplan, 'Theories and strategies of the feminist documentary', pp. 79-80.

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14 Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams, *ReVision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (Los Angeles: AFI, 1984), p. 4.

15 Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1989), p. xii.

16 See, for example, *Camera Obscura*, vol. 3, no. 4. In 'Chronology', written by The Camera Obscura Collective in this 1979 issue, the group documents their intellectual history from the founding of the first feminist film journal, *Women and Film*, in 1973 to the present in 1979. The Collective explains that their intellectual shifts deigned them from 'radical feminism, the major tendency among American feminists at the time', since most US feminists were against 'theoretical work', meaning the writings of Marx and Freud.

17 Manohla Dargis and Amy Taubin, 'Double take', *The Village Voice*, 21 January, 1992, p. 56.

18 Doane, Mellencamp and Williams, *ReVision*, pp. 7-8.

produce a generation of feminist film scholars.¹⁴ They are quick to bemoan a 'loss of activism', but they treat this as a natural progression rather than the result of strategic professional and political choices. Laura Mulvey explains: 'In terms of my own history, I sometimes feel that the excitement, novelty and sheer difficulty of semiotic and psychoanalytic theory overwhelmed other political concerns and commitments.'¹⁵

Beyond the 'excitement, novelty, and sheer difficulty' of the new theories under investigation at this time, a critique of 'other political concerns and commitments' was often waged by academic feminists who began to find the women's movement to be essentialist, and in other ways simple.¹⁶ The word 'naive' regularly accompanied the critique of feminist documentaries that recorded real women talking about their lives and issues in real time. 'Naive' means: if they knew better they wouldn't do this. The 'they' here is most often people of colour, poor people, less-educated people, some women: 'they' use realism naively. The critique of 'their' works has often come from well-educated, upper-middle-class scholars, often women, who usually identify themselves as political. Dargis wonders, 'why does it seem like the criticism lobbed at documentaries such as those on tap at the Whitney was not only too harsh, but suspiciously self-interested? Could it be that once these messy, activist, and earnest works were banished to the dustbin, attention would be paid to the sort of filmmaking that neatly mirrored the same concerns of a certain emerging, academic feminism?'¹⁷ There is absolutely nothing that is *naive* about rejecting films that do not replicate a theoretical position:

Earlier US feminist documentaries – *Growing Up Female*, *Janie's Janie*, *The Woman's Film*, and *Antonia, Portrait of a Woman* – had aimed at creating more truthful, unsteretyped images of women in their particular social, racial and class contexts Yet the British feminists criticized them on the basis of their acceptance of realistic documentary modes of representation associated with patriarchy. This theoretical work was also buttressed by a growing number of feminist avant-garde films which explicitly dealt with issues of representation, language, voyeurism, desire and the image – e.g. *Riddles of the Sphinx*, and more recently, *Thriller* and *Sigmund Freud's Dora*.¹⁸

Well before, during and after the creation of a feminist avant-garde film tradition in the seventies, there was a long and rich tradition of a 'naive', window-on-the-world type of political documentary production which includes much of the work of the Third Cinema, the identity film and video movements of women, people of colour, and gays in the seventies, and a good deal of current ethnographic media production. Importantly, much of this so called realist film and video practice is and was theoretically informed in the

traditional, academic sense: not at all naive. For example, theories of de- and postcolonialism, and much current writing about identity politics, support the complexity of utilizing realist codes towards the construction of identities in cultures where some individuals and communities continue to be invisible, voiceless, and misrepresented for political ends.

