

Real Politics and Feminist Documentaries: Re-Visioning Seventies Film Feminisms

by

Shilyh J. Warren

Department of Literature
Duke University

Date: _____

Approved:

Ranjana Khanna, Co-Supervisor

Jane Gaines, Co-Supervisor

Toril Moi

Negar Mottahedeh

Robyn Wiegman

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
Literature in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

For a brief moment in feminist time, from 1968 to 1974, women's documentaries were influential in the emerging field of feminist film studies and for feminist activism. By the late sixties feminists had identified visual representation within popular culture, film, and the media as one of the central battlegrounds for women's activism. For feminist filmmakers, documentary, with its alleged superlative grip on truth and transparency, seemed to provide an ideal counterpoint to the perceived mis-representation of "real" women in dominant, narrative cinema. Within seventies feminist film theory, however, scholars elaborated a gender-specific take on the ideological critique of realism that disavowed women's documentary films as naïve, unsophisticated, and complicit with the ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism.

In this project, I recast realism as an unruly and contradictory set of codes and conventions that generate oppositional and revolutionary political documentaries. In contrast to the dominant anti-realist reception of feminist documentaries in seventies feminist film theory then, I argue that these documentaries contain unacknowledged nuance and neglected visions of the political aspirations (however flawed) of second wave feminism. Key figures in feminist political theory, such as Nancy Fraser and Hannah Arendt, shed light on the political and subjective configurations brought forth in several feminist documentaries, including *I Am Somebody* (1969), *Janie's Janie* (1971), *The Woman's Film* (1971), and *Joyce at 34* (1972), and *Self-Health* (1974), which depend rather on second wave aspirations of collectivity and agency, and the power of self-authorship and experience.

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Introduction: Some Truths about Verité

This project, which focuses on documentary films, is also an effort in storytelling.¹ It is about the ways stories are constructed, transmitted, and then re-interpreted by tellers and listeners, filmmakers and spectators, writers and readers. At the heart of this dissertation is a group of films I will call women's documentaries or feminist documentaries of the nineteen seventies. The storytellers that interest me therefore are the women filmmakers, of course, but also the women who tell their stories within the documentaries I analyze. Beyond the camera and the screen other storytellers also insist on joining the conversation: filmmaking collectives, distributors and curators, spectators, critics, historians, and theorists. Some of the stories that will emerge from this cacophonous interlocution will have familiar content: women's movement rhetoric of the late sixties and early seventies, the institutionalization of left political thought, the persistent problem of realism in documentary studies, and the renderings of difference (sexual, racial, and otherwise)

¹ Here I want to emphasize the way that "storytelling" – by which I mean the act of constructing partially cohesive, teleological narratives about the past – always implicates the teller's desires in the present. Walter Benjamin's canonical reflections on the waning practice of storytelling, for example, usefully point to the decline of "value" granted to personal "experience" in modern narrative forms such as the newspaper and the novel ("The Storyteller" 143). However, it is Irving Wohlfarth's reading of Benjamin's essay as itself "the story of the storyteller," that resonates with the point I want to make here (1003). By beginning this dissertation with an acknowledgement of the act of telling "stories" about history, film, and feminism, I foreground my own telling as interested, partial, and insurmountably present. In her reflections on contemporary scholarship on women directors of the silent era, Jane Gaines productively wonders, "whether our current historical work tells us more about *us* than about them. When we write, speak, and teach about Alice Guy Blaché, Germaine Dulac, Dorothy Arzner, Elvira Notari, Asta Nielsen, and Lois Weber, are we representing *ourselves* as much as or more than we are representing these historical figures?" ("Are They Us" 1). For Gaines, the act of recognizing and then reclaiming historical figures as relevant to the present is also an act of re-construction in which present day scholars "in producing them as historical," "produce them as coincident with us" ("Are They Us" 4). While Gaines focuses on the recuperation of historical figures from the early twentieth century, I am interested in the re-vision of particular films from the nineteen seventies. Nonetheless, I share her commitment to self-reflexive attention to how these projects of re-construction necessarily implicate feminist political desires of the present. For more on the notion of feminist storytelling also see Clare Hemmings, "Telling Feminist Stories." On what she calls, "feminism's present tense," also see Robyn Wiegman, "Academic Feminism Against Itself" and "Feminism's Apocalyptic Futures."

in feminist academic and political thought. I will necessarily tell my own versions of these stories. Although I will endeavor to pay attention to stories and voices that have been neglected, or more perniciously, repressed, my versions of these stories will not necessarily aim to be more correct, more sophisticated, or even, more revealing. Rather, the stories I will tell and the tellers I will invoke have everything to do with addressing the feminist aspirations that women's documentaries make manifest through content and representation, formal conventions, and their commitments to collective production, exhibition, and distribution.

Throughout this project, then, I make the case for, and instantiate, a new engagement with feminist documentary films of the seventies. My dissertation therefore, clearly emerges out of the field of feminist film theory, a field of thought that coalesced in the early seventies at the same time as women's documentaries exploded onto the scene. Both women's documentaries and feminist film theory share a history that winds its way back to women's movement activism of the late sixties and early seventies. For a brief moment in feminist time, from approximately 1968 to 1974, women's documentaries were influential in the emerging field of feminist film studies and for feminist activism.² By the late sixties feminists had identified visual representation within popular culture, film, and the media as one of the central battlegrounds for women's activism. For feminist filmmakers, documentary film, with its alleged superlative grip on truth and transparency, seemed to provide an ideal counterpoint to the perceived mis-representation of

² Janet Walker and Diane Waldman note in the introduction to *Feminism and Documentary*, "activists from the second wave of the women's movement were initially attracted to the documentary form for a multitude of reasons, and early feminist film writing enthusiastically embraced these films as well" (6). In a footnote to this point, however, the editors clarify that feminist reception of women's documentaries was by no means completely uncritical (29). They cite Siew Hwa Beh (who would go on to found and co-edit *Women & Film*), who takes issue with *The Woman's Film* in a 1971 article in *Film Quarterly* and Ruth McCormick's review of several documentaries in which she laments the liberal politics at stake in films such as Kate Millett's *Three Lives*, Midge Mackenzie's *Women Talking*, Amalie Rothschild's *It Happens to Us* and others.

“real” women in dominant narrative cinema.³ Many of the first documentary films produced by women focused on newly identified “women’s issues,” such as abortion, marriage, and household labor, others centered on women’s history, class struggle, and racial discrimination. For the first time in history, numerous women were behind the cameras, rather than in front of or beside them. Taking advantage of the new possibilities created by portable 16mm cameras and synchronous sound technologies, filmmakers put other women in front of the camera to hear them narrate the struggles they faced as women. The reverberations of these innovations, as political and they were aesthetic, echoed throughout film festivals, college campuses, feminist publications, and consciousness-raising sessions.⁴

Today, of the hundreds of feminist films of the seventies, which once traveled on an international women’s film festival circuit, as well as throughout college campuses and community centers, a mere handful are available in digital format.⁵ Most of the distribution networks that carried feminist films of the seventies folded decades ago. Libraries and museums are the present-day keepers of 16mm prints that no longer circulate in the public sphere. Although both experimental and documentary films from the seventies share a problem of material scarcity,

³ Charlotte Brundson helpfully summarizes this line of thinking about what B. Ruby Rich in another discussion calls, “corrective realism,” in *Films for Women*. Brundson writes, “If women are misrepresented in classical cinema, the answer is a realist one – to represent women more truthfully, to show real women” (52). Rich offers various descriptive re-namings of the aesthetics of women’s documentaries in “In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism,” including: Validative, Reconstructive, Medusan, and Corrective Realism.

⁴ The two major considerations of the feminist film movement are B. Ruby Rich’s *Chick Flicks* and Jan Rosenberg’s *Women’s Reflections*. Numerous articles in publications such as *off our backs*, *Jump Cut*, and *Women & Film* also detail the impact of feminist documentary films in the early seventies.

⁵ As I discuss in Chapter One, major festivals devoted to women’s films started in 1972 with the First International Festival of Women’s Films in New York City and The Women’s Event at the Edinburgh Film Festival. 1973 saw the Toronto Women and Film Festival and a season of women’s cinema at National Film Theatre in London. Film festivals and conferences followed throughout the U.S. and the U.K. in the following years, including the Conference of Feminist in the Media in New York and Los Angeles (1975), the Second New York International Festival of Women’s Films (1976), and the Feminism and Cinema event at Edinburgh Film Festival (1979). See Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams’s *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* for a more complete chronology of feminist film events throughout the seventies.

there exists a definite imbalance in their intellectual longevity. Most scholars in film and feminist studies readily cite the crucial influence of films such as Yvonne Rainer's *Film About a Woman Who...* (1974), Chantal Ackerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976), and Sally Potter's *Thriller* (1979). However, women's documentary films, numerous of which appeared beginning in 1971 with titles such as *Janie's Janie* (Geri Ashur, 1971), *Anything You Want to Be* (Liane Brandon, 1971), *Growing Up Female* (Julia Reichert and James Klein, 1971), and *The Woman's Film* (Smith et al., 1971) receive scant mention in contemporary scholarship. Once the subject of intense debate in feminist film studies, women's documentaries have been left to gather dust in the archives of both feminist knowledge and documentary history.⁶

The Critique of Realism

In feminist film theory, in particular, women's documentaries came to light under a single bulb in the mid-seventies: within the context of the critique of realism throughout film theory.⁷ The critique of realism developed as a critical modality in film studies in conversation with structuralism, semiotics, and Althusser (not feminism); however, many feminist film scholars embraced the ideological critique of realism as they elaborated a distinctly feminist archive of scholarship and practice. As George Kouvaros indicates in a recently published reflection, the debates on realism in seventies film studies constituted "a defining moment" for

⁶ The most recent screenings of feminist documentaries took place at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City from January 7-26 in 1992. Titled, "From Object to Subject: Documents and Documentaries from the Women's Movement," the program consisted of 26 films produced between 1970 and 1978. Lucinda Furlong writes in the program notes, "Women chose documentary, a genre revitalized in the 1960s, as the most direct vehicle for revealing their oppressed condition."

⁷ Again, Brundson is helpful here. She clarifies that both the feminist critique of women's documentaries and their understandings of mainstream film production must be understood within the context of "the wider debates taking place within radical film theory and practice in the 70s, including the enthusiasm for 'Brechtian' and modernist ideas about film form" (52).

the field (376). Drawing on the work of the editors of *Cahiers du cinema*, Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni (who in turn based their analyses in “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” on Louis Althusser’s rendering of ideology), film theorists in the seventies developed a loosely articulated notion of realism that both was and was not a “style” or “tradition” of filmmaking (Kouvaros 376). Importantly, realism was posed as the antithesis of the more highly regarded aesthetics of modernism. Julian Murphet thus explains how what he refers to as the dominant “materialist” mode in seventies film theory in the mold of *Screen* cinema critics Colin MacCabe and Stephen Heath reserved “the noble epithet – ‘modernist’ – only for those properly experimental, avant-gardist film texts that eschewed everything ‘realist’” (343).⁸ Throughout the pages of *Screen*, film critics developed a strident critique of realism’s “ideological functioning” that also mobilized the work of German playwright Bertolt Brecht (Kouvaros 378). In “Against Georg Lukács,” Brecht famously cast realism in opposition to Lukács’ defense of nineteenth century realist fiction as far more than an issue for literature, but rather as “a major political, philosophical and practical issue” that necessitated profound consideration (45). Brecht’s modernist tenets, such as “alienation effects” and “distantiation,” which he understood as antidotes to the veiled workings of bourgeois ideology in realist art, were embraced in film studies where the notion of the “classic realist text” was used to denote Hollywood cinema in particular (Marcus 189).⁹

In film studies, as Laura Marcus clarifies in a 2007 essay on “Cinematic Realism,” certain cinematic conventions were isolated by theorists such as MacCabe, Raymond Williams,

⁸ See, for example, Colin MacCabe’s 1974 essay, “Realism and the Cinema,” his 1976 essay, “Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure,” and Stephen Heath’s 1975-6 essay, “From Brecht to Film: Theses, Problems,” and Heath, “Narrative Space from 1976, all published in *Screen*. Also relevant is Raymond Williams’ 1977, “A Lecture on Realism.” *Screen* published a special issue on “Brecht and a Revolutionary Cinema” in 1974 and Dick Hebdige and Geoff Hurd summarize *Screen*’s position on realism in “Reading Realism,” in a 1978 edition of *Screen Education*. Also see Christopher Williams’ eclectic book, *Realism and the Cinema: A Reader*, for excerpts on these and a host of other texts at stake in the realist/anti-realist debates of seventies film theory.

⁹ Sylvia Harvey also discusses the influence of Brecht on radical film culture in the seventies in *May ’68 and Film Culture*.

and Paul Willeman in *Screen* during the early seventies as complicit with illusionary realism, including “editing techniques and codes which smoothed over transitions in time and space, and from shot to shot, working towards continuity, implying subjectivity, and absorbing the spectator in the narrative frame” (190).¹⁰ Cinematic realism, thus goes the anti-realist critique, encouraged passive spectatorship and the acceptance of the real world “as is.” For MacCabe, who drew parallels between “the classic realist text” and the nineteenth century novelistic realism of George Eliot, cinematic realism, and classical Hollywood films in particular, left unquestioned the status of the “real” offering rather, the illusion of “direct access” and “transparency” (“Realism and the Cinema” 10).

In film studies, anti-realism was a critical stance and deeply politicized methodology that, as Jane Gaines contends, went virtually unchallenged for over two decades (“The Real Returns” 10). Feminist film scholars were highly influenced by the anti-realist critique during the early seventies. British film scholars such as Claire Johnston, Pam Cook, and Laura Mulvey, in particular, elaborated gender-specific frameworks for cinematic analysis that were indebted to the ideological critique of realism. For these feminist film scholars, the critique of realism facilitated a methodology for thinking through the pernicious meaning-making processes of cinema, which naturalized a view of the world and thus of women’s oppression *as is*. Johnston stated the case against realism most stridently in “Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema,” arguing, “the ‘truth’ of our oppression cannot be ‘captured’ on celluloid with the ‘innocence’ of the camera: it has to be constructed/manufactured. New meanings have to be created by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film” (214). Flagged by quotation marks, concepts such

¹⁰ Marcus’s essay also provides an extensive history of the notion of realism within film studies pre-1970, which begins with the ostensible division between the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès and proceeds through Hugo Münsterberg, André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer as well as Soviet filmmaker/theorists Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, and documentary filmmaker John Grierson.

as “truth,” “capture,” and “innocence,” signal the film theorist’s skepticism about the possibilities of representing the oppression of women through what she calls “a cinema of non-intervention” (215). In this 1973 essay, Johnston was reacting against the rising trend of women’s documentary filmmaking in the early 1970s, exemplified in films such as Kate Millett’s *Three Lives* (1971) and Midge MacKenzie’s *Women Talking* (1971). In these films, which were celebrated in print by other feminist critics as models of women’s emerging consciousness of patriarchal oppression, Johnston read a problematic reliance on “cinema verité techniques” and what she called “the idea of non-intervention” (214).¹¹ In contrast, Johnston called for a mode of women’s film practice with terms such as “break” and “disrupt” to describe her call for a new “language” of cinema and a newly constructed “interrogation” of reality (215). The point I wish to make here is to highlight how the feminist idiom of the critique of realism operated in direct collaboration with a rejection of the body of work that I take up in this dissertation. In Chapter One, I elaborate on the anti-realist theoretical framework constructed by Johnston and Mulvey as a way to situate the origins of the processes of mischaracterization and forgetting that have relegated women’s documentaries to the historical dustbin.

The opposition between realism and modernism in seventies film theory – “one of the most canonical distinctions,” writes Kouvaros – amounted to what I call the over-determination of politics and form, and what Kouvaros describes as “a highly prescriptive account of the relationship between ideology and aesthetic form” (379). In this framework, realism signaled a naïve attachment to the belief that reality could be captured by the technologies of cinema directly and transparently; the transmission of reality was supposedly cast by realism as effortless,

¹¹ Essays that celebrate these same films include Susan Rice’s “*Three Lives*,” in *Women & Film* and Ruth McCormick’s “Women’s Liberation Cinema,” in *Cineaste*.

as simple as looking out a window onto the world.¹² Modernism, on the other hand, demanded self-referential concern with the materiality of the medium itself and an effort to make explicit the spectator's role in the production of meaning. Cinematic modernism was exemplified in seventies film theory by the work of Jean-Luc Godard, whose films, in Peter Wollen's landmark considerations in both *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* and "The Two Avant-Gardes," manifest modernist politics through self-reflexive meditation on the function and form of cinematic signs.¹³ In the modernist sweep in film theory, post-war proponents of cinematic realism such as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer were recast as hopelessly passé in what Ivone Margulies aptly describes as the generalized "repudiation of realist cinema as a worthy object of analysis" (6).¹⁴

This opposition between modernism and realism, however, as Toril Moi writes within the context of her discussion of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, "is fundamentally flawed" (23). Drawing from Fredric Jameson's elaboration of "the ideology of modernism" in *A Singular Modernity* as "a set of aesthetic norms" with attendant "aesthetic and theoretical beliefs," Moi explains that (literary) realism is sorely mischaracterized by the ideologues of modernism (19).¹⁵ "Realism," she maintains, "does not have a built-in commitment to any particular philosophical

¹² Colin MacCabe thus writes of the nineteenth century novels of George Eliot, "Transparent in the sense that the metalanguage is not regarded as material; it is dematerialised to achieve perfect representation – to let the identity of things shine through the windows of words" ("Realism in the Cinema" 8). (See Kouvaros for a discussion of the evolution of MacCabe's discussion on cinematic realism throughout the mid and late 1970s.) In E. Ann Kaplan, the window metaphor (here borrowed from Derrida) also anchors a critique of realism: "Realism as an artistic style is designed to perpetuate the illusion of a stable world; and within realism it is of course the verité documentary that seems most confidently 'a window through which ... the world is clearly visible' and 'where the signifiers appear to point directly and confidently to the signified'" (*Women and Film* 131).

¹³ Also see David Norman Rodowick's *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory*.

¹⁴ See Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Volume I* and Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*.

¹⁵ The quoted text here is from Moi. Moi's comprehensive return to Ibsen in *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* sets out to reclaim Ibsen as a modernist. To do so, the author maintains, requires a reconsideration of "a theoretical rigidity" (the ideology of modernism), "a historical amnesia" (regarding the importance of aesthetic idealism in the nineteenth century), and "a historically and culturally grounded understanding of Ibsen's aesthetic development" (1).

position. There are many kinds of realism, and realist illusion can coexist with the deepest skepticism in relation to the power of words to make sense” (24). Realism, in other words, exceeds its characterization as deliberately invested in capturing reality as is; rather Moi’s point is that realism can very well share the philosophical skepticism that undergirds the ideology of modernism. Furthermore, modernist works never actually achieve the purported goal of full autonomy, of excising “all forms of reference from language,” since both realism and modernism take up the raw material of the real world (24). However, in what Moi clarifies as “the formalist opposition between realism and modernism,” politics are said to occur exclusively at the level of form, where modernism creates its break with bourgeois ideology through self-referentiality and unself-conscious realism falls into constant complicity. Moi rejects this formalist denunciation of realism at the heart of the ideology of modernism; and, furthermore, she sets forth a more elastic definition of the repudiated term in conversation with Erich Auerbach’s claim that realism is a “representation of reality”; “realism is neither a specific style nor a specific historical period, but rather an aspect or feature of all kinds of texts,” writes Moi (31).¹⁶ Jameson, too, underscores how realism “by definition” resists becoming “a paradigm of any kind: a form, a tale-type, or even a genre” (“A Note” 261).¹⁷ Recast in this way by both Moi and Jameson, a contemporary return to realism, which is what I enact here, demands attention to history, culture, politics and context: “there are all kinds of realisms,” writes Moi, “our task as literary critics is to account for their specificity, not demonize them all as naïve ‘representationalism’” (31). Moi’s intervention is leveled both at aesthetic theory writ large and within theater studies more specifically where the ideology of modernism has led critics to write off Ibsen as hopelessly realist and thus, naïve and

¹⁶ See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*.

¹⁷ Moi’s conversation with Jameson’s notion of the ideology of modernism occurs through *A Singular Modernity*. Here, I evoke a separate essay by Jameson, “A Note on Literary Realism in Conclusion,” from *Adventures in Realism*.

uninteresting. It is a testament to the dominance of the ideology of modernism and its over-generalized and false opposition between modernism and realism that both a nineteenth century playwright and feminist documentary films of the seventies could be equally dismissed with strikingly similar language (as naïve, passé, unsophisticated, and uninteresting) despite glaring differences in their historical, aesthetic, and political characteristics.

Rethinking Realism

Moi's re-engagement with realism cooperates with a broader shift in critical approaches to realism that have taken place in the last decade in the fields of literature, painting, and photography.¹⁸ In film studies, also, the critique of realism has been under serious reconsideration throughout the last decade. Ivone Margulies, for example, challenges the hegemony of the critique of realism in her 2002 collection, *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, when she states unequivocally that the anthology "distances itself from the generalized indictment of realist aesthetics as a form of deception" (5). In her introduction, furthermore, Margulies understands Comolli's materialist readings of films as highly indebted to Bazin's insights. Here, Margulies challenges the conventional narrative of the critique of realism in film studies, which locates the *Cahiers*' rebellion against "bourgeois realism" as a break from post-war investments in aesthetic realism represented by Bazin and Kracauer. Repositioned by Margulies, Bazin is transformed from a naïve, passé paternalist into a pioneering thinker who evidences an always-

¹⁸ *Adventures in Realism*, published in 2007 and edited by Matthew Beaumont, stages returns with realism throughout the humanistic discourses, including philosophy, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, literature, painting, and photography. Rachel Bowlby begins her foreword to the text with this summation: "Poor old realism. Out of date and second-rate. Squashed in between the freshness of romanticism and the newness of modernism, it is truly the tasteless spam in the sandwich of literary and cultural history" (xi). By the end of her essay, however, realism is reinvigorated with contemporary potential: "It is time for realism to be put back into the critical picture, center-stage" (xviii). In his introduction, Beaumont recasts realism as a broad analytic, "a kind of force-field in which political, philosophical, and practical questions, as well as aesthetic ones, can be thought out" (10).

already detectable skepticism about the nature *and* artifice of “realism” in the cinema.¹⁹

Throughout the collection, directors such as Maya Deren, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Andy Warhol are read through frameworks beyond the avant-garde/modernist and realist dialectic; traditionally apprehended through a formalist lens, these directors are taken up in *Rites of Realism* as invested in “real existing bodies” and manifesting “manipulations of profilmic realities” (9). *Rites of Realism* thus offers an array of cinematic reading practices that find political purchase beyond the critique of realism, but nonetheless take seriously the formal codes and conventions of individual films. Likewise, throughout the chapters of this dissertation, I make manifest an elastic methodology that imbricates attention to context, content, form, and ideology as well as the cycles of production, distribution, and exhibition that determine the circulation of films in the public arena.

My project thus joins forces with the renewed attention to the critique of realism evident, for example, throughout the Visible Evidence series of books on documentary film, including Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs’ edited collection, *Between the Sheets, In the Streets*, Diane Waldman and Janet Walker’s *Feminism and Documentary*, and Jane Gaines and Michael Renov’s *Collecting Visible Evidence*.²⁰ Realism has resurged as a site of legitimate critical inquiry, particularly for documentary film studies and in the newly articulated relationship of feminism and documentary heralded by Walker and Waldman’s collection. In their introduction to *Feminism and Documentary*, the scholars emphasize the “and” at stake in their title: “Women’s

¹⁹ A return to Bazin is central to this return to realism in film studies. In 2008, for example, the Film Studies program at Yale University hosted a two-part conference on the work and philosophy of Bazin, which took place in two instantiations: first in New Haven, Connecticut and then in Paris, France.

²⁰ For more on the Visible Evidence Series, published by the University of Minnesota Press and edited by Michael Renov, Faye Ginsburg, and Jane Gaines see Michael Renov’s concluding essay in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, “Documentary Horizons: An Afterword.” Renov comments that the books in the series indicate trends in the field of documentary studies, away from “its once single-minded focus on documentary film history, aesthetics, and ideological criticism in favor of producing a kind of *situated knowledge* in which cultural representation is linked to larger social and historical forces” (321).

studies and documentary studies have been separated by disciplinary as well as prejudicial boundaries,” write the editors (1). Whereas throughout the early seventies, in the heyday of feminist documentary filmmaking, feminist film scholars consistently engaged with documentary film, history, and theory, this mutual engagement atrophied in the wake of the feminist critique of realism.²¹ Documentary studies, meanwhile, in Walker and Waldman’s analysis emerged as a masculinist field in the seventies that was dominated by a focus on the role of the director and where the relationship to women and feminism was, the authors assert, “primarily one of omission” (4). Throughout canonical seventies texts on documentary, such as Erik Barnouw’s *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, Lewis Jacob’s *The Documentary Tradition*, and Richard Barsam’s *Nonfiction Film*, women filmmakers receive scant attention. Walker and Waldman help us see how little documentary and feminism have had to say each other after feminism’s brief engagement with women’s documentary films in the early seventies; the authors also generatively open a new terrain for re-engagement in which I situate this project.²²

In the newly configured, perhaps post-post-structuralist landscape of feminist film theory, Alexandra Juhasz has reconsidered feminist documentary realism in her 1999 essay “They Said We Were Trying To Show Reality.” Participating in what Gaines has recently called “the critique of the critique of realism,” Juhasz constructs a new approach to the aesthetic “problem” of realism and argues for its political relevance and efficacy.²³ She reanimates a possibility for realism at the service of politically motivated documentaries and questions the canonization of a mode of thinking about realism in seventies feminist film theory as “naïve” that strikes her in

²¹ In addition to Johnston, Walker and Waldman point to the critical reception of Laura Mulvey’s, “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,” as catalyzing a turn away from documentary and toward the avant-garde in the search for counter cinemas.

²² Also see Alison Butler’s “Feminist Perspectives in Film Studies” in which she asserts, “A feminist re-evaluation of the relationship of the cinematic image to reality would have interesting and significant effects, given that feminist Film Studies was founded on the rejection of Bazinian realism and the acceptance of a linguistic semiology” (Butler 394).

²³ See Gaines’s 2007 essay in *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, “Documentary Radicality.”

retrospect as problematically elitist and mystifying. Juhasz offers a new way of apprehending the aesthetic realism at stake in women's documentaries: the "realist form," she writes, is constructed through "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 within the world" (194). However, in distinction to this recent work on feminism and documentary by Walker, Waldman, and Juhasz, I locate the incommensurability between feminist film theory and feminist documentaries in their distinct conceptualizations of the political subject, rather than in the conventions of or debates about realism per se. My work on the notion of the subject, which I develop in conversation with the work of Sonia Kruks and Kathi Weeks in Chapter One is one way that I resituate a return to feminist documentaries within discourses beyond "the realism debates."

Rising feminist film scholars have Juhasz to thank for putting women's documentaries of the seventies back on the map. Indeed, the idea for this dissertation emerged when, in response to reading Juhasz's essay, I tried to screen some of the feminist documentaries she analyzes, including *The Woman's Film*, *Joyce at 34*, *Janie's Janie*, and *Growing Up Female*. I was immediately struck by another "real" obstacle that hinders access to these films: material scarcity. In the basement of the former Donnell Media Center of New York's Public Library, I was able to screen many documentary films made by women in the seventies on their original 16mm prints, such as the ones mentioned above, as well as others, including: *Woo Who? May Wilson* (1969), *It Happens to Us* (1972) and *Nana, Mom, and Me* (1974) by Amalie Rothschild; *Living With Peter* (1973), *We Get Married Twice* (1973), and *Not Together Now* (1974) by Miriam Weinstein; *Old Fashioned Woman* (1974) and *Not a Pretty Picture* (1976) by Martha Coolidge; and *Yudie* (1974)

by Mirra Bank.²⁴ Throughout these chapters, I focus on a modest handful of the dozens of documentaries produced by women during the seventies.²⁵ In chronological order, they are: *I Am Somebody* (1969) by Madeline Anderson, *The Woman's Film* (1971) by Judy Smith and other members of San Francisco Newsreel, *Janie's Janie* (1971) by Geri Ashur, *Joyce at 34* (1972) by Joyce Chopra and Claudia Weill, and *Self-Health* (1974) by Catherine Allen, Judy Irola, Allie Light, and Joan Musante.

My focus on a small number of films is a result both of my critical methodology and my thematic interests. In each chapter I make manifest a close reading practice that challenges the overly generalized application of the term “verité” used by feminist film theorists to describe the realist aesthetics of women’s documentaries.²⁶ Close readings of formal conventions demonstrate that the so-called naïve realist aesthetics of these films turn out to be not only complex, nuanced,

²⁴ The extensive collection of independent documentary films previously housed in the Donnell Media Center has been relocated to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center at Lincoln Center Plaza.

²⁵ For a more exhaustive account of the documentary and fiction films of the feminist film movement, see Rosenberg’s *Women’s Reflections*.

²⁶ Throughout feminist critiques of women’s documentaries, particularly by Claire Johnston and E. Ann Kaplan, vérité is the term most often used to describe formal conventions such as talking heads, long takes, and hand-held camera work. It should be noted, however, that “cinema vérité” is a terribly ambiguous term in documentary studies that is often loosely applied to a wide array of cinematic practices. There are historical and geographic distinctions between cinema vérité and direct cinema that are little known outside of documentary studies. In the early sixties, cinema vérité denoted the cinematic practices of anthropologist Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in France, typified by their landmark film, *Chronique d’un été* (1960). Direct cinema, which I discuss in more detail later in this introduction, was a separate tradition developed in the United States by filmmakers such as Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, Donn Pennebaker, Albert and David Maysles and others. Rouch insisted on a mode of filmmaking akin to shared anthropology, a cinema that provoked, catalyzed and shared meaning production. Rouch’s cinema vérité, like Vertov’s kino-pravda emphasized the presence of the camera and the construction of ephemeral meanings in the process shared between camera, filmmaker, and filmed subjects. Indeed, Rouch criticized direct cinema as misleading and unproblematized. Skeptical about the positivism of the U.S. direct cinema movement, Rouch saw in its “fly on the wall” principle a denial of what ethnographers know from anthropological practice: that realities are constructed, not given, and meanings change as contexts of interpretation change. For more on Rouch and French cinema vérité, see Rouch and Stephen Feld’s *Cine-Ethnography*. Throughout this dissertation, I resist the conflation of vérité and direct cinema as well as elision between vérité and women’s documentaries. I use “verité” only when I describe the feminist anti-realist critique, “direct cinema” to describe the U.S. tradition of documentary filmmaking in the mold of Leacock and Drew, and “women’s documentaries” or “feminist documentaries” to describe the body of documentary work made by women filmmakers in the seventies.

and highly constructed, but also heterogeneous and unruly. In other words, I do not seek an alternative definition of the cinematic realism at stake in feminist documentaries so much as I make manifest the dissolution of the discursive boundaries that force these films into a singular, monolithic archive under the heading “verité.” Furthermore, in each chapter, I put the films back into conversation with political, historical and geographic contexts in which they emerged, demonstrating thus how formal readings can also work within what Moi calls, “a culturalist” approach. In general, culturalism rejects the notion of the autonomy of art (central to the ideology of modernism), in favor of Marxist, feminist, postcolonial (or new historicist, or queer) readings that emphasize “the cultural, historical, social and political aspects” of aesthetic objects (22). However, Moi’s takes issue with the tendency of culturalists to “simply translate formalist concepts into politicized categories,” and leave thereby undisturbed “the formalist paradigm” with its modernist obsessions (“reflexivity, negativity, absence, the instability of boundaries, and the breakdown of language”) (24). Moi here demands a more comprehensive alternative to the formalist approach of the ideology modernism—an approach that would stress the importance of culture as well as take serious the historicization of aesthetics.

In this project, I take an interdisciplinary feminist approach to account for the themes raised by these films, which include consciousness-raising, identification, collective mobilization, race, labor and union politics, and motherhood. The films I have selected for this project thus create the possibilities for a conversation with some of the most urgent debates of seventies feminisms. In particular, in Chapters Three and Four on *I Am Somebody* (1969) and *Joyce at 34* (1972) (which I read with Laura Mulvey’s *Riddles of the Sphinx*) respectively, I draw from key figures in feminist political theory, including Nancy Fraser and Hannah Arendt, thinkers not often associated with film analysis. These theorists, I demonstrate, help us approach the issue of “the political” in feminist documentary films in a distinct register – that is, as it refers to the material

conditions of women's lives.²⁷ My approach engages with feminist documentary films through the rhetoric and revolutionary aspirations of movement activism from which they emerged in order to give meaning to the films beyond the limits of the anti-realist position in seventies film theory. Conceived of as tools for political activism, as a mode of convincing women they needed feminism, as a visual analogue to the practice of consciousness-raising, and of course as a way to insinuate new subjectivities into the public imaginary, feminist documentary films speak to various kinds of real politics at the limits of discussions about realism in feminist film theory, beyond a limited focus on either representation or form. In the chapters that follow I take seriously the political claims instantiated by feminist documentary films of the seventies and mobilize a range of conceptual tools to begin a new engagement, that is, a new story about these otherwise neglected films.

A Real Problem for Documentary and for Women

“Every film is a fiction film,” wrote Christian Metz in Part I of *The Imaginary Signifier*, published in English in *Screen* in 1975. Captured in Metz' declaration is the heady dominance of the ideological critique of realism in seventies film theory, which made no room for the particular relationship documentary film has with reality.²⁸ When, beginning in the mid-eighties, scholars began to elaborate critical modes of understanding documentary's distinct relationship to the

²⁷ I have in mind thus the legacy of materialist feminist thought in which issues of production and reproduction are central, as in my analyses of union activism and race in Chapter Three in *I Am Somebody* and the focus on labor and motherhood in Chapter Four in regards to *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *Joyce at 34*. Further readings on materialist feminism can be sought through texts such as: Rosemary Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*; Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham's *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives*; Annette Kuhn and AnnMarie Wolpe's *Feminism and Materialism*; Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean's *Materialist Feminisms*; and the 1994 special issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly* co-edited by Toril Moi and Janice Radway.

²⁸ In a recent article, Nico Baumbach develops a notion of the politics of documentary in conversation with the philosophy of Jacques Rancière. Baumbach also provides an excellent synthesis of the way seventies film theory “folded” documentary into the generalized critique of realism.

lived historical and material world we collectively inhabit, they also tried to account for the post-'68 skepticism exemplified by Metz. "But what of the bond between image and reality?" asks Bill Nichols in *Representing Reality*; he insists that for documentary, "the separation between image and what it refers to continues to be a difference that makes a difference" (7). In a later text, Nichols contends that, unlike fiction films, documentary films benefit from what he calls the "indexical whammy" – the emotional and intellectual impact that results from knowing that the events on screen *really* did take place before the camera.²⁹ Michael Renov writes of documentary's "direct ontological claim to the real" and of the way the form plucks its "signs" from everyday life whereas fiction films fabricate them for the screen (7).³⁰ As Brian Winston surmises in *Claiming the Real*, "I know of no theoretical position, no definition of documentary that does not in some way reference the relationship to the real" (9). The negotiation between the screen and reality in the context of the documentary creates a double edged sword that documentary theory consistently and awkwardly wields: on the one hand, the claim on the real defines the distinction between documentary and fiction; on the other hand, the bond with the real makes documentary potentially complicit with naturalizing discourses that support rather than challenge the status quo. In other words, documentary's superlative claim on reality has created thorny problem for film theory in the wake of post-structuralist insistence on the mediating role of linguistic signs in our apprehension of reality.

However, in *New Documentary*, Bruzzi productively assesses documentary theory in the vein of Nichols, Renov, Winston and Eric Barnouw as overly skeptical about the status of the real. It is as if, as Bruzzi points out, the real world itself got "lost along the way" (3). Reality,

²⁹ In *Introduction to Documentary*, Nichols discusses the indexical whammy in reference to *The Battle of San Pietro*, in which the claim that "war is hell" is made viscerally real through close-ups of dead soldiers (29).

³⁰ See "Rethinking Documentary: Toward a Taxonomy of Mediation," and Renov's introduction to *Theorizing the Documentary*, "Toward a Poetics of Documentary." Renov's other valuable collection is called *The Subject of Documentary*.

consistently flagged with quotation marks in documentary theory, becomes unthinkable to such a degree that Bruzzi humorously remarks, “Sometimes it seems necessary to remind writers on documentary that reality does exist and it can be represented without such a representation either invalidating it or having to be synonymous with the reality that preceded it” (3). In part, the anxiety about claims to authenticity in the documentary stem directly from the influence and popularity of U.S. direct cinema. More precisely, however, within documentary theory, Jeanne Lynn Hall and Bruzzi detect a discursive maelstrom in which the “verité” tradition has been conflated with the rhetoric of its practitioners.

In the early 1960s, the practitioners of direct cinema, Richard Leacock, the Maysles brothers, and Robert Drew, often claimed that they had finally achieved the goal of creating film “truth” with new techniques of observation, lack of intervention, and a disavowal of authorial subjectivity.³¹ Often referred to today as “cinéma vérité,” direct cinema exploited technological advances such as portable 16mm cameras, synchronous sound recording with portable equipment, and faster film stock capable of shooting in low light to challenge the Griersonian legacy of documentary film production. Grierson had conceived of documentary film as a didactic tool and a way to edify the masses.³² In the hands of the father’s (and it matters that they were all men) of American direct cinema, the documentary camera was hailed irreverently as an experience rather than an education, as a “window someone peeps through,” making possible, ostensibly, a feeling of “being there” (Bruzzi 5).³³ In the hyperbolic rhetoric of its fathers, direct cinema documentaries allegedly eschewed voice-over narration and depended fully on synchronous

³¹ Jeanne Hall’s essay includes excerpts from numerous television and published interviews with figures such as Leacock and Drew. Throughout these interviews, the filmmakers insist that direct cinema is doing something radically new and truthful. In 1965, Leacock, for example, asserts: “And then you’ve got what we are doing, which has suddenly arisen, which is totally different because this *really* has to do with reality” (27); and “In a funny sort of way, my hunch is that what we are doing is the most important thing that film can do” (25).

³² See Brian Winston for a comprehensive analysis of the Griersonian legacy in *Claiming the Real*.

³³ Bruzzi here is quoting from an interview with Donn Pennebaker.

sound from the profilmic event; they rejected the use of interviews and claimed to disappear into the events. However, as Hall powerfully contends, these claims are as theoretically dubious as they are patently false.³⁴ Even cursory attention to many of the landmark direct cinema films demonstrates long-winded narrative voice-overs, carefully composed shots, and purposeful editing.³⁵ Nonetheless, the claim contained in the proclamations by the fathers of direct cinema that documentary had the potential to manifest an aesthetics of transparency has been the subject of incisive critique in documentary studies for the past several decades and has, in Bruzzi's analysis, motivated an excessive anxiety about reality itself.³⁶ When anti-realist feminist film theorists described women's documentary films of the seventies as a singular archive of problematic "vérité" films they had in mind this legacy of U.S. direct cinema.³⁷

In the section that follows, I discuss Richard Leacock and Joyce Chopra's direct cinema classic, *Happy Mother's Day* (1963) in order to begin to redefine the relationship between direct cinema and women's documentary films. It is true that quite a few women's documentary filmmakers began their filmmaking careers as assistants on direct cinema productions.³⁸ Of the

³⁴ Hall generatively rereads the realism of direct cinema as a highly constructed aesthetic style in "Realism as a Style in Cinema Vérité: A Critical Analysis of Primary." Stephen Mamber's *Cinema Vérité in America: Studies in Uncontrolled Documentary* was the first book-length study of the tradition (published in 1976) and the last to accept the tenets of direct cinema offered by its practitioners. Recent studies that include extensive engagement with direct cinema include *Direct Cinema: Observational Documentary and the Politics of the Sixties* by Dave Saunders and *New Documentary* by Stella Bruzzi.

³⁵ See Jean Lynne Hall's point by point interrogation of the rhetoric of the filmmakers and her lengthy analysis of *Primary* (1960) in "Realism as a Style in Cinema Vérité."

³⁶ Critiques of direct cinema begin include Thomas Waugh's 1975 article, "Beyond Vérité," and Bill Nichols in "The Voice of Documentary." Bruzzi also includes an oft-cited comment by filmmaker Errol Morris, who says, "I believe that cinema vérité set back documentary filmmaking twenty or thirty years. It sees documentary as a subspecies of journalism ... Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything" (6).

³⁷ References to "vérité" are common in both Johnston in *Notes on Women's Cinema* and E. Ann Kaplan in her chapter on what she calls "the realist debates" in *Women in Film*. Kaplan, for example, writes, "By far the largest number of films by American women have taken the cinema vérité documentary form – one of the simplest and cheapest of film forms. While other film styles and modes ... are represented, the vérité style clearly dominates" (125).

