

VISIBLE EVIDENCE, VOLUME 6

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*Collecting Visible  
Evidence*

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Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov, Editors



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London

VISIBLE EVIDENCE

Edited by Michael Renov, Faye Ginsburg, and Jane M. Gaines

*Public confidence in the "real" is everywhere in decline. This series offers a forum for the in-depth consideration of the representation of the real, with books that engage issues that bear upon questions of cultural and historical representation, and that forward the work of challenging prevailing notions of the "documentary tradition" and of nonfiction culture more generally.*

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ALEXANDRA JUHASZ

[ 10 ] *They Said We Were Trying to Show Reality—All I Want to Show Is My Video: The Politics of the Realist Feminist Documentary*

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▶ **A Demonstration of Contradictions 1**

*The scene opens on 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, Mommy.' Then I knew I had to be more careful."*

:: description of a scene from *Women's AIDS Video Enterprise, We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*, 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," 1973

▶ **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*

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*cinema verité practices of the first generation of feminist documentary films.*

:: Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, "Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction," 1984

The women's movement of the early 1970s was enmeshed in a politics of representation. This inspired an unprecedented deluge of feminist films, the majority of which were documentaries.<sup>1</sup> In perhaps the only significant and coherent body of feminist film theory about documentary—the so-called feminist realist debates<sup>2</sup>—feminist scholars of this period used what Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams refer to in the quote above 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.<sup>3</sup> This has meant that as a feminist scholar of the media in the 1980s and 1990s, I have been instructed to believe that *realism* and *identification*—which are claimed to be axiomatic of talking-heads, cinema verité, or realist documentary—are not sophisticated, or even legitimate, formal strategies. And then correspondingly, feminist documentary films and videos that use such strategies (like my own *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 1970s and beyond: "Realism as a style is unable to change consciousness because it does not depart from the forms that embody the old consciousness."<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> Instead, Kaplan concludes, feminists need to make and view films that 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.<sup>6</sup>

For the majority of feminist film critics in the late 1970s and the 1980s, such pronouncements engendered a turn toward analysis of feminist avant-garde filmmaking and a concurrent erasure of more conventional political documentary practice. This inspired a theoretical and practical legacy that is the subject of this essay: the legacy of a large and important body of feminist film work that has been inadequately theorized and under-theorized, and the same-time canonization and institutionalization of films that represent only one side of the "feminist realist debates." Perhaps the

most disturbing consequence of this legacy is the loss of many of the documentaries that didn't quite make the list. Due to the insidious economic relationship between film scholarship and alternative film distribution, many of these films are lost for reevaluation because only twenty years later they are very difficult, if not impossible, to find.

Manohla Dargis begins her review of the Whitney Museum's 1992 program of 1970s 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 1980s, saw a great deal of Rainer, Potter, Ackerman, 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."<sup>7</sup> 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 ago. 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 1970s.<sup>8</sup>

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 that argued against the move toward 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 textbooks of feminist film theory).<sup>9</sup> 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 1970s (and 1980s and 1990s) realist, talking-heads documentaries by feminists and other dis-



Alex Juhasz, from *We AIDS, WAVE*, 1990.

enfranchised produced with groups of political producers are how often such work sometimes simplifies

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Alex Juhasz, from *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*. WAVE, 1990.

enfranchised 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 “realism” of the narrative Hollywood film identical to those of the “realism” of a cinema vérité 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 that quote, parody, and deconstruct this style (often within the same videos)? How are many of the accepted codes of “realism” dependent upon

access to funds, equipment, “professional” formats, and the conventional ideological positions that often align with power and capital?

Such questions point to the largely overgeneralized ways the term *realism* (as well as a host of others, including *documentary*, *cinema verité*, *identification*, *political film*, and *feminism*) is used in feminist film criticism toward the valuable work of making sense of the ideological effects of the filmic apparatus. Although such work has been immensely important, it has also often obscured the *distinctions* allowed by the always unique extra-textual conditions that define the production, reception, and form of non-industrial film and video, especially when film and video is motivated primarily by political urgency. If, in fact, it is true that the “realist” style of much 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 at this time this was a radical, new, and politicized reinterpretation of that very female subjectivity, one that 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, that did not adequately describe the documentary films that they critiqued, or the experience of making or viewing politically engaged films.<sup>10</sup> Feminist film theory was founded upon a misreading of two integral features of feminist realist documentary: that there are usually *multiple* film styles and theoretical assumptions in any given “realist” film and, more important, that realism and identification are used as viable theoretical strategies toward political ends within these films. Thus, for the sake of this essay, I will define *realism* and *identification* in ways that are indebted to, but necessarily more complicated than, how 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 molded 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 toward some manner of change. A great deal of political documentary uses realist form to do this work. By *realist form*, I refer to any of a number of always-changing conventions that 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 num-

ber of ways, including and reflection of both marginal, subversive. To portray the world that one believes to be unbiased, although this reality means, and change. To see a real world is not necessarily motivated real theirs is a politicized use *identification* to are the function of our sense of ourselves edge the many *confusion* of identification videos (which are recast television—unlikely, organizing to