Thus my aim here is not so much to challenge the theory upon which the antirealist critique was built (I am trained in, and use, this theory), nor am I contesting the practical efficacy of gaining positions within primarily male institutions by using the master's tools with and against him (I owe my academic position to this legacy). Rather, I am attempting to find what was lost along the way. Most certainly, subtle and supportive critical attention was denied an immensely important body of film by women, largely I think, because one current theoretical grid was held up against a body of film work which was itself based upon another set of theoretical principles. Kaplan, Johnston, McGarry, et al. did not invent the realist critique that they applied to feminist documentaries (although they certainly improved it by integrating gender into the mix),¹⁹ rather they privileged this discourse over another contemporaneous constellation of theories (those of the second-wave US women's movement for example.) B. Ruby Rich delineates what was actually a split in feminist film theory during its formative period: the US, 'so-called sociological, approach' and the 'originally British, so-called theoretical, approach'. Against the now institutionalized voices of theorists like Johnston, Cook and Mulvey she cites another feminist theoretical tradition embodied in the work of US feminist theorists like Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly.²⁰

Using 'sociological' theory as one's guide, many of the naively realist documentaries of the seventies take on a sophistication and a self-awareness typically denied them. For example *Janie's Janie*, the subject of a great deal of academic feminist realism bashing, actually utilizes a range of documentary techniques, some more 'realist' than others. The film documents the coming-into-consciousness of a working-class, single mother, who, by the film's end, has joined a group for welfare mothers fighting for better education for poor children, and childcare for working mothers. It is true that a direct-cinema camera documents images of Janie at home in grainy and shaky black-and-white; the camera sloppily zooms to catch her making sandwiches or cleaning the living room. We are allowed to see, as it 'really' happens, her housework, the demands of her children, her poverty. However, a good deal of the images of Janie's 'real' life in her busy and loud household capture her being interviewed, which is nothing like her real life (and nothing like the 'verite' style claimed to define this film). As she takes care of her 'real' tasks at home, she also answers questions about the pain she experienced when she lived with her husband and before that with

¹⁹ Stuart Hall writes: 'Is it true that ideologies work exclusively by their forms? This position depends on an anti-realist aesthetic - a fashionable position in debates about ideology in the early 1970s ... it represented at the time a certain justified "formalist" reaction to the over-preoccupation with "content" and "realism" on the traditional left. But it was and is open to very serious criticism. For one thing it was founded on a rather loony and quite ahistorical view of the narrative and presentation forms in television. They were said *all* to belong to the same type of "realism" - the realism of the realist text, was the phrase - which, apparently, was introduced in the fourteenth century and had persisted, more or less, right up to *Man Alive*.' 'The whites of their eyes', in Manuel Alvarado and John Thompson (eds), *The Media Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 1990), p. 21.

²⁰ B. Ruby Rich, 'In the name of feminist film theory', in *Movies and Methods: Volume II*, Bill Nichols (ed.), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 349-50.

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²¹ Kaplan, 'Theories and strategies of the feminist documentary', p. 87.

²² Barbara Susan, 'About my consciousness raising', in Leslie Tanner (ed.), *Voices From Women's Liberation* (New York: Signet Books, 1970), p. 242.

²³ Lynn O'Conner quoted in 'A broom of one's own: notes on the women's liberation program', in Joan Cooke, Charlotte Bunch-Weeks, and Robin Morgan (eds), *The New Women* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1970), pp. 189-90.

her father, and about how she fought and beat the electric company when it tried to turn off her service. Distinct from these two sorts of sequences are the dramatically-lit, direct-address statements which she makes about her life while sitting alone in her kitchen. Midway through the film there occurs an arty sequence which metaphorically depicts Janie's growth into a feminist consciousness. Staged images of Janie looking into a mirror and washing dishes (shot from outside the house through a grimy window) are set, proto-MTV style, to folksy women's music. Later the camera follows Janie to a political meeting, and then out into the world, as she informs us in a voiceover about the many issues for which she, and other women, still need to fight.

The filmmakers use a range of documentary techniques to record specific tensions within, and interpretations of, Janie's identity and reality. Yet, this is not so much to convince the audience that Janie is a real woman ('the direct mode of address . . . encourages us to relate to the images of Joyce and Janie as "real" women, as if we could know them')²¹ as to make what was at the time a current and radical political argument concerning women's self-discovery as a route towards feminist *collective identity* and political action. In 1970, Barbara Susan wrote about consciousness raising as a radical political theory:

Consciousness raising is a way of forming a political analysis on information we can trust is true. That information is our experience. It is difficult to understand how our oppression is political (organized) unless we first remove it from the area of personal problems. Unless we talk to each other about and see how many of our problems are shared by other people, we won't be able to see how problems are rooted in politics.²²