³⁸ Jan Rosenberg explains that during the 1960s, direct cinema offered an exciting realm of possibility to aspiring filmmakers. She expounds, "Even those who had not previously heard of it were quickly swept up

filmmakers I study in this dissertation, Joyce Chopra and Madeline Anderson both worked with Richard Leacock before they made their own films. However, if women's documentary filmmakers drew on the technological and aesthetic innovations of direct cinema, they nonetheless adapted and transformed these in the service of their own feminist enterprises. Furthermore, it bears remembering that the practitioners of direct cinema thought of their work as revolutionary and as a radical affront to the heavy handed didacticism traditional documentary filmmaking.³⁹ In the climate of the ideological critique in academic film studies in the seventies, direct cinema came under fire as a transparent vehicle for dominant ideology; however, in the sixties, among many filmmakers and critics there was a sense of energy, enthusiasm, and innovation that emerged when young direct cinema filmmakers claimed to do away with lighting, sets, scripts, voice-over narration, and interviews and instead record events as they naturally transpired.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, the relationship between direct cinema and women's documentary

in the enthusiasm which it generated once they became involved with this pioneering subgenre" (34). Through interviews with Joyce Chopra and Nell Cox, Rosenberg draws the conclusion that young women who wanted to become filmmakers in the 1960s ended up in direct cinema not because they were interested in documentary film, but rather because direct cinema filmmakers readily hired and trained novices, particularly women. Rosenberg cites Chopra's reflections on her involvement in *Happy Mother's Day*: "The way I got to do *Happy Mother's Day* ... was he got some nice young woman he knew, me, to take sound. Which, when you think about it, is ridiculous. I'd never taken sound in my life, really. I kind of knew how to do it. But I would never hire anybody on that basis. But he wanted a nice girl to out out with him to Aberdeen, South Dakota ... I didn't think much of it at the time" (35).

³⁹ In *Cinéma Verité: Defining the Moment* (1999), director Peter Wintonick frames the direct cinema movement as a radical break with educational documentaries of the 40s and 50s and the didactic legacy of John Grierson. Filmmakers such as Leacock, Drew and Al Maysles support this perspective in first person interviews in the documentary.

⁴⁰ It is important to distinguish between the rhetoric of the practitioners of direct cinema and the evidence of their productions. Jeanne Lynn Hall summarizes the discrepancy: "To see the early films of Drew Associates for the first time today is to be amazed at how remotely they resemble their descriptions. True, most of them feature the restless, wandering movements of lightweight, handheld cameras; the dark, grainy images of fast, monochrome film; and the impromptu performances of apparently preoccupied social actors—cinema vérité innovations which quickly became conventions. But they also feature (variously) voice-over narration, talking heads, avowed editorials, animated maps, superimpositions, subtitles, nondiegetic music, subjective sequences, matches-on-action—

films is not one of mimetic transference, whereby women filmmakers merely deployed the innovations of direct cinema uncritically. Rather, as my discussion of *Happy Mother's Day* below illustrates, direct cinema as practiced by its founding fathers offered technological, critical, and aesthetic possibilities for women filmmakers, but nonetheless demanded a feminist confrontation.

In the opening scene of *Happy Mother's Day*, Mrs. Andrew Fischer emerges from the hospital while a sober male voice-off narrates the cause of her sudden fame. The mother of five has just given birth to quintuplets. Upon her exit from the hospital, Mrs. Fischer finds herself surrounded by a mob of male journalists. In the characteristic grainy, black and white footage of U.S. direct cinema, Mrs. Fischer walks to her car and pauses to answer a few questions. The journalists crowd her, insinuating microphones and cameras at close proximity. Other reporters jockey for better access to Mrs. Fischer in the frame, partially blocking our view of the citizen celebrity. Visible between two reporters in the foreground, she stands and smiles politely, but sighs heavily before uttering her first words in the film: "I don't have many feelings." As she laughs in response to her own profound statement, the cameraman in the foreground suddenly shifts his equipment, blocking our view of Mrs. Fischer. As the film develops, it becomes increasingly clear that Mrs. Fischer is an implausible candidate for the hungry eyes of the camera. Unable to maintain her composure in this first scene, Mrs. Fischer suddenly turns away from the cameras and the microphones after a few more questions. Rather than voice any sort of apology, claim understandable fatigue or impatience, she simply lowers her gaze and stops talking. Visibly upset, but entirely reclusive, she lightly touches her husband's arm and moves to enter her vehicle. The first interview is over.

countless conventions of the traditional documentary film and the classical Hollywood cinema that serve to foreground the conventional nature of the realism of cinema vérité" (29).

Multiple interviews will follow in the film, each one more absurd than the others, as the Fischers become Aberdeen's latest and greatest local attraction. Reporters from outlets such as the *Ladies Home Journal* and *The Saturday Evening Post* are pictured photographing the happy family in dad's "only luxury," The Model-T Ford, or out and about on the farm, or wading through the mountains of commodities donated to the family. Mrs. Fischer tries on her first ever store bought dress and answers questions from the ladies' club representative about which colors she'd like them to use at the lunch that will be held in her honor. Throughout these scenes, Mrs. Fischer is often recalcitrant, slow to answer, and quite likely to respond with a shrug and an admission that she really doesn't care. It seems that as much as the local townsfolk and national media claim to want to celebrate the birth of her children, Mrs. Fischer is on to the media's ruse.

The new mother of quintuplets constantly refuses to meet the gaze of the camera and she rarely responds to the voice-off questions of the interviewer. In one of the few interview moments when she does respond, Mrs. Fisher is decidedly contrary. The interview follows a scene in which the remarkable numbers of consumer goods donated to the family are displayed on a lawn for the purposes of a photograph. Hundreds of shoes, a swimming pool, high chairs, a bathtub, gallons of milk, a mountain of jarred baby food, dishes, clothing, toys, dolls and other items are splayed out for a photographer, who is perched high atop a ladder in order to capture the shot. The ruse Mrs. Fischer seems to understand is evident in the juxtaposition of scenes in which the fetishization of the consumer goods parallels the commodification of the family itself. In the interview scene that follows, in which the couple self-reflexively consider their own fame, Mr. Fischer states his reluctant opinion that if tourists should come to the town to see the quintuplets, the visitors must be allowed in the Fischer's home. Mrs. Fischer categorically disagrees, stating unequivocally, "They're never going to be on display to anybody as far as I'm concerned." In response to the voice of a female interviewer (likely Joyce Chopra), Mrs. Fischer declares, "To anybody," before

she looks away, and then resumes defiantly, eyes still cast downward, “As far as I’m concerned that’s the way it better be.”

As the central figure in *Happy Mother’s Day*, Mrs. Fischer makes manifest a clever skepticism about the interest granted her by strangers. Her reluctance to be the star of both the film and the events in Aberdeen (a parade and a banquet are both held in her honor) raises important questions about the relationship between the filmed subject and the film that traffics in her image and her story. Although the title of the film references a decidedly gendered affair, *Happy Mother’s Day* is far from a feminist film. Demonstrated by the complicity with discourses of journalism consistently evoked in the figures of cameramen and reporters, the film self-consciously takes part in the hysterical reaction to Mrs. Fischer’s reproductive capacities, which reduce the woman to the affairs of her uterus.⁴¹ Mrs. Fischer’s reluctance to engage with the media that court her suggests that she feels she is being treated not like a queen (as one Aberdeen woman suggests), but rather like a freak. We can only speculate, of course, since the other side of her reluctance means we are never granted access to Mrs. Fischer’s feelings and thoughts about her predicament. Mrs. Fischer, as she states so clearly in her opening lines, does “not have many feelings,” at least, not many that she is willing to share with the film crew.

Before feminist filmmakers appropriated and reformulated the codes and conventions of direct cinema, including hand-held cameras, location shooting, intimate interviews, and occasional voice-over, direct cinema had very little to say to or about women. As much as *Happy Mother’s Day* makes possible a critical stance on the commodification of the Fischer family and

⁴¹ Although the television network ABC commissioned the film, the broadcast producers were dissatisfied with Leacock and Chopra’s version of the story of the media “hoopla” over the quintuplets. They never aired *Happy Mother’s Day*, but instead produced an alternative version called *Quint City*. According to Leacock, the ABC version was “toned down” and *Happy Mother’s Day* was a “political film” (Naficy 201). In a 1982 interview with Hamid Naficy, Leacock explains his sense of what makes *Happy Mother’s Day* political in these terms: “If you analyze it, if you discuss that film, whole aspects of our society will be revealed by it” (200). In the interview, Leacock expresses discomfort with the word “political” though he uses it quite a few times. At one point he says, “‘Political’ is such a bad word, like ‘propaganda’” (201).

implicates its own gaze in the exploitative impulses of the media, the film cannot find its way into Mrs. Fischer's own version of her story. As I explore in depth in Chapter Two, the second wave practice of consciousness-raising formulated notions of authority and expertise highly critical of patriarchal knowledges; women were urged to develop epistemological and theoretical frameworks based on their own experiences of being women in the world.⁴² Through this feminist framework, we understand how much is missing from this film that is supposedly about the figure of the mother. At no point do we hear about Mrs. Fischer's pregnancy, the birth of any of her ten children, her concerns about the impact the new infants will have on her life, her family, or her finances, for example. Our knowledge about Mrs. Fischer is interrupted, fragmentary, and highly constructed around the narrative of her ascension to stardom. The title, *Happy Mother's Day*, comments ironically on what appears in the film to be a very unhappy woman. Whether Mrs. Fischer was made suddenly morose by her new family configuration or is simply confounded by the relentless media attention, we never find out. However, when women like Joyce Chopra turned their cameras on themselves and their own stories, we encounter an alternative mode of filming women's lives. It is as if women's documentary films emerge precisely to capture what Mrs. Fischer denied having, that is, many feelings. Although women's documentaries were hotly contested within feminist film theory of the seventies because of their aesthetic and conceptual resemblance to U.S. direct cinema films, the example of *Happy Mother's Day* reminds us also to consider an alternative relationship at work in the term *verité*.

⁴² Thus Kathi Sarachild, of the New York based women's group, Redstockings writes, "the group decided to raise its consciousness by studying women's lives by topics like childhood, jobs, motherhood, etc. We'd do any outside reading we wanted to and thought was important. But our starting point for discussion, as well as our test of the accuracy of what any of the books said, would be the actual experience we had in these areas" ("Consciousness-Raising" 132). Among the roots of consciousness-raising, Sarachild cites the British suffragettes ("We had to describe to women their own position"), Mao Tsetung ("All knowledge originates in perception of the objective external world through man's physical sense organs"), and Malcolm X ("You can't give the people a program until they realize they need one") (133).

Feminist filmmakers like Joyce Chopra opened up the documentary form to a new political and visual subject. In Chapter Four, I demonstrate that Chopra's first self-authored film, *Joyce at 34*, is a highly self-reflexive take on the process of constructing images and narratives about the figure of the mother. *Joyce at 34* is a film about a filmmaker who is also a mother; it is about the labor of mothering and the work of filmmaking. Importantly, *Joyce at 34* is the first feminist documentary to explore the range of emotions, duties, and subjective acrobatics between personhood, motherhood, and labor that define motherhood for one individual *from her own perspective*. The film thus challenges the legacy of direct cinema in *Happy Mother's Day* on two counts: formally it makes explicit the technologies of cinematic meaning making, questioning thus its own act of representation; and thematically it grants authority to the mother's own version of her story, insinuating thus a new politicized maternal figure into public visual discourse. In other words, the film explicitly converses with *and contests* its relationship with U.S. direct cinema in ways that exceed its designation as a *verité* film. My readings of *The Woman's Film* (in Chapter Two), and *I Am Somebody* (in Chapter Three), further demonstrate how women's documentary films take up, resist, and transform direct cinema conventions as they grant unprecedented authority and political legitimacy to women of color, working class women, and women in poverty. Taking women's documentaries of the seventies seriously requires that we also engage in new conversations with the legacy of direct cinema.

Real Returns

In the anti-realist critique of women's documentaries forwarded by feminist film theory, the so-called *verité* films aspired to be "windows on the world" of women's oppression. Through realism, argued Johnston, women's documentaries sought to counter negative stereotypes with true representations of real women. Today, in the wake of several decades of thinking about the

particular truth claims of documentary film, I argue, in line with Bruzzi, that documentary films have not aspired to construct authentic representations of the real, but rather:

a documentary can never be the real world, that the camera can never capture life as it would have unraveled had it not interfered, and the results of this collision between apparatus and subject are what constitutes a documentary – not the utopian vision of what might have transpired if only the camera had not been there. (Bruzzi 7)

Sweeping assessments of the flattened archive of so-called feminist *verité* films belie the fact that among feminist documentary films of the seventies an unruly array of codes and conventions are made manifest. Beyond this, the over-determination of form and politics obscures the possibility of a comprehensive return to individual films that might reveal competing political desires, alternative modes of constructing spectatorship and subjectivity, and radical revisions of dominant narratives at work in feminism, film theory, and movement politics of the seventies. While I am arguing that feminist documentaries were erroneously homogenized and hastily dismissed in the context of the critique of realism in film studies, I am not necessarily suggesting that the films are unproblematic. Rather, I contend throughout this project that in order to make claims about women's documentaries about the seventies, we must engage with individual films on their own grounds.

As much as this means re-thinking the relationship between documentary and reality, it also requires that we take seriously the discourses at work in seventies feminisms. In feminist discourses throughout the past decade, "the seventies" have been the subject of intense debates about the origins, objectives, temporality, and affective modes of feminist thought in the academy.⁴³ Seventies feminism is alternatively celebrated for its commitment to real politics or

⁴³ See, for example, Martha Nussbaum's "The Professor of Parody," in which the author waxes nostalgic about the affiliation between activism and feminist scholarship (killed in the age of post-structuralism by theorists such as Judith Butler). Also, see: Biddy Martin, "Success and Its Failures"; Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, "But the Empress Has No Clothes!"; Wendy Brown, "The Impossibility of Women's Studies"; Susan Gubar, "What Ails Feminist Criticism?"; Robyn Wiegman's response to Gubar in "What Ails Feminist

accused of a lack of sophistication about asserting the category of woman as its unifying subject. Evident in contemporary feminist studies is a certain anxiety about the relationship present academic feminist discourses should maintain with the textual, cultural, activist and affective remainders of the seventies.

In “Telling Feminist Stories,” Clare Hemmings has argued that feminist theory attends to its recent past in the framework of two equally limiting narratives: nostalgia or progress. Both stories, each with their own affective structures, contribute to what she calls a flattening out of past decades. In the progress narrative of feminist theory, the second wave embarrassingly connotes a movement of white, middle-class women who erroneously and irresponsibly claimed to represent all women; a steady march away from the seventies thus assures a future free of exclusions, blind spots and essentialism, which allegedly plagued previous decades.⁴⁴ Indeed, many of the documentaries of the feminist film movement reflect the class biases and mainstream concerns of this white, middle-class fantasy of “sisterhood”: marriage, love, divorce, and careers. My contention is that feminist scholars have hesitated to return to these realist documentaries—and other cultural products, events, and theories of the seventies—in order to resist restaging what has been narrated as the racial and economic discrimination and heteronormativity of the politics of the second wave. Writing off the seventies as a naïve decade allows contemporary theorists to strategically claim superior and advanced sophistication in the realm of present-day feminist theory. However, the race to dismiss seventies feminism as misguided also sets up an ever-

Criticism? A Second Opinion,” as well as “The Possibility of Women’s Studies,” and “Academic Feminism Against Itself.” Finally, *differences* published a relevant special issue titled, “Women’s Studies on the Edge” in 1997.

⁴⁴ The notion of essentialism motivates powerful critiques, but is also rather unwieldy in feminist theory. In Chapter Two I draw from Noël Sturgeon’s discussions of essentialism in *Ecofeminist Natures*. One might also see Sarah Franklin and Jackie Stacey’s “Dyketactics for Difficult Times” and the special issue of *differences* on “Essentialism” from 1989.

receding present as prey to an encroaching, more enlightened future, and forecloses a productive encounter with potential counter-narratives about previous decades.

The nostalgia narrative Hemmings identifies, on the other hand, mourns the loss of urgency and activism that defined feminist theory of the seventies. Characterized by grief, the narrative of nostalgia remembers the seventies as uniformly politicized and feminism as solid, grounded and urgent. It was the assimilation of feminism into the academy, goes the narrative, which drained feminism of its relevance to real women and real politics. From this stance, a return to the seventies is also a return *to* the real, material context of women's lives and away *from* the abstract, linguistic complications of post-structuralist theory (Hemmings 127). In fact, within both narratives, post-structuralism is granted unlikely power that far exceeds its influence within academic discourse. In the narrative of progress, post-structuralist theory enlightened feminism and allowed corrections to prior essentialist constructions of the category of women (Hemmings 116). In the narrative of loss, post-structuralism fragmented and dissolved the unifying force of feminism, leaving behind an apolitical, masculinist mode of detached thinking (Hemmings 128).⁴⁵

In the re-vision I make manifest in this project, I admittedly waver between nostalgia and visions of progress. While I believe it is possible to return to the seventies without also singling out the decade as an exemplary, primary, or climactic moment for feminist thought or action, I also contend that a return to feminist documentaries places us in direct conversation with the political aspirations of seventies feminisms. To re-vision women's documentaries also means to engage in conversations that we are often uncomfortable with in contemporary feminist theory about women, union politics, collectivity, subjectivity, and motherhood. My return also forces me to speculate about why these films lost their relevance, their urgency, and their political and

⁴⁵ Also see Wendy Brown, "Feminist Hesitations, Postmodern Exposures."

aesthetic purchase at the same time as one strain of feminism became institutionalized in the university and post-structuralism gained dominance in the humanities. There are no simple answers here. My solution is to focus on the purported imperfections of seventies feminisms and argue that concepts such as naïveté and essentialism, for example, as allegedly at work in the *The Woman's Film* (1971), *Self-Health* (1974), *Janie's Janie* (1971), *I Am Somebody* (1969), and *Joyce at 34* (1974) often turn out to be more complex and nuanced, more interesting and more generative than either the critique of realism or the critique of the second wave allows, particularly when we shift emphasis from a formalist apprehension of realism to alternative discourses on politics and subjectivity.

Chapter Two revisits *The Woman's Film* made by women from the San Francisco Newsreel collective, and *Self-Health* (1974) produced with the San Francisco Women's Health Center. The few feminist film scholars who advocated for feminist documentaries in the late seventies did so on the grounds that the films exemplified, in both form and content, the claims and practices of "the women's movement," and particularly consciousness-raising. However, I argue that the link scholars such as Julia Lesage and E. Ann Kaplan insisted upon between women's politics and women's films does not go far enough to challenge the over-determination of form and politics in film theory. Both Kaplan and Lesage claim that the framework of consciousness-raising guides a more accurate reading of the political strategies of these realist films. I demonstrate that even here we might pursue a more exacting analysis. *The Woman's Film* and *Self-Health* are suitably apprehended within the political and aesthetic practice of consciousness-raising, but they emerge within this framework distinctly, particularly through strategies of identification. Here I suggest that we must think through identification outside of the filmic idiom of the language of psychoanalysis; I find support for alternative approaches in Franz

Fanon and Stuart Hall.⁴⁶ While *The Woman's Film* stresses a mode of identification that does not also mobilize a notion of identity, *Self-Health* problematically demonstrates a reliance on identity in its formulation of biological affinity. Distinctly conceived and articulated renderings of feminist subjectivity emerge in these two films despite their common allegiance to the feminist project and practice of consciousness-raising.

Chapter Three analyzes Madeline Anderson's *I Am Somebody* (1969), which documents a successful 100-day strike by black, female hospital workers of Charleston, South Carolina. At the nexus of labor, race, and gender politics, the film combines broadcast news footage of the strikers with staged interviews and a highly personalized voice-over narrative. Here direct cinema meets feminist documentary aesthetics on new ground. Through a discussion of what Nancy Fraser calls "the redistribution-recognition dilemma," I contend that as much as the film demands attention to civil rights politics of recognition and union politics for redistribution, *I Am Somebody* also insists on the inter-imbrication of gender, race, and class. In her original footage of Claire Brown, one of the strikers, and through the use of Brown's personal voice-over, Anderson constructs a film that suggests the complex interplay between the rhetorical, aesthetic and political imaginaries of the civil rights, labor, and women's movements. *I Am Somebody* reframes the race politics of the second wave by making a black woman the representative subject at stake in feminism, labor politics, and civil rights. My reading of the film takes us deep into the questions of race in seventies feminisms and argues against hegemonic narratives about "the Women's Liberation Movement."

⁴⁶ For another approach to disrupting the psychoanalytic claim on the notion of identification also see Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire*. In Chapter Two, "Desiring Others," Gaines writes, "Since at this time in history [2001] it is difficult to think how to conceptualize cinematic identification without recourse to psychoanalytic vocabulary, I begin here with a proposal that we think in terms of what is most basic to identification, which, as it emerged, is the position of one in relation to the other – hence my term, 'othering machine'" (81).

In the final chapter, I read Joyce Chopra's *Joyce at 34* (1972) alongside Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976). Celebrated in theory, *Riddles of the Sphinx* remains out of public circulation, much like its castigated realist counterpart, *Joyce at 34*. In the concluding chapter, I show that the stark opposition between the two political imaginaries represented by these landmark films (the experimental and realist) is a product of the overgeneralization and simplification of both terms of the dialectic. Exemplary of their contrasting aesthetic pursuits, these two films nonetheless share a critical focus on the politics of motherhood and maternal subjectivity, central concerns of seventies feminism. In conversation with Arendt's distinction between labor and work, I read in both films intriguing attention to the traces that remain as mothers negotiate the sticky web of desire and duty that characterizes motherhood.

Today the heady polemics between realist and modernist modes within feminist film culture and scholarship no longer hold sway. Yet, the theoretical replacement of a realist political imaginary with modernist formalism continues to shape our access to the past. Thus, to reexamine these films is to allow them to do vital intellectual work, by resisting the cultural processes and theoretical gridlocks that have contributed to their contemporary obscurity. Feminist documentaries have long been demoted to the archive, both figuratively in the discursive tradition of feminist film theory, but also literally in the basements and storage facilities of a few institutions. To reconsider realist feminist documentaries might mean to quite literally rescue them from oblivion.

Chapter One: By, For, and About: The “Real” Problem in Feminist Film Theory

“Question: What is a revolutionary aesthetic? Answer: What is revolution?”

- Barbara Martineau, “Women’s Film Daily”

In this chapter, I am interested in the means by which the dominance of the critique of realism of feminist film studies has obscured the influence and significance of feminist documentary production in the early 1970s. Motivated by real historical, material conditions in both theory and practice, feminist documentaries emerged out of the political, social, and cultural revolution once referred to as the women’s liberation movement. The “real” problem signaled by the title of this chapter thus invokes more than one sense of the “real” evident in women’s documentaries: realism is conceived as an aesthetic experiment as well as a political commitment. In both senses, “realism” exceeds its characterization within the critique levied by feminist film theorists. That is, in women’s documentary films, “realism” contained and projected a diverse and heterogeneous array of political aspirations that extended beyond individual, material film products.

In order to apprehend these alternative commitments to realism, I reanimate the sudden and explosive emergence in the late 1960s of feminist documentary film production, exhibition, and discussion. I highlight the significance of the First International Festival of Women’s Films in New York City in 1972, and early publications of feminist film criticism, such as *Women & Film*. In this chapter I build context around the feminist film movement, explore the rhetoric of documentary filmmakers, and create space in the notion of the political so as to accommodate the feminist political aspirations of feminist documentarians. Then, I restage the academic feminist critique of realism in the emerging field of feminist film studies, emphasizing the influential

scholarship of Claire Johnston and Laura Mulvey.¹ These two British film theorists shaped the anti-realist direction Anglophone feminist film theory would take well into the 1980s.

The “real” problem in the feminist film movement, however, does not simply refer to the conflict that emerged in feminist film studies over the political potential of realist documentary aesthetics. That is, it would be an oversimplification to argue that feminist film practitioners believed in the political efficacy of realism and feminist film theorists did not. Although the material presented in this chapter will affirm how efficacy, immediacy, and accessibility certainly mattered to feminist documentary filmmakers, my argument does not hinge here on alternative investments in or characterizations of the real. Rather, the main point I develop in this chapter is that the notion of political subjectivity constructed in the feminist critique of realism conflicted with the political subject anticipated by realist feminist documentaries. In Chapter Two I study more carefully the way feminist political subjectivity as imagined in films such as *The Woman’s Film*, *Self-Health*, and *Janie’s Janie* speaks to the desires and aspirations of radical feminists, and particularly to the political program of consciousness-raising. In this chapter, I read the founding texts of feminist film theory and emphasize the constitution of a post-structural, psychoanalytically defined and discursively bounded cinematic subject. By shifting the emphasis in the question, “What is a revolutionary aesthetic?” (“Women’s Film Daily” 41) from “aesthetic” to “revolution,” Barbara Martineau, whose question appears in a 1974 issue of *Women & Film*, thus captures the intervention I develop in this chapter, which stresses a conflict between women’s documentaries not at the level of aesthetics in the notion of realism, but in an alternative register of the political: in the concept of the subject.

¹ I will focus on the landmark essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Of course, Mulvey reconsidered her position in later writings, such as “Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema Inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun*.” Also see *Visual and Other Pleasures*.

In their distinct formulations of feminist subjectivity, Sonia Kruks and Kathi Weeks agree that the first order of business is to resist the oft-told “transition tale” in the humanities that narrates the shift from modernism (or Enlightenment or humanism) to postmodernism (or post-structuralism or anti-humanism) as either radical, new, or complete.² In Weeks’ rendering, the “modernist-postmodernist paradigm debate” has left thinkers with a “relentlessly oppositional logic” that forces a choice between caricatured sides (2). In Kruk’s retelling of the transitional tale, the Western intellectual tradition since the Enlightenment depended on a notion of the subject as a “knower of truth,” “autonomous, stable, and unitary, as constituting—and self-constituting—consciousness” (1). In response, the project of postmodernism was to destabilize, deconstruct, and displace knowledge, truth claims, and humanism, and “decenter the knowing subject” (1). Kruks helpfully generates several telling signposts of the postmodern subject: as “a variable and complex function of discourse” (Foucault); “determined by the displacement of the signifier...regardless of character of sex” (Lacan); and “only the signifying process” (Kristeva) (1). Like Weeks, Kruks characterizes the debate between modernism and postmodernism as heated and polarized, a debate in which one was faced with a stark and yet necessary choice between humanism and anti-humanism, the Cartesian subject or the death of the subject (3). If we think of feminist film theory as taking sides early on, this chapter will show that the coalescing discipline chose to join forces with the developing trends in post-structuralism. Feminist documentaries, defined by a realist aesthetic and a commitment to collectivist movement politics represented the humanist impulses of a paradigm feminist film theorists were eager to disavow.

² In brief, Kruks contends that existential accounts of the subject in Beauvoir, Sartre, Fanon, and Merleau-Ponty, particularly as a result of the focus on “lived experience,” can guide new thinking in feminist theory. Weeks’ alternative theory of feminist subjectivity also contends with the notion of experience (through feminist standpoint theory), but returns to Nietzsche and Foucault in pursuit of a nonessential model of the feminist subject.

A Material History of the Feminist Film Movement

In her article, “The Last Days of Women’s Cinema,” published in 2006, feminist film scholar Patricia White uses the terms “women’s cinema,” “the feminist film movement,” and “cinefeminism” in her discussion of the material practices, publications, and distribution organizations that constructed the constellation of women’s film culture in the seventies. White’s reach back into the “Archive for the Future” – the name under which *Camera Obscura* published a collection of essays on the event of their thirtieth anniversary – generatively reframes the feminist film movement as a vibrant period of women’s cinema, particularly in the face of a present moment that, White point out, sees stark gender imbalances in cinematic institutions and waning numbers of women represented at film festivals and awards ceremonies.³ Rather than isolate individual films from the period, White productively emphasizes the network of practices and organizations, distribution collectives, and screening events that constituted and sustained the feminist film movement.⁴ It is in this sense that it makes sense to speak of seventies film feminisms as constituting a “movement” worthy of reflection and interrogation in a way that includes a sustained engagement with an expansive canon from the period, which comprises documentaries as well as experimental and avant-garde films.⁵

In the North American context, the first large-scale exhibition of films made exclusively by women was the First International Festival of Women’s Films (FIFWF) held in New York City in 1972 where over one hundred films made by women since the invention of cinema

³ I focus on alternative women’s cinema in this dissertation. However, Christina Lane’s *Feminist Hollywood* makes a case for examining women directors who have left independent cinema to work in Hollywood.

⁴ White has worked widely on the significance of festivals for feminist and gay and lesbian cinema. Also see White, B. Ruby Rich, Eric O. Clarke, and Richard Fung’s essays, “Queer Publicity: A Dossier on Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals” in a 1999 issue of *GLQ*.

⁵ For more on experimental filmmakers of the seventies see Virginia Wexman and Jean Petrolle, *Women and Experimental Filmmaking* and Robin Blaetz’s collection, *Women’s Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*.

screened over the course of sixteen days. The signature event created among filmmakers and audiences the momentum and sense of community that would set in motion the feminist film movement. Dora Kaplan, in her review of the festival in *Women & Film*, describes the event as a celebration “not only of women in film, but of women in revolt” (33). In “Women, Their Films, and Their Festival,” Marjorie Rosen relates several anecdotes about how New York daily presses such as the *New York Times* “boycotted” the festival, underestimating its popularity and significance. Calling the event, “a revelation,” Rosen also remarks that many prominent women had no patience for a sex-segregated film festival, including Eileen Bowser, then at the Museum of Modern Art, and Shirley Clarke, independent filmmaker and director of *The Cool World* (1964) and *Portrait of Jason* (1967). She summarizes their position: “If women’s films were good enough, they would survive and be shown without external crutches” (36).

Despite these objections and the lack of publicity, in its final week, writes Dora Kaplan, all available seats were sold out and audiences clamored for more screenings. As a gathering place for feminists and filmmakers, the festival was also more than an opportunity to see films. Kaplan describes how new professional and personal relationships were forged between participants, transforming the festival into both “a workshop” and “an employment office” (34). According to Elenore Lester of the *New York Times* (in a dubiously titled article, “Every Day Was Ladies’ Day”), “The festival was clearly a landmark in terms of the women’s liberation movement. The feminist audience was overwhelmingly responsive and talked enthusiastically of the festivals to come. Certainly there is enough feminine filmmaking talent around to produce a stimulating annual festival” (D20). Although the Second International Women’s Film Festival in

New York City would not take place until four years later, in the wake of the FIFWF, festivals devoted to women and film erupted throughout North America and Anglophone Europe.⁶

Kristina Nordstrom, a New York feminist, filmmaker, and film programmer, who had previously worked on the New York Film Festival, generated the idea of a women's only film festival as a result of her involvement in women's liberation activism:

We had been in a consciousness-raising group and I was tired of just talking. I wanted to do some kind of action ... I knew there had been some films made by women but I didn't know how many. I thought a festival of women's films would really spotlight that for women and be something positive that they could identify with and encourage more women to do it and convince the world at large that women have those kinds of capabilities. (qtd. in Rosenberg 97)

For Nordstrom, a women's-only festival would serve feminist politics in several ways. Personally, she felt a need to "act" out her feminism beyond the small group, talking format of consciousness-raising. Yet, she also speaks of a desire to share knowledge about women's artistic production and encourage other women to produce films. And she attests to an oppositional impulse to debunk cultural myths about women's (in)capabilities. The FIFWF thus functioned within the discourses of second wave feminist activism. The goals, as Nordstrom explains them, included a platform for identification among participants, films, and filmmakers. The FIFWF was far more than an exhibition space for films made by women. In ways similar to other movement events, such as the demonstration against the Miss America Pageant of 1968, the FIFWF was designed as a site of collective identification—a political location made possible, but not wholly determined by cinema as such.

⁶ Several thorough chronologies detail the key festivals and major events of the feminist film movement. See B. Ruby Rich's *Chick Flicks* (64). Also Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams provide a chronology in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (3).

Experimental, avant-garde, feature films and shorts on 16mm and 35mm all screened during the festival. However, almost half of the 125 films showcased were documentary films and most of these made in the mold of what critics called “verité style.” E. Ann Kaplan describes the so-called “verité” form as “one of the simplest and cheapest,” suggesting that economics and lack of expertise drove filmmakers’ choices to make realist documentaries (*Women and Film* 125). Writing about the dominant trend of documentary films at the FIFWF, however, Dora Kaplan provides an alternative rationale. She emphasizes the particular technological and political context for the emergence of realist forms in films by women in the early seventies. Throughout the sixties, women who worked on film tended to be employed as “sound girls” in the circuits of direct cinema; very few women had experience as cinematographers. Resulting from the rhetoric and impetus of the emerging women’s liberation movement, however, as Dora Kaplan explains, women began to see themselves as filmmakers rather than as merely assistants to (male) filmmakers. Further, for women documentary filmmakers such as Nell Cox, who had previously taken sound on direct cinema productions, documentary offered the potential to enact anti-authoritarianism in the process of making films that likewise featured feminist critiques of patriarchal authority.⁷ Women filmmakers thus sought the possibility, as Dora Kaplan articulates their project, of “unalienated” labor, a way of making “political films politically” (38). For many women filmmakers, thus, the production of realist documentary films was not, as E. Ann Kaplan assumes, a matter of lack (lack of skills, lack of funds), but rather a political practice that allowed

⁷ Not all feminist filmmakers agreed, of course. In an interview with Kay Harris in *Women & Film*, Nelly Kaplan challenges the belief that documentary film manifests collectivity in a way that results in an abdication of individual authority. Armatage asks her, “Do you prefer directing controlled features or documentaries that require less?” Kaplan responds, “Do you mean do I prefer power or not?” And goes on to elaborate: “This is not a problem of power, this is a problem of – from a magician’s point of view – creating something where before there was nothing at all ... as happens when you make a feature. When you make a documentary even if you create in a way you’re only reproducing. When making a feature there is a very big exultation of creating a new situation. If that is a taste for power then yes, I have it” (35).

them to match their particular needs, demands, and desires with technological and formal pursuits.

E. Ann Kaplan also refers to the “verité documentary” as *the* exemplary aesthetic of realism. And realism, in the film theorist’s formulation, is a dangerous capitulation to dominant ideology: “Realism as an artistic style is designed to perpetuate [the] illusion of a stable world; and within realism it is of course the vérité documentary that seems most confidently ‘a window on the world through which ... the world is clearly visible’ and ‘where the signifiers appear to point directly and confidently to the signified’” (*Women and Film* 131).⁸ However, for some feminist filmmakers, documentaries were as much about enacting political processes, as they were the fabrication of an aesthetic object. In her review article on the FIFWF in *Women & Film*, in which she interviews several filmmakers, Dora Kaplan stresses the human production processes of documentary filmmaking. In her interviews with Geri Ashur, director of *Janie’s Janie* (1971) and Claudia Weill, whose documentary *The Home of Mrs. Levant Graham* (1971) screened at the FIFWF, Kaplan encourages the women to discuss how they developed mutually transforming relationships with their filmed subjects. In response, Ashur explains that the filmmakers spent a year with Janie, the young mother of five featured in the documentary that bears her name: “[W]e learned a lot from her. She learned a lot from us and the change in her consciousness was partially because we used to bring her piles of RAT and women’s magazines” (39).⁹

In *Janie’s Janie*, Janie describes her emerging consciousness about the oppression she suffered, first at the hands of her father, then in the shadow of her husband. The film about her documents Janie’s transformation from an isolated existence in her cramped home to a public life

⁸ In her own footnote on this citation, Kaplan references Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* through Terence Hawkes’ *Structuralism and Semiotics*.

⁹ *RAT Subterranean News* was a leftist counter-culture political magazine established in New York in 1968.

in her Ironbound neighborhood as an advocate for others. As Janie relates her life as a young girl and newlywed, the intimate scenes in her home speak to her dark and solitary experiences. In the final scenes of the film, however, Janie is framed in expansive settings: out on the street and in the daycare collective where she works. Her process of becoming, reflected in the *mise-en-scene*, moves her out of isolation and into collectivity.

Ashur admits that Janie's raised consciousness was not merely a process that the filmmakers witnessed and sought to capture. In this way, she refutes E. Ann Kaplan's charge of seeking to create "a window on the world." Rather, the changes Janie experiences came about as a result of her relationship with the filmmakers and her exposure to and engagement with movement literature. The daycare that provides the grounds in the film for Janie's arrival into the public sphere and into a political consciousness of collectivity was founded by the individuals who raised the funds for the film. If there is a problem with the way Janie's feminist trajectory is depicted in the film, then, it lies in the way the filmmakers fail to foreground the nature of their influence on Janie and opt rather for a film that maximizes the seeming naturalness of Janie's coming into consciousness. The film does not elide the technological means of production, for example in scenes where the filmmaker's voice is clearly audible as she prompts Janie with questions about her life. And yet, curiously, the film does excise evidence of the influential relationship between the filmmakers and the filmed subject, obscuring rather the human processes of production at stake in the subtext of the film. Still, this is not the same as arguing that the film, through realist aesthetics such as grainy film stock, a hand held camera, and location shooting, seeks to create "a window on the world," as Kaplan contends. If anything, the film presents a problem of fabrication: the construction and presentation of a diegetic world necessary to sustain a prior political message about the need for feminist consciousness-raising and collective, local action. Kaplan's recourse to Derrida in the quote above signals the discrepancy that interests me

between the academic's theoretical pursuits and the concrete, social politics stressed in the film. As Kruks recounts, it is a problem that did not escape Derrida himself: "I try where I can to act politically while recognizing that such action remains incommensurate with my intellectual project of deconstruction" (qtd. in Kruks 14).¹⁰

These details about the production of *Janie's Janie* and the emphasis they receive in Dora Kaplan's *Women & Film* article are significant. For filmmakers, documentary created an opportunity not only to record newly identified women's issues and politics; it offered a realm of action and collaboration. Women documentary filmmakers, in particular, conceived of cinema as a system capable of inciting social, revolutionary change. Filmmakers were not simply making films about the women's movement; they were constructing and enacting feminist political aspirations. Filmmakers collaborated to create new filmmaking collectives and distribution networks through which non-fiction films were mobilized in tandem with women's political activism, and particularly consciousness-raising, as a way to incite reflection as a precursor to action. In their inaugural catalog cum manifesto, New Day Films, one of the earliest distribution cooperatives for feminist films, describes what they felt motivated feminist documentary filmmakers: "As independent feminist filmmakers, we could see that the women traditionally found on the screen were products of the experiences, imagination, and fantasies of male filmmakers. We were making films based on *women's* needs and experiences" (qtd. in Rosenberg 86).¹¹ In her interviews with women filmmakers of the feminist film movement, Jan Rosenberg

¹⁰ Kruks excerpts this statement of Derrida's from Richard Kearney's *Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*.

¹¹ Despite New Day's inclusive rhetoric, some critics argued that lesbians were categorically excluded from their notion of "women." In a special issue of *Jump Cut*, the guest editors write, "Lesbianism is not a subject of interest to New Day Films, the single largest feminist distributor of documentary films in the United States. Lesbian issues are not addressed in the New Day films, the word does not appear in their catalogue, and only rarely does any woman even appear to be a lesbian in the interviews and portraits that form their film treatments of social issues. It would be foolish to expect heterosexual feminists to produce

determines that the majority of young feminist filmmakers in the early seventies, such as Julia Reichert, Judy Smith, and Geri Ashur “began making films in order to communicate their feminist politics” (43). For feminist documentary filmmakers of the seventies, cinema represented a realm of possibility: the possibility of addressing the needs and desires of reconfigured feminist subjects, the potential to enact feminist politics in the work of filmmaking, and the opportunity to insinuate alternative representations of women in the public sphere.

Three New Day films that evidence these political strategies are: *Growing Up Female*, *Anything You Want to Be*, and *Joyce at 34*. Significantly, however, the cinematic techniques evident in these three films vary substantially and in ways that exceed the “verité” designation assigned to them. In *Growing Up Female*, directors Julia Reichert and James Klein interview young girls, adolescents, and adult women as well as teachers, psychologists, and mothers in an effort to expose how culture and ideology indoctrinate girls in America into pursuing an oppressive and subservient model of femininity. The film is formally comprised of conventionally-staged talking head interviews as well as observational scenes that lack direct intervention by the filmmakers, classic “verité” conventions. Throughout, the auditory track consists of popular songs, conversations between filmmakers and filmed subjects, and a scripted, didactic voiceover by the filmmaker/experts. The final woman interviewed is a young, white suburban mother bemoaning the “brainwashing” she felt she was subject to as she matured: getting married and having children, she explains, was all she was ever supposed to want. Sitting in her kitchen, reading parenting magazines after her domestic chores are complete and her children snug in bed, she sounds full of regret: “If I had it to do over again would I do it again?”

lesbian films. But if New Day’s films are meant to describe the reality of women’s experience, then they must include lesbians as a part of that reality.”

Oh god. I doubt it.” Stitching together six portraits of girls and women at different stages of “womanhood,” the film argues that American Womanhood is a sham. The only solution for “the American woman” is solidarity with other women. Urging women to unite, the film clearly operates in tandem with women’s liberation activism and the program of feminist consciousness-raising, both thematically and aesthetically, as it tries to convince women that they need each other and a movement to change the course of their collective future.