As a feminist, I am troubled that the theory I make and watch. I



Aida Matta and her son in *People Affected by AIDS*.

ber 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 is not necessarily to 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, what it feels like, how it functions, or how it might 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 usually take 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 that occur when individuals view 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, I am disturbed that the theory I respect and use is so often at odds with the media I make and watch. In this essay I attempt to reconcile the contradictions



Aida Matta and her son, Miguel, from *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*, WAVE, 1990.

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 will argue that this did not occur 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 legitimate 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 essay I attempt to retrieve 1970s 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 is without any warrant whatsoever. Nor is it to posit that we haven't 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) that 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, I am arguing that a careful look at the formal strategies of many of the feminist "realist" documentaries of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s will allow us to see what many earlier critics missed: that there is contradiction, antirealism, and many realisms within specific "realist" texts. But second, I am arguing that even the most "naively realist" moments within such films can function in ways more viable than many critiques 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 toward personal and collective action.

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▶ A Demonstration

So, even as the problems with realist form that have been identified by anti-realist 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. Although 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 audiences, 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 essay, I first look at realist political documentaries from the 1970s and then conclude with a discussion of my own AIDS video production. This work represents my attempt to understand both what the antirealist position missed and how it also contributed to a critical vocabulary that has pushed many makers and viewers of realist documentaries in the 1990s toward a more noticeably self-aware theoretical/political practice.

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### A Demonstration of Contradictions 2

*"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."*

:: description of a scene from VIP Video Group, *HIV TV*, 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," 1983

### 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 Criticism," 1978

Although 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



How HIV is transmitted, from *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*, WAVE, 1990.

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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 U.S. academy, while the newly translated to 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 that focused on this theory was itself providing a legitimating discourse for American scholars. Thus, before Kaplan critiques *Janie's Janie*, she devotes six pages to "the theoretical sources for such arguments," schematically citing the work of Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Metz, Barthes, Kristeva, and Althusser.<sup>11</sup> 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 produce a generation of feminist film scholars."<sup>12</sup> They are quick to bemoan a "loss of activism," but they treat this as a natural progression rather than as 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."<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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 are most often producers of color, poor people, less educated people, some women; "they" use realism naively. The critique of "their" work 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?<sup>15</sup>

There is absolutely nothing *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, unstereotyped 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*.<sup>16</sup>

Well before, during, and after the creation of a feminist avant-garde film tradition in the 1970s, there was a long and rich tradition of a “naive,” window-on-the-world type of political documentary production that includes much of the work of the Third Cinema, the identity film and video movements of women, people of color, and gays in the 1970s, 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 toward the construction of identities in cultures where some individuals and communities continue to be invisible, voiceless, and misrepresented for political ends.

Thus my intent in this essay 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 theoretical grid was held up against a body of film work that was itself based upon another set of theoretical principals. 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);<sup>17</sup> rather, they privileged this discourse over another contemporaneous constellation of theories, those of the second-wave American women's movement, for example. B. Ruby Rich delineates what was actually a split in feminist film theory during its formative period: the American, “so-called sociological, approach” and the “originally British, so-called theoretical, approach.” Against the now institutionalized voices of theorists like Johnston, Pam

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Cook, and Mulvey she cites another feminist theoretical tradition embodied in the work of American feminist theorists such as Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly.<sup>18</sup>

Using "sociological" theory as one's guide, many of the naively realist documentaries of the 1970s take on a sophistication and self-awareness typically denied to them. For example, *Janie's Janie* (1970-71), 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 film's end has joined a group for welfare mothers fighting for better education for poor children and child care 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 many 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 "verité" 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 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 that she makes about her life while sitting alone in her kitchen. Meanwhile, midway through the film an arty sequence occurs that 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 voice-over 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")<sup>19</sup> as to make what was at the time a current and radical political argument concerning women's self-discovery as a route toward 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.<sup>20</sup>