Coming directly out of this political philosophy, *Janie's Janie* makes use of the camera in a manner similar to the structure of a consciousness-raising group: by articulating and sharing in public her personal history and experience *on film*, she works to construct a political critique regarding the status of all women. This is marked formally by the transition from Janie's single, isolated image recorded alone in the domestic sphere, to her communal political action in the outside world: a move discussed and performed by many women in and out of representation during this period. For example, Lynn O'Conner writes about women's experiences in consciousness raising: 'She begins to understand that the process of consciousness raising is in fact a process that probably has no end, that she may now understand the need for collective revolutionary solutions, but her own consciousness is still on the move and she knows not where it will end.'²³ Only after speaking to *the camera*, about her past, her relationships to men, her lack of job training, and the racism which was bred in her by her family, school and

24 Lesage, 'The political aesthetics of the feminist documentary', p. 515.

25 Kaplan, 'Theories and strategies of the feminist documentary', p. 87.

26 Dargis and Taubin, 'Double take' p. 56.

neighbourhood, does Janie recognize her need to interact with other poor women with needs similar to her own, regardless of their race.

'It was an act of previously unarticulated knowledge', writes Julia Lesage in 1978 about the feminist documentary film of the seventies, 'of seeing that knowledge as political (i.e. as a way of beginning to change power relations), and of understanding the power of this knowledge was that it was arrived at collectively'.²⁴ The making of this film provides the forum for Janie's 'previously unarticulated knowledge'; it propels Janie's individual experience into the realm of the collective. The film doesn't document Janie's fixed and unproblematic identity so much as it documents Janie's identity-in-process, her coming into a politicized identity and the making of a political woman through the focus upon identity allowed by cinematic realism. So intent were some film theorists upon inventing a new, more liberatory, filmic language that it seems that this very cinematic realism – a term which in their usage loosely encompasses the variety of formal techniques used in *Janie's Janie* and films like it – blinded them to what else occurred in the film (its class and gender-based analysis, its critique of the fixed identity of the isolated housewife). Thus Kaplan can argue that simply because Janie is depicted in a realist 'autobiographical mode', she is necessarily seen in the manner of all realist films – having an essence that has 'persisted through time and whose personal growth or change is autonomous, outside the influence of social structure, economic relations, or psychoanalytical law'²⁵ – even as Janie articulates a politicized critique in these same talking-head interviews.

The reliance upon talking-head style of many early feminist documentaries has also inspired a great deal of harsh criticism. Yet, in retrospect, Amy Taubin insists that a primary lesson of seventies documentaries is that 'the way to insure marginalized people a place in history is to record their stories on film'.²⁶ Realist codes and talking-head conventions are most typically used to do the political work of entering new opinions, new subjectivities, or newly-understood identities, into public discourse. Thus, *It Happens to Us* (Amalie Rothschild, 1972) compiles testimony of women who have had abortions by primarily utilizing a talking-head interview technique. We see women addressing an interviewer or the camera and speaking out loud their gruesome, undocumented, private experiences with illegal abortions. The interviews of a diverse group of women are edited thematically. Although the individual stories of the women are compelling and unique, the power of the film is not in its conventional realist function of confirming these women's realities or identities as fixed or complete – in inspiring identification with individual women – but documenting the reality of a collective, gendered oppression. Words that have rarely been said by women out loud form a revisionist history that unifies a range of positions as

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Similarly, films like *Healthcaring: From Our End of the Speculum* (Denise Bostrom and Jane Warrenbrand, 1976) and *Birth Film* (Susan Kleckner, 1972) enter 'private' images of women's bodies into the public domain: we see a closeup of a mother giving a gynaecological exam to her daughter; we see a closeup of a woman's vagina as she gives birth to a child. The female genitals are shot in such extreme closeup that we lose sight of the 'real' woman attached to them. Instead, these images provide visual evidence towards the contemporaneous political critique of the healthcare system and the social construction of women's sexuality. In an article written in 1971 about the politics of women's sexuality, Alix Shulman explains, 'now that women, the only real experts on female sexuality, are beginning to talk together and share notes, they are discovering their experiences are remarkably similar and that they are not freaks. In the process of exposing the myths and lies, women are discovering that it is not they who have individual sex problems: it is society that has one great big political problem.'²⁷

27 Alix Shulman, 'Organs and orgasms', in Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran (eds), *Woman in Sexist Society* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1971), p. 301.