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

Joyce Chopra and Claudia Weill’s short film, *Joyce at 34*, which I analyze closely in Chapter Four, evidences an investment in the power of “true” stories about “real women” to convey the multiple oppressions women face, convincing women, as it were, of the need for women’s liberation. Yet, the cinematic techniques the film deploys also vary far more than the “verité” designation assigned to them allows. Joyce’s primary struggle in the documentary revolves around the problem of trying to pursue her filmmaking career and meet the demands of

motherhood and spousehood. These concerns, limited to the ruminations of the (here: white, heterosexual) middle-class, nonetheless resonate with reflexive obsession about the work of cinema and the labor of women, both within and beyond the text. Indeed, many women's documentaries from the seventies exhibited self-reflexive film techniques, which work to expose rather than conceal filmic modes of production such as shot set-up, lighting, and editing.

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

Growing Up Female, Anything You Want to Be, and Joyce at 34 all reflect on the collective stories of women's lives, drawing attention to the way seemingly individual struggles actually speak to systematic problems, which would require that women unite in a political

movement of liberation. Though the films clearly insist on the power of “true” stories about “real women” to convey the multiple oppressions women face in a capitalist patriarchy, the cinematic techniques they deploy vary. If women filmmakers, several of whom, incidentally, started as “sound girls” for the fathers of direct cinema, deployed some the codes and conventions of so-called documentary verité, they clearly set out to make their own kind of films, which could speak to and account for women’s gendered experience in a world run by men and, most urgently, that would serve to convince women that they needed a women’s liberation movement.¹²

As much as the mediascape of the feminist film movement depended on the production of individual films, the feminism that mobilized documentary production extended beyond the limits of the screen.¹³ However, as feminist scholars began to articulate their critical responses to women’s documentaries, their commitments to emerging theories of cinema semiotics and psychoanalytic processes of spectatorship foreclosed a theoretical consideration of the social and political forces that informed films from conception and production to distribution and exhibition. B. Ruby Rich remarks that feminist film production in the seventies was a matter of deep political commitment, “encompassing a wide social setting”; before it became “an area of study,” it existed, in Rich’s words, in “a sphere of action” centered on questions of “life that go beyond form” (*Chick Flicks* 65). The network that sustained feminist documentary production, exhibition, and distribution in the seventies was complex and unique to the feminist film movement. As Patricia White cautions, while more recent decades boast of an ever-growing sphere of media

¹² Joyce Chopra took sound and co-produced Richard Leacock’s *Happy Mother’s Day* (1963), which I discuss in the Introduction, and Nell Cox also worked with Leacock and D.A. Pennebaker. See Rosenberg’s chapter, “The Filmmakers” in *Women’s Reflections*.

¹³ Julia Reichert explains, “The other thing that’s very exciting is when a program of women’s films is a catalyst in a community. I’d show a series of films and afterwards we’d talk about the films and the local situation. You’d see people groping and excited—women who hadn’t met before talking for hours and then deciding to meet again. Consciousness raising groups, women’s centers, and all kinds of activities around the country started with films being a catalyzing force” (“New Day’s Way”).

produced by women, attention to the relations of production that determine their distribution and exhibition has waned significantly.

Feminist Film Criticism

In addition to developing new filmmaking practices, distribution networks, and exhibition venues, feminists in the seventies, both inside and outside of the traditional academy, wrote passionately and heterogeneously on the subject of “women and film” in ways conversant with movement political rhetoric. Film programs at women’s film festivals were among the first published writings, which circulated among festival participants. Patricia White reminds readers that Claire Johnston developed her landmark essay, “Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema,” as part of her involvement in the Edinburgh Film Festival’s 1972 Women’s Cinema Event. As they generated written film programs and literature about both new and “rescued” women’s films, women who organized the first festivals in New York, Edinburgh (*The Women’s Event at Edinburgh Film Festival*, 1972), Philadelphia (*Philadelphia’s First International Festival of Films by Women*, 1972), Toronto (*Toronto Women and Film Festival*, 1973), and Chicago (*Chicago Films by Women Festival*, 1974) quickly became aware of a scandalous lack of investigation into the subject of “women and film.” Canadian Kay Armatage wrote in 1972 about the difficulties involved in organizing women’s film festivals. Despite the overwhelming presence of women in “the movies” and even, occasionally, behind the camera, she explains, “scholarship on women’s cinema is almost nonexistent” (46). Journalists from serial publications such as *off our backs*, *Ms. Magazine*, and the *Village Voice* in the U.S. and *Spare Rib* in the U.K. covered the events, atmosphere, and discussions at the festivals for a feminist readership.

Among the first full-length books published on the subject of women and the cinema were *Women In Focus*, Jeanne Betancourt’s 1974 examination of films made by “filmmakers

with a feminist consciousness” (xx), which includes details about how to rent and exhibit 16mm prints, and *Women’s Films in Print* (1975) a directory of over 800 16mm films made by women, similarly intended to provide programmers and educators with details necessary for film exhibitions and discussions. Neither text assumes a shared knowledge about feminist and women-made films, but rather they both estimate the need to generate interest in the new media and provide information about accessing the new materials. This focus on exhibition and viewing practices suggests the significance during the early years of the feminist film movement of creating community through a shared encounter with emergent films in what Rich calls a “sphere of action.”

As it emerged, feminist film criticism also focused on explicating the gendered socialization of women and the circumscription of their roles in society and cultural forms, and particularly the media. The first landmark serial publication in English on the subject of “Women in Film,” was a special issue of the Canadian film journal, *Take One* in 1972.¹⁴ Groundbreaking for recognizing the increased significance of film for the women’s movement, the “Women in Film” issue of *Take One* focused on concerns over women’s (mis)representation in the media. Molly Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape* and Marjorie Rosen’s *Popcorn Venus*, as well as *Take One*’s special issue, all published between 1972-1973, centered on identifying and unveiling problematic, stereotypical representations of women throughout visual media. Critics labored to link sexist representations of women in media culture to the systematic oppression of women by patriarchy and capitalism. For Haskell and Rosen, the treatment of women on screen mirrored the subjugation of women in society and culture. In Haskell’s summation, “Movies are one of the

¹⁴ *The Velvet Light Trap* also published an entire issue on the place of women in Hollywood in 1972. In Europe, after 1974 the West German journal *Frauen und Film* was among the first journals entirely devoted to feminist film theory. For a more detailed discussion see Janet McCabe’s *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman into Cinema*.

clearest and most accessible of looking glasses into the past, being both cultural artifacts and mirrors” (xii).

For emergent feminist film critics, it was imperative to explain how within a more general critique of the media, film presented a unique sphere to contend with. In the words of author J. Pyros writing in the 1972 *Take One* issue, “Millions of people are exposed to films, so no area is more useful for disseminating positive or negative images of women.” (7). Manifest in work on women and film in publications before 1974 was also an attempt to rewrite the history of male cinema and highlight the contributions of women. Of the six feature articles in *Take One*’s special issue on “Women in Film,” for example, two are interviews with filmmakers and three are catalogues of women’s participation in the North American film industries.¹⁵ In the early years of the feminist film movement, women were reconfiguring knowledge about themselves at the level of image, in the annals of history, and reasserting their presence in the realm of film as active participants in the industry. There was a focus on “positive or negative images,” in addition to assessments of how female characters were stereotyped in dominant cinema, and how the stereotypes reflected the gendered politics of the era at stake.

These interests lead Patricia Erens in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, published in 1990, to describe this body of work as constituting “image studies” and the editors of *Re-Vision* to label it the “image of” tradition. In Eren’s periodization of feminist film criticism, “image studies” dominated the field, as evidenced by the selections in *Women & Film* and early issues of *Jump Cut*, until the materialization of critiques to this approach from British film feminists

¹⁵ The interviews were: “Shirley Clarke: Image and Images,” and “Kay Armatage interviews Joyce Wieland.” The other three features were: “Notes on Women Directors,” “Women on Women in Film,” and “Canadian Women Directors: A Filmography.”

(xvii).¹⁶ Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams write, “[T]he ‘image of’ tradition of feminist film criticism has been recently criticized for revolving around fairly simple notions of realist representation. Yet it is important to recognize the value of such studies, both as a point of departure for students first encountering the subject and for historians and sociologists who seek more detailed information...” (6). Here the authors rehearse a standard periodization in the field where the theoretical investment in a politics of representation constitutes a fixed, prior, and surpassed moment of analysis. In the early seventies, however, by populating the lacunae on the subject of women and film, feminist criticism created new possibilities for understanding the particular role cinema played in the systemic oppression of women by patriarchy. At issue were the problems of how women shared a common subjectivity (and subjugation) designated by the signifier “women,” and the insidious role of the mass media in instantiating their defeat. In subsequent periodizations, however, this moment is calcified into a past that feminist theorists would soon disavow.

In the wake of “special sections” on women and film in Anglophone publications such as *Take One* (in 1972), *Film Quarterly* (in 1971-192), and *The Velvet Light Trap* (in 1972), came the first full journal devoted to the topic of women and cinema: *Women & Film*, which was published out of the University of California at Berkeley for the first time in 1972 and sold for 75 cents. *Women & Film* surfaced out of a collective of self-designated “non-professionals” who described

¹⁶ However, lest characterizations such as Erens’ elide the heterogeneity of women’s thinking about film, representation, and gender in North American feminist work before the British critique, Barbara Martineau’s “Thoughts About the Objectification of Women” in *Take One* offers an original theoretical analysis of the problems of “representation” for the politics of women’s liberation. With prophetic concern that the “notion of woman as object” was in danger of “falling into disuse as an overused cliché,” Martineau set out to theorize the psychology of women’s oppression in the philosophical framework of “otherness” (15). Martineau was highly conscious of her focus on “the traditional pattern of man as creative artist, woman as malleable material,” but explained, “The cinema tends to emphasize this pattern” (16-17).

their perspective as “feminist-marxist-anarchist.”¹⁷ The West Coast collective explained that they “dare” to put together such a journal, despite their status as “amateurs,” because they found no such perspective in published writing about women and the media. The journal, which ran successfully for less than four years, marks a moment when the critique of media among feminists was paramount in the liberation efforts of the women’s movement. Following the self-proclaimed women’s liberation movement’s first large-scale protest against the Miss America pageant in 1968, women staged a demonstration at the Madison Square Bridal Fair, and a sit-in at the headquarters of the *Ladies Home Journal*.¹⁸ When *Women & Film* emerged, so little had been written from a feminist perspective on the politics of representation throughout the media that the field was open and the methodologies were heterogeneous. Indeed, “feminist film theory” proper had not yet coalesced into a formal academic discipline and women who wrote about film considered themselves “critics” and not “theorists.”¹⁹

This distinction would become supremely important and adhere to the periodization Eren’s manifests above. Critics were allegedly attached to simplistic representation and

¹⁷ “Finally, we are non-professionals who dare put a magazine together because there is a real need for an arena for debate and presentation of views especially from a feminist-marxist-anarchist direction” (6).

¹⁸ According to Carol Hanisch who was a member of the New York Radical Women, the idea for the landmark 1968 Miss America Protest in Atlantic City came directly as a result of watching *Schmeerguntz* (“A Critique of the Miss America Protest” 86). Hanisch’s description of the “feelings” evoked by remembering the act of viewing the Miss America pageant speaks to a problem that both Patricia Smith and Annette Kuhn have remarked upon. That is, how can film theory account for feeling and memory in response to viewing experience? In this context, we might ask: How can film theory help us understand the impact and urgency with which women’s films were apprehended during the explosive years of feminist activism in the early seventies? In *Uninvited* White recalls scrubbing her elbows fastidiously at age thirteen in response to *The Member of the Wedding* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952). These types of literal and visceral responses to film, for White, suggest that the affect attached to films can create the possibility for community identification. For Hanisch and the women in her consciousness group, screening Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley’s experimental montage film certainly created this kind of possibility – “We all agreed that our main point in the demonstration would be that all women were hurt by beauty competition—Miss America as well as ourselves” (87). The notion of a community of “all women,” has been identified as the motivating fantasy of second wave women’s activism. Yet, White’s point remains despite this critique. Whether or not the community is “real” or “imagined,” White suggests that the basis for its construction can be found in the affect attached to a film.

¹⁹ Ruby Rich describes these discreet moments of “criticism” and theory” in “In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism.”

stereotype while theorists would see their project as elucidating the particular signifying processes of cinema. The framework and progressive narrative became so entrenched that anthologies rarely include any essays written before Johnston and Mulvey. E. Ann Kaplan, for example, opens *Feminism and Film* with “The Modernist Mode,” writing the so-called early period completely out of the stories feminist film theory tells itself about itself.²⁰ In contrast, I claim that feminist film criticism generated a critical if limited approach to women’s film. In particular, we find evidence of a political allegiance to leftist politics intimately tied to women’s liberation activism and socialist feminism. I say this without wanting to assert that its goals were more or less important, more or less real, or more or less feminist than the post-structuralist project that ensued. Rather, the point is to show that there existed an alternative discourse of feminist politics in which a distinct political subject was envisioned. When feminist film theorists throw out “the early years” baby as symptomatic of an Enlightenment project of total knowledge, they also discard the productive waters that force an engagement with a political subject that strives for agency, collectivity, and freedom.

Women & Film, for example, devised a project that incorporated analyses of representation with a Marxist perspective on global politics and the industrial goals of Hollywood. The “call to arms” in the opening issue is at once directed at women, but also to “all oppressed people.” In the vein of New Left rhetoric, which drew the notion of examining one’s own oppression from the Black Power Movement, the *Women & Film* collective aligned itself with Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino’s “Toward a Third Cinema.” In the 1968 manifesto, the Argentine filmmakers stress that “revolution” begins in the moment when the collective

²⁰ I’m riffing here on the notion of story telling generated in Clare Hemmings’ productive essay, “Telling Feminist Stories.”

consciousness registers a need for change.²¹ For Solanas and Getino, the *beginning* of study and organization on different fronts is already revolutionary. The filmmakers clearly articulated their ambition in producing films as the realization of not beauty but provocation.²² The goals of this particular beginning in *Women & Film* were as broad, democratic, and as idealistic as the credo of the Latin American revolutionaries'. Both insisted on the need for action, agency, change, and resistance.

The link that *Women & Film* forge with the rhetoric of Third Cinema resonates as well at the level of aesthetics. As Alexandra Juhasz points out, the “naïve” realism that raised red flags for feminist film theorists in women’s documentaries comes of out a rich tradition of realist political documentary film production in Third Cinema. Realist political documentaries were also produced by other seventies movements, including by people of color and gay rights activists, as well as defining the aesthetic commitments of much contemporary ethnographic and media production. Christine Gledhill made a similar point in 1978, arguing that the critique of realism constituted a thorny problem for film feminists since so often realism generally constitutes “the first recourse” taken by oppressed groups.²³ As the rhetoric and corollary aesthetic tradition of Third Cinema indicates, realist codes and conventions make possible an often complex

²¹ Alice Echols explains how the new left picked up the notion that “revolutionary consciousness emanates from ‘the perception of oneself as one of the oppressed’” around 1966. Although this would later become central to the women’s movement in the form consciousness-raising, “in 1966, the new left embraced the idea in ways that further marginalized women” (37).

²² “[W]e realized that the important thing was not the film itself but that which the film provoked” (Solanas 20).

²³ “Once an oppressed group becomes aware of its cultural as well as political oppression, and identifies oppressive myths and stereotypes—and in the case of women, female images that simply express male fantasies—it becomes the concern of that group to expose the oppression of such images and replace their falsity, lies, deceptions and escapist illusions with reality and truth” (462). Gledhill goes on to specify however that “a simplistic use of the notion of cinematic realism” ignores three significant problems. The first centers on the fantasy that “real” women could ever be adequately rendered in the realm of images and equally apprehended by all women. The second misunderstands cinema as existing politically rather than at the service of pleasure and fantasy. And the third denies the constructed nature of realism itself. Nonetheless, Gledhill distances herself from an anti-realist position she calls “monolithic” and which “collapses realism into naturalism and invalidates the fact that different media forms ... refer to and construct reality in very different ways” (462-465).

negotiation of political identities, particularly when the marginalized and voiceless determine the contours of their own counter-hegemonic representation. The heterogeneity of theoretical orientations evident throughout the issues of *Women & Film* demonstrates that although the journal is consistently appended to an initial or early stage of feminist film criticism, for example in the introductory notes to anthologies of feminist film theory, this early stage was perhaps more complex, less fixed, and more generative than later studies acknowledged.²⁴

In a recently published account of the genealogy and landscape of the discipline of feminist film theory, Janet McCabe also links the pioneering studies of early feminist film work to the political action of the women's movement; both demonstrate a strong affinity to activist feminist politics by "offering knowledge about how the patriarchal world worked to oppress women" (6). McCabe credits the work of Haskell and Rosen, for example, as following on the tradition of Simone de Beauvoir's cultural history of the production of women in *The Second Sex* (6). McCabe offers a generous reading of the theoretical underpinnings of the so-called "sociological" writing of early feminism film critics and perhaps points out a direction for generative thinking in the vein of Kruks's project on a notion of the political subject explored in the terms critical to existential philosophers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Yet, rehearsing the commonly expressed critique of the period, she also intimates that the theoretical enterprise took for granted the notion that a direct relationship between representation and power produced evident meanings in cultural products that could be excavated and exposed by critics. McCabe here participates in the critique initiated by feminist film scholars as they pursued the theoretical trends introduced by British film feminists. The resulting criticisms of

²⁴ See, for example, *Feminism and Film Theory* edited by Constance Penley, *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sue Thornham, and *Feminism and Film* edited by E. Ann Kaplan.

early feminist film criticism as well as feminist documentary practice, which took root in the ground of a new engagement with Althusser and Lacan, held that both early feminist criticism and practice were founded on a naïve investment in the potential of images to transfer direct and natural meanings about the world, summarized by the editors of *Re-Vision* as “fairly simple notions of realist representation” (6).²⁵ Adamantly anti-realist, modernist film theory post ’68 would generate a theoretical landscape in which realist documentaries and critiques of representation formed the basis for feminist film scholars to construct a progressively oriented escape route from what was figured as a fixed, prior, and singular naiveté.²⁶

The Ideological Critique of Realism

Newly reconfigured academic subjects, feminist film theorists certainly shared the anti-establishment political commitments of feminist activists, yet as part of institutions of higher education, they inhabited a particular and separate intellectual terrain in the early seventies. Just as the political commitments of feminist filmmakers and feminist critics helps construct a framework for their work outside of the realism/experiment dialectic set up by feminist theorists, so the theorists should be read within the context that gave rise to their versions of political and cinematic subjectivity. As E. Ann Kaplan recounts in the introduction to *Feminism and Film*, the “fascination with post-structuralism and things French” came about in part as a response to the dominance of New Criticism in the humanities (5). As the political imaginary of the left was

²⁵ The key essays are Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” and Jacques Lacan’s “The Mirror Stage.”

²⁶ For Janet Walker and Diane Waldman, editors of *Feminism and Documentary*, the “wedding of the critique of realism with the goals of feminism was a crucial development that had enormous consequences for the direction of feminist film theory and the marginalization of documentary within it” (8).

increasingly preoccupied with Anti-Nuclear, Civil Rights, Students and Women's Movements, scholars sought alternatives to the humanistic framework that facilitated New Criticism's version of formalism. Juhasz adds to this context the fact that women were eager to establish legitimacy within the U.S. academy at the same time as French scholarship in post-structuralism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis began to be translated into English. The convergence of these influences on feminist critics of film in the academy amounted to a categorical rejection of "realism."²⁷

In the mid-seventies, emerging feminist film theorists were quick to dismiss women's documentaries as highly naïve "verité" films. Verité tellingly implied a collusion with the U.S. direct cinema movement of the 60s and a belief espoused primarily by filmmakers such as Robert Drew, Richard Leacock and DA Pennebaker that documentary had finally achieved its goal of objective, immediate, and transparent cinema. Indeed, in professional and non-professional literature about women's documentaries, beginning in the seventies, "verité" was used in shorthand to denote the particular kind of aesthetic that dominated women's filmmaking, which emphasized the accessible, "real lives" of the filmed subjects, characterized for example, by women who speak directly to the camera, or amongst and to other women beyond the frame.

"Realism" became a loosely defined but highly pernicious "style" of filmmaking in feminist film theory in the seventies and eighties—a problematic aesthetic to be countered both in theory and in practice. Authorized with sweeping powers of signification, "realism" encompassed both fictional and non-fictional texts in seventies film theory and became a strange sort of beast: code at once for transparency, verisimilitude, and illusionism, linked to ideological complicity and political conservatism. Annette Kuhn, thus, continuing this tradition into the 1980s in

²⁷ Juhasz goes on to point out how academic film feminists are often well-educated, upper-middle-class scholars decrying the naiveté of "others" (often poor, less educated people of color). She quotes Manohla Dargis who wonders if the academic critique of feminist documentaries was "not only too harsh, but suspiciously self-interested" (199). Jane Gaines intimates as much in her essay, "Women and Representation." She writes, "Has the study of popular film, once not no respectable, been suddenly made distinguished and serious via the female scholar's association with French theory?"

Women's Pictures explains that “the basic shared characteristic of all forms of cinematic realism is their tendency to transparency in representation ... that is, all realist forms have the ‘appearance of reality’ in common” (132). If dominant fictional cinema accomplishes the appearance of reality through conventions such as continuity editing, the close-up, shot-reverse-shots, and point-of-view shots, documentary cinema’s realism is written into the text through the language of “naturalness” according to Kuhn: the use of hand-held cameras, focus shifts, and free-style editing. Following Kuhn then, documentary realism—as it strives towards transparency—mimics the ideological complicity of fictional realism: processes of signification fall into the background of film-texts that rather foreground their relation to the real world. As a result, spectators rest assured that being in the world makes sense, that representations can convey natural meanings, and that meaning-making is but a process of receiving canned messages from the text. Feminist critics in other words demanded a cinema that could break with this naturalized and visually complicit presentation of the world and of women’s oppression.

In her article, “They Said We Were Trying to Show Reality—All I Want to Show Is My Video: The Politics of the Realist Feminist Documentary,” Juhasz contends that because feminist film theory coalesced in the mid-seventies around a disavowal of realist aesthetics, feminist film academics generated a canon of experimental feminist films such as *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976), *Thriller* (1979), and *Sigmund Freud’s Dora* (1979), which explicitly manifest an engagement with problems of representation, language, ideology, and desire. Women’s documentaries, on the other hand, because they did not speak to this new “theoretical grid” were written out of the canon and specific knowledge about these films has been “lost along the way” (200).²⁸ Juhasz, following Ruby Rich, counters that U.S. women’s documentaries were not necessarily un-theoretical or naïve, but rather they evidenced alternative theoretical commitments, in particular

²⁸ Also see Janet Staiger’s 1985 essay, “The Politics of Film Canons.”

to American feminist theorists such as Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly. For Juhasz, what appears *in theory* as “an irreconcilable split” between U.S. and British feminist theories, the former based in second-wave politics of agency and collectivity, the latter aimed at mobilizing ideological analysis, boils down, rather, to “a more subtle contradiction” in ways of understanding what she calls, “the political efficacy of reality and identity” (204).²⁹ In her reassessment of the context in which feminist documentaries came to light in the seventies, Juhasz ultimately advocates *for* the use of realism by politically motivated producers of media. “Realism,” for Juhasz indicates a nuanced approach to the “real world” and “real experience,” both of which are necessarily engaged by individuals who seek change in their lived context. Drawing from her contemporary involvement with AIDS media activism, Juhasz maintains, “‘Realism’ can function in any 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” (195).

Juhasz treads meticulously through definitions of terms such as “realism” and “identification,” which formed the cornerstones of the feminist critique of realism in the early seventies. Her attention to detail contrasts with the ways realism and identification were used in highly generalized ways to describe the “effects” of film on cinema “subjects”. Among the major influences on feminist film theorists in the seventies were contemporary essays such as Jean-Louis Baudry’s “Ideological Effects” and Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni’s “Cinema/Idelogy/Criticism” – founding texts of apparatus theory. As they fleshed out the complicity of cinema with dominant ideology and turned attention to the internal systemics of the film, the theorists concomitantly mobilized a particular Lacanian theory of the subject governed

²⁹ In *Skeptical Feminism*, Carolyn Dever generatively discusses the notorious U.S./U.K. in feminist studies whereby U.S. academic feminism is cast as sociological, empirical, and thus naïve in contrast to its more abstract, theoretical, and sophisticated foil in the U.K..

by symbolic structures of power. I want to argue then, that the irreconcilable split, evident in the discomfiting misalignment between feminist film theory and realist documentaries is not only a disjuncture caused by competing investments in realism, as Juhasz points out. At the heart of the disconnect between feminist film theory of the seventies and realist documentary films also rest critically distinct figurations of the spectator and incompatible theories of cinematic, and by extension, political subjectivity.³⁰

The coalescence of a political cinematic subject for feminist theorists gravitated around developments in French film theory. Published in *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1970, Baudry's "Ideological Effects" essay explicates the relationship between "identification" and "ideology" in what he terms "the basic cinematographic apparatus." Setting up an analogous relationship between the movie screen and Lacan's mirror stage, enacting what Judith Mayne describes as "an almost irresistible fit," Baudry describes the process by which the transcendental self produces unified meaning out of the discontinuous fragments of the film "[j]ust as the mirror assembles the fragmented body in a sort of imaginary integration of the self" (364). "Identification" thus refers to the unconscious psychoanalytic processes that work to confirm a spectator's false sense of him/herself as unified and autonomous, misrecognizing thus the originary fragmented psychic self as the illusory, mastering self of cinema. For Baudry, and the theorists that pursued this theoretical inquiry, the technologies of cinema grant the apparatus pernicious potential: "It is an apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology: creating a phantasmization of the subject, it collaborates with a marked efficacy in the

³⁰ Gledhill makes a similar point in her 1978 essay, arguing that anti-realist feminist film theory left unattended the matter of the audience's role in cultural production. "Althusser's theorization of the individual's interpellation under the category of the subject implies an identity between these two structures that is repeated in anti-realist aesthetics, in that only the consideration given to the audience is in terms of 'readers' and 'subjects' as textual constructs where the textual subject reproduces in artistic form the psychoanalytic concept of the subject ... there has been little consideration given to the audience as it is constituted outside the text in different sets of social relations such as class, gender, race, etc." (473).

maintenance of idealism” (364). That is, swept into the *jouissance* of an illusory sense of wholeness, the subject of cinema misrecognizes the “reality effect” of cinema for the real thing; by identifying with the screen the cinema subject mistakenly assumes a sense of mastery over the film. The ideologically-based symbolic structure of cinema is elided in the gaze of a cinema subject phantasmically swept into the illusory deception created by the technologies of the cinema. By wedding Lacanian psychoanalysis with Althusser’s concept of ideology, Baudry set in motion a modality of filmic analysis that theorized its spectator as a psychoanalytically defined “subject” of cinema. Rising feminist film scholars noted that feminist documentaries preserved cinema’s aspiration to seamless illusion, which made them *as problematic* as the narrative films at stake in Baudry’s analysis.

Another landmark essay for feminist film theorists was Comolli and Narboni’s manifesto, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” which originally appeared in *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1970 and was published in English in *Screen* the following year. In it the authors declare, “*every film is political*, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it (or within which it has been produced, which stems from the same thing)” (814). The deployment of ideology here emphasizes the place of cinema within dominant structures of capitalism; ideology determines each film, albeit differently. According to Comolli and Narboni, the task of radical political filmmakers was to expose the workings of ideology, not perpetuate the illusions of realism. The editors write, “Once we realize that it is the nature of the system to turn the cinema into an instrument of ideology, we can see that the filmmakers’ task is to show up the cinema’s so-called ‘depiction of reality’” (815). The function of the critic was to make known the ideological underpinnings of the deceptive text by resisting the lure of its illusion.

Influenced by these seminal texts, and others, such as Christian Metz’s imbrications of Lacan with a structuralist analysis of the film as text, and Jean-Pierre Oudart and Daniel Dayan’s

rendition of suture, feminist film theorists developed theoretical approaches that would specify the internal ideological operations of film texts as governed not only by capitalism, but also by patriarchal determinations of women and gender.³¹ The focus on the interrelation of social, material, and psychic modes of production in the institution of cinema provided feminist scholars with methodologies that would unravel the naturalization of woman as cinematic Other. At the same time, as McCabe contends, by mastering rigorous theoretical and philosophical trends, feminist film theory gained intellectual legitimacy and authority within the academy. However, by aligning itself with new formations of ideological and textual filmic analysis, feminist film theory also legitimized the classical model of spectatorship constituted by a Lacanian theory of the subject.³² Despite the radical deployment of neo-Marxism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis to insist upon the gendered relations that constitute the gaze and the notion of woman as sign, feminist film theory develops in direct contrast to a notion of subjectivity, arguably at stake in feminist documentaries, which builds itself around notions of experience, agency, and collectivity.

The Feminist Critique of Documentary Realism

One of the most important figures for feminist film theory in this vein was British feminist Claire Johnston. In an early pamphlet, Johnston challenged the U.S. journal *Women &*

³¹ Metz's seminal books include *Film Language*, published in English in 1974 and *The Imaginary Signifier*, published in English in four parts from 1975 – 1982. See also, "Cinema and Suture" by Jean-Pierre Oudart and Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema." Kaja Silverman responds to these conceptualizations of suture in "Suture" in *The Subject of Semiotics*.

³² I knowingly leave unquestioned the generalizations regarding, for example, "Lacanian psychoanalysis" as a symptom of the trends in seventies film theory, which understood the latter almost exclusively through a reading of Lacan on the mirror stage. For a more nuanced engagement with Lacan and further development of the notion of the gaze see, for example, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*.

Film for its allegedly “sociological and deterministic” perspective on women in cinema.³³

Referencing *Women & Film*, Johnston surmises that the analyses in the journal demonstrated a “crude determinism,” “puritan elements,” and were essentially “repressive” (*Notes* 3). Johnston objected to the so-called image analysis trend in U.S. feminist scholarship; she incisively deconstructed the notion that *real* women were “misrepresented” as sexual objects in cultural products meant to serve the interests of men. For Johnston this line of critique was mistakenly leveled at the tribulations of representation and problematically assumed a direct relation between media images and what Marjorie Rosen calls “real-life” women.³⁴

The focus on representation, for Johnston, boiled down to a puritanical concern over values and morals (good image/bad image) and demonstrated a lack of understanding of the particular signifying practices of cinema. Johnston, rather, drew analytical force from the methods forwarded in the French cinema journal, *Cahiers du Cinema* and the British film journal *Screen*. In Johnston’s elaboration, thus, to conflate media of all kinds into one manipulative and coercive monolith, which is how she understood the project of *Women & Film*, means to ignore the specific myths on which the cinema is based. Whereas Johnston registers the importance and singularity of film for the women’s movement, arguing that “it has been at the level of the image that the violence of sexism and capitalism has been experienced ... In the media, women have

³³ The *Women & Film* collective encountered the critique of its general approach as “sociological” in the interview conducted with Noel Burch in the fall of 1973. In their analysis of the interview with Burch, they express dismay over a “glaring” contradiction between his “political theory” and his “personal practice” (“Beyond Theory of Film Practice” 20). The collective points to an “apparently elitist gap in his avowed and insistent Marxism” and mention his propensity to discuss his own work at length while demonstrating “an apparent lack of interest in *Women and Film*’s evolution since the last issue, which he condemned as ‘sociological’” (20). By way of “critique,” the collective contends that they agree with Burch’s understanding of what constituted politics in film (the exposition of the means of production), but point out that this fails to address sexuality or sexual politics. Writing under the heading, “autocritique,” the collective goes on to blame its own inability to lay claim to expertise in the face of “an authority figure” (20).

³⁴ See an early elaboration by Rosen in “Popcorn Venus or How Movies Have Made Women Smaller Than Life.”

experienced the profoundest contradictions in their situation” (*Notes 2*), she proposes that women’s “intervention” must interrupt the “ideological manipulation” effected in the realm of representation. For Johnston, the efforts of filmmaking collectives and festivals that create, promote, and reevaluate “the role of women in the arts” had yet to accomplish the most crucial intervention: that is, a coherent theory of women’s cinema. In her introduction to *Notes on Women’s Cinema*, Johnston explains, “Women’s cinema should not only concern itself with substituting positive female protagonists, focusing on women’s problems, etc.: it has to go much further than this if it is to impinge on consciousness. It requires a revolutionary strategy which can only be based on an analysis of how film operates as a medium within a specific cultural system” (*Notes 2*). Here, Johnston’s insistence on “consciousness” seems to resonate with U.S. second wave feminist rhetoric of political change through consciousness-raising. For feminist activists, consciousness-raising created a forum for sharing individual experiences with the purpose of elucidating these as resulting from a systematic oppression that required a collective solution. However, for the British theorist, consciousness was not a matter of “knowing” differently or more expansively the self in relation to other women and patriarchy and capitalism, but rather refers to a psychoanalytic subject constituted by a system of cultural signification.

Rather than struggle with the problem of “stereotypes,” Johnston argues that myth explains the misogynistic “use” of women in cinema. Although she calls for an engagement with Marx and Freud, it is ultimately Barthes whom she mobilizes. Following Barthes, who argues that in the manipulation of media the sign is drained of its original denotation and is granted a connotation that is mistaken for the sign’s natural meaning, Johnston claims that myth, rather than stereotype, functions to transform an image of woman, which is ideologically complicit with sexism, into a representation that seems natural and self-evident. If earlier film analyses had focused on the way stereotypes secured women’s subjugation on screen and, mimetically, in the

world, Johnston sought to detour feminist film criticism into examining the potential of stereotype to function in potentially subversive ways, rather than always as “misrepresentation.” Thus Johnston is able to return to narrative, Hollywood films and argue that filmmakers such as Dorothy Arzner used female stereotypes to upset the misogynistic representation of women, not merely buttress their subjugation.

In her rejection of the so-called “sociological analysis,” Johnston troubled all lines of critique that centered on the notion of “realism.” For Johnston, when early feminist criticism argued that mainstream cinema “misrepresented” women, it concurrently implied that “truthful” representations of “natural” or ontological women were a utopian possibility of feminist film practice. Johnston insisted that the founding assumption here, which links the ontological to the iconic, denies the operation of signs and myths in the cinema. Thus, she categorically rejected “any view in terms of realism,” since cinematic realism belied the workings of myth at the service of ideology, making the woman on screen seem like a fixed and natural signifier of a signified woman, when in truth, the woman on screen (denotation) represents only connotation, or what woman has come to mean in a world determined by patriarchy (25). For Johnston, realism could only serve the purposes of dominant ideology—to repress or displace the idea of woman.

In “Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema,” Johnston writes explicitly against the trends in women’s documentary filmmaking. Her manifesto, which calls for a new feminist filmmaking practice, denounces what she calls the cinema of “non-intervention” as patently complicit with sexist, capitalist patriarchy. She writes, “[T]he idea of non-intervention is pure mystification. The sign is always a product. What the camera in fact grasps is the ‘natural’ world of the dominant ideology” (140). In the grasp of “realism,” and motivated by “emotionality and mystery,” women’s documentaries, in Johnston’s estimation fell prey to the “invasion of ideology.” The only solution lay in the elaboration of a “counter-cinema” that would create “new meanings ... by

disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film” (140). Johnston reacted with deep skepticism towards women’s documentaries, which she viewed as invested merely in transforming film content and narrative. Mired in an erroneous focus on representation, women’s documentaries naturally answered the problem of misrepresentation with realism. However, for Johnston, the problem was not misrepresentation. Charlotte Brunsdon summarizes the anti-realist position Johnston assumes as follows: “It is not a question of real women misrepresented, but of the filmic representations of women contributing to, and constructing, our understanding of what a woman is” (53). As Brunsdon recalls, both the focus on classical Hollywood and the turn away from documentary realism in feminist film theory took place within the context of a renewed engagement in radical film theory and practice with Brechtian and modernist ideas regarding film form (52). Johnston was instrumental in instigating the shift away from realism and documentary and towards an entirely new kind of cinematic practice and corollary theory, which would, ideally, attend to the politics of the sign, interrupt the insipid transference of ideology to susceptible audiences, and speak to the workings of desire.

In U.S. feminist film criticism, Johnston’s influence manifests, for example, in Eileen McGarry’s “Documentary, Realism, and Women’s Cinema,” a landmark intervention in the coalescence of the anti-realist critique among U.S. feminist film theorists. Published in *Women & Film* in 1975, McGarry formulates a two-part disagreement over the alleged “neutrality of reality” in documentary and its particular significance for feminism. In the first part, she challenges film theorists ranging from Kracauer to Bazin, but especially Stephen Mamber and the proponents of American direct cinema (which she refers to as cinema-verité) on their faith in the possibility of transmitting reality through the film camera. In the presence of the technologies of cinema, no matter how purportedly unobtrusive, McGarry clarifies, the profilmic event becomes coded by dominant ideology and part of a system of signification. There is, in other words, never the

possibility of a direct and unmediated access to something called reality, for reality itself is already coded and further, “it is the job of ideology to be transparent, to conceal itself in order to remain unquestioned and unexamined” (53). “So, what actually happens then,” writes McGarry in an often-quoted assertion about the mystification at play in cinema vérité, “is that those relationships already coded within dominant ideology enter into the film unquestioned by the aesthetic of realism” (53). Drawing from Paul Willeman, McGarry points to conventions such as deep focus photography, the use of particular kinds of film stock, and editing as ways that the reproduction of reality carries the burden of manipulation at every level of production. In sum, she argues, “every cinematic device is a further mediation of reality which attempts to disguise its reproduction of ideology” (54).

In the second part of her essay, however, McGarry struggles somewhat in an attempt to specify why realism matters in particular for feminism. Citing Metz, McGarry stresses the “extra-cinematic,” or the “sign systems of the natural world,” which flesh out her discussion of the way reality itself is always coded, but place her dramatically close to a discussion of stereotype. Thus, the problem with documentary women, McGarry seems to assert, is that one can never apprehend images of women outside the sexist codes of the natural (read: patriarchal) world. In the end, she buttresses her argument by channeling Johnston’s assertion that in order to for women’s cinema to emerge, a “radical break with conventions and forms” is required. Despite demonstrating her support of and reliance on Johnston’s analysis, McGarry isolates several U.S. documentaries that resist, in her estimation, the conventions of cinema vérité: New York Newsreel’s *Makeout* (1971) and *She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry* (1970) and San Francisco Newsreel’s *Herstory* (1970) and *The Woman’s Film* (1971). In her brief treatment of the films, McGarry points to techniques of intellectual montage, expressionistic sequences, the use of drawings, signs, voiceover, and actresses, which interrupt facile realism. In her discussion of *The Woman’s Film*, however,

McGarry contends that by centering its analysis on otherwise marginalized women (black, Chicana, welfare recipients, working class), that is, by trading in *natural* coding for what she calls “heroic” coding, the film “elevates *real* woman” beyond traditional stereotypes. Here, McGarry cannot help but make, in her terms, “revolutionary content” and representation a salient feature of her filmic analysis. Though McGarry makes a strong case for ideological critique in the first part of her essay, in the encounter with U.S. women’s documentary films, her analysis also acknowledges the necessity of meeting the film in one of its major registers: in the project of transforming women’s representation.

Indeed, McGarry’s reading helps bring attention to the varied techniques at work in a documentary like *The Woman’s Film* where the use of some realist conventions, such as talking heads, grainy film stock, and sound-image synchronicity, do not evince what might also be recognized as radical filmic potential. In *The Woman’s Film*, the audience is confronted with a spectrum of feminist activists that may challenge previously held expectations of what women’s liberation “looks like.” By foregrounding the experiences of these marginalized women, the film recenters their peripheralized subjectivities. The film deliberately takes part in a politics of representation, if by representation we mean, following Juhasz, the *construction* of images, rather than the naturalized projection of fixed or stable identities. When the stories of marginalized people are recorded on film through realist codes and talking head conventions, Juhasz argues, they do the political work “of entering new opinions, new subjectivities, or newly understood identities into public discourse” (203). In Chapter Two, I explore *The Woman’s Film* in conversation with the radical feminist program of consciousness-raising and explore the configuration of feminist subjectivity that the film calls into being.

For many filmmakers and activists, “revolutionary aesthetics” were made possible when what Martineau in the mid-seventies called “emerging peoples” gained access to the means of

producing their own images.³⁵ In her 1984 discussion of how psychoanalytic and semiotic British feminist film theory defined the field at large by the mid-nineteen eighties, Jane Gaines continued to posit the radical validity of a politics of representation in “Women and Representation”: “Can filmmakers afford to undertake an abstract analysis or make an educational statement about representation if it is politically imperative that they represent a ‘brutal actuality’ in order to counteract its ideological version?” Here, Gaines signals the political urgency with which some marginalized people create self-representations and counter-representations. She also describes the priority some radical filmmakers place on the accessibility and comprehensibility of their films over the experimental subversion of more traditional forms. For both Gaines and Juhasz, communities of color and other historically oppressed group depended on newly gained access to representational media in order to create and mobilize emergent collective subjectivities. However, by the mid-seventies, Johnston’s critique of realism and Mulvey’s call for attention to narrative cinema helped draw feminist attention away from a focus on women’s cinema. In the early seventies there existed a certain rapture with the possibilities of women’s cinema among feminists. However, theoretical attempts to define what made “women’s cinema” particular or even “feminist” – raised for example in discussions about “women’s aesthetics”³⁶ – were truncated by feminist efforts to instead reveal the ideological structures of dominant cinema.