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'Connor 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."<sup>21</sup> Only after speaking *to the camera* about her past, her relationships with men, her lack of job training, and the racism that was bred in her by her family, school, and neighborhood 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," Julia Lesage wrote in 1978 about the feminist documentary film of the 1970s, "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."<sup>22</sup> 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 does not document Janie's fixed and unproblematic identity so much as it documents Janie's identity-in-process, her coming into a politicized identity, the making of one 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 the cinematic realism of consciousness-raising—a term that 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



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Glenda Smith-Hasty, from *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*, WAVE, 1990.

has “persisted through time and whose personal growth or change is autonomous, outside the influence of social structure, economic relations, or psychoanalytical law”<sup>23</sup>—even as Janie articulates a politicized critique in these self-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 1970s documentaries is that “the way to insure marginalized people a place in history is to record their stories on film.”<sup>24</sup> 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* (1972) compiles testimony of women who have had abortions by utilizing primarily a talking-head interview technique. We see women addressing an interviewer or the camera and telling 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 in its documentation of 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 one

potential for a shared feminist identity and the political action that this collective articulation of oppression will inspire.

Similarly, films like *Healthcaring: From Our End of the Speculum* (1976) and *Birth Film* (1972) enter "private" images of women's bodies into the public domain: we see a close-up of a mother giving a gynecological exam to her daughter; we see a close-up of a woman's vagina as she gives birth to a child. The female genitals are shot in such extreme close-up that we lose sight of the "real" woman attached to them. Instead, these images provide visual evidence toward the contemporaneous political critique of the health care 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.<sup>25</sup>

According to Taubin, 1970s feminist documentaries are defined by "a realpolitik rather than the politics of representation."<sup>26</sup> 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 that records the delight and power felt by women learning to use film and audio equipment. In *The Woman's Film* (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's taking control of technology. As with the political strategy of consciousness-raising, these films attempt to confirm not the stability or unity of identity, but rather its flexibility and the potential political power of individuals connecting through systems of discourse that allow for the recognition of the relatedness of their identities and thus 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



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Sharon Penceal, from *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*, WAVE, 1990.

women by bourgeois, patriarchal ideology are dangerous and oppressive. They also share the belief that neither identity nor reality is essential or fixed; rather, both 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, and most feminist documentarians utilized the strategic reconstruction of identity as their first step. "Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality," writes Johnston.<sup>27</sup> I agree, and I suggest that realist images of women discussing their lived experience constitute one such strategy with which to initiate this challenge.

### ▶ A Demonstration of Contradictions 3

*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 1970s focused upon the talking-head history film. We viewed *Union Maids*, 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 viewing *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," 1991

*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-schmealism; 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 startling to hear and see women give witness, but not in the degraded language of talk TV."*

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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," 1984

As she critiques realist documentaries, Claire Johnston claims that "it is idealist mystification to believe that 'truth' can be captured by the camera."<sup>28</sup> The mystification seems misplaced here: it is an elitist mystification to believe that nonacademics believe that "truth" is the only thing captured by cameras. In my work producing alternative AIDS videos with collectives of individuals who are affected by the crisis (working-class, minority women from Brooklyn for *We Care*, poor HIV-positive men and women from

Brooklyn for *Sexier: A Collage* that activist vi- ing truth with real words and better vision c better reality f watch videos t for many of th *Care* and *HIV* don't get the t world; they do and geography women docum mode," the wa tify with them Davies. I'm a j While Kaplan characterizes p mentaries are scene, for the p like "Should I "Could you sh

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Brooklyn for *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 from capturing truth with their camcorders. AIDS documentaries that focus upon the real words and experiences of real women attempt to make with video *a better vision* of those individuals' reality as well as to contribute toward a better reality for the intended viewer.<sup>29</sup> 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 such as *We Care* and *HIV TV* aren't experts in the “real” world; Marie and Cathy don't get the time and privilege to define themselves publicly in the “real” world; they don't 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 makers and those who then identify with them: “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 safe sex.” While Kaplan worries that we will be duped by the “unified self which characterizes pre-semiological 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 Care*, and *HIV TV*, codes of realism *are* used, and identification *is* intended to occur among 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've 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 simply isn't that moment—it is not as complete, not as rich, not as thorough as your real experience. It is something else—something powerful, too, something like a video. If you've 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 wasn't 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've *made* something there. If what you've shot is a person, perhaps yourself, then you *know*, no naïveté here, that the act of making a



Carmen and Willy, from *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*, WAVE, 1990.

video is a work of self-production. By working with and through forms of representation like video, we make identity and meaning. 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 ourselves as we hope to be seen.