28 Dargis and Taubin, 'Double take', p. 56.

According to Taubin, seventies feminist documentaries are defined by 'a realpolitik rather than the politics of representation'.²⁸ But this realpolitik is based upon a politics of representation, although not one directly indebted to semiotics or psychoanalysis. Rather, feminist realist documentaries focus attention on the *condition of constructing collective identity through representation*. A large number of these documentaries include self-referential footage which records the delight and power felt by women learning to use film and audio equipment. In *The Woman's Film* (Woman's Caucus of San Francisco Newsreel, 1971) images of women with cameras and nagra sound recorders accompany the voices of women in a consciousness-raising group who are discussing the importance of women taking control of technology. As with the political strategy of consciousness raising, these films do not attempt to confirm the stability or unity of identity, but rather its flexibility and the potential political power of individuals connecting through systems of discourse which allow for the recognition of the relatedness of their identities and hence the possibility for collective action.

Thus, what may seem to be an irreconcilable split between competing feminist theories founded upon either second-wave feminist consciousness raising (as evidenced in much of the period's documentary film production) or adaptations of ideological analysis (as evidenced in the feminist film critique of these films) is instead a more subtle contradiction in beliefs about the political efficacy of reality and identity. Both of these schools of feminist film theory and practice agree that the identities that are created for women by bourgeois, patriarchal ideology are dangerous and oppressive. They also share the belief that neither identity nor reality are essential or

29 Johnston, 'Women's cinema as counter cinema', p. 215.

fixed, but rather that they are constructed by patriarchal culture. Yet academic feminists of the period seemed to argue that a dismantling of identity is the viable response to these conditions, while most feminist documentarians utilized the strategic construction of identity as their first step. 'Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality',²⁹ writes Johnston. I agree, and suggest that realist images of women discussing their lived experience is one strategy with which to initiate this challenge.

A demonstration of contradictions III

During the Spring semester of 1992 I taught a course at Swarthmore College called 'Women and Documentary'. The final class of a section devoted to women's documentary practice in the seventies focused upon the talking-head history film. We viewed *Union Maids* (Julia Reichert, James Klein and Miles Mogulescu, 1975), having read a great deal of contemporaneous feminist film theory in the preceding weeks. As we discussed why feminists had criticized these less-than-formally-innovative films, two comments seemed particularly demonstrative of the sentiment in the classroom. One student explained that whenever she found herself *liking* the film, getting wrapped up in the words or struggles of the women speaking on the screen, she would think of me so as to remember why I would say this wasn't a 'good' film. After screening *Union Maids*, another student sheepishly asked: 'Remind me why we're not supposed to like identification?'

The psychoanalytically informed film criticism following Mulvey's original attack on the visual pleasure of narrative cinema is still marked by a suspicion of any kind of feminine role model, heroine or image of identification . . . 'Identification' itself has been seen as a cultural process complicit with the reproduction of dominant culture by reinforcing patriarchal forms of identity. Jackie Stacey. 'Feminine fascinations: forms of identification in star-audience relations', p. 147.

Discussing *Union Maids*, my students say that they enjoy hearing smart, brave, political women recounting their lives. Feminist film theory be damned, young feminists need role models. They are moved by the images of beautiful, smart, political and articulate women on the TV screen. Realism-schemealism; we are almost entirely denied this privilege in our culture. In a review of a Whitney Museum series highlighting the documentaries of the women's movement, Manohla Dargis and Amy Taubin have a similar reaction: 'After a decade of Phil and Oprah and Sally, it was

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Making identity in alternative AIDS media by women

It seems useful at this point to make a general distinction between the use of talking heads to represent some official and authoritative position, and the use of talking heads of people who are telling their own stories.

Barbara Halpern Martineau, 'Talking about our lives and experiences: some thoughts about feminism, documentary and "talking heads"', p. 259.