No one was more influential in this regard than Laura Mulvey. In her 1976 article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Mulvey argues for the use of psychoanalytic theory as “a political weapon,” capable of “demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has

³⁵ “Women’s films must be seen in the light of revolutionary aesthetics. Women must develop revolutionary aesthetics. The context for a revolutionary aesthetic is the struggle by emerging peoples to gain control of the tools which have previously been used to control them” (Martineau, “Women’s Film Daily” 41).

³⁶ A valuable essay in this regard is “Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics,” which includes commentary on a range of issues relevant to women’s and feminist aesthetics, feminist film, and theory by Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, Judith Mayne, B. Ruby Rich, and Anna Marie Taylor.

structured film form” (58). In conversation with a coalescing interest in deploying psychoanalytic theory towards an understanding of the “pleasure” provided by classical film spectatorship, Mulvey’s determinedly feminist intervention argues that psychoanalysis is particularly relevant to feminist criticism and a necessary tool to “advance our understanding of the status quo, of the patriarchal order in which we are all caught” (59).³⁷ Like her contemporary, Johnston, Mulvey establishes the particular signifying practices of cinema as distinct and yet related to the more general problem of “the representation of women” in visual culture. In order to break away from the ideological structures of film form, which lock women into a spectacle of “to-be-looked-at-ness” through a male gaze, Mulvey argues, it is “cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged” (68). Thus, Mulvey concludes that at the level of form, radical filmmakers must assume the task of liberating the look of the camera (“into its materiality in time and space”) and the look of the audience (“into dialectics, passionate detachment”) (69). Taking her own call to arms into the realm of practice, Mulvey also made several films with Peter Wollen; *Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons* (1974) was their first collaboration and *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976) became their most influential film. Mulvey and Wollen’s films complemented their theoretical pursuits by breaking with classical conventions and severing the audience from the pleasures of what she called “scopophilic voyeurism” and identification.

For Mulvey, then, “alternative cinema” constituted a space where the “basic assumptions” of dominant cinema could be exposed and challenged. As in Johnston’s call for women’s countercinema, Mulvey’s alternative practice formulated a notion of the cinema

³⁷ By 1985, Mayne describes as “a commonplace [in film theory] that the simultaneous development of cinema and psychoanalysis at the end of the nineteenth century was not accidental” (93). Yet, despite the influence of Mulvey’s article psychoanalytic frameworks of analysis remained controversial in feminist film theory. In Mayne’s description, “a Lacanian perspective on sexual difference and a feminist one do not necessarily intersect, and Lacan’s characteristically sexist wit has made it difficult for many observers to understand what possible interest his work holds for feminists” (93).

spectator as a subject position fully constructed by the text. However, Mulvey also dramatically challenged apparatus theory by pushing the debate into gendered territory. By mobilizing Freud's scopophilic subject, Mulvey insists on the pleasure gained in looking and further, how this pleasure is constructed in gendered ways. Classical cinema encodes a patriarchal system of looks that splits pleasure between "active/male and passive/female." By occupying the male gaze, spectators gain pleasure in the dominating look upon the female image. Here, the Lacanian subject of cinema takes part in a gendered sense of unrecognized mastery over the image, which, in classical cinema, is the image of woman. The constitution of the ego by identification with the active male hero draws the spectator into the erotic pleasure of scopophilic-voyeuristic looking at the woman-as-image. However, objectified thus, woman as fetish also conceals the male subject's fear of castration. Thus, woman's image must be managed in the text by disallowing its complete appearance. This explains, for Mulvey, the repetitive fragmentation of women's body parts. When women appear as legs, cheeks, and breasts, the threat of castration they pose and the "lack" they signify becomes commodified, spectacularized, and evinced in the classical narrative film. In this way, the classical text, operating in the unconscious language that structures male desire, maintains its commitment to fulfilling patriarchal codes of pleasure.

Mulvey's radical intervention into apparatus theory specified the previously un-gendered psychoanalytic subject of cinema as constituted by sexual difference above all else. Her essay was also a call to arms, arguing for a feminist aesthetics to match feminist critique, both necessitating the destruction of visual pleasure. However, in Mulvey's theorization, classical cinema emerges as a monolithic institution of patriarchy that locks spectators into a one-way exchange: as passive receptors of dominant ideology. Though particularized by gender, the spectator remains a subject position constructed entirely by the text, lacking agency, specificity, history, or context. Thus, hers was a mode of theorization incompatible with an analysis of

women's documentaries, which, as the following chapters demonstrate, anticipated active subjects of a shared political imaginary bound by collectivity, agency, and action.

Beyond initiating a mode of critique that itself neglected documentary form and realist feminist practice, Mulvey was also instrumental in establishing a narrative of progress in feminist film critique in which women's documentaries mark a stage quickly surpassed, a springboard that landed the discipline of feminist film theory in the higher ground of experimental cinema. In 1979, in "Feminism, Film, and the Avant Garde," Mulvey delineates the by-now familiar trajectory of feminist film criticism, rehearsed consistently in anthologies of feminist film theory. The story feminist film theory tells itself about itself in Mulvey's 1979 version begins with theory and praxis directed at "The Attack on Sexism," and moves through "First Feminist Films," to eventually land at "The Search for Theory" and its subheadings: Ideology, Semiotics, and Psychoanalysis. In Mulvey's temporalization, the former is fixed in the past as a "first phase of thought" that has "it seems been surpassed" and the latter takes precedence in a moment of and beyond the present as "directions for the future" (3).

In her discussion of "the first feminist films," Mulvey attributes the intention and vigor of women's documentaries to the activism of the women's movement and feminist consciousness-raising and agitation. Despite these strengths, she writes about early feminist documentaries, "their weakness lies in limitations of the *cinema verité* tradition" (4). She continues,

While as documents they can have an immediate political use, their aesthetics are bound by a concept of film as a transparent medium—reproducing rather than questioning—a project which reduces the camera to a magical instrument. There lies behind this a further assumption, that the camera...can grasp essential truths and by registering typical shared experiences can create political unity through the process of identification. (4)

For Mulvey, early feminist documentaries were, in other words, not exactly a dead end, but rather a false start—a limited way of beginning to explore the possibilities for feminist cinema in order that it fully exit the realm of dominant cinematic practices and leave behind the magnetic pull of identification. The way forward, presumably in a time and place where the urgency of “immediate political use” no longer took precedence in feminism, demanded a commitment to creating a new language of cinema. Her influence on the field remains unmatched. As Gaines remarked in 1984, “The history of feminist film criticism in Britain and the U.S. might be written as pre and post ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ by Laura Mulvey.” Judith Mayne adds in 1985, “It is only a slight exaggeration to say that most feminist film theory and criticism of the last decade has been a response, implicit or explicit, to the issues raised in Laura Mulvey’s article: the centrality of the look, cinema as spectacle and narrative, psychoanalysis as a critical tool” (83).

Indeed, publishing and citation practices beginning in the mid-seventies, and particularly after the publication of Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” create the illusion of a consensus in the field about the political and aesthetic failures of women’s documentaries. For us, over thirty years later, anthologies provide a sort of map of the central zones of inquiry and regions of theoretical pursuits in the discipline. In the case of feminist film theory, these maps/anthologies published post-Mulvey most often suggest that the discipline proper emerges precisely *after* 1975 when Mulvey first called for feminist film theory to deploy psychoanalysis as a “political weapon” against the workings of patriarchal film culture and specifically, narrative (Hollywood) cinema.³⁸ Occasionally anthologies of feminist film theory begin with Claire Johnston’s “Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema.” Feminist film anthologies rarely

³⁸ An alternative to this approach can be found in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*.

acknowledge other authors in the pre-1975 period. When selections from authors such as Sharon Smith, Haskell, or Rosen do appear, they are qualified in the introduction as “the first attempt” of feminist film theory and serve to mark the dreaded “image analysis” project that the interventions of Mulvey and Johnston helped detour.³⁹ The most common way to approach the genealogy of what we know as “feminist film theory” today is to begin with Johnston and Mulvey as the mothers of the discipline and proceed through the decades of challenges and corrections to their polemical investigations. However, to frame feminist film theory within the limits of post-Mulvey-ism concomitantly obscures the veritable explosion that occurred in the early seventies among feminist documentary filmmakers. As a result, a particular temporality of feminist film practice emerges in the landscape of feminist film theory.

Women’s filmic and published film criticism in the early seventies espouses allegiance to concepts such as activism, commitment, identification, and realism. But as the years progress, these same notions are inflected in retrospective critiques as, at best, naïve, unsophisticated, and preliminary, at worst, complicit and reactionary. The early seventies are thus fixed into a progressive narrative in which feminist thinking moves hurriedly toward greater precision in thought and action in the key of abstraction, theory, and experiment – a trajectory granted intellectual weight and purchase by the trend toward post-structuralism in the humanities in U.S. universities. Women’s documentary films of the seventies, thus, define a realm of thought and action that feminist film theorists of the mid to late seventies felt they had to repudiate. In the chapters that follow, I resist this stance towards the seventies and initiate new conversations with feminist documentary films.

³⁹ See in particular Kaplan’s Introduction to *Feminism and Film*.

Chapter Two: Consciousness-Raising and Radical Feminism in *The Woman's Film* (1971) and *Self-Health* (1974)

In Chapter One I traced the intellectual history of feminist film theory, arguing that the direction pursued by the pioneers of the discipline—toward experimental and avant-garde cinema which suited the theoretical pursuits informed by Althusserian Marxism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics—left a rich and varied body of feminist documentary work under-examined and eventually obscured by decades of neglect. As it coalesced around a rejection of “realism” feminist film theory constituted a notion of the cinematic subject in the terms of post-structuralism, and particularly a Lacanian psychoanalytic subject determined by symbolic structures of power. As a result, feminist film theory turned its eye away from films that allegedly reanimated a humanist and knowing Cartesian spectator/subject. Realist documentary films, in the parlance of this either/or paradigm, were especially problematic and complicit with patriarchal and capitalist ideology. Realist documentary films, swept by feminist film theorists into a monolithic category under the term “verité,” attempted to “capture” the world as is and project women on screen as if they were natural and real, rather than constructions of the film-text’s processes of signification. The dismissal of vérité films occurred under the banner of formalism, which apprehended these films flatly in terms of their realist aesthetics.

In the face of critiques inspired by British cinefeminists¹, Julia Lesage countered that

¹ See Kaplan, “Interview with British Cine-Feminists” in *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology*. Kaplan discusses the “verité” tradition in American feminist documentary with British film theorists Claire Johnston, Pam Cook, and Laura Mulvey. Johnston, for example, explains, “I have often been very struck by *cinema verite* movies and am convinced of their importance to the women’s movement. But to people outside, what a lot of *cinema verite* movies do—women talking endlessly about their experiences—often has no effect at all. It doesn’t do any work in terms of presenting ideas or actually engaging the audience at any level. It encourages passivity” (396). Cook expands, “It’s the idea of realism which we’re trying to question rather than saying that *cinema verité* is realist and the entertainment film is nonrealist. We tried to interrogate the notion of realism in the cinema” (396).

feminist documentaries accomplished radical political interventions; feminist documentaries, for example, re-envisioned the iconography of women, politicized domestic space, and created a visual analogue to the practice of consciousness-raising. For Lesage, feminist documentaries accomplished political radicalism not in spite of the realist aesthetics they deployed, but precisely because of them. Echoing E. Ann Kaplan's assessment in "Women's Happytime Commune," in which the author forges a connection between feminist documentary and the political program of consciousness-raising, Lesage makes the realist aesthetics of feminist documentaries essential to their political relevance.² She writes, "Women's personal explorations establish a structure for social and psychological change and are filmed specifically to combat patriarchy. The filmmaker's and her subjects' intent is political" (509). Placed within the context of a movement that sought to destroy patriarchy by convincing women that they needed feminism, bridging the personal and the political, and emphasizing commonalities amongst women as a political class, women's documentaries screen a very particular notion of the political. The aesthetics of feminist documentaries, in Lesage and Kaplan's analyses, were most clearly legible within the discourse, rhetoric, and activism of the women's liberation movement. The films gained political purchase because they shared the political vision of a collective, radical movement, particularly, in Lesage's words, "the ethos" and goals of consciousness-raising (507). Lesage and Kaplan fasten the political impulses of feminist documentaries to their aesthetic conventions. Feminist film theorists blamed realism for the documentaries' political shortcomings; Lesage and Kaplan attribute the films' political relevance to their realist aesthetics. In either stance, form is either the solution or the culprit. The overdetermination of politics and form in film theory obtains despite

² In "Women's Happytime Commune: New departures in Women's films," Kaplan spends time considering legitimate reasons for the verité approach. As my analysis in Chapter Four bears out, however, in the later publication of her book *Women & Film*, Kaplan omits this analysis.

Lesage's recuperation of the feminist political determinations of realism.

I agree with Lesage that the documentaries produced by feminist filmmakers sought relevance with movement politics—a claim I substantiate in the first chapter and continue to develop here. I also agree with Lesage that many feminist documentaries launch a return to the context of consciousness-raising—an arena of debate in feminist theory that went through a long silent period throughout the eighties, but began receiving renewed attention in the mid-nineties, particularly amongst feminist literary critics. Where I differ with Lesage centers on her insistence on the relationship between form and politics. Like Lesage, I stress the political relevance of feminist documentary films, but I want to pay close attention to the way each film constructs political subjectivity within and also beyond the frame. The documentaries I read in this chapter, *Self-Health* (1974) and *The Woman's Film* (1971), stressed identification, empathy, and authentic, shared experience in conversation with the idealist rhetoric of radical feminism. And yet, to say that they gain political purchase when read within the context of consciousness-raising, as Lesage argues, does not go far enough to elucidate the political machinations and aspirations the films make manifest.

Self-Health and *The Woman's Film*, for example, despite their common allegiance to the rhetoric of radical feminism and the practice of consciousness-raising, apply pressure to different political visions and constitute distinct political subjects. *The Woman's Film* radically focuses on women of color and working class women and screens an imaginary of women's liberation as a coalition movement where the most oppressed inhabit the center. Writing of the women in the film, one reviewer remarks, "They do not, in the wildest stretch of the imagination, fit anyone's image of militant supporters of Women's Liberation" (McKinney, 16A). Whereas identification and experience in *The Woman's Film* do not depend therefore on identity and sameness, in *Self-Health*, women's collective oppression and action is activated through a discourse of anatomical

similarity. Read through the lens of consciousness-raising, *The Woman's Film* and *Self-Health* thus screen both a radical feminist political fantasy as well the limitations of the rhetoric and visual manifestations of female solidarity.

Consciousness-raising has constituted a problem for feminist theory in the wake of post-structuralism—one that is at once theoretical and practical, as well as aesthetic.³ This is because consciousness-raising promulgates the centrality of terms at odds with a poststructuralist, discursively constituted and fragmented antihumanist subject: namely, experience and identity.⁴ If the renderings of political subjectivity in *Self-Health* and *The Woman's Film* pose problems thus for feminist and film theory then, it is not simply or solely because they are presented in the language of realism, but rather because concepts such as action, agency, autonomy and experience have been characterized as incommensurate with a poststructuralist understanding of the subject.⁵ What I believe is called for here, echoing the concerns raised by Kathi Weeks and

³ I make this claim keeping in mind Clare Hemmings' interpretation of the narrative at play in feminist studies in "Telling Feminist Stories" whereby post-structuralism is cast as the key culprit for instigating feminisms' misguided distance from "real" politics. I want to focus here on incommensurability rather than affective structures of blame. Later in the chapter I return to the tendency to blame post-structuralism evident the return to consciousness-raising in feminist literary studies.

⁴ Carla Kaplan rehearses the narrative that interests Hemmings when she writes, "Throughout the seventies and eighties it was possible for many feminists to rest fairly comfortably with a politics of identification. Indeed, identifying with other women seemed to be not only possible but an important ethical commitment, a way, as [Adrienne] Rich put it, of ensuring 'accountability'" (26). Kaplan proceeds to claim that "in the wake of post-structural challenges" and "in the wake of challenges posed by lesbians and women of color to the exclusionary practices within white feminism's putative unity and homogeneity" recourse to identity was read as "theoretically single-minded" (26). In *The Erotics of Talk* Kaplan wants to recuperate consciousness-raising as a paradigm relevant to contemporary feminist literary criticism. In order to do so, she folds the critiques of women of color into the poststructuralist challenges, as if they were commensurate. In fact, these were two distinct although interrelated critiques. As Kruks helpfully points out, when lesbians and women of color decried the exclusionary practices of feminisms, they did not specifically forward a critique of the notion of the subject or the concept of experience. Kruks writes, "Rather, their complaint was that their own experiences had been excluded" (132).

⁵ Kruks contends that in fact postmodernism resounds with the unfinished project of what she calls the "interior attributes of the classical Enlightenment subject" (11). This is evident for Kruks in the consistent personification of the power of discursive systems. She writes, "This one-sided attribution of agency to discursive systems, made at the cost of evacuating all initiative or freedom from the individual subject, reduces the latter to no more than a hapless vehicle or conduit through which agency passes. This reduction is highly problematic. For many kinds of human action, including collective movements of resistance, can

Sonia Kruks in their reformulations of feminist subjectivity, is a resistance to the either/or terms of the modernist/postmodernist debate in which we must choose either a humanist, Cartesian self-knowing subject *or* a displaced and discursively constituted notion of subjectivity. My claim is that there is more to be said about the subject constituted both within and beyond the frame of feminist documentaries than recourse to the either/or paradigm allows to surface.

The Woman's Film, Identification and Difference

In an interview published in the inaugural issue of *Women & Film* in 1972, San Francisco Newsreel filmmaker, Judy Smith, describes the film she produced, directed, and edited with Louise Alaimo and Ellen Sorin, *The Woman's Film*. Asked about whether the filmmakers prioritized the aesthetic construction or the information at stake in *The Woman's Film*, Smith replies, "...this film came from the people. We when started out to make this film we decided that we weren't going to write the script, that the ideas would come from those women, that – like what Mao says, from the people to the people" (33). A New Left filmmaking and distribution collective, Newsreel was at the center of the political cinema scene in the U.S. in the late 1960s. Newsreel filmmakers generally claimed an anti-bourgeois notion of cinema, keen on shocking what they understood as bourgeois aesthetic sensibilities.⁶ Films produced by the collective infamously share anti-conventions such as shaky camera work, blurred focus, erratic editing, and a lack of narrative cohesion. The first film made by an all-women crew in the radical filmmaking

only take place if at a certain point individuals make a commitment that could also be refuted—that is, if they exercise freedom" (12).

⁶ Newsreel articulated their project this way: "Films made by Newsreel are not to be seen once and forgotten. Once a print goes out, it becomes a tool to be used by others in their own work ... We intend to cover demonstrations; to interview figures like LeRoi Jones and Garrison; we want to show what is at stake in a housing eviction or in consumer abuses in Harlem; we should provide information on how to deal with police or on the geography of Chicago" (Rabinowitz 87).

collective, *The Woman's Film* brings the tension between art and propaganda to the fore in the mind of the interviewer from *Women & Film*. But Smith's reply to the question of whether content or form guided the production of the film aims at a slightly different target, one perhaps just left of the art vs. propaganda mark. Smith, instead, explains the philosophy guiding the production of *The Woman's Film*. Quoting Mao, she points at once to the inspiration for the film, the reason for its form, and the purpose of its content: from the people, to the people.

Smith thus not only links the film to Marxism through the teachings of Mao; she also conjures the feminist practice of consciousness-raising—the hallmark political program of the women's liberation movement, and among radical feminists in particular. Radical feminists were not strictly Marxists. Rather, in their conception of women as an oppressed class of society, gender constituted the primary contradiction. Their contemporaries in the women's liberation movement in late sixties were both “politicos” and “liberal feminists.”⁷ Hailing from the new left, politicos aimed at integrating women's issues into the larger left movement and understood capitalism to be the major barrier to women's liberation. Liberal feminists on the other hand sought an agenda of integration and argued for larger participation and equity for women in economics, politics, and culture. I want to focus on radical feminists because of their commitment to the practice of consciousness-raising and their attention to the “roots” of radical oppression, which they located in the institution of the family. Radical feminists also made reproductive rights and access to legal abortion central to their activism. They constituted and mobilized thus a feminist political “body” that demanded autonomy, sovereignty, and authority. In the struggle for reproductive rights, in particular, radical feminists, such as the New York group Redstockings,

⁷ Historian Alice Echols deciphers the intermingling threads of the Women's Liberation Movement in *Daring to be Bad*. Noël Sturgeon generatively takes issue with this “typologizing” tendency in feminism in *Ecofeminist Natures*. See Chapter 6 in particular for a review of feminist histories on the U.S. women's movement, including Echols' book.

conjured an embodied and authentic feminist subject singly capable of accessing the truth of her own experiences.

Radical feminists such as the New York Radical Women and Redstockings held fast to the idea that women needed to completely rethink *thinking* as a way of getting closer to the truth of women's oppression. Rather than understand women's oppression through theoretical models created by the class of oppressors, radical feminists sought to access an untainted relationship to their role in society.⁸ Radical feminists, in other words, wanted a mode of thinking that resonated with the particular experiences of being women in the world. British feminist Sheila Rowbotham stated the case unambiguously in *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*: "the language of theory—removed language—only expresses a reality experienced by the oppressors. It speaks only for their world, from their point of view. Ultimately a revolutionary movement has to break the hold of the dominant group over theory, it has to structure its own connections" (33). Rowbotham echoes the sentiments of many women's liberation activists and thinkers who saw the program of consciousness-raising as a method of analysis and discovery designed to create new and more relevant knowledges.

Conducted in small groups of women in living rooms across the U.S., consciousness-raising began in earnest around 1967 when women met to understand the problem of male supremacy.⁹ Consciousness-raising was a mode of activism most likely brought into women's

⁸ Kathie Sarachild explains, "The idea was to take our own feelings and experience more seriously than any theories which did not satisfactorily clarify them, and to devise new theories which did reflect the actual experience and feelings and necessities of women" ("CR as Radical Weapon" 135).

⁹ Sarachild describes the emergence of consciousness-raising in "Consciousness Raising: A Radical Weapon," as a result of the desire to have a radical approach to women's liberation. She writes, "...it seemed logical that we had to study the situation of women, not just take random action. How best to do this camp up in the women's liberation group I was in—New York Radical Women, one of the first in the country—shortly after our group was formed." Sarachild attributes the phrase "raising consciousness" to Ann [sic] Forer. Echols corroborates Sarachild's description in *Daring to Be Bad*. In Echols' account, based on a personal interview with Forer, Forer remembers that she felt she had "no idea how women were

liberation by radical women like Kathie Sarachild, a founder of the Redstockings, and a prolific writer on the subject of consciousness-raising. Like many radical feminists, Sarachild had been active in the civil rights movement where activists had been encouraged to “tell it like it is” (Echols 84). Women who claimed the revolutionary right to practice consciousness-raising also reached back to a lineage that included the Chinese revolutionary slogan “to speak pains to recall pains” and the rhetoric of Guatemalan revolutionaries—hence women’s liberation’s most memorable slogan, “the personal is political.” Consciousness-raising, in other words, signaled the emergence of revolution—the coming together of a newly defined people, in this case women, in an effort to name their oppression, connect through shared experience, and strategize a collective liberation.¹⁰ In her reconsideration of consciousness-raising in *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, Catherine MacKinnon describes the practice as much more than a talking process conducted in small groups. In MacKinnon’s rendering, consciousness-raising was in fact the instantiation of an emergent, collective consciousness. Following MacKinnon, thus, I want to explore the ways consciousness-raising worked in modes beyond the terms of sharing experience, but rather for the ways it brings us closer to seeing what was both a feminist aspiration and the imagined practice of a new becoming.

One of the earliest feminist documentaries, *The Woman’s Film* explicitly demonstrates the trajectory of consciousness-raising, which takes the five women featured in the film from personal lament, through shared experience, to political action. The forty-five minute film opens

truly oppressed,” and asked the women in the group to describe what they meant by oppression (83). As a result of this conversation, the women in the group set out to spend more time on consciousness-raising.

¹⁰ In *Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World*, Rowbotham stresses revolutionary potential of changed consciousness, which comes about only through great effort. She writes, “All revolutionary movements create their own ways of seeing. But this is a result of great labour. People who are without names, who do not know themselves, who have no culture, experience a kind of paralysis of consciousness. The first step is to connect and learn to trust one another” (27).

with a series of still shots, a staccato collage that juxtaposes photographs diverse women laboring, washing linens, dishes, and floors, with mass media representations of idealized and stereotypical women in the poses of brides and beauty queens. The pop music hit, “I can’t get no satisfaction,” provides the rhythm for the opening montage, which sets forth the contraction at the heart of the women’s liberation movement and explored throughout the film – that is, the clash between received notions of “womanhood” and the real-life experiences of poor and working-class American women. In *The Woman’s Film*, women’s telling of their own experiences directly to the camera constitutes a mode of being and a realm of analysis that is in opposition to patriarchy. As MacKinnon suggests, the repeated act of telling it like it is, in this case through a process constructed by the technologies of documentary, constructs at the same time as it instantiates an alternative vision of being.

As the film progresses, the general contradictions of the opening montage are particularized in the life stories of five California women; the idealized visions of womanhood give way to often miserable details of the real life oppressions faced by dozens of women of color and poor and working class women who gather in women’s groups throughout the film. Although we come to recognize five individual women, their interviews are broken into segments and distributed throughout the course of the film. Less important than their individual biographical details are the revelations they share about their experiences as daughters, wives, mothers, and workers. In the opening sections of the film, black and white welfare mothers, Chicana activists, white middle-class professional women, and working class women spell out the details of their oppression at the hands of their fathers, then their husbands. They describe the lives they expected to have and the way these contrast wildly with the lives they ended up living.

In the opening scene a white woman shares her girlhood fantasy of married life, “I used to think when I got married I was going to buy me a whole bunch of Pepsi Colas and candy bars

and just lie on my couch.” In similar medium shots, the next scenes feature a black woman and a working class white woman echoing this same shattered vision of married life: “My marriage was going to be completely different”; “My husband thought I was just a foot rug under his feet. For 16 years I was like a slave to him.” As they remember these expectations, the women are filmed identically in a classic talking head, interview pose. Each woman is isolated from other influences and centered in the frame, commanding thereby the full attention of the spectator. There are no psychologists, social workers, or feminist spokeswomen interpreting the narratives of the poor and working class women. Granted full command of the time and space of the frame, each woman is validated as the expert of her own experience of oppression, witness to her own transformation, and evidence for women beyond the frame of a newly possible subject of feminist politics.

Across scenes of difference in which women of different classes, races, and activist allegiances gather to construct an analysis of their political conditions, the mode of production insists on visual equality. The medium shots of individual women in the opening sequences zoom out and become long shots, which reveal rooms full of women supporting each other with corroborating tales of subjugation. Again, the framing techniques at work are applied consistently to diverse scenes of women. In this way, the film’s codes and conventions—though starkly limited to a series of mostly talking head shots—enact equality and justice formally and the same time as a rhetoric of collectivity surfaces in the narrative. In these scenes where women speak both to each other and to the camera, women literally and visually arrive at the realization that their oppression is systematic rather than individual; “the only way things are going to be livable is for a complete change over to be made,” explains one young black mother; “change has to come through changing minds,” echoes another.

A wide range of screenings and extensive media coverage suggest that Newsreel hit home with their first film by, for, and about women. In a review titled, "'Woman's Film': A Look at Poverty," The *San Francisco Chronicle* announced on February 26, 1971, "Women's liberation now has its own full-length film, with more good humor than anger" (20). *The Woman's Film* enjoyed successful runs in New York and California theatres. Newsreel filmmakers also screened the film to diverse audiences, ranging from movement meetings and university screenings, to a room of male telephone company employees.¹¹ In April of 1971, the film reached the museum circuit with a screening at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City as part of series programmed by John Hanhardt entitled, "What's Happening."¹² Positive reviews of the film erupted in print media from Berkeley to New York.¹³

Yet, a critical group of rising feminist film scholars felt otherwise. After less than 4 years, *Women & Film*, which published the interview with Judy Smith cited above, folded. Several of the women who had worked as associate editors on that publication left to found what has become one of the most important feminist journals devoted to gender and cinema, *Camera Obscura*. In 1976, the *Camera Obscura* collective worried about the prominence of feminist documentary films like *The Woman's Film*. In women's documentaries, the *Camera Obscura* collective deciphered a problematic reliance on dominant cinematic structures of identification and subject positioning. Referencing *Three Lives* (1971), *The Woman's Film*, and *Janie's Janie*, the editors admit,

¹¹ For example, a Newsreel press release advertises screenings in February 1971 at American Zoetrope, Surf Interplayers, and the University of California, Berkeley (MOMA Archives).

¹² MOMA press release draft (MOMA Archives). Sharon Smith describes the screening to telephone company employees in the *Women & Film* interview (31).

¹³ Press reviews of the film include: Joan McKinney, "The 'Quiet Women' Speak Out," *Oakland Tribune*; Beverly Koch, "Liberated women Take Up the Arts," *San Francisco Chronicle*; Jonas Mekas, "Movie Journal," *Village Voice*; Molly Haskell, "Women Without Men," *Village Voice*; "Femmes Fatales," *Women's Wear Daily*; Irwin Silber, "The Woman's Film," *Guardian*.

We found problematic the idea that we could change people's attitudes fundamentally by showing them positive images with which to identify ... We found that they often lacked even a minimal analysis of the political and ideological determination of women's oppression in their belief that these powerful and moving images could just "speak for themselves." (8)

For the editors of *Camera Obscura*, realist feminist documentary films relied on psychoanalytic identification and presented themselves as "unmediated and transparent" and, as a result, constructed "the same kind of subjectivity" for spectators as "classical" films in "the cinematic apparatus" (8).¹⁴ The psychoanalytic and discursive notion of subjectivity at play here depends on generalizations of both "subjects" and "realism." Since the editors were invested in applying apparatus theory rather than upsetting its assumptions, they neglect the specificities of the three films they mention. More to the point, however, the editors of *Camera Obscura* were in pursuit of a distinct political vision than those at stake for the filmmakers and subjects of feminist documentaries. Whereas the rising feminist film theorists sought a new language and a new politics of cinema, feminist documentaries evidence allegiance to cultural and political revolution and the projection of a new communal frame of reference for the ensuing and inevitable political revolution.

Kate Millett and Carol Hanisch write about their sense of the inevitable and impending revolution they sensed during the early years of feminist activism. In her 1990 preface to *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett remembers the year her groundbreaking work was published: "By the summer of 1970, the moment this text was released, there was a great wave of feminism building. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the suffrage, there were marches and strikes of women workers

¹⁴ The entire quote reads: "We also began to question the idea of films with a feminist subject matter which maintained or even reinforced the spectator position of classical film: these films, too, presented themselves as unmediated and transparent, as 'windows on the world,' as having privileged access to truth because of their documentary form; they offered the same kind of subjectivity in terms of strategies for identification with characters and took for granted as unproblematic the position of the spectator in the cinematic apparatus" (*Camera Obscura Collective* 8).

in New York and throughout the United States. It was the right moment. The rest is history” (xviii). Millett’s nostalgia about 1970 resonates with the euphoria and sense of certainty many activists experienced. Carol Hanisch, a founding member of New York Radical Women, writing in 1976 looks back at “those early years” as an ephemeral moment of absolute possibility:

In those early years, caught up as we were in one of those rare moments in history when the truth shines through so brilliantly that it becomes the most moving and profound experience of our lives, we thought it would only be a matter of a few years before we would have male supremacy conquered. In retrospect the idea sounds a little naïve—silly almost. (“The Liberal Takeover” 127)

This experience of revolution as reality defined the political framework of feminist activism at work in *The Woman’s Film*. In the final sequence of the film, the diverse women featured throughout appear as leaders at rallies and demonstrations, galvanizing other women to resist and revolt. As the accompanying sound track makes clear with the repeating refrain, “I woke up this morning...”, by sharing their experiences and uniting their energies, the film suggests, women have finally woken up to the truth of their oppression.

The Woman’s Film mobilizes the two key concepts at work in consciousness-raising: experience and identification. Conceived as a site of pure authenticity for radical feminism, experience granted women in consciousness-raising groups a newfound authority. The Redstockings Manifesto expresses the vision in these terms: “We regard our personal experience, and our feelings about that experience, as the basis for an analysis of our common situation. We cannot rely on existing ideologies as they are all products of male supremacy culture. We question every generalization and accept none that are not confirmed by our experience” (113). As visualized in the film, each woman was the expert of her own being in the world, the author of her story about living in it, and the executor of her narrative describing that experience. By granting women the authority to generate alternative epistemologies through personal experience,

Redstockings' notion of consciousness-raising aspired to a radical reconfiguration of both collective identification and collective knowledge: women as a class allegedly shared a unique perspective on the world, hitherto unrevealed and hence, a potential site of tremendous political power.

Further, experience constituted a vehicle for identification between and among women. The rhetoric of the Redstockings' Manifesto fantasizes about a mode of identification that could bridge women *in spite of* their differences; gender, in other words, above all, defined women's being in the world in the political vision of the radical feminists. "We identify with all women," declares the 1969 Redstockings Manifesto, "We define our best interest as that of the poorest, most brutally exploited woman. We repudiate all economic, racial, educational or status privileges that divide us from other women. We are determined to recognize and eliminate any prejudices we may hold against other women" (113). In this fantasy of female solidarity, identification hinged not on identity between women, but on the recognition that gender was the defining feature of women's lives. Contemporary feminist studies evidence valuable and vituperative critiques of the assumptions at play in this version of "identification not identity" where "differences" are allegedly suppressed, excluded, or ignored in a universalistic narrative that actually only applies to the perspective of white, middle-class women. In Chapter Three, I work through some of these positions in my study of Madeline Anderson's *I Am Somebody* (1969).

Here, I want to emphasize how *The Woman's Film* actually does build a vision of feminism as a coalition movement that prioritizes the struggles of women of color and poor and working class women, projecting the lived possibility of this radical feminist fantasy. And it does so through a visual practice of consciousness-raising, which mobilizes identification, but does not build its alternative political imaginary around a homogenous category of woman. Rather, the

film channels its commitment to justice and equality through its realist codes and conventions. By framing diverse individual women and groups of activist women with consistently applied time and space constraints, notions such as authority, experience and expertise are dispersed, decentered, and defamiliarized. *The Woman's Film* puts realist aesthetics to work at the service of a radical political vision of feminist politics. Identification was critical to this aspiration. The filmmakers hoped that women viewers would “identify with the experiences and feelings of the women in the film” and embrace the idea that “women are strong when united, and when they work together and support each other, they have the power to bring about meaningful and necessary changes in this country” (“The Woman’s Film” Notes). The film both demonstrates and executes the possibility of a new albeit fantastical feminist becoming. By following the progressive trajectory from the personal to the political among a group of diverse women, *The Woman's Film* stresses the power of identification and empathy and the action these have the potential to ignite.

My understanding of documentary spectatorship in response to *The Woman's Film* posits the significance of a dialectical process of exchange between situated, political subjects and conversant political films. Jane Gaines reminds documentary scholars about Sergei Eisenstein’s formulation of political spectatorship in her essay, “Political Mimesis.” The Soviet filmmaker and theorist consistently emphasized the primitive, spectacular, and sensual effects of cinema on the bodies and senses of spectators. Since, Gaines contends, “psychoanalysis does so little to help us with political action,” a return to Eisenstein’s focus on the bodily responses creates possibilities for a theory of documentary spectatorship that accounts for “what it might be that *moves* viewers to want to act, that moves them to do something instead of nothing in relation to the political situation illustrated on the screen” (89). Gaines is quick to admit that the notion of an actualized, bodily and political response to documentary film is “somewhat of a fantasy” (89). But

nonetheless, she develops a theory of “the sensationalized body” which is moved viscerally to carry on the revolutionary struggles represented in radical documentary films. In her contribution to positing “an adequately theorized defense of the use of the documentary realism in the politically committed film,” Gaines turns to the concept of mimesis. What is particularly generative about Gaines’ concept of mimesis for my project here is her attempt to think beyond calcified problems of ideological complicity in realist, political documentaries. Gaines moves us into a notion of spectatorship that emphasizes the exchange between political content and a politicized spectator response. That is, the spectator is conceived with far more nuance, indeed in flesh and body, in ways that, for example, the *Camera Obscura* critique of women’s documentaries made impossible. Spectators of political documentary films, following Gaines’ thinking, become actual people, lived audiences, potential interlocutors and certainly, potential political actors.

What Brian Norman calls “the conversion narrative” also plays a significant role in the construction of an alternative notion of spectatorship in *The Woman’s Film*.¹⁵ We have already noticed that the overall structure of *The Woman’s Film* mirrors the ideal trajectory of consciousness-raising in which the individual women in the film come to see their struggles as necessitating a collective solution. Norman contends that the representation of this arc opens a path towards liberation for women reading consciousness-raising documents. Likewise, it makes sense to speculate that *The Woman’s Film* aspires to instigate this realization in spectators – the realization that feminism, here and now, is possible for me, too. The path exists not solely because of a one-way transmission of a real conversion, but rather, importantly, as fantasy and in

¹⁵ In his essay on consciousness-raising documents, Norman explains that one characteristic consciousness-raising documents share is the inclusion of conversion narratives in which “the newly enlightened author describes her entrance into feminist consciousness and offers a path for her to-be-liberated sisters reading the document” (43).

the context of a dialectical exchange between the documentary and its spectator. In the space between the film and the viewer existed a potentially powerful encounter made possible by the practices of the real at stake in documentary films. Consciousness-raising, after all, operated in the framework of potential transformation ignited by shared experience; *The Woman's Film*, conceived thus as a consciousness-raising film also constituted the opportunity to create an experience, one that might be shared by an audience and then reflected upon in the discussion that followed.

Although little documentation exists to provide empirical details of the screenings and discussions that took place throughout the women's movement, catalogues and essays make frequent reference to the vital role that film played in the practice of consciousness-raising. The film library catalogue of the University of California Extension Media Center, for example, announced the new category, "Women's Films" in 1973 with an introductory note and an essay by Anne Bishop, an activist in the Bay Area women's movement who created film directories for use by women's groups. According to the introductory note, the women's movement created a massive demand for films about women and the movement. "We received numerous letters and calls from colleges, schools, women's groups, and community organizations asking for relevant films and information" (1). In 1973, Bishop still worried about the lack of good films "useful for studying the social position of women in the United States" (2). Distribution collectives like Iris and New Day reference the need for films relevant to women's issues for use amongst activists. About *The Woman's Film*, Judy Smith explains that part of the role of Newsreel filmmakers was to travel with their films and lead discussion groups with viewers.

A poster for New Day films explains that the work of radical filmmaking is only half complete when a film is completed; "this is only half of the process of producing films," they write. By creating an alternative distribution network, New Day hoped to retain more profits for

filmmakers, but also to reach more extensive audiences, as well as prevent filmmakers from losing control over the use of their work amongst audiences. Far beyond the traditional movie theatre, the audiences New Day sought might be congregated in college classrooms, storefronts, high schools, union halls or living rooms. The audiences for women's documentaries, in other words, were not static configurations mysteriously sedimented in the dark naves of movie theatres. Although innovative theories of spectatorship were on the horizon of European film theory, characterized by Jean-Louis Baudry's notion of cinema as apparatus, which posited "subject positions" as an alternative psychoanalytic category to the traditional film "viewer" – this was not the sense of an audience shared by radical producers of feminist cinema in the early seventies. Neither were audiences conceived as passive vehicles of reception or as simply consumers of information. Rather, the audiences of women's documentaries were seen as subjective locations of potential transformation and becoming.

The Iris Catalogue, for example, emphasized the need for discussion after powerful screenings. "Discussions," the catalogue explains, "help break down our usual passive consumer attitude toward culture." Structured around descriptions of individual films with details relevant to renting and screening, the Iris catalogue also includes a section for each film that reads, "Suggested Topics for Discussion." For *Wishfulfilming* (1973), a documentary by the Santa Cruz Women's Media Collective about a collective of women who come together to make a film, the suggested discussion topics include: "Are collectivity and creativity mutually exclusive?" and "How to deal with power and power struggles." For *We're Alive: A Film from Women in Prison* (1975), which documents a video workshop for women prisoners in California, questions push the issues of stereotype and activism: "Who goes to prison and why?"; "Doing Prisoner and Parolee Support work in your area." For *Menses* (1973), Barbara Hammer's satirical film about the politics of menstruation, suggestions for a post-screening discussion include questions about

culture and myth: “what if women stopped buying Kotex, Modess, Fems, and Tampax?”; “The shame and secrecy of menstruation”; “The use of imagery to break down taboos.” The questions suggested by the film catalogue resonate with the questions recommended by organizers of consciousness-raising sessions. Questions posed to women offered an opportunity to reflect on their personal experiences, consider the role of the media, and imagine the possibilities for change. Communal film viewing, followed by structured discussions, emphasized content and community, participating thus in the goals of consciousness-raising. The films not only show people coming to consciousness; they create the possibility of that experience for the audience. In this way, the notion of identification serves as a critical modality to this type of film activism.