To make images of little-represented identities is just that: to make *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. Because 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 is this readily available image of its self-aware aspects of women, we also emulate that we discard the stuff about women's fascism and the earlier, psychological identification so the female fans about the recollections about a variety of procedures rigid feminist, psychological

The work of documentary realist images of reality and final, so we proceed on the screen. We need to know, while and dedicated black and make political agenda, view do women in consciousness of self, but to cross ideological agenda.

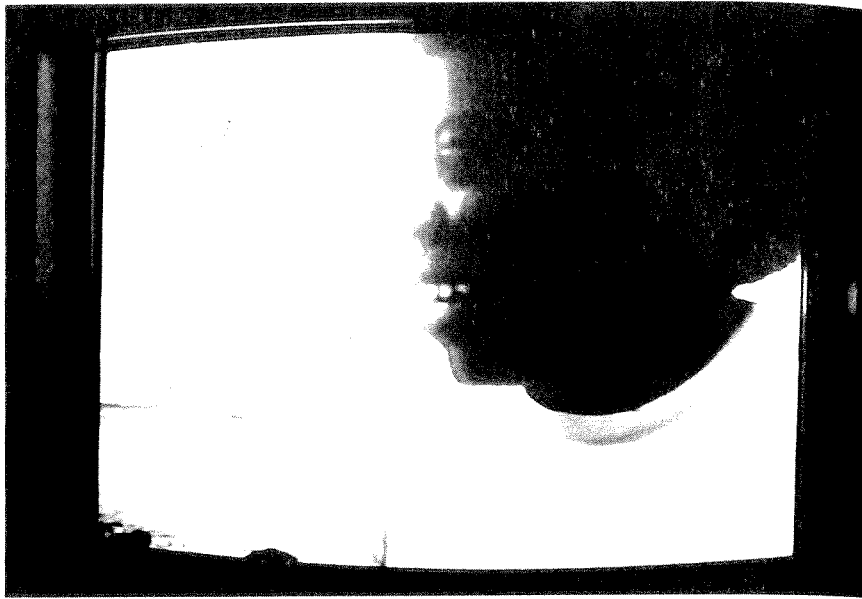
Thus I believe categorized in the realist with no work to do shortsighted.<sup>32</sup> First a real stake in interj beliefs and "identity and challenge representations within even a representation, that call that realist representation one such element. V of the video camera there, it lets her pass in her life as an AIDS head (for example, the words "dental d



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 feminist film theory, deplete the realist image of its self-aware identity production? Certainly we "identify" with the aspects of women's experiences that sound and look like our own, but we also emulate traits and experiences that are different from our own, and we discard the stuff we don't like or don't 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.<sup>30</sup> She found that women's recollections about their favorite stars invariably brought forth discussion of a variety of processes of identification, only some of these filling the rigid feminist, psychoanalytic mold.<sup>31</sup>

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 modeling images of proud, powerful, and dedicated black, 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" is shortsighted.<sup>32</sup> 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, it lets her pass information beyond the spaces and places she travels in her life as an AIDS educator. Voices off-screen talking to the talking head (for example, when a group member off-camera prompts Cathy with the words "dental dam") remind the viewer that there is a space on the



Sharon Penceal, from *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*, WAVE, 1990.

other side of the camera. The comfort that 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.

Johnston's projection that "a cinema of non-intervention . . . promotes a passive subjectivity at the expense of analysis" also overgeneralizes filmic spectatorship, as if all viewing situations are the same.<sup>33</sup> 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 forms of the films are 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

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partial recognitions and fragmented replications as they do about the misrecognition of a unified subjectivity in an ego ideal on the screen.<sup>34</sup>

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.

*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 defense for the production of reality-based films for the political movements of the underdeveloped. 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."<sup>35</sup> Birri's simultaneous use of "reality" and "deconstructs" points to an understanding of real-world conditions that 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 one considers 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."<sup>36</sup>

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 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.<sup>37</sup> 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 people with AIDS; members of ACT UP) while at the same time working toward representing or building 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" in AIDS activist art production.<sup>38</sup>

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 although postmodern theory has made central the concerns of difference and otherness, there has been little focus on how considerations



Marcia Edwards, from *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*, WAVE, 1990.

of the nonessential nature of identity can itself be used politically.<sup>39</sup> 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 first to define for themselves and then to unify around identities that 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”:

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.<sup>40</sup>

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, 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 HIV-positive, middle-camera and the TV soferences. The spectat communities, and inf to be gained from ma There is pleasure to b some of the many rea cation when utilized : documentaries.