As she critiques realist documentaries, Claire Johnston claims that 'it is idealist mystification to believe that "truth" can be captured by the camera'.³⁰ The use of the term 'mystification' seems misplaced here: it is an elitist mystification to believe that non-academics believe that 'truth' is the only thing captured by cameras. In my work producing alternative AIDS video with collectives of women who are affected by the crisis (working-class, minority women from Brooklyn in *We Care*; poor, HIV-positive men and women from Brooklyn in *HIV TV*; privileged college undergraduates for *Safer and Sexier: A College Student's Guide to Safer Sex*) I have seen again and again that activist videomakers are doing something quite different than capturing truth with their camcorders. AIDS documentaries which focus upon the real words and experiences of real women attempt to make with video *a better vision* of that individual's reality as well as to contribute towards a better reality for the intended viewer.³¹ Political women need to make and watch videos to hear and see themselves speak: a condition unavailable for many of them in the 'real' world. Women in AIDS videos like *We Care* and *HIV TV*, are not experts in the 'real' world; Marie and Cathy do not get the time and privilege to define themselves publicly in the 'real' world; they do not communicate effortlessly across divisions of class, race and geography. Thus, a large number of alternative tapes about AIDS by women document, celebrate and affirm, in the dreaded 'autobiographical mode', the words and experiences of the maker and those who then identify with her: 'Hi, I'm Marie, welcome to my home'. 'I'm Cathy Elaine Davies. I'm a patient here at Woodhull. I'd like to inform you on safer sex.' While Kaplan worries that we will be duped by the 'unified self which characterizes pre-semineological thought', those of us making feminist documentaries are deciding the best way to be ourselves *for the camera*, for the scene, for the particular video with its particular purposes. We ask questions like: 'Should I sound familiar, or like an expert?' 'Did I say that right?' 'Could you shoot that again?'

In feminist documentaries such as *Union Maids*, *Janie's Janie*, *We*

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 214.

³¹ A similar project is seen in the Soviet constructivist documentaries of Esther Shub and Dziga Vertov. See Annette Michelson (ed.), *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Vlada Petric, 'Esther Shub: cinema is my life', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1978) pp. 430-56.

Care, and *HIV TV*, codes of realism *are* used, and identification is intended to occur between maker, subject and viewer. Yet, even as a woman speaks as herself on camera, or even as a viewer identifies with her, these makers, subjects, and spectators are perfectly aware of the videotape mediating between the women watching in the world and the women represented to them through discourse. If you have ever shot a video or been interviewed, you know that using a camera is not an innocent act. You become aware of the power there; you become aware of how the camera affects an interaction. The videotape left over after an event or a moment is not simply that moment; not as complete, not as rich, not as thorough as your real experience. It's something else – something powerful too – something like a video. If you have ever edited you know this with an irrefutable certainty, as you move an image of a moment next to an image of another moment that was not next to it in reality, as you pull a good sentence out of a muddled paragraph, as you make yourself more articulate by dropping the 'ums' and 'ands.' You have made something there. If what you have shot is a person, perhaps yourself, then you *know*, no naivete here, that the act of making a video is a work of self-production. By working with and through forms of representation like video, identity and meaning are made. This is precisely what the feminist–realist debate said we *did not* know. But how could one not recognize that it is the self-conscious telling of oneself and one's ideas, to a camera and through an editing machine, that makes the self that one becomes on video? It is a privilege, as a woman, and as a political woman, and as a culturally disenfranchised woman, to get to do this: we are so rarely allowed to work on, and then present our selves as we hope to be seen.

To make an image of little-represented identities is just that: making *images*. The point is not that by shooting a video you lock yourself, your identity, into one place, but rather that you work on it, that you are self-consciously aware that there needs to be an identity there. A steady shot of a woman does not necessarily fix her with an essential identity, especially if she is discussing (or depicting) in front of the camera her own ambiguity about her identity. Since so much of feminist and other 'identity' video movements are specifically about *constructing* our own identities in a society that has usually done this for minorities, much of the 'realist' footage in minority-produced productions ends up recording people reflexively discussing the meaning, reinterpretation and importance of their own identity.