Indeed, *The Woman’s Film* conceived as a consciousness-raising film pushes us to consider other ways of thinking about identification. Before film theorists in the 1970s linked identification to a mode of infiltration for dominant ideology in narrative cinema, Franz Fanon used the term to describe the culturally-situated viewing experiences of post-colonial subjects. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon gives the following example in a footnote:

Attend showings of a Tarzan film in the Antilles and in Europe. In the Antilles, the young negro identifies himself de facto with Tarzan against the Negroes. This is much more difficult for him in a European theatre, for the rest of the audience, which is white, automatically identifies him with the savages on the screen. (Fanon 152-53)

Fanon’s point is that cultural context defines the processes of identification for the post-colonial subject. Identification, thus, in Fanon’s conception, resists stasis and fixity; rather as a psychic process of recognition, identification depends critically on context. Fanon’s insistence on recognition not only with the characters on screen but *via* the other spectators in the room, sheds light on the radical feminist understanding of the role of identification in the process of consciousness-raising. For radical feminists, recognition with other women happened not only as

a result of the content of the shared narratives of experience, but within the community of listeners. To identify with women in a consciousness-raising session meant to collectively imagine a political subjectivity for the future, not necessarily to feel confident about the fixed identity of the present. In this way, identification served a forward reaching goal rather than sedimenting a prior, or fully constituted subjectivity.

The disjunction between a radical feminist understanding of identification and the concept as it circulated in psychoanalytically-determined feminist film theory should come as no surprise. As Stuart Hall remarks, “Identification turns out to be one of the least well-understood concepts ... It is drawing meanings from both the discursive and the psychoanalytic repertoire, without being limited to either” (2). In my reading, radical feminists saw identification as the means of calling into being a new feminist subject in solidarity through the process of consciousness-raising. This is not to say that the effort would ever be either successful or complete. Hall maintains that the fictions motivated by the efforts of belonging, in this case, the fantasy of sisterhood imagined in the process of consciousness-raising, are effectively constitutive of identities despite the “fictional nature of this process” (4).¹⁶ Feminist documentaries, such as *The Woman’s Film* by both performing and constructing consciousness-raising for and among feminist viewers, contributed to the constitution of an idealized and fantasized feminist solidarity.

¹⁶ The entire quote reads: “[Identities] arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the ‘suturing into the story’ through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within the fantasmatic field” (4). In “Who Needs Identity,” Hall offers a discursive approach to identification which “sees identification in construction, a process never completed—always ‘in process’” (2). If identification is a concept often critiqued because it implies recognition between fixed identities, that is, stable subjects, Hall recasts the concept in the light of Foucault’s emphasis on discursive practices. The result, rather than reify the notion centered subject of cultural practice, is attention to the “subjectification to discursive practices, and the politics of exclusion which all such subjectification appears to entail, the question of identification” (2).

And yet, it is important to reiterate here that the film also maintains a difference between identification and identity.

In *Janie's Janie*, for example, another Newsreel film, identification serves precisely within a framework of difference signaled by the Redstockings Manifesto. *Janie's Janie* features the story of a white, single, welfare mother of five in Newark, NJ. The film's narrative is motivated by Janie's journey to independence, her transformation from her father's Janie, to her husband's Janie, to the final realization: Janie's Janie. Unlike *The Woman's Film*, which intercuts archival images of women to establish a historical framework for women's oppression, *Janie's Janie* visually takes place entirely in the context of the present. Whereas *The Woman's Film* downplays a biographical imperative by featuring a myriad of women and a chorus of reflections on women's oppression, *Janie's Janie* maintains an interest in Janie as an exemplary figure for women's liberation. Despite these differences, both *Janie's Janie* and *The Woman's Film* evidence an aesthetic commitment to projecting a conversion narrative, as well as the impulse to cast an unlikely figure at the center of women's liberation. At a time when the mainstream press sought the least threatening spokeswoman for the movement in Kate Millett, featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1970, the women of Newsreel shared the opinion with radical feminists that "women's lib" was about identifying with the most disenfranchised among them. Structured around the trajectory from the personal to the political implied by consciousness-raising, *Janie's Janie* takes part in the central project of radical feminism: to encourage women to see their own oppression mirrored in the narratives of all women, despite the obvious differences in their material lives—to identify, in other words, as the Redstockings manifesto suggests, with "the poorest, most brutally exploited woman."

In the silent opening shot of *Janie's Janie*, a woman's figure in the center of the frame walks away from the camera, towards the front door of a modest row house. Children rush out to

meet her and assist her with the grocery bags she carries home. *Janie's Janie*, thus begins on the outside of Janie's intimate life, following her, as it were, towards the heart of her story: her domestic life inside the home. Inside her house, Janie continues with the motions of her life even as she answers delicate questions about her abusive father and controlling husband: she dresses the children, prepares a chicken for the oven, and folds laundry all the while smoking cigarettes and constructing the narrative of her raised consciousness. The film stitches together excerpts from several different interviews to create the trajectory that would lead Janie through her young life under her father's strict rule, to her dashed hopes of salvation through marriage, to her final realization that solidarity among women is the only answer that will lead to structural change for the working poor.

Visually, the film eschews visual continuity for the sake of maintaining the consciousness-raising trajectory from the personal to the political. Janie narrates the sense of loneliness and isolation that plagued her before she linked up with the welfare rights activists in her community. Once she understands that her struggles are shared by women throughout her neighborhood, the path towards action is obvious. At this point in her narrative, the film shifts from the domestic sphere, to the public sphere. As Janie speaks non-synchronously in a voice-over, shots of Janie show her outside her home, where her political awakening has led her: at the neighborhood child care center her group founded to provide free child care to working women and at the organization office where she consults with colleagues. In the film's final shot, Janie again walks away from the camera, but this time, her body occupies the center of an image of a city street. Janie heads into the distance, a new horizon before her.

In seventies French film theory, identification signaled the pernicious practices of dominant cinema, which disarmed spectator-subjects of their analytical faculties and lulled them into passive receptacles for the ideology projected from the normative narratives on screen. At

best, the film-as-text might evidence enunciative fissures in its ideological cohesion, creating exploitable crises for a resistant spectator. However, for radical feminists of the early 1970s the notion of identification implied a material, counter-hegemonic practice if it also supported notion of subjectivity that assumed each subject contained within an authentic core that could be grasped and altered in full. Imbued with utopian potentiality, identification was assumed to be capable of generating a sisterhood among a viable group, “women,” previously distracted from their gender solidarity by the supposedly false divisions that kept them isolated from each other: domestic heterosexuality, class, race. In this sense, then, what academic feminists branded as problematic structures of cinematic identification in feminist documentaries might be recast rather as a kind of political identification, critical to the rhetoric, fantasies, and political aspirations of radical feminism.

Self-Health, Experience and Sameness

Despite the radical feminist insistence on concentrating on the most oppressed, however, the feminist fantasy of solidarity more often lent itself to the repression of difference. Whereas *The Woman's Film* and *Janie's Janie* illustrate the commitment to maintain a disjuncture between identification and identity, *Self-Health* slides into that discursive space, consistently disavowed within radical feminist discourse, where identification and identity are actually one. A powerful fantasy throughout seventies movement rhetoric, literature and film, consciousness-raising nonetheless became an equally powerful problem for the movement and for theory. According to Carla Kaplan, consciousness-raising was a project of significant albeit unrealized potential:

[U]ltimately, it was neither challenging nor as provocative as it might have been. Consciousness-raising often failed to reach a truly heterogeneous group of women or even to appreciate the heterogeneity of its own potential practitioners. Many women left consciousness-raising groups disappointed at not being heard and fed up with the subtle

pressures to conform to particular viewpoints or to avoid taboo subjects, especially about race and class, about feelings of hostility toward other women and feelings of desire for them. (155)

Kaplan spells out the intrinsic problems that were built into the concept, practice, and theory of consciousness-raising. Based on similarity, consciousness-raising suppressed the significance of difference. Based on sisterhood, it made claims about womanhood that were soon critiqued as essentialist and exclusionary. Although the slogan for radical feminism insisted that “we are one, we are woman” (Echols 203), the fact was that this rhetoric of sisterhood, as soon as it was uttered, came under assault in the movement from working-class women, lesbians, and women of color.

The way that a pioneering film like *Self-Health*, for example, screens consciousness-raising into the fabric of a radical film about women reclaiming their bodies from the male-dominated medical-industrial complex locates sameness in the bodies of women who are all white. In *Self-Health*, produced with the San Francisco Women’s Health Center, viewers take part in two group sessions for women. In the first, women are guided through a pelvic self-examination; in the second, women learn how to perform breast self-exams. The women participants are gathered in the intimate spaces of the domestic sphere. In the manner of consciousness-raising sessions, the women form a circle with their bodies, which are casually propped against pillows on the floor. The camera replicates the egalitarian ethics of the consciousness-raising session by granting equivalent screen time to each participant, following the individuals around the circle as they engage in a discussion about their experiences with medical professionals and coming to terms with masturbation, menstruation, and sexuality.

Self-Health opens with a manifesto. Over soft, precise close-ups of the most general anatomical details of female intimacy—nipples, lips, arm pits, and pubic hair—a voice calls forth a new feminist subject: a subject defined by a dialectical relationship between the individual and

the collective; the female body mediates the exchange. In voice-off, a woman declares, “We’re learning from our own bodies; teaching ourselves and each other how each of us is unique and the same, and what we need in order to be healthy.” According to the visuals, what women share exists in the details of their bodies. By reclaiming this “lost territory, which traditionally belonged to our doctors, our husbands, to everyone but us” the film suggests, women can lay claim to a veritable sisterhood. As the title appears during a long take that begins at a woman’s face and ends on her pubic mound, mapping “the lost territory” at stake, the voice-off proclaims, “and now it’s time to get it back.” As if to describe the place women are moving away from, the first group of women on screen describe their discomfort with the “down there” of their bodies. By framing the women who speak in eye-level medium shots, the camera situates the spectator within the circle of women. The seamless editing between shots of women speaking replicates the motions that might be natural for a person sitting amongst the women in the circle. Intimately situated within the most private kind of conversation, the spectator is not at all a voyeur, slyly perceiving but unperceived. Rather, the spectator becomes a participant of the group session. *Self-Health* thus reconfigures the cinematic representation of women’s bodies, recuperating them from the medical as well as the cinematic gaze and claiming them *for* women and *for* a presumably female audience.¹⁷

Once the film pursues the documentation of the three main workshops, the camera techniques focus on synching image to sound. The result is a film that evidences a commitment to message and content: women have historically been alienated from their own bodies by a male-dominated medical establishment. Provided with speculums, mirrors, and flashlights, women need first of all to assume a responsibility for *knowing* their own bodies – for recognizing the

¹⁷ Eithne Johnson theorizes what she calls “the specular scene” in *Self-Health* in “Loving Yourself: The Specular Scene in Sexual Self-Help Advice for Women.”

shape, feel, and characteristics of their cervixes, uteruses, and breasts. By extension women will have gained a power to control their health, reproduction, and holistic sense of self where the outside is coterminous with the inside of the body. The film focuses on women as a collective, rather than on individuals. As with *The Woman's Film* the women featured are not identified by name, place, or origins. Their individual experiences are shared in order to construct a general point about the need for women to assume responsibility for the knowledge of their bodies.

The aesthetics of the film focus on a linear trajectory, which begins with alienation and the sense that women individually experience this estrangement from the medical establishment. Then, through sharing their experiences, women realize that alienation is rather a collective experience. In voice-off, which accompanies a long-shot of three women lounging on a sheet examining their cervixes, a woman explains: "A lot of us have felt the same fears and doubts and we always felt that we experienced them as individuals. And when we're in a group we realize that many of us have felt the same things; there are fears and doubts that we share together and that we can explore together." Visually, the women in the film literally shed their outer layers as they collectively investigate their own and each other's bodies. The journey takes these women to the interior of their bodies, where their commonality is revealed and then, literally, felt. In a third workshop, the facilitator guides the participant women through the mechanics of a bi-manual pelvic exam. Equal screen time is granted to the woman performing the exam and the woman, Christy, who is being examined. Christy is encouraged to feel for her uterus before the other women in the room are invited to experiment. Throughout the room, where women stand observing and participating in the lesson, comments of surprise abound: "It's so small!"; "It's amazing!" The intimacy—and intimate touching—among the women creates the possibility for connection, and, ultimately, action. Because the filmic techniques stress intimacy and egalitarianism with eye-level shots and medium shots that generally include a woman's face with

her genitals, the viewer metonymically takes part in the shared experience generated on screen. The key to the film lies in the strategies of identification—with the camera and with the women on screen: cervix to cervix, as it were. Pushing against the so-called naïve realism *Self-Health* in terms of consciousness-raising we get closer, not necessarily on the truth of the movement, or the truth of the film itself, but rather to the truth of the interrelated fantasies of both of these.

In particular, the fantasy of sisterhood, given flesh in the practices of the real, manifests in *Self-Health* as a function of identification as identity. Another way to say this would be to point out that *Self-Health* problematically mobilizes an “essentialist” visual and rhetorical construction of the category of women. The film lays bare, thus, the inner logic by which the radical feminist call for solidarity and sisterhood under the banner of gender concealed the fact that the notion of women at work was actually modelled after white, middle-class feminists. As Noël Sturgeon lays out in *Ecofeminist Natures*, feminist activism and feminist theory are often divided along the lines of essentialism. Feminist activism is usually implicated in problematic structures of essentialism, while feminist theory is credited with a more enlightened anti-essentialism. Sturgeon writes, “the political implications of essentialist constructs of women or of race are some of the central problems of contemporary feminist theory” (6). Sturgeon’s work on ecofeminism complicates what she sees as a “stalemate” between tropes of essentialism and anti-essentialism within contemporary feminism by paying close attention to movement politics and working in two directions: theorizing activist practice and seeing theory in that practice (11). It is helpful here to keep in mind the specificity and context within which Sturgeon analyzes both the critique of essentialism and the mobilization of the category of women for feminist activism. As my analysis of *The Woman’s Film* bears out, movement-based calls for gender solidarity need not necessarily elide and suppress race and class differences. However, *Self-Health* exemplifies the ways that the fantasy of feminist sisterhood and the structures of identification mobilized by the rhetoric,

practice, and visual representation of consciousness-raising could easily support the marginalization of difference, particularly when the notion of woman at stake is located in the anatomical similarities of the female body.¹⁸ By constructing sameness through anatomy, and constituting identification through identity, *Self-Health* indeed provides evidence for the anti-essentialist critique of feminism.¹⁹

When second wave feminism is cast as a monolithic movement that constituted collectivity through the exclusion of difference (as has sometimes occurred in the anti-essentialist critique), the practice of consciousness-raising is characterized as a project that generally occurred among women who were not interested in difference.²⁰ Though they often work in tandem, the anti-essentialist critique of unacknowledged homogenization, however, is not the same as the postmodern critique of consciousness-raising, which usually gravitates around the notion of experience that sustained the idealized project of constructing new epistemologies and new collectivities. Although “experience” constituted, as Kruks calls it, “the very bedrock of second wave feminism,” it became “a suspect concept,” one feminists “have grown wary of talking about” (131). Scepticism generated by the critique of essentialism and the critique of experience in feminist theory brought into question the notion of a subject that contained a pure core and unmediated access to an inner self. Joan Scott influentially reworked the notion of

¹⁸ *Self-Health* thus shares some of the limitations of the women’s health movement from which it emerges. Sandra Morgen’s *Into Our Own Hands* and Jennifer Nelson’s *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* provide excellent analyses of women’s health activism of the 1970s. Both authors detail the critiques of the self-health movement in particular, which emphasized cervical self-examination as visualized in the film. Further, both authors stress the critique levied at mostly white women health activists for de-emphasizing the way health is always imbricated with race, class, and culture. Thus, the critique of the women’s health movement echoes the critique of seventies feminism more generally.

¹⁹ Landmark examples of feminist anti-essentialist critique include: Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”; Angela Davis, “Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights”; Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House”; *This Bridge Called My Back*; The “Combahee River Collective Statement”; *Conditions Five: The Black Woman’s Issue*; and *The Black Woman: An Anthology*.

²⁰ Brian Norman spells out these characterizations and dominant narratives about consciousness-raising in “The Consciousness-Raising Document, Feminist Anthologies, and Black Women in Sisterhood Is Powerful.”

experience and its attendant notion of subjectivity by demonstrating its contingent historicity and discursive nature. “It is not individuals who have experiences,” writes Scott, “but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation ... but that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced” (779). Scott pushes against a notion of experience that takes for granted the prior existence of a knowing subject in favor of an understanding that questions how conceptions of selves are produced in ways that naturalize ideological categories and identifications, such as man, woman, heterosexual, homosexual, black, white, etc. (782). As a practice that exemplified the notion of experience that Scott implicates in her postmodern reassessment, consciousness-raising clearly fell out of step with feminist theoretical trends of the early 1990s.

Even before consciousness-raising became theoretically suspect, however, Carolyn Dever asserts that the practice had become fully “conventional” within feminist movement politics by the end of the seventies (35). The mainstreaming of radical feminism’s solidarity project is evident throughout popular culture in the late seventies, for example in Hollywood productions such as *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975) and *An Unmarried Woman* (Paul Mazursky, 1978). In 1989, Anita Shreve’s book *Women Together, Women Alone*, an ethnographic analysis of women involved in consciousness-raising, the women Shreve surveyed saw consciousness-raising as project designed around individual enlightenment, not at all political revolution. Radical feminists had predicted the turn to liberal and cultural feminism by the mid seventies. In 1976, Hanisch argued that women’s liberation had already lost track of its radical roots and moved toward a more “liberal” project, epitomized by the growing centrality of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and Gloria Steinem’s *Ms. Magazine*. The Redstockings’ 1975 publication, “Feminist Revolution” opens with Sarachild’s admonition to maintain a radical intention for feminism and resist the processes of erasure that elide the differences between

radical and liberal feminism. The journal ends with articles titled, “Gloria Steinem & the CIA,” and “Agents, Opportunists, and Fools,” and a final section with the headline, “Building a Real Left.” However, by the mid-seventies, internal fissures amongst radical feminists as well as what Echols describes as critical problems in their theoretical framework, weakened their critique and their message. In the garb of liberal feminism within movement politics, consciousness-raising became a project geared to the individual.

Not until the mid-nineties, did feminist theorists return to the subject of consciousness-raising as part of a more comprehensive reengagement with the texts and theories of seventies feminism. The line of inquiry pursued by feminist literary critics such as Maria Lauret, Lisa Maria Hogeland, and most recently, Carolyn Dever, draws upon popular and bestselling novels of the seventies such as Dorothy Bryant’s *Ella Price’s Journal*, Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room*, Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*, Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man*, and Alix Kates Shulman’s *Burning Questions* and *Diary of an Ex-Prom Queen* and to a lesser extent the novels of Doris Lessing. The authors agree that “taking seriously” the fictional enterprises of feminist authors requires a primary recognition that the texts gather their rhetorical and political force from their historical situation and collaboration with the women’s liberation movement.

The reconsideration of consciousness-raising among feminist literary critics generates trends worth exploring here. Among the recuperation efforts of feminist literary critics we find the elaboration of a desire to reconstruct a theoretical practice that accounts for movement politics. Yet, in the work of Lauret and Hogeland, in particular, this recuperative practice consistently requires the disavowal of post-structuralism. Lauret calls feminist fiction of the seventies and eighties “a liberating literature, a female body of texts which sought to liberate both women and writing from the constraints of masculinist double standards in literature and in life”

(1). Writing in 1994, Lauret argues that “Women’s Movement fiction” was suffering from a serious case of neglect. To blame were the critical trends among feminist critics in the early eighties: poststructuralism and psychoanalytic theory, which “obliterated history” and zoomed in on “questions of signification and female subjectivity” at the expense of pursuing investigation into “the social functions of literature” (2). She writes, “Separated from its mother’s body – the Women’s Movement – feminist criticism inserted itself into the symbolic order of theoretical correctness and repressed, for the moment, its more anarchical social and political impulses” (3). In Lauret’s narrative, “a gap opened up” between the cultural products of the Women’s Movement and the theoretical questions pursued in the academy (3). Feminist realism, it was argued, was still embedded in traditional conceptions of identity and referential modes of representation; “it merely reproduced conventional constructions of reality instead of challenging them” (3). Lauret argues that this kind of logic demonstrates a “reductivism” in the critique of realism. Amongst the critics of novelistic realism was a familiar name in feminist film criticism as well, Elizabeth Cowie who authored a critique of *The Women’s Room*. Lauret explains that the case made against feminist realism by critics such as Rosalind Coward, Margaret Homans, Meaghan Morris and others such as Elizabeth Wilson and Nicci Gerrard was based exclusively “on the grounds that it operates (especially in the first person voice) on a ‘naïve’ theory of signification” (94).

Lauret’s critique of post-structuralism as a theoretical trend that killed the activist urgencies that constituted women’s movement literature exemplifies a trend Clare Hemmings identifies in what she calls the stories of feminist theory tells itself about itself. According to Hemmings, feminist theory attends to its past in the framework of two equally limiting narratives: nostalgia or progress. In the progress narrative, a steady march away from the past assures a future free of exclusions, blind spots and essentialism, which allegedly plagued previous decades.

The nostalgia narrative, which Lauret mobilizes, mourns the loss of urgency and activism on behalf of “real women” that characterized feminist theory of the seventies. Both stories, each with their own affective structures, contribute to what Hemmings calls a flattening out of past decades. Hemmings takes issue with the tendency to blame post-structuralism for most trouble spots in feminist theory. From the perspective of the nostalgia narrative, post-structuralism is to blame for wrenching a committed, urgent practice away from, as Lauret passionately expresses, “its mother’s body” – the mother here imagined as movement it/her-self. Post-structuralism in the narrative of progress is credited with initiating skepticism about the unity implied by the term woman. From either perspective, post-structuralism becomes the focus and the defining moment of feminist theoretical production and prior lines of inquiry are fixed into homogenous, flattened out decades that exist fully in the past.

While I clearly share some of Lauret’s desire to recuperate cultural production of the seventies and make a claim for its contemporary relevance, to make a case based on terms as over-generalized as “the women’s liberation movement,” “realism,” “activism,” or even, “consciousness raising” means that we remain within the terms of the debate that we wish to critique. That is, if the seventies are critiqued variously as essentialist albeit politicized, committed albeit naïve, and embedded in movement politics that were nonetheless misguided, the task must be to insist on particularization rather than continued overgeneralization. Throughout this chapter I have focused on consciousness-raising as conceived and practiced by radical feminists such as the New York-based Redstockings. In my discussions of *The Woman’s Film* and *Self-Health*, I have argued that as a critical point of reference, the rhetoric of consciousness-raising draws us into both the fantasies and the limitations of radical feminist calls for female solidarity. Rather than insist upon the “real” versus the “contingent,” my appeal to recognizing seventies feminist rhetoric as evidencing aspirations seeks to resist idealizing, romanticizing, or

homogenizing either feminist cultural and theoretical production or the fragmented coalition movement politics from which they emerged. In Chapter Three I continue to work towards particularity over generalization in my analysis of Madeline Anderson's *I Am Somebody* (1969), which documents a successful 100-day strike by black, female hospital workers of Charleston, South Carolina. I unpack the film's direct cinema aesthetics and argue that its formal conventions construct a commitment to historicizing the dramatic strike within the context of the civil rights and labor movements. I particularize the relationship between realism and feminist politics without relying on homogenous fabrications of "the woman's movement" or the category "verité" to make the film's political and aesthetic aspirations relevant.

Chapter Three: *I Am Somebody* (1969) and a Politics of Recognition

*...But I who am bound by my mirror
as well as my bed
see causes in color
as well as in sex*

*and sit here wondering
which me will survive
all these liberations.*
- Audre Lorde

*In other words, of white feminists we must ask, what exactly do
you mean when you say 'WE'??*
- Hazel V. Carby

Madeline Anderson's film *I Am Somebody* (1969) opens with a series of shots of Charleston's historic sites and tourist attractions: the monuments and mansions, the seaside and the ferries. Mixed with an instrumental track of the civil rights protest song, "We Shall Overcome," a voice-over contextualizes the images in the memory of a woman whose opening words in the film are: "Ever since I could remember, the tourists would come to Charleston in the spring of the year." In ways that are both literal and figurative, the footage of Charleston provided by the city's Board of Tourism supports the voice-over's reference to the gaze of the tourist. As Ellen Strain suggests, the touristic gaze simultaneously distances the viewer from the viewed at the same time as it immerses the viewer in the "being there" of the other. The tourist's gaze thus seeks both a voyeuristic distance and total knowledge. In the gaze of the tourist, as theorized by Strain, the other is made exotic, desirable, and the object of the tourist's quest for knowledge.

I Am Somebody reworks this dialectic of immersion and distance, however, by making explicit the distinction between two Charlestons: the one that tourists come to see and the "real"

Charleston, which they will be encouraged to know. The film drives the logic of the touristic gaze to its extreme in order to expose a Charleston that has been forced into hiding. The cinematic conventions at work in *I Am Somebody* indeed invite a knowledge-seeking gaze, in Bill Nichols' terminology, a spectator motivated not by scopophilia, but epistophilia.¹ A spectator, in other words, who might trade in a desire to consume the other for an opportunity to know something true about a previously misrecognized subject before the gaze. What the spectator of *I Am Somebody* is encouraged to see and know, in the words of the voice-over, is a view of the city "as it really was... if you were poor and black." The spectator of *I Am Somebody* is charged with nothing less than the act of recognition.

From a sweeping panorama of historic facades on a cobblestone street, the film jumps to a low-angle shot of a carriage horse's trampling hooves. To be "poor and black" in the syntax of film is a state that exists not along the grandiose avenues of the celebrated city, but in a precarious location underneath the beast of burden. What follows is a film that sets out to tell the story of a 100-day hospital workers' strike in Charleston, South Carolina from the perspective of the underneath, the trampled upon, and the burdened. The façade of the tourist's gaze is replaced in the film with conventions that claim to speak truth about the union campaign and encourage identification with the strikers.

Identification in *I Am Somebody* supports the politics of recognition at work in the film. That is to say, the politics of recognition here take form through what Nancy Fraser explains is a Hegelian line of thinking, or "the identity model." This process of mutual recognition, following Hegel, occurs between two subjects who recognize each other as distinct, but equal. Recognition constitutes subjectivity reciprocally, as "one becomes a subject only by recognizing, and being

¹ See Nichols, *Representing Reality* for an elaboration of the concept of the epistephilic spectator of documentary.

recognized by, another subject” (“Rethinking Recognition” 109). *I Am Somebody*, thus generates yet another way of understanding the aesthetics of realism at work in feminist documentaries: in the service of a politics of recognition. Whereas Chapter Two shed light on modes of identification in *The Woman’s Film* and *Self-Health* that trafficked in identity and non-identity between feminist subjects, this chapter engages with Fraser’s understanding of the recognition-redistribution dilemma in order to address the political stakes of *I Am Somebody*. In the film, union politics for better wages for black, female hospital workers (redistribution) embeds the political desire among all black people to be properly recognized as human (recognition) as well as the specific political claims of black women, engaged in both waged and unwaged labor.

As a result of these layered and often competing political imaginaries, *I Am Somebody* marks an intriguing and contested space of feminist subjectivity, political representation, and political desire within seventies feminist documentaries. As one of the few made by, for, and about black women, *I Am Somebody* also intersects with attenuated discourses in the historiography of the women’s movement, feminist theory, and feminist film theory. Distinct among many of the films from the archive of seventies feminist documentaries, *I Am Somebody* struggles to create a politics of recognition that accounts for black people’s will to be recognized as properly human as well as black women workers’ aspiration to be distinguished among them as particularly subjugated by a function of not only race, nor race and class, but race, class, and gender. While they were supported by local ministers, students, and even national figureheads of the civil rights movement, all but 12 of the over 400 strikers who won their struggle for fair wages against the hospitals were women, all of them black. In the film, Anderson combines broadcast news footage with staged interviews, constructing a complex interplay between the rhetorical, aesthetic and political imaginaries of the civil rights, labor, and women’s movements. This chapter also sets out to explore how and why *I Am Somebody* might be called a “classic”

feminist documentary and the ramifications of its enthusiastic reception within feminist film culture on considerations of race politics within seventies feminisms.

Rights, Redistribution, and Recognition

In “From Redistribution to Recognition: Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post-Socialist’ Age,” Fraser distinguishes between two categories of injustice: socioeconomic and cultural. Socioeconomic injustice stems from the political-economic structure of society and includes exploitation, economic marginalization, and deprivation. Cultural injustice speaks to what she calls “social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication,” such as cultural domination, disrespect, and nonrecognition. The solution to socioeconomic injustice lies in the redistribution of economic resources; cultural injustice on the other hand demands recognition as a remedy. The distinction between these two understandings of injustice, she admits, is analytical rather than realistic. In life, the two are mutually entwined, often creating what Fraser describes as a “vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination.” *I Am Somebody* manifests this “interimbrication” as Fraser calls it between socioeconomic and cultural injustice. The hospital workers in the film constitute a class; the literal demands made by the strikers address their economic exploitation by demanding better wages and better hours. Yet, with support from civil rights leaders, the hospital workers’ strike becomes a collective struggle of the black community. The specific politics of redistribution embed a logic of generalized recognition that encompasses the entire population of black people in Charleston.

Introduced by the title, *I Am Somebody*, Madeline Anderson’s documentary immediately asserts its relevance within the lexicon of the politics of recognition of the civil rights movement. Referencing a phrase made famous by Jesse Jackson, *I Am Somebody* lays claim to a politics driven by a collective will to assert the most basic humanity of black people. In his biography of

Jackson, journalist Marshall Frady describes the phrase “I am somebody” as the leader’s “most famous litany.” According to Frady, Jackson often recounts the day the phrase occurred to him. It was the day before Martin Luther King, Jr.’s interrupted vision, the Poor People’s Campaign’s “Resurrection City,” was to be dismantled in Washington, D.C. in June 1968.² After living for almost six weeks in desperate conditions in the ad hoc city on West Potomac Park during a political action most journalists and politicians at the time dismissed as an utter failure, the residents of Resurrection City finally were to be evicted by city officials. In future speeches Jackson would claim:

When I looked down from the back of that truck, it was mostly women and children, all colors, a rainbow of them. And they looked up at me for something I could not give them—I couldn’t give them any money for a bus ticket back home, nor could I take away the pain in their hearts because Dr. King had been killed. But then I remembered something. That when you’ve lost everything—every thing—you still have your humanity and your integrity, you still have your will to be somebody. So I asked all of them standing down there before me, asked them to repeat these words, *I am somebody*. It just came out of me—‘I am somebody!’ And they came back, *I am somebody!*” (Frady 244)³

At several points in the film, a chorus of voices chanting the refrain, “I am somebody” accompanies footage of the marchers.⁴ To be “somebody” in the discourse of the documentary is to be recognized as a group by (white) power as belonging among the “human.”

² For a broader understanding of both the Poor People’s Campaign, which consumed Martin Luther King, Jr. until his assassination, as well as Resurrection City see Robert T. Chase, “Class Resurrection: The Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City” and Charles Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection: The Poor People’s Washington Campaign*.

³ Frady, whose biography consistently emphasizes Jackson’s opportunism suggests that the phrase actually came from Dr. King himself, perhaps as early as 1964 in Mississippi when Dr. King bellowed out to crowds gathered at a mass meeting, “You must not allow anybody, *anybody*, to make you feel you are not significant and you do not count. *Every* Negro has worth and dignity, because white, Negro, Chinese, Indian, man or woman or child, doctor or preacher or cotton hand, we are *all* the children of God. You are somebody. I want every one of you to say that to yourself—say it out loud now: *I am somebody*” (244).

⁴ “I am somebody,” is also the title of Jackson’s poem, which elaborates the theme of personhood evoked by the title of the film. The poem begins, “I Am/ Somebody/ I Am/ Somebody/ I May Be Poor/ But I Am/

That is, while the film primarily documents the events and concerns that lead the hospital workers to join 1199 and strike against their employers, *I Am Somebody* consistently asserts a politics of recognition relevant to all black people through the visual and verbal lexicon of the civil rights movement. In the opening sequence, the shot of the carriage horse's galloping hooves cross fades into a shot that features hundreds of marching human feet. The transition literalizes the transformation from non-human to human that the film desires to produce in the recognition of black people. A voice distinct from the narrator's announces, as if reading from the march manifesto, "We as black people in South Carolina have awakened to the fact that we are no longer afraid of the white man and that we want to be recognized, not because of our race, but because we are human beings."

This matter of recognition—the demand to be recognized as human—is fundamental in the film and established a priori to the particular struggle by black, female hospital workers at stake in the film. In the opening march scene, for example, there is no mention in the voice-over of the fact that the march was part of the hospital workers' strike. In shots of the march, the frame repeatedly fills with the upper bodies men and women, black and white, as they march arm in arm dozens deep in the streets. The images attest to a peaceful demonstration, inter-racial solidarity, and massive collective will. However, only posters and paper hats, which display UAW, AFL-CIO and 1199, the hospital workers' union name and number, make reference to the labor politics at stake. Reverend Ralph Abernathy speaks in voice-over of the success of the Mother's Day March. As he relates his feelings of excitement when he saw over 14,000 people marching in solidarity that day in Charleston, the image track features a shot of the Reverend arm in arm with

Somebody/ I May Be Young/ But I Am/ Somebody..." The part heard in voice-over in *I Am Somebody* includes the refrain, "I May Be Black/ But I Am/ Somebody."

black women. His presence at the march and the authority granted to his reflection in voice-over serve to code the event as significant within the context of the civil rights movement. He makes no mention of the hospital workers' union when he says, "I just knew that this would be the beginning of a new day in Charleston." This opening sequence thus creates the framework within which the hospital worker's strike gains general relevance to the struggle of all black people in their demand for recognition.

Scenes of marches, demonstrations, protests, and gatherings dominate the visuals of *I Am Somebody*. In these, the particular redistribution demands of the hospital strikers are secondary to the demand for recognition by all poor, black people of Charleston. As in the opening march sequence, mixed crowds chant, raise fists, and hold signs of protest as they move en masse, line up to picket, and gather around speakers throughout the streets of Charleston. In particular, the film grants generous attention to Abernathy and his leadership throughout. Several scenes shot at night feature marchers violating curfew to gather peacefully in the streets. In these scenes, Reverend Abernathy dominates the frame as he speaks to law enforcement officers and the press. In one such scene, a young Jesse Jackson is visible by his side. Much is made throughout the film of Abernathy's arrests in Charleston; in one shot, he is led away in handcuffs, in another he makes a peace sign with his cuffed hands through the barred window of a police van. Abernathy is shown disembarking a plane with an entourage of Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff members; and he is featured on several occasions speaking at rallies held inside churches. In the excerpts of his rally speeches, Abernathy makes manifest the politics of recognition at stake for black people in terms that do not acknowledge the specifically gendered struggle of the hospital workers. Indeed, in one early segment he remarks, "I want to tell all of Charleston that we are going to all be saved together as brothers, or we're going to perish as fools." In ironic response, the film cuts to reveal the church nave full of black women in white hospital uniforms

donning blue and white paper union hats. Despite the obvious specificities at stake in the hospital workers' strike, however, the film makes clear that the black women strikers needed the support of the local black community as well as the leadership of the national civil rights movement.

In Fraser's terms, *I Am Somebody* consistently affirms the interimbrication of the politics of recognition with the politics of redistribution when the subjects at stake are oppressed by race, class, and gender. The film also creates a context in which the strikers' demand for remedies beyond redistribution makes political sense. In one excerpt the director of the county hospital is featured in a news format close-up as he says, "I do not believe this is a civil rights issue whatsoever." When a journalist follows-up with the question, "Why not?" the middle-aged white man is obviously at pains to answer. He pauses, turns his head, then smiles, and turns back to look at the journalist. Finally, he breaks into a grotesque laugh, and falters, "I just don't believe it's a civil rights issue." Indeed, the director's stance is to de-racialize the struggle and cast it as a cut and dry labor issue: "They are working for wages at jobs which have no relation to race, creed, sex or anything else." Divorcing the issue of civil rights from the wage negotiation at stake in the strike was clearly in the legal interests of the hospital administration. Moreover, reducing the strike to a labor conflict would benefit the hospital administration by depoliticizing the contest. Thus, by linking the strike to civil rights the hospital workers benefit not only from the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but also from the political, social, and symbolic capital surrounding the more generalized movement for recognition. The hospital administration is accused not only of cheating the workers of a fair living wage; it is guilty of the moral, social and political transgression of denying them status as human beings.

Tracing the roots of Anderson's film back to the union efforts of New York Local 1199 illustrates that Anderson's task in making *I Am Somebody* was to create a film that would speak primarily to the people involved in the strike or workers involved in future strikes. Anderson was

commissioned to make *I Am Somebody* by Moe Foner who served as the head of New York Local 1199's educational and publicity campaigns beginning in the early 1950s.⁵ Foner likely envisioned a film that could function as an organizing tool for labor unions. In his autobiography, the formidable union activist devotes a chapter to the Charleston strike featured in Anderson's film. He mentions the film, however, merely in passing, at the end of a long narrative detailing the twists and turns in the organizing efforts. Although the strike was in the short term successful it did not achieve a "real hospital union" (Foner 80). After the experienced organizers left Charleston and national civil rights leaders moved on to other campaigns, the collective structure that the strike had generated began to collapse. And yet, according to Foner, the strike had the more lasting effect of creating solidarity and purpose among Charleston's black community. His single mention of the film reads, "We made a movie about the strike called *I Am Somebody*, a phrase intended to sum up the sense of self-respect the strikers gained through sacrifice, courage, and unity. The Charleston story and the movie about it were a major help in organizing elsewhere" (Foner 81). Foner, in his role at 1199, instigated the production of several films, plays, and musical scores. None of them receives extensive treatment in his autobiography. About *Hospital Strike*, for example, a film produced by volunteer filmmakers John Schultz and Pat Jaffe, Foner writes, "The movie was very effective. Our members loved it" (52). Despite giving the films short shift in his published writing, however, Foner clearly sensed that filmmaking had a significant role to play in the politics of union activism. Foner describes films as "effective" in

⁵ Local 1199 emerged in 1932 as the Retail Drug Employees Union. Foner describes the organization's "American Left" ideals, particularly its long-standing commitment to opposing racism and eradicating racial and ethnic prejudice. In 1937, Local 1199 worked in Harlem to ensure the hiring of black pharmacists. In 1957, 1199 began organizing hospitals. Hospital workers were excluded from the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. As a result, in Foner's words, "their pay was so low, this put hospital workers in the position of being involuntary philanthropists" (38). Thought of as the "forgotten workers," hospital workers were mostly minority women, a population Foner admits unions were not keen to organize since it would mean "a low return in dues and a new kind of membership that most unions were unaccustomed—or even unwilling—to deal with" (38).

terms of his goals: creating solidarity among union members, inspiring workers to organize, and creating a human face for unions in order to generate public sympathy for union efforts.

Because Foner recruited Anderson to make a film about the South Carolina strike after the events he wished to publicize had already transpired, Anderson assembled *I Am Somebody* almost entirely from newsreel footage garnered from major broadcasters. She shot additional footage after she had compiled an initial rough cut from footage selected from the archive libraries of ABC, CBS, and NBC. The resulting film resembles the so-called verité productions of the direct cinema movement. The newsreel footage is taken from a hand-held camera, focus is often off, and movement is jerky and unpredictable. *I Am Somebody* is not a formally experimental film. It seeks to elucidate an accessible, humanist narrative in which at a particular moment in history the weak come together to defeat their oppressors. The film does not evidence an attempt to complicate viewing positions or reception. Anderson did not manipulate the media images she procured in order to expose their constructedness or reveal the hidden ideologies of journalism. To the contrary, the newsreel images that comprise *I Am Somebody* stand in for the pro-filmic event; they say “this is what happened.”

The use of archival news footage is ubiquitous throughout labor and civil rights documentaries. Archival news footage substantiates the veracity claims of historical documentaries, which, like *I Am Somebody*, are produced subsequent to the events they visualize. In Julia Reichert and Jim Klien’s *Union Maids* (1976), contemporary footage of three former Chicago socialist activists is juxtaposed with archival footage and still photographs of demonstrations, marches, and sit-downs, which punctuate the speakers’ testimonies about the CIO organizing drive.⁶ Henry Hampton’s renowned *Eyes on the Prize I and II* (1987), which aired on public television, uses the same format: contemporary interviews interspersed with archival

⁶ In Linda Gordon’s words, “The force of the class struggle of the 1930s is shown, not just told.”

footage, woven together with a poignant and relevant musical score. If oral history provides the aural narrative, the archival footage serves an evidentiary role, visualizing the events for the viewer and lending them veracity. Traditional documentary conventions of realism in historical documentaries dictate a need for the events to occur on screen in visual terms, whether or not the speaker who voices history is represented in the footage that accompanies the narrative. The answer to the question *how can one represent the past on screen?* is offered conventionally with footage from the mass media, generally television journalism. Severed from its intended outlet on television, within news broadcasts, archival visual material circulates as a signifier of uncomplicated truth, sheer image.⁷ News footage gains meaning in historical documentary from the context of its juxtapositions, the determinants of its original production remain obscured, unexamined.⁸

The link between television news and documentary, particularly in the 1960s, maintained a clear and strong bond, particularly for Anderson, who worked both in television and on documentary film before *I Am Somebody*. Before 1960, television journalism evidenced a connection to a documentary tradition rooted in the legacy of Griersonian documentaries of the 1930s. One of documentary's three great "fathers," Grierson's heritage is synonymous with an understanding of documentary as bearing the burden of its social function and its role in the service of public education. Narrated by Edward Murrow, the *CBS Reports Harvest of Shame*, for example, documented the troubles of migrant agricultural workers. Shown the day after Thanksgiving 1960, *Harvest of Shame* shared the vision of documentary, first forwarded by

⁷ In her essay on *Eyes on the Prize*, for example, Elizabeth Amelia Hadley does not distinguish between archival footage gathered from television journalism and that procured from other documentary sources, referring to the historical film footage simply as "vintage film footage" (101). This kind of slippage demonstrates the ease with which televisual news footage circulates as merely archival, uncomplicated by its origins in the media marketplace.