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#### NOTES

1. The Whitney Museum sh these feminist documen 1992 program “From Ob Documents and Docume Women’s Movement.” *Th Three Lives* (Women’s Li Company, 1970), *The Wo Caucus of San Francisc Women’s Lib* (People’s V *The Politics of Intimacy* 1972–73), *Another Look News Service*, 1972), *Th Women’s Building Film* (*Healthcaring: From Our* (Denise Bostrom and Ja 1976), *It Happens to Us* 1972), *Birth Film* (Susan *Growing Up Female* (Ju James Klein, 1971), *Fifty* (Optic Nerve, 1973), Nur

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 TV screen, as she takes her image to workshops and conferences. The spectator gets the rare 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 oneself. These are some of the many real prides and pleasures allowed by realism and identification when utilized as feminist strategies within politically motivated documentaries.

I have highlighted here several critics who refer to cultural production as at once directly political and theoretically complex. Too much criticism has needed to sever these agendas that many of us find perfectly compatible: the attempt to represent in order to contribute toward change in real-world, lived conditions and at the same time offer 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 documentary struggles 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 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 position is one of criticality, theoretical sophistication, and practical efficacy.

#### NOTES

1. The Whitney Museum showed twenty-six of these feminist documentaries in its January 1992 program "From Object to Subject: Documents and Documentaries from the Women's Movement." The program 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 Guftason, 1972-73), *Another Look* (Women's Video News Service, 1972), *The Fifth Street Women's Building Film* (Janus Lurie, 1971), *Healthcaring: 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), and *The Amazon Festival* (Santa Cruz Women's Media Collective, 1973-77). See Lucinda Furlong, "From Object to Subject," program notes, 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* 3, no. 4 (fall 1978), including *Three Lives* (Kate Millett), *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), and *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 makers, and the distributors that handled many of these films are long out of business.

2. 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)."
3. I've capitalized *Feminist Film Theory* here to help signify the highly canonical nature of what is in fact, a very recent and only small subset of a much larger and more contradictory body of critical writing. Throughout this essay, I refer to the few authors and texts that 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. Just so, the writings from one "side" of this "debate" have been more broadly circulated; the writings that participate in the anti-realist side of this "debate" include Christine Gledhill, "Recent Developments in Feminist Film Criticism," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3, no. 4 (fall 1978): 458-93; Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema," in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 1, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) (this appeared originally in *Notes on Women's Cinema*, ed. Claire Johnston [London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973]); Kaplan, "The Realist Debate" (this chapter is revised and expanded in the article "Theories and Strategies of the Feminist Documentary," in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988], 78-102); Eileen McGarry, "Documentary, Realism, and Women's Cinema," *Women and Film* 2, no. 7 (1975): 50-57.
4. Kaplan, "The Realist Debate," 131.
5. McGarry, "Documentary, Realism," 53.
6. Kaplan, "The Realist Debate," 138.
7. Lesage, "The Political Aesthetics," 510.
8. 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 1970s feminist documentaries. For instance, the group is currently in production on a tape about feminist self-health.

9. Some of these articles that contest the anti-realist position include Julia Lesage, "The Political Aesthetics"; Barbara Halpern Martineau, "Talking about Our Lives and Experiences: Some Thoughts about Feminism, Documentary and Talking Heads," in *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of Committed Documentary*, ed. Thomas Waugh (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 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* 24 (autumn 1977); and Lesley Stern, "Feminism and Cinema-Exchanges," *Screen* 20, no. 3-4 (1979-80).
10. Several of the articles that 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.'" "The Realist Debate," 134. Similarly, Gledhill 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." (Christine Gledhill, "Developments in Feminist Film Criticism," in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams [Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America and American Film Institute, 1984], 41. However, these realist forests were somehow missed for the semiotic trees. The legacy of these articles centers on their criticism of realist practices.
11. Kaplan, "Theories and Strategies," 79-80.
12. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, "Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction," in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America and American Film Institute, 1984), 4.
13. Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1989), xii.
14. See, for example, *Camera Obscura* 3-4 (1979). "Chronology," written by the Camera Obscura Collective in this issue, documents the Collective's intellectual history, from the

founding of the first feminist film collective, *Women and Film*, in 1973 to 1979. The Collective explicitly declared its political stance and the major tendency of 1970s feminism, the major tendency of feminists at the time," because we can feminists were again: work," meaning the writing of Freud.