If the construction of identity is so clear to the women who make political documentary, is it equally evident to those who watch it? If the work of film production highlights the act of identity construction for the maker, is this readily available to the viewer? Does the powerful draw and pleasure of identification, as defined by

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³² Interestingly enough such feminist reinterpretations of earlier film theory have been focused for at least the past ten years on the 'women's film' and other popular texts. As scholars try to understand how women can watch mainstream cinema and television without being duped and without being considered stupid, they have had to expand and alter feminist interpretations of identification and negotiation. Perhaps because of a profession-wide disappearance of studies of both documentary and the avant garde, this feminist critique has remained almost entirely in the domain of mainstream culture.

³³ Jackie Stacey, 'Feminine fascinations: forms of identification in star-audience relations' in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 160.

³⁴ Kaplan, *Women and Film*, p. 127.

feminist film theory, deplete the realist image of its self-aware identity production? Certainly we 'identify' with the aspects of women's experiences which sound and look like our own, but we also emulate traits and experiences which are different from our own, and we discard the stuff we do not like or understand. In a recent article about women's fascination with female stars, Jackie Stacey attempts to expand the earlier, psychoanalytic, feminist theoretical understandings of identification so that she can understand a range of processes described by female fans about their relations to the stars.³² She found that women's recollections about their favourite stars invariably brought forth discussion of a variety of processes of identification, only some of these filling the rigid feminist, psychoanalytic mould.³³

The work of defining who we are in relation to AIDS is encouraged by realist images of real women. Our identity in relation to AIDS is not stable and final, so we produce new and useful identities in relation to what we see on the screen. We appreciate that these women-on-tape tell us facts we need to know, while at the same time modelling images of proud, powerful and dedicated black, female, HIV-positive women. Because the women who watch and make political documentary share beliefs, feminist positions or a political agenda, viewers use their identification with women on the screen as do women in consciousness-raising groups: not to form a complete sense of self, but to cross through individual identity so as to unify a collective, ideological agenda.

Thus, I believe that the worry that many feminist film critics communicated in the realist debates that in such films 'the filmic processes leave us with no work to do, so that we sit passively and receive the message',³⁴ is short-sighted. First, it is condescending to the feminist spectator who has a real stake in interpreting and evaluating the rare representations of her beliefs and 'identity'; it is not only feminist film scholars who question and challenge representation. And there are many formal and thematic elements within even a realist, talking-head video that refer to the act of representation; that call attention to video as video; that remind the viewer that realist representation is not necessarily transparent. Direct address is one such element. When Marie talks to us, she calls attention to the power of the video camera: it lets her show her house to people who will never be there and lets her pass information beyond the spaces and places she travels in her life as an AIDS educator. Voices offscreen talking to the talking head (for example when a group member offcamera prompts Cathy with the term 'dental dam'), remind the viewer that there is a space on the other side of the camera. The comfort which resonates between subject and maker in many AIDS videos is palpable to the viewer. It reminds us that there is a process and interaction involved in taping: Marie lets this camera into her home; that must be someone

she likes or knows behind the camera; Cathy is acting comfortably, even in relation to articulating these difficult and personal topics.

35 Johnston, 'Women's cinema as counter cinema', p. 214.

Johnston's projection that 'a cinema of non-intervention . . . promotes a passive subjectivity at the expense of analysis'³⁵ also overgeneralizes filmic spectatorship, as if all viewing situations are the same. Recent ethnographic approaches to spectatorship have stressed that we view *in context*. For instance, viewers of alternative, political films do not watch them as they would Hollywood films, *even* when the form of the films is similar, because the screening of such films usually occurs in intimate gatherings where discussion subsequently focuses response. Somehow, in the flurry to disavow the talking head, realism and identification in the service of understanding and critiquing mechanisms of signification, feminist scholars stopped thinking critically about the complex and intelligent ways that many people watch and make realist film and video. Stacey finds that female spectators describe multiple and complex processes of identification: 'the research also challenges the assumption that identification is necessarily problematic because it offers the spectator the illusory pleasure of unified subjectivity. The identifications represented in these letters speak as much about partial recognitions and fragmented replications as they do about the misrecognition of a unified subjectivity in an ego ideal on the screen.'³⁶ Finally, the feminist realist debate missed the most critical point of all: the impact and power of these films and videos comes more from their *use* than from their *form*. These films are first, but not merely, forms of political action.