⁸ R. Bruce Brasell explores at length the way a dependence on "televisual material" has limited the public's perception of the civil rights movement such that "the history of the movement becomes a history of its media representations" (12).

Grierson, as an edifying force in the development of a democracy with a conscience. Beginning in 1960, however, television networks began to develop the “journalistic documentary,” which maintained an interest in social commitment, but invested in the possibility of objectivity, balance, and an unbiased reflection of social reality.⁹

The turn away from pointed advocacy *in* the social sphere to alleged objectivity *about* it also occurred in documentary filmmaking during the heyday of American direct cinema (also known as cinema vérité in the US). Ostensibly a response to the burdensome social commitment and heavy narration dictated by the Griersonian tradition, as is well known, direct cinema was claimed by its pioneers to be the realization of cinema’s objective power to merely record reality. Richard Leacock uttered one version of the movement’s oft-recited manifesto: to create the visual equivalence of “being there.” Robert Drew, who called all documentary before direct cinema patently “false,” came directly out of a career in television. All of the direct cinema practitioners felt that new, portable technology maximized the potential for documentary film to record life as it is. Lightweight 16mm cameras made it possible to reduce the film crew size to only two people, who could move easily through space. Faster film stock facilitated a new ability to record events with available light, rather than elaborate lighting set-up. Miniature sound recording devices, which ran on batteries, created the possibility of recording sound in synchronicity with image. These technological breakthroughs made filmmaking less expensive, easier, and quicker. It was the gain in mobility with respect to filmed subjects, however, which really exploded the possibilities of documentary filmmaking. For the first time in cinema history, the filmmaker could literally “follow its subjects across social boundaries and borders ... wander into the semi-private spaces and exclusive places of everyday social life, in short, to cross from the public

⁹ See “Legitimizing TV Journalism in 60 Minutes: The Ramifications of Subordinating the Visual to the Primacy of the World” by Sarah Stein.

sphere into the private domain ... and hear what was being uttered, because this is a camera with ears” (Chanan 166-7). The seismic technological shifts brought about an innovative set of documentary conventions, which exploited the camera’s new abilities. There is no doubt that direct cinema changed the documentary form radically.

The techniques of direct cinema also became incorporated into television journalism. For indeed, the shared goal of objectivity made the conventions of direct cinema compatible with a new style of mobile reportage, where the journalist entered the spaces at stake and spoke directly from various on-location sites and where the dramatic arc of the story emerged as a result of the recorded events, not prior to them.¹⁰ The pioneers of the tradition did not question this liaison with network television, nor the affinity between direct cinema and journalism. On the contrary, television broadcast was the mostly likely exhibition space for documentary in the early 1960s. Direct cinema did not claim to offer a new politics for documentary. Rather, it sought primarily enter a new, more intimate space. The main subjects of direct cinema provided the opportunity to stage an insider’s perspective on a male public figure, “the fly on the wall” view: John F. Kennedy (*Primary and Crisis*); Bob Dylan (*Don’t Look Back*); Stravinsky (*A Stravinsky Portrait*). Direct cinema filmmakers eschewed social commitment or admission of subjectivity, laying claim rather to immediacy, non-manipulation, spontaneity, and, finally, objective truth – a set of aspirations that made the form highly compatible with the new objectivity aimed for by television journalism.¹¹

¹⁰ See Chapter 10 “Truth Games” in Chanan’s *The Politics of Documentary* for a more thorough discussion.

¹¹ Thomas Waugh is one of many critics who lament the influence of direct cinema amongst audiences and filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s. For Waugh, the discrete failure of the form came from the filmmakers’ failure to take advantage of their status and popularity in order to address the urgent political upheavals of their time. “To be sure, they often provided undeniably profound and touching works of art, but films which failed to meet the increasing need for explicit sociopolitical analysis to support the momentum of the alternate politics. This failure of Leacock, Wiseman, et al. was a particularly bitter one, because of their widespread reputation as social critics, and because of the broad-based, potentially activist, liberal audience they addressed.” Errol Morris is another critic of the influence of direct cinema: “I believe that cinema

That Anderson drew from televised news footage to visually historicize the 1999 Hospital Union Worker's Strike in Charleston, South Carolina speaks to established conventions related to the film's purpose and intended address. The incorporation of direct cinema aesthetics in television journalism meant that the archived footage available to Anderson bore the stamp of verité; by assembling the verité news footage into a narrative about the strike, Anderson's film became legible within the circuits traveled both by labor films and civil rights documentaries; and as a final material product of assemblage, the film enunciates a commitment to realism and the veracity implied by that aesthetic as well as an appeal to identification within certain audiences. *I Am Somebody* bears testament to a tradition of filmmaking relevant to labor and civil rights documentaries. Yet, it also exceeds these parameters.

The Specifics of Race, Class *and* Gender

Within the seemingly genderless discourses of civil rights and labor politics, which seek both redistribution and recognition remedies, Anderson consistently affirms in *I Am Somebody* that the political subjects under construction were black women workers. At the nexus of race, class, *and* gender, thus, black women radically redefine the demand for "human" recognition. The film makes evident how the rhetorical framing of the strike by civil rights leaders such as Abernathy excised the notion of gender from the appeal for human recognition. This is poignantly evident when, as mentioned in the examples with Abernathy above, the speeches excerpted in the film make claims about "brotherhood" and "all black people", even when the visual track features scores of black *women's* bodies exclusively. Yet, by featuring numerous interviews with the

verité set back documentary filmmaking twenty or thirty years. It sees documentary as a sub-species of journalism" (Quoted in Bruzzi, 5).

hospital workers themselves, and through the footage and voiceover of Claire Brown, Anderson constantly punches through the genderless rhetoric to affirm the gendered politics at stake in the strike and in the film.

In one of the first protest sequences, for example, footage and sound from an interview with one of the strikers creates a gender-specific framework to interpret scenes of police violence against the strikers' bodies. In a tight talking head close-up, a hospital worker describes how the strikers hoped unionization would provide the support the workers needed to raise labor issues with the hospital administration. Sound from her interview creates a bridge to the next shot of black women in an orderly picket line in front of the hospital, yielding signs that read "Medical College is Hurting Charleston," and "Still a Slave." The images convey that the orderly protest transformed into a scene of confusion and violence. In one long shot, the black women try to move away from an ensuing crowd of white police officers. A white journalist in the foreground moves to one side of the scene to capture images much like the ones we witness. In the voice-over, the woman remembers that the women had gone out with peaceful intentions. In her rendition, the strikers assumed the police officers would act reasonably: "We was women and we didn't have no weapons or nothing; I felt that they wouldn't hardly hit us with those big clubs." Shocking medium shots reveal that neither their gender nor their peaceful intentions protected the women from the fierce onslaught of the officers. White and black police officers violently shove black women into vehicles and hammer their heads and bodies with clubs. Although the voice-over continues to claim that the women had gone out with the intention of "fighting them with the law" not with fists, black women in the scene do fight back. They slap at the officers, desperately trying to protect each other. In the final sequence of jarring shots, black women are arrested and roughly loaded into police vehicles. A crumpled and upside down paper hat with the 1199 union logo is what is left of the picket line in the final frame of the sequence.

In another example, two juxtaposed interviews with the black, female workers demonstrate the interlocking calls for both redistribution and recognition.¹² As a document of their struggle, the film focuses attention on the necessary and immutable imbrications of demanding better wages and recognition as humans. Indeed, the film makes the distinction among these impossible. At the scene of the picket line one striker explains that although white and black aides perform the same labor, white aides are paid more than their black counterparts. She is framed in a close-up, her union hat prominently displayed on her head. A microphone appears in the bottom of the frame and moves back and forth from the striker to the journalist who poses questions about the strikers' demands. In response to the journalist's question about what outcome she'd like to see for the hospital workers, the woman responds unequivocally: "In the hospitals I'd like to see fair treatment." Although the woman isolates wages as the issue at stake for the strikers, in the next interview excerpt another hospital worker focuses on the issues of discrimination and disrespect. Her grievances include being called "Hey, girl," and nicknamed with racial epithets. "I think all of us deserve respect," she concludes, "regardless of age, race, or creed."

Just as the Reverend Abernathy voices the generalized call for human recognition in the film, Coretta Scott King speaks to the particular political location of black women workers. During a rally for the hospital workers, King tells the crowd of black women that she is proud to support their "crusade for freedom and dignity." She cites the obvious socioeconomic injustice the women workers are subject to: "After all," she says, "A dollar thirty cents an hour is not a wage; it is an insult." King goes on to admit that her other interest in being present for their

¹² This places them squarely in what Fraser describes as the redistribution-recognition dilemma. Since Fraser is interested in rethinking identity politics, she stresses how both "race" and "gender," unlike "class," constitute bivalent and therefore "dilemmatic modes of collectivity." She focuses on the means by which race and gender mobilize dual and opposing remedies that necessitate both the dissolution of the collective identity (redistribution) and its reification (recognition).

struggle has to do with the fact that most of the hospital workers are “women, black women. Many of whom are the main supporters of their families.” Close-up shots of the elegant and commanding widow of Martin Luther King, Jr. as she speaks into a web of microphones at a podium are punctuated with similarly framed shots of black women in the audience. The film draws out the parallels between the national figurehead and the Charleston strikers as King continues, “I feel... that the black woman... in our nation, the black working woman is... perhaps the most discriminated against... of all... the working... women. The black woman.” As she speaks, King pauses thoughtfully between her repetitions of the phrase, “the black woman.” Her passion for the political issue is visible, it is audible, and it is mirrored in the faces of the black women in the audience.

Anderson sought to create a film that would reach these women in particular. She says as much in a 1972 interview with the editors of *Film Library Quarterly*. “I wanted some kind of personal touch that the women strikers could identify with” (41). The strikers in this case were black women workers – new faces on the scene of labor marches, a new collective subject, in this case of both political action and filmic reception. *I Am Somebody* puts black women workers at the center of the civil rights movement in 1969, at the heart of a labor campaign, and through the film product itself, in the center of feminist film culture of the seventies.

Within the feminist film movement, *I Am Somebody* was taken up and claimed as a distinctly feminist documentary through a set of practices of screening and interpretation that I aim to “read” in relation to the operations of race in the women’s movement. Jan Rosenberg asserts that *I Am Somebody* figures as a “classic” example of feminist documentary in part because of its aesthetics and theme, but also because Anderson went on to make a portrait film about another woman, a black woman painter, *Clementine Hunter-Artist*. In other words, for Rosenberg, that two of Anderson’s films center on the lives and struggles of women and because

Anderson happily accepted the incorporation of *I Am Somebody* into feminist film culture, Anderson is logically assimilated into the feminist film movement as both pioneer and a classic. I suggest that the straightforward logic of this association belies a far more complex set of relations and considerations that have to do with the difficult dialogues surrounding the politics of race in the women's liberation movement.

Among feminist documentaries of the seventies, themes central to lives of white, middle-class women dominate, particularly in films about women juggling their personal lives with their careers, grandmother-mother-daughter relations, women's health and reproductive rights, and women as artists. However, as my discussion of *The Woman's Film* in Chapter Two demonstrates, some of the most powerful feminist documentaries also reach outside of these normative narratives into the lives of the white poor and working class and the concerns of women of color. Striking is the fact that among films that feature white women, a spectrum of lives emerge that showcase women as workers, artists, mothers, teachers, thinkers, leaders, writers, and activists, women who are poor and working class, and women who are just comfortable, or extremely privileged. In films about black women and women of color, the spectrum narrows considerably.

In feminist documentaries, black women are imprisoned and on welfare, they are on strike and turning tricks. Inevitably, they are fierce and outspoken, decrying the conditions that have them jailed, beaten, and unemployed; they talk of revolution and resistance and the tremendous power of women's collectivization. The majority of these films, which include *Inside Women Inside*, *Women Talking*, *The Woman's Film*, *We're Alive*, and *Veronica* were made by white women; *I Am Somebody* is the exception. Given the look and sound of Anderson's documentary, the major difference between *I Am Somebody* and the vast majority of feminist documentary films might have gone undetected. Anderson suggests as much when she says, "For

many years, many people (who saw my work) never knew I was black” (Moon 11). Outside of Rosenberg’s *Women’s Reflections*, Anderson’s place in the history of cinema is most often explored as a pioneer filmmaker in histories of black filmmakers, such as *Reel Black Talk* by Spencer Moon.¹³ From these we learn that Anderson’s first job in the filmmaking industry was with Leacock as the producer of *Integration Report I* (1960), one of the first films to capture the sit-in movement that would spread across South. She went on to work with renowned experimental filmmaker Shirley Clarke on *The Cool World* (1963), Clarke’s verité-fiction on the alienation of black youth in Harlem. She produced and directed *Malcolm X - Nationalist or Humanist* (1967) after working on *The Cool World*. Eventually, Anderson made her way to public television with “Black Journal” on WNET-TV in New York City under the leadership of William Greaves before directing *I Am Somebody* in 1969. After 1970, Anderson returned to public television, primarily on children’s educational programs such as *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company*.

I Am Somebody screened at virtually every event relevant to the emerging feminist film movement in the early 1970s.¹⁴ At the Flaherty Seminar in 1970, *I Am Somebody* screened alongside other feminist documentaries such as Amalie Rothschild’s *Woo Who? May Wilson*.¹⁵ In 1972, Anderson’s documentary was included in the First International Festival of Women’s

¹³ In Moon’s book, Anderson appears directly after William Alexander (1916 – 1991) who directed propaganda films during WWII, two major feature films in the 1940s, and produced his final feature, *The Klansman* in 1974. Anderson’s claim to fame in Moon’s text is as “the first African American female independent filmmaker in the United States to produce a television series and have it air nationally”: *The Infinity Factory* (1978) an education program for children aired on PBS.

¹⁴ B. Ruby Rich provides a useful chronology of feminist film activities and publications in *Chick Flicks*. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams provide a similar list in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*.

¹⁵ The 1970 session also included landmark films such as Jorge Sanjine’s *Blood of the Condor* and Newsreel’s *Amerika* and *People’s War*. See Patricia Zimmerman, “Flaherty’s Midwives” for details about the relevance of the Flaherty Seminar’s for the incubation of feminist film in the 1970s. Zimmerman writes, “During the late 1960s and through the 1970s, Flaherty Seminar programming clearly sided with the more realist, cinema verité side of feminist documentary” (73).

Films, the signature event that marked the emergence of a second wave feminist consciousness in the realm of cinema. Alexandra Grilikhes brought *I Am Somebody* to Philadelphia audiences at Philadelphia's first international festival of Films by Women. As women's film festivals proliferated throughout the US and Europe, *I Am Somebody* found receptive audiences. In many of the earliest published materials on feminist documentaries, *I Am Somebody* is routinely mentioned as a documentary relevant to feminism generally and to black and working class women specifically; it is placed unselfconsciously alongside dozens of documentaries featuring new perspectives on women, by women, and about women.¹⁶

I Am Somebody would have played easily among new feminist documentaries at festivals and conferences. Many would have apprehended *I Am Somebody* in the terms described by one reviewer for *Ms.* magazine in 1973: "As a record of women moving from uncertainty to a sense of their own worth, it has universal appeal," she wrote ("Reel at Last" 97). As my previous chapters indicate, feminist documentary films shared a commitment to making the invisible visible, to launching a wider spectrum of "real" representations of women into the public sphere, and to creating a visual analog to the feminist practice of consciousness-raising. With few exceptions, feminist documentaries in the early seventies engaged with the conventions of realism, offering challenges and resistances, but claiming the form as necessary and relevant for the political desires of filmmakers and activists. As is true of many of the films considered throughout this dissertation, the determination in *I Am Somebody* to use film to mobilize new emerging subjectivities takes place through practices of the real. In *I Am Somebody* the

¹⁶ See, for example, Jeanne Betancourt's *Women in Focus*. In Betancourt's "Theme Index," *I Am Somebody* appears under various headings: Community, Discrimination, Careers, Violence, and Black Women. Other documentary films that fall under the heading "Black Women" include: *Angela Davis – Portrait of a Revolutionary* (1971), *Fear Women* (1971), *Game* (1971), *Growing Up Female: As Six Becomes One* (1971), and *Veronica* (1969). Julia Lesage also mentions *I Am Somebody* in her landmark essay, "The Political Aesthetics of the Documentary Film."

Charleston strike takes shape for viewers through on-location shots of picketers, marchers, and speechmakers—bodies in action and in motion *in politics* on screen.

However, in the original footage of Claire Brown and her first-person voiceover narration, *I Am Somebody* utters an unambiguously gendered take on the events in that took place that spring in Charleston.¹⁷ It is through Brown that we apprehend the realization of what Abernathy calls, “a new day in Charleston” in the opening sequence of the Mother’s Day March. Following the march, the film cuts to the first sequence of Anderson’s original footage of Brown. Abernathy’s final words about the Mother’s Day March create a bridge with the shot of Brown that follows. She is framed in close-up, cropped at the shoulders, standing in front of a bathroom mirror. In the foreground, her hand moves a cloth in circles over her reflection in the glass. “It *was* a new day,” Brown emphasizes with authority in the voice-over while she repetitively wipes the mirror clean. As the voice-over continues to describe the success of the Mother’s Day March and the coalitions between civil rights groups and the labor unions that made the event a tremendous success, the framing zooms out to capture both Brown and her reflection. She circles the mirror a few more times with her cloth, and then checks her reflection, and starts to exit the bathroom.

Situated in a decidedly intimate space in her home, Brown is at first introduced to the spectator indirectly, through the mediation of the looking glass. The film here emphasizes the act of looking and the process of creating a clear image, a true reflection. As we gaze at Brown, she gazes at herself. She does not return the camera’s gaze, but rather ignores it, performing for the camera the act of seeing herself. Two simultaneous moments of mutual recognition are

¹⁷ John Williams has also argued that by showcasing the activism of black working class women as central to the civil rights movement so soon after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Anderson “unintentionally subverts traditional accounts of the movement. The role of blue collar females in the fight for civil rights is all but obscured in works such as Henry Hampton’s highly lauded *Eyes on the Prize* television series and most other accounts of this era” (40).

thematized. Not only does the film invite the epistephilic spectator to know Brown, it suggests that first of all, Brown must work to know herself. Perhaps Brown is making her own image more clear to herself as she repetitively wipes the mirror. Perhaps in the act of looking at herself Brown instantiates the process of becoming a political subject made possible through participation in the hospital workers' strike.

Whereas the broadcast footage of interviews with strikers features them in identical talking head poses, the sequence of images of Brown in her home speaks to a distinct register of political becoming and a more intimate notion of political recognition. In the scene that follows, Brown heats water over the stove in the kitchen and then sits down at a table and to make herself a cup of instant coffee. This sequence of Brown performing a series of household tasks lends subtle complexity to the voice-over in which Brown describes the motivation behind 1199's strike. Up to this point in the film, Anderson has emphasized the generalized politics of race and class, but in the visual shift to the interior domestic space, in which a single woman moves through "women's work," Anderson forces attention to the gendered racial politics at stake in the strike Brown describes. Brown attests to this particularizing shift with the words: "of the 400 strikers all but 12 we're women. All of us were black."¹⁸

The next scene featuring original footage of Brown comes in several minutes later. In the scenes that precede it, female hospital workers are arrested during a protest march; one woman stands in line to board the white police bus with a sleeping baby on her shoulder. She rocks him gently and looks directly into the camera, willing the spectator to wonder how she might constitute a threat worthy of incarceration. Contrasting the emphasis on gender contained in this

¹⁸ Anderson described the process of creating the narration: she invited Claire Brown to stay with her for a week in New York. Anderson took her into the editing room each day. Together they viewed the footage and Anderson would ask her, "What do you think of this?" and Brown would tell her what she saw and remembered. In the sound studio she encouraged Brown to talk about the film in that same way (*Film Library Quarterly* 41).

sequence, the following shots feature union officials at work. Black and white men talk into telephones, make lists, and plan events as Brown's voice-over describes the nuts and bolts of supporting the strikers. Women line up in the kitchen at "strike headquarters" for plates of rice and beans. In another shot, women stand over a mimeograph machine organizing leaflets. No mention is made of the gendered division of labor at play at strike headquarters whereby men are credited for directing the strike while women feed each other. But in the following scene with Brown, gender and labor, both within the public politics of the strike and in the private sphere of Brown's family come to the surface.

In this scene, Brown speaks to the camera in the film's familiar talking head framing about how her involvement in the strike affected the usual division of labor and leisure in her family. She describes being away from home for long hours everyday. Her children, she relates, spent more time at home alone. Her husband worked his regular job during the day, and, in addition, had to see that the children were fed, bathed, and put to bed. As she talks, the camera pans right, shifting the frame from a close-up of her, to a two-shot of her and a young child, to then finally rest on her husband. The couple, with the child seated between them, sits casually on a wooden bench, a bright white lace curtain behind them. As we watch the close-up of her husband's smiling face, Brown continues to say that her husband, discussed here in the third person, even went to the grocery store and cooked. The man's expression, though smiling, betrays a detectable embarrassment. He scratches his eyebrow. He smiles, then stops smiling as if unsure how to perform during his wife's narrative, particularly when it becomes more personal. Brown admits the new arrangement sometimes upset her husband, but, she explains with passion, "This was like my thing; it was something I had to do." Concluding her summary of the effect of her participation on her household, Brown says, nonetheless, they worked it out and her husband,

who remains acknowledged by the camera's steady framing of his head and shoulders, bore with her "till the end of it."

Although the camera grants more time to the husband's face in this brief scene, only Brown speaks. She imparts her own version of her story. She speaks with confidence and poise, unconcerned about the discomfort she (or the camera) might be causing her husband. Her monologue emphasizes the transition she makes in her role as a working mother. Her participation in the union strike upset the balance she previously maintained between her responsibilities at work and at home. The result, she admits, encountered resistance from her husband. While she engaged in the public, political sphere outside the home, he became responsible for taking on her domestic labor. Her narrative makes clear that her experience of politics in the public sphere cannot be isolated from its impact on her private, domestic existence, nor on the division of unwaged household labor within the home. The notion of politics at work in this scene imbricates a series of overlapping spheres of oppression: by the state, the hospital system, and the familial order at home. Again, the focus on Brown in Anderson's original footage brings the notion of recognition into a distinct register. Not only do the scenes of Brown particularize the politics of the strike into a specific battle for black women workers, Brown also instantiates the act of self-recognition. In this interview scene with her husband and child, Brown unapologetically situates herself and her sense of self in the center of the struggle: "it was something I had to do"; "it was my thing," she explains.

In the film's last sequence, two juxtaposed scenes seal the seam between the politics of recognition at stake in the strike and the self-recognition achieved by Claire Brown. The scene just before the final shots takes place at a press conference in which a black female spokesperson for the strikers announces their victory. She is seated at a square table with a cast of officials, reporters, and spokespeople. Her torso is framed against a background of suits and ties. She reads

from a statement, which details the terms of the agreement between the strikers and hospital officials. Beyond the facts and figures of the redistribution agreement achieved by the strikers, the final words she reads declare the accomplishment most sought by the strikers, “We are returning in a new relationship of mutual respect and dignity between the workers, the county council, the hospital administration and the entire community.” When asked by a reporter what exactly the workers accomplished by striking, the woman, Ms. Simmons, declares boldly and without hesitation, “We gained recognition as human beings for one. We gained that recognition... as human beings.” She nods emphatically and looks at her interlocutor directly. As she continues to stare down the male voice that interpellated her, her face dissolves into the cut. A white bird framed by a blue seaside emerges in the following shot. Clearly an allusion to freedom, the image also returns the visual index to the seaside featured in the film’s opening footage of Charleston in the gaze of the tourist.

Whereas in the opening sequence the Charleston seaside stands in for the city’s oppressive class structure and racist heritage, at the end of the film, the seaside becomes the site where a new subjectivity, captured in the image of the flying bird, has been made possible by the politics of the strike. In this final sequence, the black female body replaces the formidable edifices that house Charleston’s power structures. Brown walks casually along the waterfront as her voice-over utters the film’s final call to arms: “If you’re ready and willing to fight for yourself; other folks will be ready and willing to fight with you. We learned that you gotta be together. That’s what a union is all about.” While in the film’s final moments, Brown’s narrative emphasizes solidarity in labor and race, her body and voice insist on the unspoken gendered politics of recognition and self-recognition that emerge within the matrix of class and race in the strike, and in the film.

In the final section of this chapter, I suggest we place the film in conversation with black feminist writings of the early 1970s as a way to understand the film's status as a classic feminist documentary. Based on an investigation of writings from the early seventies, which evidence a difficult dialogue taking place between the universalizing claims of white women and the particularizing demands of black women, I conclude that the desire to incorporate and, further, make exemplary, *I Am Somebody* indicates the unrealized desire of some white women in the feminist film movement to project a kind of feminism in potentia, a screened imaginary. Much like *The Woman's Film*, *I Am Somebody* radically reconfigures the visualization of the feminist subject. Embedded in the film's traffic between human recognition and the particularities of race, gender, and class, a black women is made to stand in for both "the human" in the politics of recognition and for "woman" in the film's feminist reception.

Difficult Dialogues¹⁹

In my time with writings on the politics of race in the women's movement in the seventies and early eighties, I read a tense, but vigorous dialogue taking place on the issue of race between and among black and white women beginning with the inception of gender-based feminist organizing. Black women consistently challenged white women to hear their resistance to a singular, unified movement based solely in an aspiration for freedom from gender oppression. White women often questioned their ability to speak *for* all women, despite a desire

¹⁹ This subheading alludes to Johnnella Butler's essay "Difficult Dialogues" in *The Women's Review of Books*. Butler maneuvers an incisive critique of the continuing inability of women's studies to relinquish its attachment to a world-view in which gender is the primary and dominant oppression. She opines that ethnic studies would more readily be cured of its homophobia than women's studies of its ethnocentrism. Her 1989 essay continues to resonate. The 2009 National Women's Studies Association conference shares Butler's title, Difficult Dialogues. The Call for Papers states that the conference "will examine how feminist intellectual, political, and institutional practices cannot be adequately practiced if the politics of gender are conceptualized (overtly or implicitly) as superseding or transcending the politics of race, sexuality, social class, nation, and disability."

to unshackle them from an oppression white women understood as both collective and primary. Many radical feminists argued that by destabilizing gender oppression in the capitalist economy, the women's liberation movement would force the unraveling of all systems of domination, including racism.²⁰ Some black women responded with fury, daring white women to see how their perspective was possible only as a result of their race privilege. There might not have been much agreement, but there certainly was a great deal of blunt dialogue.

Throughout feminist studies, a timeline of race politics suggests that white women were blind to their exclusions and totally ignorant of the claims of black women and women of color until the 1980s. Characterizing this trajectory, historian Sherna Gluck, for example, refers to the early history of feminist activism among women of color as obscured by a "veil of silence" in histories of the second wave. In her analysis, the veil was lifted only following a 1977 National Women's Conference at Houston and in 1982 when "groundbreaking essays and anthologies by and about women of color opened a new chapter in U.S. feminism (see especially Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981)." Susan Stanford Friedman, within an article that deeply probes the politics of feminist historiography, nonetheless repeats the point that U.S. feminism focused narrowly on "sexual difference" until the late 1970s and early 1980s when "pioneering essays ... and edited collections" forced women's studies and feminism into a more expansive discussion of difference versus commonality and solidarity.²¹ Clare Hemmings refers to this dominant version of feminist

²⁰ The Redstockings Manifesto reads: "Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy: men dominate women, a few men dominate the rest. All power-structures throughout history have been male-dominated and male-oriented" (223).

²¹ The rest of the quotation reads: "due to pioneering essays by writers like Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Adrienne Rich, Johnnetta Cole, Bonnie Zimmerman, Rachel Blau Du Plessis, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Alice Chai, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty—to name a few—and edited collections such as *The Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldúa); *But [sic] All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, and Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Gloria T. Hull et al); *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (Evelyn

theory's own story about itself as "a developmental narrative," which moves from "unity and sameness, through identity and diversity, and on to difference and fragmentation" – stages that correspond to the decades of the seventies, eighties, and nineties respectively (115-116).²²

Throughout feminist theory, one reads these debates as taking place within neatly defined decades, characterized by an ostensible unity and homogeneity. As a result, conversations are "fixed," as Hemmings asserts, into tidy decades, where conversations both begin and end. In the case of "diversity" in particular, the narrative suggests that "race" as an issue emerged only in its proper decade (the eighties) and was adequately resolved there in the wake of a post-structuralist conceptualization of located subjectivities (allowing a sort of "now we know better" perspective on the past).

The wave of 1980s writing by women of color was indeed paradigm shifting for academic feminism. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, editors Moraga and Anzaldúa, describe the way their collection of writings by "radical women of color," started out as a "reaction to the racism of white feminists" (xxiii). In their 1979 solicitation letter, the editors explain, "We want to express to all women—especially to white middle-class women—the experiences which divide us as feminists; we want to examine incidents of intolerance, prejudice and denial of differences within the feminist movement" (xxiii). Within the context of a different historical moment, Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* details the development of reactionary thrust to the first wave of feminist activism. Despite powerful instances of "sisterhood" among black and white women during the period of abolition, when white women such as Susan B. Anthony refused to

Beck); *Lesbian Studies* (Margaret Cruikshank); and *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Mohanty).

²² For Hemmings it matters in particular that this dominant story is told in one of two affective modes: progress or loss. In the progress narrative feminist theory arrives at a place "beyond falsely bounded categories and identities"; in the loss approach, feminist theory moves out of a period of unified activism into fragmentation and abstraction.

support the inclusion of black women into suffrage associations, according to Davis, they catered “to the demands of white supremacy” (118). Focused on the movement that the second wave inherited, *Women, Race, and Class* clearly uttered a warning about the uneasy alliances between black and white women under the rubric of feminism. 1981 also saw the publication of bell hooks’ *Ain’t I a Woman*, which vociferously challenged white women on their universal proclamations, for claiming the signifier “women” for a privileged minority. hooks explains that she was prompted to write *Ain’t I a Woman* by what seemed to be a lamentable lack of material that directly addressed the experiences of black women. In the preface of her 1984 follow-up book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks reminds readers that feminist theory has emerged primarily from “privileged women who live at the center” (x). Her books seek to remedy the imbalance by opening a circuit into the conversation from the contrary direction. In the UK, Hazel Carby took note of the explosive debate in the US that emerged when black women charged that it was racism in the women’s movement that denied black women the possibility of inclusion. “In Britain too it is as if we don’t exist,” she writes, “the exploration of contemporary racism within the white feminist movement in Britain has yet to begin” (221).

In *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives*, editors Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis set out to understand the chasm that separated the liberation struggles of black and white women. They point out “explicit forms of racism” in “The White women’s movement,” evident in the prioritization of certain struggles over others. Though the editors acknowledge the contributions made by “the women’s movement” to the understanding of questions that affect “all women’s lives” – the general diagnoses centers on the silencing and neglect of black women’s lives, which led black women to dismiss the initial articulations of the movement as “irrelevant” (3-4). In the narrative constructed by the editors, the women’s liberation movement, by ascribing dominance to sexual oppression over class or race, neglected

to address either racial privilege or racial discrimination in a manner satisfactory to black women. For the editors, the white women's movement stumbled along for too many years until it began to wonder why so few women of color joined their ranks. By the time of the book's publication in 1981, the editors claim that the women's movement has "begun—only begun—to explore the racist reasons for the movement staying mostly White" (7).

Jill Lewis' essay in the collection, "Sexual Division of Power: Motivations of the Women's Liberation Movement," wants to both admit the racist shortcomings of the movement and prove that among Black women, stereotypes and generalizations about the women's liberation movement circulate widely, "aided by the media and by the ways Black men and White men have projected the movement" (43). A way of "correcting" the biased narratives about women's liberation, Lewis' contribution highlights the various campaigns throughout the women's movement dedicated to struggles beyond mere sexual oppression, including the National Welfare Rights Organization; the United Farm Workers Union; Coalition of Labor Union Women, etc. For Lewis the point is not to claim that the women's movement was free of contradictions and exclusions, but rather to resist the "myths and stereotypic images of 'women's libbers,' 'spoiled housewives,' or simply 'man-haters'" (69).

The examples rendered above begin to articulate the critique of the women's liberation movement as racist, exclusionary, silencing. Some black feminist texts pre-1981 are occasionally interpellated at the service of the analysis (The Combahee River Collective Statement consistently appears). However, the concepts of silence and exclusion are applied in broad strokes. Too often the landscape of black feminist writing and thinking before 1981 seems far more barren than it was, leading to an unfortunate contradiction. By focusing on the perspectives and motivations of white women, the authors tend to neglect and deemphasize the rich collections of heterogeneous writings by women of color throughout the seventies. Paradoxically, when

black women and women of color (in fury) and even white and privileged women (in apology) point fingers back to women's liberation as a movement that silenced black women, they repeat the injustice they claim to identify. Writings by black women, which take on this issue consistently throughout the seventies, are left out of the conversation, while white women's universalisms (so ubiquitous they no longer require citation) receive constant playback.²³ What is necessary instead is a counter-narrative, which forwards a claim emphasized by Robyn Wiegman in "What Ails Feminist Criticism? A Second Opinion,": a critique of the "universalization of white women as woman" paradigm has *always* been present within feminist writings (369).²⁴

Speaking up against universalism and racism

Black women, as individuals and as collectives, published scores of articles, essays, and positions papers throughout the years of the women's liberation movement, which evidence a thread of immediate discontent with the logic, goals, and sense of exclusion emerging from a coalescing movement of white women. Some black women resisted this thread with writings that claim feminism *for* black women as well. Throughout these writings, only a few of which I take up here, clear evidence of a dialogue persists between black and white women long before the 1981 wave of radical writings by women of color. Within the context of these examples, both the politics of recognition at stake in *I Am Somebody* and its reception as a "classic" within feminist

²³ Robyn Wiegman explains how this kind of claim, centered on the subjectivity of white women, results from an impulse to conjoin history and meaning with "the prototypical plot of white women's subjectivity" (379).

²⁴ Wiegman's response to Susan Gubar's 1998 article, "What Ails Feminist Criticism," and indeed, many of the late 90s debates within academic feminism, which detailed the anxieties about the relationship of women's studies to its origins in the women's liberation movement, framed the terms of the argument I undertake here. In "What Ails," in particular, Wiegman takes issue with Gubar's "misdescription" of the archive of black feminist writings of the late seventies and eighties. Whereas Gubar relegates works by Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Christian, and Mary Helen Washington to a reactive, second stage of feminist analysis, Wiegman suggests they could also be understood as evidence of coterminous and continuous dialogue on race within feminism, one that occurs not after a happy stage of feminist solidarity in discourse, but rather during an always already tense and active exchange in feminist discourse.

film culture become linked to the complex negotiations between race, gender, and class that define feminism for black women in the early seventies.

Toni Morrison's 1971 article, published in the *New York Times Magazine*, minces few words in her assessment of the racism at work in women's liberation. Titled, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," the article offers a pat answer to the issue posed in its title: "Distrust. It is white, therefore, suspect" (15). Morrison's assessment generalizes the perspective of black women, explaining in broad terms that their skepticism towards the women's liberation movement stems from the fact that black women see white women as "the enemy." According to Morrison, black women understand white women to be grasping for power—white power that would be lorded over black women, not shared with them. Morrison buttresses her analysis by relating a similar reflection shared by Ida Lewis, a former editor-in-chief of *Essence*. In her interview with Nikki Giovanni, Lewis dismisses the women's liberation movement as "a family quarrel" between white women and white men. Despite the fact that Lewis admits she supports the goals of women's liberation, she understands that the role of black women "is to continue the struggle in concert with black men for the liberation and self-determination of blacks" (15). Morrison (and Lewis) explain the absence of black women in the women's liberation movement as a matter of racial politics: liberation for black women was impossible in a framework that refused to engage with racism specifically.

Morrison's claim about the refusal on the part of black women to take serious the white women's liberation movement depends on a particular understanding of women's liberation as a movement of elite, white women demanding access in the highest ranges of society. She writes, "The early image of Women's Lib was of an elitist organization made up of upper-middle-class women with the concerns of that class and not paying much attention to the problems of most black women..." (15). If white women's demands come out of their own historical relations with

white men, counters Morrison, so are black women's relationships to black men defined by a shared history – a history defined above all by subjugation by white power. Even as white women fight for liberation, Morrison quips, “someone's nice black grandmother” shoulders the responsibilities of the liberated woman's home; “If Women's Lib needs those grandmothers to thrive, it has a serious flaw” (63). For the black women Morrison describes, white women are regarded as children, “never as adults capable of handling the real problems of the world” (63) – and it is this feeling of “superiority” to white women paired with black men's formidable opposition to women's lib that makes black women reluctant to sign on.

Nowhere in Morrison's article is there a sense that black women *should* sign on – or whether they should organize specifically around gender at all. This does not mean that Morrison resists change or the notion of liberation. What Morrison seeks, rather, is a movement organized around the concept of human liberation, “human rights,” that is, rather than what she calls, “sexual rights.” She locates the hint of this possibility in figures allied to civil rights, like Shirley Chisholm and Fannie Lou Hammer, and in Beulah Saunders, a welfare rights activist. Morrison, thus, makes manifest the politics of (human) recognition likewise at stake in *I Am Somebody*, where the possibilities for a black feminist subject emerge only when gender is put into conversation with class and race.

Although Maine Williams agrees that black and white women have distinct battles to wage against their oppressors, particularly in terms of class and race, she articulates the possibility of gender-based organizing for black women. When Williams presents the friction between black women and the women's liberation movement in “Black Women and the Struggle for Liberation,” she gives specific examples for why black women see their oppression as primarily race-based; black women, she explains, “have not yet developed a feminist consciousness.” According to Williams, the “middle-class” mentality of the white movement

seems at odds with black women's needs – most black women see little attempt within women's liberation to incorporate the problems that affect poor and working women, including domestic workers, factory employees, striking telephone workers and women in prison. As a solution, Williams argues, white women must refrain from speaking *for* black women, but allow black women to speak for themselves. She cites the emergence of a black feminist consciousness in the creation of the Black Women's Alliance, formed in New York to address the specific oppressions of Black women and to avoid the bitter anti-male sentiments of the white women's movement.

Williams and Morrison exemplify the way that black women's writing on the subject of women's liberation strove to explain how the women's movement neglected to address the issues that most mattered to them: race and class. This meant, first of all, grasping the so-called women's movement as one comprised primarily of white, middle-class women. In Francis Beale's "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," the author argues that this privileged bias resulted in a movement that lacked emphasis on the economic and social realities of black women's lives – a kind of economic and social exploitation they share not with white women, but with black men. Beale also questions the relevance and urgency of the goals of the women's liberation movement, as she apprehends them. She wonders aloud about the notion of equality at stake in the movement: "Are white women asking to be equal to white men in the pernicious treatment of third world peoples?" Like Morrison and Williams, Beale questions whether the grasp for power by white women means simply an accommodation of white women into the ranks of white power. "Any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the black women's struggle," she makes clear.

Linda La Rue takes particular offense at the analogy between the oppression of blacks and that of women uttered by white women. White women, she counters, are only second to white men in the opportunities they are granted to lead what she calls, "a free and fulfilling life,

both mentally and physically.” Black women, in contrast, have far more to complain about than the newest line by Clairol, the hemlines by Christian Dior, or the poor taste of Playboy; they have “the suffering and depravity of *real* oppression” (164). Not that she’s satisfied with the black male’s “capitalist Muslim” idealization of Black women either: “the adoption of Afro hairstyles on pregnant women covered in long African robes” (165). La Rue echoes Beale and Morrison’s concern about white women’s notion of power: does it also imply a subjugation of blacks? True of many of these writers, La Rue insists on the distinctions that exist in the oppression of black women and the suppression of white women.²⁵ For many women writers, like La Rue, it was important to stress the ways in which black women were not only differently struggling in the world of white power, but how for them the struggle was also *more* urgent, *more* violent, and *more* complex because of the multiple oppressions that yoked them. How could they be sure white women would not continue to benefit from their race privilege. In other words, what in the world did they have to gain from joining their struggle?

These early writings by black women on the politics, methods, and discourse of the women’s liberation movement share an insistence on the inability of black women to sign on to a movement dominated by white women of privilege. Black women refused to be spoken *for* by the universalizing discourse of the white women’s movement, but they also refused not to be spoken *with*. Throughout the writings, a palatable disappointment and distrust characterizes black women’s understanding of the women’s liberation movement. In the coming years, this discontent and refusal also gets staged as a provocative determination to accuse white women of their unacknowledged racism, their reactionary participation in the matrix of white supremacy.