15. In Manohla Dargis and A. Taubin, *Village Voice*, January 1979.
16. Doane, et al., "Feminist Film Theory," in *Voices from Women and Film*.
17. Stuart Hall writes: "Is it true that the major tendency of feminists at the time," because we can feminists were again: work," meaning the writing of Freud. It depends on an anti-realist position in debate in the early 1970s. . . . It is a time a certain justified 'for the over-preoccupation with 'realism' on the traditional and is open to very serious thing it was founded on a quite ahistorical view of the presentation forms in television said all to belong to the semiotic—the realism of the rephrase—which, apparently in the fourteenth century or more or less, right up to M. Hall, "The Whites of Their Media Reader, ed. Manue. John Thompson (London: 1990), 21.
18. B. Ruby Rich, "In the Name of Theory," in *Movies and Me* Bill Nichols (Berkeley: Univ Press, 1985), 349-50.
19. Kaplan, "Theories and Strategies of the Feminist Documentary," in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988], 78-102.
20. Barbara Susan, "About My Raising," in *Voices from Women and Film*, ed. Leslie Tanner (New York: 1979), 242.
21. Lynn O'Conner, "Defining the Small Group (pamphlet), c. Bunch-Weeks, "A Broom of on the Women's Liberation New Women, ed. Joanne C Bunch-Weeks, and Robin M wick, Conn.: Fawcett, 1970.
22. Lesage, "The Political Aesthetics," 510.
23. Kaplan, "Theories and Strategies of the Feminist Documentary," in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988], 78-102.
24. In Dargis and Taubin, "Do

- founding of the first feminist film journal, *Women and Film*, in 1973 to the present in 1979. The Collective explains that its intellectual shifts deigned it from "radical feminism, the major tendency among American feminists at the time," because most American feminists were against "theoretical work," meaning the writings of Marx and Freud.
15. In Manohla Dargis and Amy Taubin, "Double Take," *Village Voice*, January 21, 1992, 56.
  16. Doane, et al., "Feminist Film Criticism," 7-8.
  17. 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*." Stuart Hall, "The Whites of Their Eyes," in *The Media Reader*, ed. Manuel Alvarado and John Thompson (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 21.
  18. B. Ruby Rich, "In the Name of Feminist Film Theory," in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 349-50.
  19. Kaplan, "Theories and Strategies," 87.
  20. Barbara Susan, "About My Consciousness Raising," in *Voices from Women's Liberation*, ed. Leslie Tanner (New York: Signet, 1970), 242.
  21. Lynn O'Connor, "Defining Reality," in *The Small Group* (pamphlet), quoted in Charlotte Bunch-Weeks, "A Broom of One's Own: Notes on the Women's Liberation Program," in *The New Women*, ed. Joanne Cooke, Charlotte Bunch-Weeks, and Robin Morgan (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1970), 189-90.
  22. Lesage, "The Political Aesthetics," 515.
  23. Kaplan, "Theories and Strategies," 87.
  24. In Dargis and Taubin, "Double Take," 56.
  25. Alix Shulman, "Organs and Orgasms," in *Woman in Sexist Society*, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 301.
  26. In Dargis and Taubin, "Double Take," 56.
  27. Johnston, "Women's Cinema," 215.
  28. *Ibid.*, 214.
  29. 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* 3, no. 4 (fall 1978): 430-56.
  30. Interestingly, 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.
  31. Jackie Stacey, "Feminine Fascinations: Forms of Identification in Star-Audience Relations," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 160.
  32. Kaplan, "The Realist Debate," 127.
  33. Johnston, "Women's Cinema," 214.
  34. Stacey, "Feminine Fascinations," 160.
  35. Fernando Birri, "Cinema and Underdevelopment," in *Twenty-five Years of New Latin American Cinema*, ed. Michael Chanan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 12.
  36. Gledhill, "Whose Choice?" 389.
  37. James Meyer, "AIDS and Postmodernism," *Arts Magazine*, April 1992, 65.
  38. *Ibid.*
  39. Cornel West, "Black Culture and Postmodernism," in *Remaking History*, ed. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (Seattle: Bay, 1989), 92.
  40. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End, 1990), 27, 20.