36 Stacey, 'Feminine fascination', p. 160.

They said we were trying to show reality. All I want to show is my video.

The theoretically sophisticated directors of the Third Cinema voiced a similar defence of the production of reality-based films for the political movements of the underdeveloped world. Film theorist and maker Fernando Birri writes: 'by testifying critically to this reality, to this sub-reality, to this misery, cinema refuses it. It rejects it. It denounces, judges, criticizes and deconstructs it.'³⁷ Birri's simultaneous use of 'reality' and 'deconstructs' points to an understanding of real-world conditions which are formed in, but are not reducible to, discourse. Gledhill, after questioning 'reality' and 'realism' for most of her article about developments in feminist film theory, concedes that when considering feminist documentaries as *political* tools, the theory itself must change as well: 'if a radical ideology, such as feminism, is to be defined as a means of providing a framework for political action, one must finally put one's finger on the scales, enter some kind of realist epistemology'.³⁸

37 Fernando Birri, 'Cinema and underdevelopment', in *Twenty-five Years of New Latin American Cinema*, Michael Channan (ed.), (Indiana: British Film Institute, 1983), p. 12.

38 Gledhill, p. 389.

This tension between theory and practice seems most tense for theorists. People making political art are more than capable of simultaneously understanding that while reality is constructed

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³⁹ James Meyer, 'AIDS and postmodernism', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 66, no. 8 (1992), p.65.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴¹ Cornel West, 'Black culture and postmodernism' in Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (eds), *Remaking History* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), p. 92.

⁴² bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 27.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

through discourse, it is also lived in ways that need to change for many individuals. James Meyer recognizes how this tension is resolved in AIDS activist art. In his article, 'AIDS and postmodernism', he argues that both postmodern and realist techniques are used as a 'double strategy', 'at once critical and presentational' in activist AIDS video production.³⁹ Producers of alternative AIDS video need to root their activist position in the claim of a strategic identity shared by others (caregivers; black, gay, male PWAs; members of ACT UP), while at the same time working towards a society more flexible in how it uses identity to label and control people. Thus, Meyer identifies a strange blend of 'avant-gardist criticality versus essentialist instrumentality'⁴⁰ in AIDS activist art production.

The recent writings of feminist, ethnic and gay cultural theorists invoke a similar understanding of identity: it is always constructed, it is neither fixed nor essential, but it needs to be present nevertheless. Cornel West suggests that while postmodern theory has made central the concerns of difference and otherness, there has been little focus on how considerations of the nonessential nature of identity can itself be used politically.⁴¹ People who are oppressed because of their identities, essential or culturally constructed, do not have the luxury of celebrating the end of identity. However, they do have the power to first define for themselves, and then unify around identities which are ever-adaptable and contextually useful. bell hooks invokes this position when she discusses 'radical postmodernism' which 'would need to consider the implications of a critique of identity for oppressed groups':⁴²

We return to 'identity' and 'culture' for relocation, linked to political practice – identity that is not informed by a narrow cultural nationalism masking continued fascination with the power of the white hegemonic order. Instead identity is evoked as a stage in a process wherein one constructs radical black subjectivity.⁴³

The making and watching of alternative AIDS video provides a space in culture where political women with limited access to cultural production can partake in 'radical postmodernism'. Using video, women affected by AIDS can begin to invent, articulate and debate who they are, what they know and what they could be. For the women in the AIDS community, the political instance of access to media production allows us to speak our needs, define our agenda, counter irresponsible depictions of our lives, and recognize our similarities and differences. Cathy, who was a sex worker, and is a recovering IV drug user, who lives in Woodhull hospital in Brooklyn and is HIV-positive, gets the authority of being treated as an expert. Marie, an HIV-positive, middle-aged black woman, is allowed the affirmation of the camera and the television screen, as

she takes her image to workshops and conferences. The spectator gets the pleasure and privilege of seeing ideas, communities and information that are rarely represented. There is pride to be gained from making a work that is important and useful to others. There is pleasure to be gained from seeing and being one's self. These are some of the many real prides and pleasures allowed by realism and identification when utilized as feminist strategies within politically motivated documentaries.