²⁵ La Rue writes, “Blacks are *oppressed*, and that means unreasonably burdened, unjustly, severely, rigorously, cruelly and harshly fettered by white authority. White women, on the other hand, are only *suppressed*, and that means checked, restrained, excluded from conscious and overt activity. And there is a difference” (166, emphasis in original).

In Autumn 1979, Barbara Smith and Lorraine Bethel guest edited an issue of *Conditions* titled, “The Black Women’s Issue.” The multivalent issue comprises poetry, feature-length articles, essays, journals and prose all written by Black women. In the introduction, the editors celebrate the presence of so many Black women writers in a feminist publication. “So often,” they explain, “women’s publications, presses, and organizations have claimed that they could not find any women of color as an excuse for their all-whiteness” (11). Thus on the opening pages, the *Conditions: Five* issue highlights a conflict between “white feminism” and “black feminism” – whereas “feminism” belies its whiteness in its claim to represent all women, black feminism outs its racial specificity in order to interrupt the fantasy of (white) sisterhood. Bethel and Smith’s introduction immediately dispels the myth that black women’s silence stems from their own lack of desire to write, shout, or be heard. “This issue,” they proclaim, “clearly disproves the ‘non-existence’ of Black feminism and Black lesbian writers and challenges forever our invisibility, particularly in the feminist press” (11). The conflict at the heart of the *Conditions: Five* issue pits ethnocentric white feminists against those black feminists who have been excluded from feminism writ large. The *Conditions: Five* issue claims to give Black feminists their voices, perhaps for the first time.

In a poem titled, “What Chou Mean *We*, White Girl?”²⁶ Lorraine Bethel takes aim at “so-called radical white lesbian/feminist(s). Seemingly inspired by the smell of “a soft privileged life without stress, sweat or struggle” that emanates from a sweater purchased from a “white-skinned (as opposed to Angle Saxon)” woman at a yard sale, the poem specifically indicts “them” – those feminists who call up Black women like Bethel to represent “THE BLACK/THIRD WORLD/FEMINIST/LESBIAN/WOMAN” at “a women’s conference, meeting, caucus,

²⁶ The subtitle of the 1979 poem continues, “Or, the Cullud Lesbian Feminist Declaration of Independence (Dedicated to the Proposition that All Women Are Not Equal, i.e. Identical/ly Oppressed).

workshop, business, magazine, party, _____,* revolution...”²⁷ (87). The indictment then rails against the tokenism Bethel says runs rampant throughout the women’s movement. In “this open letter to movement white girls,” Bethel insists that women of color have had enough of teaching white women about what it means to be black, lesbian, feminist, “teaching Colored Herstory 101” (88). Rather than expend precious energy legitimizing the white feminist movement, black women, Bethel imagines, should protect their style, their knowledge, and their identities in order to benefit their own causes, their own culture. For Bethel, Black feminist and Third World women share an authentic “sista energy” so innate that they speak their shared “experience and sensibility without having to explain anything to each other because we are each other’s lives and words” (91).

Bethel’s critique produces a version of white feminism defined by its desire to utilize black women. That is, for Bethel white feminists include black women’s voices in conferences, panels, etc. only to legitimize an otherwise exclusionary political platform. White women, in other words, are concerned with white women’s struggles. Black women and Third World women, it follows, should divest energies from their movement and reinvest resources in their own struggles. For Bethel, presumably, “sisterhood” is not only an illusion that masks a racially exclusive agenda, but more perniciously, it robs energy from black women’s own political struggle and advancement. Nonetheless, the poem clearly celebrates a uniquely black *and* Third World experience in the world that women excluded by white feminists share and can draw from. The problem, in other words, is not essentialism per se. It’s the assumption that white women speak for and to all women under the rubric of “woman”. Rather, what Bethel wants to claim is an alternative essence of woman – one defined again by a set of exclusions, what she calls Third

²⁷ The asterisk leads to this quote: “Third World women may fill in the latest white women’s activity they have been invited to legitimize” (87).

World and Black. In her essay, co-editor Smith makes a similar case in different terms. “Black and Third World women’s relationship to the systems of oppression in this society are, by definition, different from those of other oppressed groups who do not experience both racial and sexual oppression at the same time” (123). Black and Third World women thus experience a “geometric” set of oppression at once different from those of white women, however, apparently the same as each other.

The logics of exclusion thus are quite similar. Black feminists in the *Conditions: Five* issue also felt that this shared experience of multiple oppressions would lead Third World women to produce a “specific theory and practice” meant to fight their particular oppressions. What the collection argues is that “sisterhood” as it was imagined by white feminists obscured differences: sexual orientation, class, and racial differences that were supposed to be less important than gender. What it offers instead is not necessarily an alternative model, but rather an alternative sisterhood – one shared by women of color and unknown and unavailable to white women. The *Conditions: Five* issue thus answers the problems of one sisterhood with another – determined by a distinct set of exclusions.

The *Conditions: Five* text stands out as an early attempt to not only address the racism of the white women’s liberation movement, but to begin to articulate an alternate sphere of reference of black and third world women. The determination to forward a coherent black feminist subjectivity would lead to the wave of writings that emerge just a few years later. There is a separate point I wish to draw from this section, which demonstrates the vigor with which black women dialogued with women’s liberation on the issue of race. That is, since the inception of the women’s movement, black women have spoken back to white women about their racism and their unacknowledged privilege. When we examine the primary texts that circulated in those days, we find that white women were consistently questioned about the methods and politics of a

movement that claimed to desire the liberation of all women, but neglected to address what “freedom” would mean to the different women at stake. Within this context, we create a new horizon for grasping the significance of *I Am Somebody* and the politics of its exemplification in the canon of feminist documentary films of the seventies.

The Crisis of Singularity

In “The Oppositional Gaze,” bell hooks links the racism she reads as endemic to feminist film theory to the field’s origins in the women’s liberation movement: “Since feminist film criticism was initially rooted in a women’s liberation movement informed by racist practices, it did not open up the discursive terrain and make it more inclusive” (101). hooks here locates the racism of feminist film theory in the field’s dependence on psychoanalytic theory, which privileges sexual difference above all other forms of difference. Whereas feminist film theories attached supreme significance to the representation, construction, and subjectification of “women” at the service of patriarchy, the signifier “woman” is seemingly evacuated of all possible difference and rather filled with the assumptions of white womanhood. The result of what hooks refers to as an aggressive silence on the subject of blackness in feminist film theory is a silencing of black women’s voices, and further, a conspiratorial violence with the mainstream cinematic (mis)representation of black womanhood. hooks’ critique of feminist film theory echoes her assessments of feminist theory in general. Both privilege sexual oppression and suppress the significance of differences rooted in class, sexuality, and race.

The link hooks establishes between feminist film criticism and the women’s liberation movement is productive here. In part, what hooks must do is leap over many years of discourse in both the women’s liberation movement and in feminist film theory in order to make her claim about the racism they share. Pre-1981, an active dialogue precisely *on* the subject of race took

place in the writings relevant to the women's liberation movement. Likewise, before the publication of Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure" essay in 1976, which initiated an engagement with psychoanalysis in feminist film theory, feminist film *critics* (before they claimed the terms theorists and theory) drew from diverse theoretical paradigms to work through the relationship of women to cinema. It is precisely with the silence hooks leaves unidentified in these two disciplines (feminist theory and feminist film theory) that a valuable understanding of the methods, politics, and aesthetics of *I Am Somebody* occurs.

Since it is both true that feminist film culture eagerly evoked *I Am Somebody* as a prototypical feminist documentary film *and* Anderson encouraged the film's reception in these terms, it makes sense to wonder by what logic the film can be apprehended as feminist. I've chosen to locate a study of the film within the difficult dialogues that took place on the subject of race between and among black women during the emergence and establishment of women's liberation in the late sixties and early seventies. What this provokes, I believe is a way of understanding *I Am Somebody* as forcing an unacknowledged crisis in singularity of the notion of "the" feminist film movement and redefining the term "feminist" in the concept of seventies feminist documentaries.

Feminist scholars have argued convincingly in the last decade that putting race at the center of a discussion of the women's liberation movement deeply upsets the singularity of feminist activism in the seventies. That is, once we acknowledge the multiple fronts on which women waged their struggles, the coherence of a singular movement of women becomes untenable. Rather, what we find in the late sixties and early seventies is a landscape of activism by diverse groups and organizations of women, impossible to generalize as existing and cooperating within a singular movement. To continue to stress the existence of a "hegemonic"

movement is to continue to neglect the impact felt throughout diverse communities during those years.

As early as 1984, bell hooks sought to destabilize the notion of a singular (white) women's movement, titling one chapter in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, "The Significance of Feminist Movement." In 1994, Katie King forwards hooks' critique in her book, *Theory in its Feminist Travels: Conversations in US Women's Movements*.²⁸ Sherna Berger Gluck, writing in 1998, acknowledges hooks' refusal to apply the article "the" to 1970s feminism. In her article, "Whose Feminism, Whose History?" Gluck signals her ambivalence about doing a history of U.S. feminist activist by troubling her subtitle with parentheses: "Reflections on Excavating the History of (the) U.S. Women's Movement(s)." Since hooks' intervention, a collection of new histories of feminist activism in the 1970s have emerged, many of which focus specifically on the issue of race in the movement – working to rescue second wave activism from the stereotype of absolute racism, which so plagued it throughout the 80s and 90s.

In *Living for the Revolution*, for example, Kimberly Springer maps black feminism not through the exclusion of the women's liberation movement *per se*, but rather locating black feminist politics "in the cracks" of the civil rights and the women's movement, through formal organizations such as the Third World Women's Alliance (1968-1979), the National Black Feminist Organization (1973-1975), the National Alliance of Black Feminists (1976-1980), the Combahee River Collective (1975-1980), and the Black Women Organized for Action (1973-1980). She writes, "*Living for the Revolution* is but one intervention in the normative account of hegemonic feminism, an attempt to reshape the retelling" of the women's movement" (2). In "Re-visioning the Women's Liberation Movement's Narrative," Rosalyn Baxandall claims that the

²⁸ In the introduction, King refers to her refusal of a singular U.S. women's movement: "One argument I make about theory in feminism is embedded in the subtitle of this book; I refer to 'conversations' in feminist thinking as a challenge to taxonomized feminist theory, feminist history, or feminism, as a challenge to any unitary history of 'the women's movement'" (xi).

collection of essays she co-edited with Linda Gordon shows that “the early formations we uncovered were primarily comprised of Black and poor women and members of Black nationalist or Old Left groups” (230). Becky Thompson also has a problem with the way histories of the second wave, such as *Faces of Feminism*, *Feminism and the Women’s Movement*, and *Daring to Be Bad*, focus exclusively on the women’s movement as a white women’s movement. Following Chela Sandoval, who refers to this version of women’s liberation as “hegemonic feminism,” Thompson wants to tell the history of the second wave from the point of view of “women of color and white antiracist women” (337). Doing so reveals what Thompson refers to as “multiracial feminism—the liberation movement spearheaded by women of color in the United States in the 1970s that was characterized by its international perspective, its attention to interlocking oppressions, and its support of coalition politics” (337).

By shifting the possibilities at stake in the concept of seventies feminism, by re-framing the re-telling, these authors offer an answer to the question of how Anderson’s film might be apprehended as a feminist text. *I Am Somebody* speaks to the racialized gendered politics of labor organizing in the late sixties. In other words, it speaks to a politics of feminism located at the nexus of race, class, and gender. That white feminists would have claimed it as one of *their* own might be read as a wish, then, rather than a delusion. Rather than argue that the film be re-located with the canons of black cinema, union films, or civil rights documentary, I suggest we mine the possibilities of the incorporation of *I Am Somebody* into the category of feminist documentary films of the seventies. The film visualizes the impossibility of extracting gender from its social, political, and economic imbrications with class and race. The political impulse of black feminism as visualized in *I Am Somebody* encourages an epistiphilic spectator who wants to know, because this would entail the mutual act of recognition in the call for a new politics of distribution. The distribution-dilemma made visible in the film instatiates the concerns of black feminist writers of

the early seventies and radically situates the black woman at the center of interlocking struggles for justice: the feminist film movement, the labor movement, and the civil rights movement.

Chapter Four: Motherhood, Feminist Subjectivity, and Aesthetic Practice in *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976) and *Joyce at 34* (1972)

“At this point I, as a woman, ask in amazement, and what about motherhood?”

- Karen Horney, “The Flight from Womanhood”¹

In the landmark experimental film, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976), the story of a young mother develops over the course of thirteen shots, each filmed as 360-degree rotating panoramas. To call this central section of the film about a character named Louise and the course of her relationships with her daughter, her husband, and her friend Maxine, “a story” already puts this reading at odds with a film that deliberately resists conventional cinematic modes of telling and showing. The second film by influential film theorists, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, *Riddles* exemplifies a theoretical project of negation, a cinematic experiment that resists structures of

¹ Written in 1926, Horney’s essay is a forward thinking reconsideration of the gender-neutral presuppositions of Freud’s research on childhood development. Her aim in the essay is to speculate on “the problems of feminine psychology” from a perspective in which we “try to free our minds from this masculine mode of thought” (59). In the function of reproduction, Horney finds an undeniable instance of radical alterity, even an example of woman’s advantages over men, in her capacity to give birth to new life. She responds in particular to Ferenczi’s “genital theory” in which women’s desires to become mothers are understood as “compensatory devices” for the lack of a penis. Horney’s rhapsodic retort includes ecstatic examples of the pleasure women sometimes experience in pregnancy and motherhood: “And the blissful consciousness of bearing a new life within oneself? And the ineffable happiness of the increasing expectation of the appearance of this new being? And the joy when it finally makes its appearance and one holds it for the first time in one’s arms? And the deep pleasurable feeling of satisfaction in suckling it and the happiness of the whole period when the infant needs her care?” (60). Horney arrives at the conclusion that in fact the social devaluation of motherhood in which “from the standpoint of social struggle, motherhood *may* be a handicap,” might actually be an expression of men’s envy of women’s “no means negligible physiological superiority” (60). Horney thus radically resituates motherhood as burden in terms of a male need to disavow the superiority implied by women’s capacity to bear children. Horney’s affront to the neglect of the mother’s perspective and pleasure in dominant psychoanalytic discourses resonates throughout this chapter. For further reading on Horney and her contemporaries see Janet Sayers, *Mothers of Psychoanalysis: Helene Deutsch, Karen Horney, Anna Freud, Melanie Klein*.

spectatorial expectation and desire with regard to both form and content.² Despite the radical ruptures and challenges wrought by the film, however, the fourth and longest section weaves together a loose narrative from threads of the life of a young mother as she makes the significant transition from an isolated union with her daughter in the domestic sphere to a separated, public life as a working mother.

As much as the film stakes its political claims in the heady climate of aesthetic experimentation and psychoanalytic and semiotic film theory in the mid-1970s then, it also grounds its politics in the concurrent debates central to the feminist movement. That is, *Riddles of the Sphinx* is centrally a feminist reconsideration of women as mothers. In Section 2, “Laura speaking,” Mulvey appears within a medium shot, casually dressed and seated at a desk against a black background. Here she signifies herself, the filmmaker and theorist. She manipulates a pen in her hands and looks down as if occasionally checking her notes, acts which serve to mark her status as an intellectual and lecturer. Rather than an elided presence beyond the text, the filmmaker makes herself known self-reflexively within it. A boom microphone, clearly visible in the foreground, reinforces this reflexivity by signaling the technological means of the film’s production. Self-reflexivity is one cinematic strategy the film employs to levy its aesthetic, political and discursive interventions. As the filmmaker within the film, Mulvey also transmits another critical register, that is, a radical reorganization of psychoanalytic theories on the subjective trajectories of mothers and daughters. In the scene, “Laura speaking,” the filmmaker upsets a conventional rendering of the myth of Oedipus by reading “between the lines” to reveal evidence in the figure of the exiled, threatening Sphinx of women’s exclusion from patriarchy. Within the logic of the film, to recover the excluded voice and perspective of the Sphinx is to

² Mulvey’s thoughts on the imperative for a cinema of non-pleasure are articulated in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” For a discussion of *Riddles of the Sphinx* specifically see Friedman, “An Interview with Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey on *Riddles of the Sphinx*.” For an excellent reading of Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure” essay as a feminist manifesto see, Mandy Merck’s “Mulvey’s Manifesto.”

challenge the “rule of the father” with a “voice off”, “a voice apart.” The voice of the Sphinx is that of the suppressed mother.³ In Mulvey’s summation, “Motherhood, and how to live it, or not to live it lies at the roots of the dilemma.” The questions posed by the film register both a need to understand the dilemma of motherhood from the perspective of the mother, as well as the impossibility of accessing a truthful, unmediated, or authentic answer to the riddles of motherhood that the Sphinx directs us to consider.

Another film from the mid-seventies that reconsiders motherhood from a feminist perspective is *Joyce at 34* (1972). Joyce Chopra’s short personal documentary evidences an allegiance to direct cinema and variations on its attendant conventions of documentary realism. As such it emerges from a set of aesthetic concerns distinct from those that generate the formal conventions of *Riddles of the Sphinx*. *Joyce* explores the filmmaker’s attempt to come to terms with her competing desires, maternal and professional. Joyce’s story begins at the end of her pregnancy, meanders through the first year of her daughter’s life, and ends with her contemplating a second child. If *Riddles* eschews linear storytelling in favor of interruptions, gaps, and non-sequiturs, *Joyce* in contrast maintains fidelity to lived time and space, to logical flow, and a naturalized trajectory of cause and effect. Yet, like *Riddles*, *Joyce at 34* subjectivizes and thematizes “the filmmaker” within the film, and as such reflects an interest in cinematic reflexivity and strives to expose rather than conceal the means of cinematic production. The dilemmas of motherhood at play in the film revolve around the filmmaker as such, the work of filmmaking, and the labor of motherhood. At the level of narrative, the film participates in a similar mode of exposure: the admission of maternal disquietude, the smoldering ambition in a

³ Mary Ann Doane and Stephen Heath criticize this casting of the Sphinx within the very terms that the film seeks to criticize. For Heath, “the sphinx is produced as a point of resistance that seems nevertheless to repeat, in its very terms, the relations of women made within patriarchy, their representation in the conjunction of such elements as motherhood as mystery, the unconscious, a voice that speaks far off from the past from dream or forgotten language” (73). In Doane’s summary, the film risks “recapitulating the terms of patriarchy” (“Woman’s Stake” 168).

woman who would also be a good mother, the disruptive arguments that emerge in a nuclear family in which gender roles are rigidly prescribed. Though *Riddles* is a fictional, experimental film from the U.K. and *Joyce* is a realist documentary from the U.S., both films share a feminist political commitment to rethinking the practice, experience, and institution of motherhood for women in the early to mid-seventies.

In her book *Women & Film*, E. Ann Kaplan writes these two films into place at opposite ends of a spectrum of feminist filmmaking of the 1970s. At one end, *Joyce at 34* exemplifies the dominant trend, what she calls documentary in the “verité style.” As my previous chapters bear out, many films made by women in the early seventies were, like *Joyce at 34*, highly personal documentaries in which women described new realizations about recently identified women’s issues. At the other end stand more experimental and formalist projects, in Kaplan’s rendering, the “avant-garde theory” films, such as *Riddles*, which she suggests came about as a response to the “perceived inadequacies” of realist work (125). Each film therefore marks a specific place on an imaginary line that signifies time and progress in terms of a relationship to aesthetic practice (realism or experiment). Kaplan reads these two films in opposition, suggesting that the avant-garde theory film emerges to correct the errors of realist projects, but also in tandem with a “structuralist, semiological criticism of realism” (127). As for realist documentaries, on the other hand, Kaplan expresses confusion about what might have inspired them: “[T]he vérité style clearly dominates,” she writes. “The precise causes for this, other than economic ones, are unclear” (125). And later, “for whatever reasons, the documentary form is so prevalent” (125). Rather than read these films for the ways in which they differ, however, this chapter seeks common features. Where I do read differences I find them outside the limits the experiment/realist dialectic.

Commonality is a loaded term in a discussion about seventies feminisms. As feminist historians like Sherna Gluck and feminist theorists such as Chela Sandoval have made clear, writing U.S. second wave commonality into existence through hegemonic models of historiography has systematically occluded knowledge about the activism and theoretical production of numerous women's groups in communities of color.⁴ As discussed at length in Chapter Three, feminist subjectivities in the seventies coalesce in discourse and practice through a range of interconnected locations generated by race, class, and gender. To resist master narratives about the seventies, then, is to insist on particularity over generalization when speculating about the constitution of feminist subjectivities. Rather than make general claims about how motherhood gets articulated as a concern for seventies feminisms in either the U.S. or the U.K., this chapter seeks the particular manifestations that emerge in two distinct yet related films. Certainly it must be recognized that the two films emerge from different geographical contexts and distinctly articulated feminist politics. In addition, the films differ dramatically in terms of form, content, and focus.⁵ Yet, significantly, both films gravitate around the experience

⁴ See for example, Gluck, "Whose Feminism, Whose History?" and Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* as well as Cherríe L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back* and Katie King's *Theory in its Feminist Travels*.

⁵ In "Women's Happytime Commune: New Departures in Women's Films," published in a 1975 issue of *Jump Cut*, E. Ann Kaplan usefully distinguishes the British tradition of women's filmmaking from the American by connecting them to the women's movements in each country. Hence, in the US where the women's movement's slogan was "the personal is political", where consciousness-raising was the major program of the movement, and where the movement coalesced through the efforts of middle-class women often coming out of the sixties student movement and civil rights (rather than the labor movement as in UK), the films reflect these inspirations: they tend to document personal journeys into the political sphere. And many of the films were seen as organizing tools – or as revelatory contributions meant to connect women's lives to the social conditions that produce and proscribe these. Kaplan reads women's documentaries in the context of the movement for women's liberation and the process of consciousness-raising, the cornerstone of women's organizing. Within this context, she acknowledges how the verité aesthetic functions as "cinematic intervention" as well: "Firstly, showing real women on the screen is, itself, revolutionary, conditioned as we are to the idealized, fantasy images of the commercial cinema... Secondly, the kind of documentary women are making is the antithesis of those awful "educational" films people saw in high school." Yet, Kaplan makes it clear that the British women saw the situation quite differently from US women in part as a result of the structures and respective concerns of the women's movements in the US and UK in the early seventies.

and institution of motherhood and both feature a white, middle class mother who travels awkwardly between the realm of the family in the domestic sphere and the world of waged labor outside of it. In this chapter questions of race are refracted primarily through whiteness. Here, class becomes the main carrier of difference except in a scene in *Riddles of the Sphinx*, which I discuss later, in which the relationship between Louise and Maxine, a black woman, suggest an alternative model of intersubjectivity.

Debates about motherhood were integral to seventies feminisms; yet the focus of these interrogations ranged significantly both between and among groups in the U.S. and the U.K.⁶ Ann Snitow provides a comprehensive analysis of U.S. second wave rhetoric on motherhood in “Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading.” She constructs a “time-line” on feminism and motherhood that begins with *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, proceeds through a second period from 1975-1979, and ends in the period after 1979. Despite the fact that *Joyce at 34* was produced in 1972, both *Riddles* and *Sphinx* take a stance relevant to Snitow’s second period. It was a time, according to Snitow, when feminism began to take the issue of motherhood “seriously, to criticize the institution, explore the actual experience, theorize the social and psychological implications” and break “the taboo on mother’s own descriptions of the fascination and joy of mothering (even in a patriarchy) and also the pain, isolation, boredom, murderousness” (34). British feminist Sheila Rowbotham articulates similar concerns as central to what she calls “Women’s Liberation.” In Rowbotham’s telling, British feminists were also committed to exposing the myths about motherhood as “woman’s inevitable destiny,” resisting the idea that

⁶ M. Rivka Polatnick’s “Diversity in Women’s Liberation Ideology,” for example, teases out the major differences between two black and white U.S. women’s groups of the late 60s: the New York Radical Women and the Mount Vernon/New Rochelle Women’s Group. Based on research from oral interviews and analysis of the groups’ position papers, Polatnick opines that in contrast to the white women’s group, the black women viewed motherhood more favorably; “the mother role itself was not the problem” (689). For NYRW, motherhood was “mainly a site of oppression. Freeing up women to do things other than mothering was their paramount consideration” (694).

“happiness comes only through motherhood,” and asserting the ways “motherhood carries both oppressive and fulfilling elements” (82).

Feminists in both the U.K. and the U.S. then insisted upon motherhood as socially, culturally, and materially defined, rather than a given, natural, or necessary state of being for all women.⁷ U.K. feminisms, however, were more tightly aligned in practice with labor struggles than U.S. feminisms, and focused more insistently on the relationship between production and reproduction in a capitalist economy. Juliet Mitchell explains in *Woman’s Estate* that U.S. feminism differed from movement feminisms of other industrial nations in the early years in particular because of its lesser allegiance to either labor movements or socialist stress on the working class as *the* revolutionary class.⁸ In the U.K., Rowbotham describes a common “release of dissatisfaction,” which came from distinct groups of mothers: middle-class, married, and educated as well as single mothers, both middle and working class. These groups, in cooperation with unions and activists, sought what Rowbotham calls “practical steps” that might help ensure “mother’s ‘survival’” (83). Among these, as is evident in *Riddles of the Sphinx*, childcare concerns and the cooperation of labor unions were central.⁹

⁷ In *Women the Longest Revolution*, Juliet Mitchell describes the capitalist ideology that relegates women to the function of “complement” to men’s active and integral role in production this way: “Bearing children, bringing them up, and maintaining the home – these form the core of woman’s natural vocation, in this ideology” (31). And later, “The causal chain then goes: Maternity, Family, Absence from Production and Public Life, Sexual Inequality” (32).

⁸ Throughout *Woman’s Estate*, Mitchell forwards an internationalist model of women’s liberation. In the first paragraph of the preface she writes, “Women’s Liberation is an international movement – not in organization, but in its identification and shared goals” (11). As a socialist feminist, Mitchell employs this powerful rhetorical method of insisting upon women’s liberation as international and widespread in order cement feminism into a viable, if not inevitable, manifestation of the contradictions experienced by women as a class throughout the world. In her life, she spent many years lecturing and writing in the U.S., which she singles out consistently in both *Woman’s Estate* and *Women: The Longest Revolution*. In *Woman’s Estate*, she admits, “I find it extremely difficult to write about the American Movement. Like America itself it seems to defy coherent analysis. One feels the movement everywhere – but can often find it nowhere” (49).

⁹ The British documentary *Nightcleaners* by the Berwick Street Collective also evidences a socialist feminist take on the concerns of diverse, working class mothers (and includes footage of Sheila Rowbotham as well as other prominent feminists involved in London-based feminist groups).

To frame motherhood in terms of a “dilemma” as Laura Mulvey does in *Riddles of the Sphinx* (and as Sheila Rowbotham repeats in “To Be or Not to Be: The Dilemmas of Mothering”) evokes the subtitle of Hanna Arendt’s *The Human Condition*: “A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man.” While feminist scholars like Adrienne Rich, Mary O’Brien, and Wendy Brown read in Arendt a lamentable allegiance to masculinist political theory and criticize Arendt for her gender blindness, other feminist readers of Arendt have argued that the political theorist’s understanding of the *vita activa* – labor, work, and action – offers a rich and complex vision of political life relevant to feminist thought.¹⁰ Mary G. Dietz, for example, argues, “although a feminist analysis never emerges in *The Human Condition*, the materials for one are always threatening to break out” (238). Here, Arendt’s distinction between labor and work, which Arendt herself calls “unusual,” (72) helps situate commonality in the excavations of motherhood in *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *Joyce at 34*. In both films, mothers traffic uneasily between the public sphere where Arendt locates “work” and the private, domestic realm where “labor” takes place. Dietz explains Arendt’s distinction between work and labor in “Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics.”¹¹ Labor corresponds to nature, to biology, and the body itself and shares the cyclical temporality of these. Work, on the other hand, implies mastery over nature, and human productivity. Whereas labor refers to the “slavish,” repetitive, ceaseless efforts required to sustain life itself, work entails the finite processes of the production and destruction of things. The objects that labor produces, in contrast, are ephemeral, inevitable, fully consumed, and leave no trace behind.¹² The relationship between labor and work, as Dietz asserts in “Feminist Receptions

¹⁰ Mary G. Dietz summarizes these positions on Arendt in “Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics.” Feminist academics who have found Arendt’s thinking compatible with feminism include Nancy Harstock, Hannah Pitkin, and Terry Winant. Arendt seems particularly valuable for those seeking to elaborate feminist standpoint theory.

¹¹ Also see, Dietz’s *Turning Operations: Feminism, Arendt, Politics*.

¹² Arendt writes, “It is indeed the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. And yet this effort, despite its futility, is born of

of Hannah Arendt,” does not fully correspond to the more traditional feminist binary of private and public, however, and that is because Arendt maintains labor and work in a tripartite category with action, which triumphs over both as “the human condition of plurality” (9).¹³

Dietz concedes that Arendt’s “scholarly development of a conceptual history of labor and work is remarkably silent on the sexual division of labor in the family and on the way in which gender informed traditional understandings of labor and work in both classical and modern thought” (237). Nonetheless, in Arendt’s description of labor and the *animal laborans*, Dietz reads “material” relevant to feminist analysis. In this project, also, Arendt’s distinction between work and labor, precisely because it is not self-same to the private/public binary, generates a productive engagement with the representations of motherhood at stake in *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *Joyce at 34*. Feminist reconsiderations of the private/public binary, particularly by those who would seek to revalue and reprioritize the so-called feminine private realm, tend to stabilize rather than disrupt ways of thinking the gendered division of labor in the two realms.¹⁴ Arendt’s gender blindness and tripartite arrangement between work, labor, and action here becomes paradoxically useful as it creates an enunciative position outside of the public(male)/private(female) binary. In *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *Joyce at 34*, Arendt’s theories on the processes of work and labor in

a great urgency and motivated by a more powerful drive than anything else, because life itself depends on it” (76).

¹³ In the first chapter of *The Human Condition*, Arendt explains, “All three activities and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality. Labor assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species. Work and its product, the human artifact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time. Action, in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is for history... However, of the three, action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting” (10-11).

¹⁴ Writing of standpoint theory from the late 1960s and 1970s, for example, Kathi Weeks, explains how “relying on the logic of separate spheres to posit a radical difference between men’s work and women’s work, these standpoint theories risked, despite strong methodological commitments to the contrary, replicating undifferentiated and naturalized models of gender” (“Life Within and Against Work” 238).

modern political life shed light the multiple ways the films foreground what we might call, “being-in-work” and “being-in-labor.”

Riddling Motherhood

It is in the psychoanalytic framework of the Oedipal myth that *Riddles* carves out its deliberation on the dilemmas of motherhood.¹⁵ In Section Three of the seven sections that comprise the film, footage of the Sphinx at Giza, Egypt is re-filmed in slow motion, distorted and overexposed. Revealed from many different perspectives, the Sphinx is also brought terribly close in shots that expose even the grainy texture of the film stock. The zoom pulls us ever closer to the Sphinx, and in particular to its closed mouth. In light of Mulvey’s commentary in the previous section of the film, repeated close-ups of the Sphinx’s closed mouth emphasize the suppression, silence, and mystery that characterizes the female Sphinx of Greek mythology. Her voice, in Mulvey’s reading, exists in exile, a voice off, and a voice apart. From up close, the mouth of the Sphinx offers no clues to her interior. Rather, the surface of the carved stone draws attention to nature of the material object itself. Its worn, imperfect texture is mirrored in the grainy surface quality of the celluloid. The instrumental soundtrack loops around and around, with no seeming beginning, middle, or end. Sound and image thus create a mood of mystery that disorients. The first three sections crucially set up our reading of Louise’s maternal story in the language of psychoanalysis, a theoretical approach that privileges sexual difference and the workings of desire within the family unit. Scholarship on *Riddles* has emphasized the ways psychoanalytic

¹⁵ Mitchell’s emphasis on the need to construct “a complex reaction to the nuclear family” helps explain the significance of an approach to the ideology of motherhood at stake in *Riddles*, which combines an emphasis on labor (maternal, cinematic, and economic) with the theoretical methods of psychoanalysis. Mitchell, an early advocate of feminist engagement with both Freud and Marx, makes her case in *Woman’s Estate*: “to ignore Freud is like ignoring Marx – it reveals a preference for pre-scientific ideology over scientific discovery... The Women’s Liberation Movement cannot afford to indulge the bad poetry about women, when we have a science we can use, explore, criticize, amend. For psychoanalysis, like all sciences, is open not closed” (169).

film theory explicates the enunciative register of the film – a productive conversation in light of Mulvey’s own theoretical work.¹⁶ Yet, here I want to stress how the film’s approach to the politics of motherhood also takes root in the realm of the unconscious and the unconsidered and speaks in the code of riddles rather than answers. In the scenes that comprise Louise’s story, it is within the construct of the family where particular notions of labor, work, desire, and pleasure will emerge.¹⁷

The transition to Section Four of the film, Louise’s section, occurs with the first inter-title. Framed in the language of speculation, the text also poses a question, “Perhaps Louise is too close to her child. How much longer can she reject the outside world, other people and other demands?” At the mention of “Her husband often,” however, the text breaks off abruptly, mid-sentence. If the question about Louise’s over-identification with her child suggests there might be a problem, the introduction of a third term reveals both the fragility of the dyad and the likelihood that the father will force the disruption of their symbiosis. “Perhaps Louise is too close to her child,” but perhaps not. In Freud’s rendition, the Oedipal phase is one in which the child’s trajectory into adulthood is at the center. In *Riddles*, however, it is the mother’s psyche that takes precedence and her experience of the evolving mother-child bond that matters. What would it mean for Louise to be “too close” to her child? The assumption provided by the inter-title is that the over-determination of her womanhood with her motherhood will annihilate some part of her

¹⁶ See, for example, Jacquelyn Suter and Sandy Flitterman, “Textual Riddles: Woman as Enigma or Site of Social Meanings? An Interview with Laura Mulvey”; “Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics” with Michelle Citron et al.; Lynne Greeley, “*Riddles of the Sphinx*: Filmic Puzzle or Feminist Password?”; and E. Ann Kaplan, “Avant-garde Feminist Cinema: Mulvey and Wollen’s *Riddles of the Sphinx*.” The full script of the film was published as, “*Riddles of the Sphinx*: Script” in *Screen* in 1977.

¹⁷ In Mulvey’s words, “One predominant interest was how to deal with political issues in terms of aesthetics. There’s a way in which *Riddles*, taking the question of the mother and child, is in itself a political issue. The interests that give rise to that come directly from the influence of the feminist movement. The way in which this whole aspect of things can be tied in with questions of aesthetics intrigued us. How did you deal with images of these kinds of things on film itself?” (Friedman 24).

self that is relevant both to her husband and to the outside world. There is a danger implied in losing herself to her child.

The inter-title stresses the oppressive effects that result when the notion that womanhood is only fully realized in motherhood is taken to its extreme. Being-in-labor ceaselessly, or, being in eternal labor, thus, forecloses the possibility of maternal freedom. And yet, rather than a definitive judgment, rather than certainty, we are offered ambiguity about whether this is in fact the case in Louise's situation. By resisting a closed and cohesive statement in the inter-title then, the film creates an encounter with the shot that follows in the context of speculation and wonder. The film builds into the diegesis space for a participating spectator, one encouraged to create an opinion about the closeness between mother and daughter and whether Louise's potential over-identification with her child contributes to limitations on her self-hood.¹⁸

The first of the thirteen shots that construct Louise's story occurs in a brightly lit and tidy kitchen where Louise prepares breakfast for her daughter. As the camera pans clockwise, the midsection of a woman holding a child on her hip appears awkwardly in the frame. Tightly framed around the place where their bodies join at the mother's hip, the moving image captures a moment and a pose that is both excessively tender and casually mundane; the woman wipes her child's hands and repeats the gesture on the child's stuffed toy. Weighty on her mother's hip, the child appears large and capable of washing her own hands, not to mention standing on her own two feet. That the mother carries her child and completes the task for her gestures towards a measure of excess in the mother's attention. The suggestion that "perhaps Louise is too close to her child," resonates here in the tight bodily arrangement of mother and child. Indeed, without

¹⁸ Rowbotham explains how feminists grappled with an ambiguous response to dominant stereotypes about motherhood. "To dismiss the delights of mothering denies intense and passionate aspects of women's lives. But to elevate these into an alternative ideal is to deny the negative feelings, to return women to the sphere of reproduction and subordinate childless women men to a maternalistic hierarchy" (87).

heads, without faces, the bodies of mother and child merge here briefly into a single form: mother-child.

In the interior of this domestic space, Arendt's notion of labor is thematized and visualized. In the kitchen, the camera maintains its inexorable clockwise pan, generating labor's cyclical, non-linear temporality through image and sound. Motivated by a formal logic rather than narrative progress, the motion of the camera quickly falls out of sync with the bodies in motion beyond the frame. Void of synchronous sound, the shot replays the eerie, mysterious instrumental soundtrack from earlier sections. The presence of the suppressed mother Sphinx pierces the scene through this musical leitmotif as well as in a literalized voice off. As the visual frame proceeds around Louise's kitchen, happening in its calculated path upon the child in her highchair as she tends to her toy, upon the mother as she tends to her child, the voice off initiates a monologue of associated phrases. The word "time" figures heavily in the monologue in phrases such as mealtime, story time, time to get ready, no time, time to worry, time to hold.

The gendered labor that takes place in the kitchen is defined by persistence, repetition, and relentlessness. Tasks performed here only once surely take place countless times in the course of Louise's day: washing hands, washing dishes, preparing and serving food. Louise's motions in labor are practiced and natural, even relaxed. The literal repetitive act of beating eggs and the endless loop of the soundtrack bear out a circular logic in cooperation with the monologue. Although the voice-over lacks a coherent pattern, certain words are repeated, associated with other themes, and then repeated again, as in "keeping": keeping going, keeping looking, keeping in the background, keeping calm, keeping clean. Illustrative adjectives and nouns punctuate the string of gerunds: domestic labor, disheartened, burdened, desultory, narcissistic love, idealized, tranquilized, released. In Louise's kitchen, being-in-labor sustains life with repetitive cycles of food, care, and cleanliness. And yet, it is not a state of being that leaves

no trace behind. The voice off, with its vacillations between ecstasy and despair, indicate that the traces of interest in *Riddles* are the psychic remainders that constitute the being of the mother (still) in labor.

As the pan approaches its starting point once again, the three recognizable blue pots in the frame take on new significance, referencing a family composed of three, not two. A man's hand reaches into the right side of the frame for the slivers of crust that Louise excises from a slice of toast. As she butters, he reaches. Though their hands share the frame, they do not reveal any meaningful interaction. Though she attentively prepares breakfast for the child, the father claims only the excess of the labor: the unwanted crusts of bread. He stands apart from the activity between mother and child, his difference signaled as well by his overcoat and the newspaper under his arm. Partially visible is the front-page headline, "Mortgages" and the subtitle, "home." For the father, home is a place that exists as the subject of public discourse. He is of the outside world, the world of work, and an excess visitor to this interior home space of repetitive labor, of love, care, and nurture. In this first shot of Louise's story, the layering of the optical, the musical soundtrack, and the voice off create a dense network of meanings gravitating around a mother caring for her child. With circuitous speculation, the shot posits a potentially insidious arrangement of mother and child where over-identification threatens to loop the mother into self-effacement, tranquilization, and burden. Yet, the tenderness and attention that define Louise's being-in-labor and care for her daughter also suggest an undeniable maternal desire to perform the ceaseless routines of childcare, a theme reinforced in the scene that follows. *Riddles* intervenes then both in the conventional rendering of the Oedipal phase as well as within a feminist resistance to motherhood as a woman's destiny by insisting on what Rowbotham calls "the evasiveness of desire" (87). *Riddles* complicates Arendt's notion of labor, also, since, being-

in-labor constitutes a gendered mode of being in the world and one that sometimes generates pleasure and fulfillment and leaves traces that are felt if not seen.¹⁹

The next shot takes place in the evening in the child's nursery: "bedtime, she likes to stay in Anna's room, waiting for her to fall asleep and tidying away the traces of the day." The pan once again occurs at hip level where Louise's midsection moves in and out of the frame against a background of toys, clothes, and the furnishing of a child's dimly lit bedroom. Once again, a looping instrumental soundtrack and a monologue of associated nouns, verbs, and phrases accompany this cyclical panoramic shot. In light of the inter-title, Louise's incessant motion in the room suggests that she resists terminating her child-centered activities at the end of her daughter's day: "She still seems to need the." At its breaking point, the inter-title leaves off in mid-speculation about Louise's needs. What matters though is that the mother has needs – an apparent strong need to continuously care for her child, to remain close and within a certain order, both physical and emotional. The excess implied by the word "still" however hints at an unnatural temporality generated by the mother's desires. "She *still* seems to need the," resonates with "Perhaps Louise is *too* close to her child." These first two inter-titles suggest something amiss in the mother's relationship with her child: a love too close, a yearning gone on too long. The first two shots, which capture the beginning and end of Louise's child-centered day, create the sense that despite her constant tidying, despite her efforts to do away with the "traces," Louise's life evidences a lack of orderly evolution, a lack of progress and balance in her being-in-labor. The voice off begins its associative chain with the negative impact of the mother's arrested development: "distressed, strained." The obvious draw to remain ensconced in this impasse,

¹⁹ Horney, too, wonders about psychic traces. She speculates about how the masculinist model of development could possibly apply fully to females, even if we are to assume that female adaptation to the male structure within patriarchy (she does not use that term) takes places necessarily and almost completely. "But it does not seem to me clear offhand how everything bestowed by nature could be thus absorbed in it and leave no trace," she writes (58).

however, is also made obvious in the juxtaposition of the phrases that follow, “nesting, in the nest, comfort, effort, at the breast, at rest, resting.”