Solanas, Meyer, West, hooks and myself all refer to cultural production at once directly political and also theoretically complex. Too much criticism has sought to sever these agendas that many of us find perfectly compatible: the attempt to represent in order to contribute towards change in real-world, lived conditions as well as at the same time offering a critique of the notion of the unified, gendered, classed, raced subject who can be unproblematically represented and oppressed within that 'reality'. Although I would not want to suggest that all political documentaries struggle within both of these realms with equal skill, self-awareness or energy, I am trying to suggest that feminist, realist documentary – especially that motivated by political struggles which are focused upon the consequences of identity and community in a bigoted society – will position itself in both form and content, in some relation to reality, and more often than not this is a position of criticality, theoretical sophistication, and practical efficacy.

My thanks to the many friends and colleagues who read, discussed and inspired this paper – especially Erin Cramer, Betsy Bolton, Alisa Lebow and Scott Bukatman for their close and careful readings of many drafts. It seems many of us 'Third Wavers' are trying to reevaluate and retrace our recent, yet often hidden, feminist theoretical past.

The Whitney Museum programme included: *Three Lives*, Women's Liberation Cinema Company, 1970; *The Woman's Film*, Woman's Caucus of San Francisco Newsreel, 1971; *Women's Lib*, People's Video Theater, 1970; *The Politics of Intimacy*, Julie Gustafson, 1972-3; *Another Look*, Women's Video News Service, 1972; *The Fifth Street Women's Building Film*, Janus Lurie, 1971; *Heithearing: From Our End of the Speculum*, Denise Bostrom and Jane Warrenbrand, 1976; *It Happens to Us*, Amalie Rothschild, 1972; *Birth Film*, Susan Kleckner, 1972; *Growing Up Female*, Julia Reichert and James Klein, 1971; *Fifty Wonderful Years*, Optic Nerve, 1973; *Nun and Deviant*, Nancy Angelo and Candace Compton, 1976; *Makeout*, New York Newsreel, 1972; *Not A Pretty Picture*, Martha Coolidge, 1975; *Nana, Mom and Me*, Amalie Rothschild, 1974; *Ama l'uomo tuo*, Cara de Vito, 1974; *Daughter-Rite*, Michelle Citron, 1978; *The Emerging Woman*, Women's Film Project, 1974; *Antonia: Portrait of the Woman*, Judy Collins and Jill Godmilow, 1974; *Union Maids*, Julia Reichert, James Klein and Miles Mogulescu, 1975; *Janie's Janie*, Geri Ashur and Peter Barton, 1970-71; *Harriet*, Nancy Cain, 1973; *Chris and Bernie*, Deborah Shaffer and Bonnie Friedman, 1975; *In the Best Interests of the Children*, Iris Film Collective, 1977; *Dyketactics*, Barbara Hammer, 1974; *The Amazon Festival*, Santa Cruz Women's Media Collective, 1973-7. See Programme Notes: Lucinda Furlong, 'From object to subject', The Whitney Museum of Modern Art, 1992. More films are listed in Julia Lesage's 'The political aesthetics of the feminist documentary film', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Fall 1978, including: *Three Lives*, Kate Millet; *Joyce at 34*, Joyce Chopra; *Woman to Woman*, Donna Deitch; *The Flashettes*, Bonnie Friedman; *Parthenogenesis*, Michelle Citron; *Like A Rose*, Tomato Productions; *We're Alive*, California Institute for Women Video; *Self Health*, San Francisco Women's Health Collective; *Taking Our Bodies Back*, Margaret Lazarus, Renner Wunderlich and Joan Fink; *The Chicago Maternity Center Story*, Kartmquin Films. Most of these films are very difficult, if not impossible, to find. They were often distributed by the maker; the distributors who handled many of these films are long out of business.

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