Crucially, the scene in the child’s bedroom introduces the subject of the voice off as an “I.” Pondering in her circuitous illogic, the I wonders about minding, about needing to mind, about daring to mind, about minding minding and about minding needing: “I never minded the warmth. I minded the need,” she admits. “‘It was needed to have minded,’ I used to say, but was it needed to have minded very much, more than I could ever have dared?” In the context of previous reflections and associations stemming from nest, breast, and rest, the I articulates a thinking back to moments in the past when she minded and needed and perhaps didn’t protest the minding quite enough. The I of the voice off is of course not Louise and not not-Louise either. That is, the dilemma of motherhood presented here in the voice-off of the suppressed mother excavates a complex network of desire, deliberation, duty, and daring regarding being-in-labor. The naturalized work of childcare and domestic labor (the minding) captured in the visual register becomes the subject of contemplation in the voice off. To mind the minding means to admit that the work of mothering creates reactive instances of displeasure and resistance, particularly to the child’s relentless needs. In question, however, is the mother’s right to protest the displeasure: does she dare admit to minding the needing? The film asks how the drudgery of child minding, which is one face of being-in-labor, might find expression in a way that does not deny the obvious pleasures wrapped into the practices of mothering. The film’s deliberation on the mother as feminist political subject occurs here in the emotional terrain of domestic space where the balance between the minding and the needing threatens to overwhelm the I.

From the perspective of patriarchy, signified in the film in the character of the father, Louise’s overinvestment in her self as mother creates a problem that requires transformation; being-in-labor must be balanced with being-in-work. Tangled in the twosome of mother and child

and unable to express the minding of the needing, Louise seems to her husband isolated and unreasonable. In the next title card, her husband Chris “cannot make her see reason and get out more into the world” and so he feels “he must leave the house himself.” The pan that follows begins in the corner made where two large windows join in a front room in Louise’s house. Through sheer curtains in the daylight hours, the street is visible. The outside world enters the visual landscape of the film here for the first time; and its place is clearly set apart through the demarcated border of the dressed windows. A man walks around the house and loads luggage into a car parked adjacent. Echoed in the aural traffic between “cold” and “warmth” in the voice off, outside and inside refer to distinct modes of being where a warm interior (the space of the mother and being-in-labor) recoils from the cold (the outside world of the father and being-in-work). The perspective created by the gaze of the camera remains definitively inside. Though warm and sheltering, the space “inside” also houses fear and preoccupation signaled by the repetition in the monologue of references to underneath, beneath, deep, hiding, and covering. In the monologue, a warmth deep inside, the warmth of mothering that “consoles,” resists a cold that concedes nothing. But the mother’s transformation from warmth to cold is imminent: “Transformed I would confide, I could have cried, I could have died,” begins the monologue, which affirms as it ends, “it never died, in repose from warmth to cold.”

The soundtrack undergoes a parallel transformation in this third shot of Louise’s story. At the end of the voice off monologue of the Sphinx, the word of the father penetrates the scene in synchronous sound. Throughout the shot, the father’s mobile figure moves through the doorway, traversing with ease the boundary between inside and out. Louise comes into the frame from the depths of the house again carrying her child on her hip. In the liminal space of the threshold the father says goodbye with these words: “Nothing much more to say, is there? We’ve said it all.” After urging Louise to phone him if necessary, he says goodbye to Anna and departs. Though we

will hear Louise's voice later in the film, in this shot, it is only the father who speaks. It is the father also who desires to end the speaking, declaring that it has all been said before. From the perspective of patriarchy the problem is evident: the mother's over-identification with her child and refusal to be other than in labor, has atrophied her bond to her husband. The film, however, both affirms the mother's over-identification as problematic at the same time as it complicates the certainty of that problem. That is, Louise's resistance to the outside world might also stem in part from a desire to protect her child, notably a girl. It may result from the pleasure she derives in mothering her child in relative isolation. Whatever the case, for the case is clearly a riddle, the dissolution of the heterosexual couple creates a rupture in the mother's ability to remain in labor. This occurs in the aural syntax of the film at the same time as it initiates a transformation for the mother. In the scenes that follow, the balance of the soundtrack shifts such that synchronous sound is more prevalent than the speculative, associative voice off of the Sphinx. If in the father's terms there is nothing left to say about the "problem" of Louise's relationship with her child, the film attests that in fact the mother has much more to say. In part, the feminist politics of the film take root in this attempt to fill the silence of the mother's perspective on her own mothering with a voice that emerges not only from the interior and emotional range, but one that is uttered publicly in concert with other women.²⁰ In the psychoanalytic framework constructed by the film, this might be phrased as the film's engagement with the politics of the unconscious and the imaginary as well as that of the real. Louise as mother, as woman, as wife, in labor is also Louise

²⁰ Mulvey describes the efforts of the film as attempting to "fill in the gaps" opened by the women's movement between women and their own desires: "In *Riddles*, I think, I felt the time had come not to deal with that kind of silence which so many in the women's movement had felt and had talked about, a kind of cultural silence essentially. Having taken that as a fact, one had to go ahead and try and fill in the gaps and think of what ways one would give voice to female desires. That was one reason for concentrating on the mother and child relationship. It has been examined in various kinds of ways but not really opened up as an emotional and poetic fact" (Friedman 23).

in action as feminist political subject. The transformation is revealed to be a matter of emphasis rather than a stark substitution of parts.

The film resists positing a simple solution to Louise's problem of over-determination and stagnancy in being-in-labor. Her entry into the workplace is motivated by extrinsic and apparently economic factors, not by a desire to seek emotional or professional fulfillment in other terms. Critically, the inter-title signals a shift from the notion of the individual to the plural category of women. Louise's transition into being-at-work then is also a move beyond the individualized self, into the possibility of collectivity, which characterizes Arendt's notion of action—whether this is self-defined (i.e., “women's movement”) or an involuntary response to the hail of the capitalist patriarchy (i.e., “women's work”) however is yet unclear.

The working world of women is rife with contradictions and processes of alienation. At the telephone exchange, all of the workers are women. They share a single open space and a common function. When the pan captures their boss, a man, he is writing as he speaks into a regular telephone in an individual office with a proper door; he is separated from the group of working women. The labor at stake at the telephone exchange utilizes women as vehicles of communication rather than as initiators, producers, or mediators of meaningful human or commercial exchange. Donning headphones and manipulating cables, the women appear almost as extensions of the machines that loom over them. The women make connections possible, but they fill in no content, add no layers of meaning to the exchange, and in fact produce nothing tangible. The soundtrack is full of voices in synchronous sound. However, no concrete or systematic meaning is to be rendered from their collective resonance. Only Louise's brief conversation with Maxine is coherent, then her apology to a client she has disconnected inadvertently. Louise at work is visually whole, but emotionally fractured. Rather than categorically celebrate the move from being-in-labor to being-in-work, the film makes room for

the complex emotional landscape of the working mother and challenges the father's belief that something in the outside world will cure what ails Louise. When the pan moves beyond Louise, her colleagues and the machinery, a map of the world tacked to the wall comes into view. The map signifies the larger arrangement of systems—geographic, emotional, and economic—beyond the domestic sphere in which the mother and daughter must now develop.

The transition from labor to work initially disorganizes Louise. The lack of the Sphinx's voice off in the scenes of Louise at work suggests perhaps an inability to access the psychic disturbance the move initiates. The commitment to synchronous sound on the other hand allows a distinct register of political discourse to emerge as the film turns its attention to a more explicit engagement with matters of workplace nurseries and women's issues within labor unions. The mother as political subject of feminism demands attention to interlocking political concerns surrounding labor, gender, children, and wages. As one title card indicates, women struggle to function as workers in a marketplace that needs them and yet paradoxically punishes them for abandoning "their proper place." In the film, mothers who work outside the home struggle against competing ideologies of gender and capitalism. As mothers they belong at home with their children and husbands where they perform uncompensated, unending cycles of household labor. As workers, however, their alienated waged labor occurs in the background and allows connections and exchanges to occur in the marketplace. If the household allows the denial of an outside, the workplace encourages the suppression of the private, individuated lives of workers. For the mothers in the film, the contradictions are untenable.

The scene that follows in the workplace cafeteria suggests that a possible solution exists in the communication and collectivity between and among women. In the cafeteria at Louise's job once again a new world of working women comes into view. As the pan makes its way around the room, some working women in the frame make and serve tea while others drink tea

and converse, apparently on break. Again the soundtrack relays diegetic sound exclusively. All of the audible conversations between the women are about their children and their childcare arrangements; some express dismay at their limited choices of affordable care, some convey the emotional hardship they and their children experience when they separate. These interior and private revelations emerge among the women despite the public work environment that surrounds them. The cafeteria walls are mostly bare, which makes a few notable, picturesque prints of far away travel destinations stand out: Japan, the Grand Canyon. The women seem immune to the unlikely call of the exotic and remote. Their concerns rest heavily on landscapes that are rather interior and familiar. Being-in-work thus and being-in-labor exist simultaneously in these mothers when the emphasis is on the psychic traces the conflict engenders. Around the room, small groups of women share their experiences, affirm the similarities between them, and offer up a collective solution of a workplace nursery. The process that takes place in the cafeteria is not unlike the practices of consciousness-raising of second wave feminists. The women workers of the telephone exchange demonstrate an immediate manifestation of the slogan “the personal is political.” Whereas in the previous scene, Louise singly demonstrated how leaving Anna had caused her to arrive at work in “a flap,” in the cafeteria, her personal experience is revealed to be a systemic problem for the working mothers at the telephone exchange; and the solution is figured as one that must be generated collectively.²¹

The struggles faced by these mothers occur at the nexus of gender and class where competing ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism contort the everyday into a knot of simultaneously lived and contradictory oppressions. In the following scene, shot from inside a moving vehicle as it travels around a roundabout, Louise is finally mobile, traveling through

²¹ Dietz highlights the incompatibility of this notion of political action with Arendt’s theory of “action.” Further, Arendt distanced herself from Women’s Liberation and its “social dimension” and refused to isolate “women’s issues” from a more general notion of human emancipation (Dietz, “Feminist Receptions” 17).

public space in the company of other women. As they ride, they discuss the history and potential future of union support for workplace nurseries. The move from warm inside to the cold workplace is not a tidy leap into public freedom and action for Louise; on the contrary, it is a move into a new space of interlocking oppressions. Neither does the proposed collaboration between labor activism and feminism lead to a clear solution for Louise and the working women of the telephone exchange. The women express doubt about the willingness of the trade unions to take up their gendered cause, signaling rather a need for women to organize on their own behalf. The scene ends with more questions than answers: should the mothers be allowed to visit during the day? Who should pay? And who should manage the nurseries? The film leaves these questions unattended. After all, they are the riddles posed in the lives of mothers and the film is one that speaks in a questioning rather than an answering voice. Rather than take up and advocate any particular line in British feminist organizing principles, the film insists on complicating notions of action with the psychic dimension of being-in-labor and being-in-work. The mother as political subject of feminism in *Riddles of the Sphinx* does not emerge autonomous as the result of collective action: a union campaign and the realization of a workplace nursery. Rather, she represents a “political location” in the liminal space between the interior and exterior, both within and outside of the self. If Louise in this scene seems on her way to self-actualization in collective action, in the following scenes she doubles back again on any simply defined notion of progress.

In a few of the scenes that follow, one in a playground and the next in Louise’s mother’s garden, all momentum towards the realization of the workplace nursery campaign has stalled; and yet, the film does not suggest that this indicates any kind of failure. Rather, at the point when Louise’s political participation in the workplace halts, the film cycles back to reconsider the emotional and intellectual landscape of the mother as political subject who is traffics between in-labor and in-work. The point, as I see it, remains tied to the film’s insistence on questions rather

than answers, on politics as they occur both within and outside of the subject, and the constitution of the political subject as such; woman, worker, mother, friend, wife exist within interlocking systems of domination in the family, the workplace, the unions, the playgrounds, and the home. As Louise distractedly attends to Anna at a playground in the next scene, the soundtrack once again comprises the looping instrumental track and the riddling voice of the Sphinx without any trace of synchronous sound. Other women are there, caring for their children, but the mothers do not interact. Their mouths move as they communicate with their small children, but the insistent questioning of the Sphinx silences their voices.

The cyclical, nonlinear temporality of the narrative in which Louise's move out of the mother-child dyad progresses, then stalls, then moves into her own past is expressed in the voice-over as well. The Sphinx describes a linking of questions, one leading to the next until they return to the original point of departure. Then she proceeds to demonstrate the pattern, posing question after question for the entire duration of the five-minute shot, which visually ends again where it began. The questions initially gravitate around women, labor, organizing, and oppression. They shift into questions about the unconscious and the imaginary ("What would the politics of the unconscious be like?"), then probe the family and motherhood ("How necessary is being a mother to women, in reality or in imagination?"). And end again at the beginning: on the problem of workplace nurseries. Focus on the working mother as political subject generates this series of riddles, all of them linked to the problem of women's oppression at the center. Yet like the spokes of a bicycle tire, each line of thought takes its own direction outwards from this problem of sexual difference only to join up again in another circle of riddles. The subject of feminist politics in *Riddles* is fluid rather than fixed, caught in a cycle of unending riddles, and determined by numerous vectors that struggle to take priority in both thought and action. Thought itself poses a problem, suggesting that at least part of the challenge for feminism lies in the realm of the

impractical and the unarticulated. As the scene ends, the voice describes “a gathering of strength” but no conclusion, a move into society that lands the subject “back into her own memory” and yields “no certainty of success.” Like a snake consuming its own tail, the temporality of feminist subjectivity in *Riddles* mirrors that of labor in which the future and the past are locked into a revolving, unprogressive, and unproductive cycle.

What does it mean for a mother to need her child? What is the difference between maternal need and maternal desire? Posed as “need,” the mother’s wish to be close to her child and care for her sometimes constitutes an unhealthy emotional response in the film, a preliminary phase the mother struggles to surpass as she regains her sovereignty. This is particularly true in the discourse of the father, who returns in the subsequent scene to assess the mother’s progress. As in the section’s opening shots, the presence of the father once again forces the contest between maternal need and maternal desire to the surface. In the language of the father, the mother’s desire for intimacy and union with her child is reconfigured as a pathological pause, as a need that originates from the mother and distances her from himself (and by extension the world at large). The father does not see himself at all implicated in the being-in-labor that loops Louise away from him, despite the fact that it was he who abandoned the mother and child. If Chris’s departure was meant to catalyze Louise’s entry into being-in-work, the result of his exit has rather grounded an alternative mode of being-in-labor. That is, the cyclical, unprogressive and unproductive state of nature implied by being-in-labor remains the defining framework for Louise’s life, oddly with or without the house, child, and husband this usually requires. This is not to say that Louise remains essentially or eternally in-labor, but rather that the traces that have imprinted and constituted her subjectivity remain defined by the desires that make being-in-labor something other than an enforced, policed, or false state of being.

The insertion of an excerpt of Mary Kelly's filmic documentation for *Post-Partum Document* underscores the meta-critical reflection in *Riddles* on the subject of maternal needs and desires.²² In the scene, Louise, Maxine and Chris sit in his place of work, an editing studio. Visually, the film asserts its self-reflexivity as it pans over editing equipment, film reels, and projectors. The film within the film claims to offer "maternal discourse" on the "crucial moment" of the child's entry into nursery school – the moment when the "dyadic mother-child unit" splits and the child enters the Symbolic order of the father. In the footage Chris edits, the mother speaks in two registers: the psychoanalytic and the personal subjective. She refers to "his/my adjustment" and a "lack of boundary definition." She speaks of guilt, anxiety, and worry about her child as he makes the transition into a world separate from her. She relates daily concerns about tonsillitis, doctors, and medicine as the screen within the screen manifests images of the mother caring and playing with her son. Kelly's Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse describes the Oedipal phase of the child as the intervention of the father forces the weaning of the child from the mother into the symbolic order of the Father. It is the undoing of the imaginary mother-child dyad that is at stake in both films. Crucially, Kelly's loyal rendering of the Oedipal phase corroborates with the f/Father's discourse on the union between mother and child as a "problem" that results from the mother's arrested development. The layering of film within film thus not only suggests the levels of mediation that filmic technologies necessarily generate. The quasi-documentary excerpts construct alternative registers of visual, aural, and theoretical reflection on

²² Kelly writes about her influential art installation "Post-Partum Document" in depth in *Post-Partum Document* and *Rereading Post-Partum Document*. Mulvey was also keenly interested in Kelly's work. Indeed, in her 1976 review of *Post-partum Document* for *Spare Rib* republished in the appendix to the text, *Post-Partum Document*, Mulvey describes the cultural and intellectual intervention realized in Kelly's work with a description that would also suitably describe *Riddles of the Sphinx*: "As an artist, she forces into public view the unacceptable combination of the roles mother/artist – a slap in the face for old guard concepts of the artist as freewheeling genius; as a feminist she focuses on the contradictory emotions that necessarily come with motherhood, which have been almost taboo as a subject for art in male-dominated culture" (*Post-Partum Document* 201).

the central dilemma of motherhood, that is the need for and resistance to maternal differentiation. Might the mother consume the child with her need, her closeness? Might the child consume the mother and realize an anti-maternal feminist fear that maternity annihilates female subjectivity? How might these same questions change when it is the suppressed mother herself who asks them?²³

The anti-maternal feminist line evident, for example in Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* is usually traced back Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. Linda Zerilli reanimates this trajectory of anti-maternal feminism in "A Process without a Subject: Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva on Maternity." Although she wants to reclaim Beauvoir's notion of subjectivity from feminists who interpret the French philosopher as advocating for a masculinist humanism, she does not challenge the understanding of Beauvoir as adamantly anti-maternal. For example, "Although Beauvoir agrees with Kristeva that "in the mother-to-be the antithesis of subject and object ceases to exist," she sees in that collapse not cause for joy but clear feminist grounds for women to refuse maternity: it obliterates female subjectivity" (Zerilli 112). This consistent misreading of Beauvoir by Anglophone feminists has occurred, according to Toril Moi as a result of H. M. Parshley's deficient "edition and translation." Moi argues that Beauvoir in fact never advocated against motherhood. Rather, she consistently advocated on behalf of women's right to authentically and freely choose or refuse motherhood. In Moi's reading of Beauvoir, the French philosopher argues, "Unless we manage to undo the sexist and heterosexist ideology that posits that motherhood is every woman's destiny, that only a mother is a real woman, and that women's

²³ Kelly's work supports this focus on the maternal perspective on differentiation rendered in *Riddles*. In the introduction to the text *Post-Partum Document*, Kelly writes, "I am trying to show the reciprocity of the process of socialization in the first few years of life. It is not only the infant whose future personality is formed in this crucial moment, but it is also the mother whose 'feminine psychology' is sealed by the sexual division of labor in childcare" (1).

true nature can be found in mothering, women will never be able to genuinely choose whether to have children or not” (“While We Wait,” 1027-1028).

Rather than offer a solution, the film’s operative psychoanalytic framework constructs the problem of maternal subjectivity as an unsolvable riddle. At the outset of her story, Louise’s flaws, in the eyes of the father, stem from a total non-differentiation with her child and an inability to be other than in-labor. Yet the final blow to the familiar order results not necessarily from the assertion of her subjective autonomy. By insisting on a non-teleological temporality throughout, *Riddles* forecloses a facile maternal trajectory that would measure Louise’s progress (or feminism) in terms of physical and emotional distance and differentiation from her child and successful transition into being-in-work. Rather, Louise as maternal, feminist, political subject is beset by ambivalent and competing needs *and* desires with regard to her child and her self that resist adhering to a masculinist, psychoanalytic notion of proper, progressive “development.” In the scene at Maxine’s, where the women seek to make meaning together out of another woman’s nonsensical dreams, women’s *inter*-subjectivity is emphasized also in the mise-en-scene. The room features multiple mirrors and a variety of curtains, both to cast reflections and interrupt their transmission. The recognition of self that might take place here would occur in fragments, double reflections, and in the gaze of the other (to emphasize this, the cinematographer comes into view in one of the mirrors). There is no unitary, sovereign or authentic self for the mother to return to here. And yet, there is a new relationship, a new inter-subjective order under construction for both women, one black and one white. Their racial differences suggest a relationality defined perhaps not by identity (as in the case with mother and child), but rather as dependent on difference.²⁴

²⁴ Kaplan includes reflection on a criticism of *Riddles* that centered precisely on the figure of Maxine. According to Kaplan some (she provides no citations for her claims) argued that the film problematically rehearses “our cultural, mythic associations with the black image” and “primitivism and mythology” as well as uncritically replaces sexual difference with a visual difference. For Kaplan, this assertion of racial difference in the register of the erotic “simply compounds the problems” (*Women and Film* 181).

In the final scene of Louise's story, it is Anna's voice that speaks of the past from a distant future point of reference. In a final moment of the past folding in on the future and the present, the film overlays the visual image of Louise and Anna roaming through the Egyptian room at the British Museum with a voice-over in which Anna remembers her mother in the past tense. She explains that the voice of the Sphinx speaks to her loudly and plainly now, though she can recall that it was always there, always easy to forget, that she had heard it ever since she knew she was a girl. She remembers a moment of separation from her father and the time when she surprised her mother and her female friend in bed. Flanked by ruminations on the Sphinx, an acrobat, and capital, Anna's final verbalized sensation is one of success, of getting what she wanted, of flinging herself into the air. In the final shot of Section Four, the film posits a hopeful future in the voice of a daughter who has emerged triumphant from the processes of socialization. If Louise's "story" draws attention to a present moment (in the 70s) where the mother as political subject forces an examination of interlocking oppressions that limit women's choices at home, at work, and in the public sphere, this section of the film also manifests hope for a future generation that is able to speak from a located, gendered subject position that is nonetheless defined by freedom and possibility – exactly what Beauvoir hoped for.

The Joyce of Motherhood

Like *Riddles*, *Joyce at 34* is also at its core a film about maternal transformation. For Joyce, the crucial subjective transition, however, occurs with the birth of her daughter, Sarah Rose Cole. Kaplan agrees that both films deal with the problem of motherhood, but she insists

that *Riddles* does so “theoretically” while *Joyce at 34* does so “pragmatically.”²⁵ In debates about seventies feminism, the opposition between pragmatism and theory quite often falls along national lines, as in Kaplan’s rendering where the British film is theoretical and the American film is not.²⁶ In this reading, however, I resist the framework that opposes realism/pragmatism to experiment/theory. The opposition is not only falsely over-generalizing, but it is also unproductive. Certainly, *Riddles* manifests an interest in motherhood as an abstract problem rooted in cultural myths. The film attempts to construct a political and aesthetic response in a new, feminist cinematic syntax. However, we have already seen that many of the “problems” at stake in *Riddles* are also what Kaplan might call “pragmatic” ones: issues of childcare and union campaigns, for example, the relationship between labor activism and gender injustice, and the gendered division of labor in the nuclear family. To read the film *only* for its engagement with “theory” minimizes the significance of these themes and limits the generative possibilities for feminism brought forth by the film. Likewise, to underestimate the ways *Joyce at 34* draws attention to its own formal strategies closes down discussion about how the film experiments with documentary conventions and insists on seeing and screening the mother as feminist political subject anew.

Kaplan concedes that there is a problem with the “monolithic, abstract formulation” of “criticisms of the realist verité film” (130). As I have made manifest in each chapter of this project, “when one looks closely” at individual films, Kaplan admits that they prove to be “more

²⁵ “Mulvey/Wollen’s film broke new ground in dealing theoretically with the problem of the mother from her point of view (in contrast to the pragmatic level of the realist films *Joyce at 34* and *Janie’s Janie*” (*Women and Film* 171).

²⁶ Carolyn Dever challenges this characterization of U.S. feminist action and theory, in particular by revisiting Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics* in the Introduction to *Skeptical Feminism*. Mary Dietz, however, rehearses the typification of U.S. feminism as “pragmatic” in her explanation of why second wave feminists passed over Arendt in the development of theories of action, participatory politics, and the public realm. She writes, “In part, no doubt, the gulf between feminism and Arendt – at least in the United States – was occasioned by the pragmatic rather than theoretical character of the American feminist movement itself” (Dietz, “Feminist Receptions” 18).

heterogeneous and complex” that the critique allows for (130). Yet, Kaplan also unfairly characterizes *Joyce* as “boringly realist” (130). In the single paragraph in which she reads *Joyce* “closely,” she concentrates exclusively on what the film elides (class and economic relations, conflicts and contradictions) and how the film fails to challenge “the bourgeois model” in either form or content. In Kaplan’s reading, *Riddles* is “innovative,” “important,” but there is almost nothing redeemable about *Joyce at 34*.²⁷ Since so little has been written about Chopra’s film in feminist studies, Kaplan’s assessment matters, even now more than 25 years later. Kaplan’s determination that the film is boring works in tandem with her sense of the film’s realism. In other words, it is because the film is realist that it is also boring; or, the film’s particular mode of realism is boring realism. If we disrupt her framework, however, in which realism = boredom, the film might still seem boring to some, but the boredom will perhaps result from something else. *Joyce at 34*, after all, focuses narrowly on one woman’s normative experience of middle-class marriage and motherhood. She is lovely, talented, and privileged; she is white, heterosexual, and middle-class. Her husband is equally good-looking and talented, even empathetic to her feminist demands for equality. (Yawn.)

Indeed, it is worth asking where a contemporary sense of boredom in response to *Joyce at 34* might come from. I speculate that it is precisely because the formal and narrative codes and conventions evident in *Joyce at 34* have become painfully familiar in our current moment. So many of today’s popular documentaries are personal investigations rendered in the reconfigured languages of direct cinema that it is difficult to recognize the innovations and interventions at stake in *Joyce at 34*. Boring in this sense means familiar and unchallenging – adjectives that would never apply to *Riddles of the Sphinx* despite the fact that the film uses an excruciatingly

²⁷ See Chapter Twelve, “Mothers and Daughters in Two Recent Women’s Films: Mulvey/Wollen’s *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976) and Michelle Citron’s *Daughter-Rite* (1978)” in *Women and Film*.

slow 360 degree panoramic shot technique, without edits, without alteration, throughout the majority of the film (and that is just one example of many arguably “boring” techniques at work in the film). My task then in part is to defamiliarize documentary conventions in *Joyce at 34* and make the formal structures of the film matter. Therefore, rather than let Kaplan have the final (injurious) word on the film, I suggest we take a cue from her injunction to “look closely” at the same time as we read the films for commonalities. Like *Riddles*, *Joyce at 34* gravitates around the internal and external disruptions experienced by a mother in a moment of subjective maternal transition. Like *Riddles*, *Joyce* also locates the individual mother within a greater matrix of cultural expectations, economic pressures, and personal aspirations. Like *Riddles*, *Joyce* complicates the mythic harmony of the nuclear family and poses the problem of motherhood in generational terms that implicate mother, grandmother, and daughter. Thus, although the films certainly attest to distinct aesthetic and political commitments (and even these are more nuanced and complex than Kaplan’s experimental/realist framework allows for), there are also definitive and productive overlaps.

With its first breath, *Joyce at 34* visually intimates a lack of synchronicity between “mother” and “image.” The presence of the mirror’s frame in the cinematic frame and the trope of reflection in the opening shots also anticipate the film’s consistent self-reflexivity. The first two shots of the film are re-photographed still images of Joyce at the end of her pregnancy. In the first, the mother-to-be contemplates her own image in a full-length mirror. The camera is positioned behind the pregnant woman; her full belly and face appear in the mirror’s reflection. In effect, two bodies and two frames are visible. When the camera has zoomed closer to the woman’s torso and face, the title text appears in bold, white letters over her back. A jump cut leads to the next shot of a still photograph in which the pregnant mother lies on a couch. She looks down towards her exposed belly, her hands cupping the swell. As the camera pans laterally

from her face to her belly, the voice-over declares, “It’s limbo. It’s absolute limbo.” In a moment of visual stillness, when the pan ends on a frame that maintains the woman’s pregnant belly in the center but excises her head from view, the voice-over continues, “I’m really angry at having, being biologically this way. That I have to wait around.”

In her voice-over Joyce refutes any notion of romance she’s supposed to feel at the end of her pregnancy. Rather than buttress a stereotypical “image” of motherhood as the epitome of women’s self-actualization, Joyce divulges impatience, anger, and frustration at what she perceives to be “waiting around.” Joyce’s Freudian slip between “having” and “being” in the voice-over echoes the problem of finding herself “in limbo” at the end of her pregnancy and invites a provocative question about women’s relationship to their corporeality, a problem embedded in but left unarticulated in Arendt’s genderless notion of labor. Does one “have” a female body or “is” one a female body? For Joyce, now past her due date, the having/being problem amounts to an excruciating lack of control and a threat to her being-at-work: “I’m also a filmmaker,” she explains, “I want to get back to work.” Joyce’s work as a filmmaker, her being-at-work, is central both to the narrative and at the level of enunciation. In the following shots of the opening sequence, a long take of Joyce “waiting around” is spliced with footage of Joyce working on a film set. In close-up, Joyce wears sound recording gear as she moves within the tracking shot. Here the mobility of the woman at work contrasts with the stillness of the woman in (not yet) labor, waiting. Joyce at work is alert, smiling, and interactive; as mother in waiting, she chews nervously on her fingernail, blinks rapidly, and is silent.

And yet, the film’s obvious self-reflexivity at the level of enunciation is meant to support rather than challenge realist claims to authenticity. That the film is self-reflexive works in cooperation with the thrust of the realist narrative in which Joyce is visually and aurally constituted as a “real” person in lived time and space. If indeed we are, as Kaplan argues, “kept

from acknowledging” the difference between representation and ontology as a result of the film’s formal techniques, it is not because the film is “not self-reflexive.” Rather, the fact of the film’s self-reflexivity cannot guarantee what Kaplan would call a “break” with “the habit of passive viewing.” Indeed, *Joyce at 34* levies a challenge to the framework in which active spectatorship is made possible by the inclusion of self-referential filmic techniques, such as images of media technology or the repetition of frames within frames. In the documentary, Joyce’s work as a filmmaker is less about meta-criticism as it is about complicating notions of women’s work and women as workers in the public realm. Does this constitute the grounds for passive viewing? In Kaplan’s framework, where the text is singly capable of constructing a subject position as a result of its formal conventions, the answer is still, yes. In an alternative paradigm in which the film contributes to public discourse about the constitution of a feminist political subjectivity grounded in motherhood, the answer is a definitive no.

Like *Riddles of the Sphinx*, *Joyce at 34*’s central commitment is to illuminate the practice, institution, and experience of motherhood from the perspective of the mother herself. In *Joyce* the mother as feminist political subject emerges on screen through a series of painful adjustments and reflections that take place from the child’s “birth to walking.”²⁸ Throughout the film, Joyce’s relationship to her filmmaking competes with her relationship with her daughter. Yet, at stake is far more than a simple matter of balancing what Chopra would call “parenting and career” or what Arendt leads us to consider as being-in-work and being-in-labor. For Joyce, the struggle that takes place is about the definition of self within competing paradigms of female subjectivity: self as woman, as filmmaker, as wife, and as mother. Similar to *Riddles of the Sphinx*, the trajectory of maternal subjectivity mapped by the film is crooked, winding, and often non-progressive

²⁸ Chopra described “the story” of the film in these terms. “We wanted to make a film about me that would go from the child’s birth to when she starting walking. Then Sarah didn’t start walking until she was 14 months old!” (*Interview*, 17 February 2010).

despite *Joyce at 34*'s tight, teleological arc in lived time and space. Near the end of the film, the daughter, Sarah's, progress is clear; she has learned to walk. She masterfully pushes a tall chair past a doorframe and waddles happily at the playground. Yet, "progress" cannot describe the journey taken by the mother who rather seeks to settle into a subjective state in which being-in-labor and being-in-work dislodge from affinities to public and private. Unlike *Riddles of the Sphinx*, where Louise is faced with the stark choice between waged work outside the home, and unwaged labor within it, Joyce's labor is also her work. That is, the self-reflexivity of the film attests to a blurring of the discrete categories of work and labor in Joyce's life. Indeed, for Joyce the possibility of freedom (here an aspiration of the individual) depends on the ability to make labor the product of work itself.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the scene in which Joyce gives birth to her daughter. Quite literally in labor, Joyce is at once the working subject of the film and the raw material of her own work. The birth scene in *Joyce at 34* takes place in a conventional hospital setting, where Joyce is coached by medical staff in blue scrubs. The camera initially focuses on her face contorted by the exertions of labor. As the child emerges from her, the camera shifts to focus exclusively on the tiny, wet head emerging from her vagina. While candid birth scenes were by this time familiar in the work of experimental and avant-garde filmmakers, ranging from Stan Brakhage's *Water Baby Window Moving* (1962) to Gunvor Nelson's *Kirsa Nicholina* (1969) and educational videos about home birth, *Joyce at 34* screens the birth of Sarah Rose Cole as an exemplary moment of woman's labor as woman's work. In a film about her own life, professional and personal, Joyce's birth scene serves the dual purpose of literalizing the act of giving birth to a new self that motherhood entails as much as it turns this radical moment of sexual difference into the raw material of work.

At the end of the film, Joyce remains unclear about how to prioritize and organize maternal and professional desires. The final shot of the film is a close-up of Joyce in a room bright with natural lighting. Voice and sound are initially synchronized as Joyce explains that she both does and does not want to have another baby. When an off-screen voice (presumably that of Claudia Weill, the co-director) asks her why, she begins to laugh as she says, “I think if I have another baby, it would probably be the end.” Here, sound and image tracks suddenly split. The visual freezes on the close-up of Joyce smiling, her head thrown back just slightly. Her voice, however, continues to elaborate on thoughts of being able to “just about manage” with “just one” child. She admits that having only one child might be “selfish,” but nonetheless, she’s fearful that two would be impossible. As she laughs again, sound and image resume synchronicity and Joyce rejoins her laughing voice once again before the fade out ends the film. There is a way in which this final splitting at the conclusion of the film hints at the subjective disjuncture that defines motherhood for Joyce. The reason the idea of another baby is laughable to Joyce is clear from her remark that it would be “the end” – the end of her professional career, that is, and in the syntax of the film, the end of a crucial facet of Joyce’s life. In the final instance, when the work of creating a film about being-in-work and being-in-labor is complete, we continue to wonder about the possibility of Joyce’s freedom. The mere mention of “the end” stalls the progress of the visual narrative, just as in the opening scenes where the still images code pregnancy (non professional time) as a time of frustrated waiting. Joyce’s nervous laughter in this final shot bridges the gap, but does not suture over the obvious conflict wrought by mother’s competing desires.

In a later sequence when Sara is 6 weeks old, Joyce takes the child to her mother’s house in New York so that she can work on a new film assignment. As the visual track shows Joyce and Sarah’s departure at the airport and flight to New York, it is in voice-over once again that Joyce reflects on how traveling with her daughter has presented seemingly endless complications and

has distracted her from thinking about the film she's about to make. The journey to her parent's home also provokes a critical reflection on her changed sense of her self as daughter. It occurs to her that having a child has filled her with an unexpected, but immense sense of "relief" at having done "the right thing." As Joyce admits the regression into an adolescent desire for her parents' approval, the visual track jumps from a shot of the retreating landscape from the plane's window to home movie footage of Joyce at her graduation party at sixteen. The association of regression with motherhood plays into familiar feminist fears about the way investment in what I'm calling being-in-labor saps women of their potential to gain footing in the public sphere. Indeed, throughout the film, and despite scenes in which Joyce acts out and utters obvious maternal pleasure in labor, motherhood constitutes a sticky web of pleasure, duty, and distraction that Joyce must consistently keep at bay.

The return home in the narrative's present tense then is also an internal return to the site of the filmmaker's initial departure from her familial home. The silent home movie footage of couples dancing gains new meaning relevant to the present tense narrative from Joyce's voice-over. Significantly, in this segment of the voice-over, Joyce assumes the position also occupied by the spectator who gazes from a location outside of the film. Like the spectator, Joyce assumes an almost corporeal presence off screen through the intimate act of describing the images we both see. The footage freezes individual women mid-dance as Joyce signals them out to the spectator: "There's me... That's my old friend Toby... There's Gloria..." The content of Joyce's voice-over, however, is not about what it felt like to be young or on the verge of independence. Rather, what the home movie footage plus voice-over construct is a context for Joyce's emergence into motherhood. Each of the friends in the home movie is described in terms of her marriage and maternity. This one has 3 children already, this one had her first at 20, this one got married right away, etc.. It becomes clear that Joyce is an exception in the social scaffolding that contains her

white, middle-class nuclear family. In this way, the fact of Joyce's motherhood is rendered both exceptional as well as expected. The visuals emphasize this "late arrival." From the home movie footage (fixed into the past with the final phrase, "That was 18 years ago") the film cuts to a shot from Joyce's present tense perspective in the window seat of the plane's landing on the tarmac.

Joyce's mother is a critical figure and presence throughout the film. She lends insight into the ways Joyce's own mothering is both exceptional in the context of her professional life and also in conversation with familial and cultural expectations surrounding women's maternal roles. In one shot that appears during the sequence when Joyce and Sarah are in New York for the first time, Joyce's mother admits how surprising it is to witness Joyce care for Sarah. Framed tightly in a classic talking head interview pose, Joyce's mother reveals how unlikely it seemed that Joyce would divert attention from her career to fulfill the duties of motherhood. "I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw her handling the baby, bathing the baby, nursing the baby, which is something I never expected either from Joyce... Just to know that this is number one. This is the number one career at the moment." In the grandmother's discourse, motherhood entails a certain amount of sacrifice as well as the cyclical and repetitive gestures that define labor. As Joyce reveals in the next scene, the sacrifices demanded by being-in-labor usually come in the form of the mother's professional ambitions, her desire to also be in work. This is the sacrifice Joyce refuses, and the film, which is the product of Joyce's work is also the instantiation of a trace of Joyce's labor. As a product of Joyce's work about her labor, the film radically posits the possibility of both/and for women. And yet, the latent association between motherhood and regret and regression, for example, in the "sweet sixteen" reminiscence above, suggest that maternal freedom in these conditions requires a firm resistance to succumbing to the consuming lull of labor.

Over images of Joyce's mother at the piano, Joyce's voice-off tells us that her mother once hoped to be a concert pianist. Instead, she now occasionally accompanies her son who did

become a musician. A brief history of Joyce's maternal legacy follows in a series of re-photographed still images that tidily match the voice-off: black and white photographs of Joyce's parents wedding; their first, second, and third children; Joyce's grandmother who cared for them; Joyce's mother working as a teacher, a profession Joyce admits she never regarded as important because it was performed by women. The emphasis on Joyce's matrilineal heritage provides a framework in which to understand Joyce's present tense conflict between her maternal and professional desires. The images of the women in her family constitute a collage of professional sacrifices. In her voice-over, Joyce distinguishes herself from this legacy of "women's work," however. If the black and white photographs seems to fix this selfless history in the distant past though, it becomes clear in the present tense scene that follows that Joyce, now also a mother, shares more with her mother's generation than she expected.

The film gives the sense that despite the obvious gains made in women's freedom to self-actualize professionally, systematic injustices and cultural expectations continue to curtail options and opportunities for women in the public sphere. The scene described above ends with a zoom on a black and white photograph of Joyce's mother's teaching colleagues. Dozens of teachers, mostly women, are arranged in several tiers; they all smile for the professional photograph. After a jump cut, the same photograph appears in the film's present tense mid-frame in the hands of a middle-aged woman. Brought back to life in moving color image, the photograph stitches together the past and the present, bringing Joyce's life into a continuum of maternal subjectivity defined in part by schisms wrought upon working women. In the film's present, a lively group of retired schoolteachers recount their own experiences juggling professional lives with motherhood. In this scene, sound and image are synchronized as women remember how feelings of conflict and guilt dominated their lives. Chopra recounts that she and Claudia Weill deliberately incited the conversation by asking the women a question, "Did you ever find it difficult to balance

parenting with working?” Yet, the filmmakers were astounded at the flood of dialogue that ensued.²⁹ In the film, this becomes evident as the women talk over each other, interrupt one another, and generally shout out anecdotes about hiding pregnancies for fear of termination, about children begging them to stay home sick, about feeling lesser than “real mommies” because of their working lives. The cinematic conventions in this scene, particularly the use of synchronous sound, natural lighting, and quick pace editing emphasize the energetic responses among the women. By framing of each woman as she speaks, the filmmakers grant authority to the speaker; each woman is the expert of her own experience. Yet the collection of stories and the close seating arrangement of the retired teachers around the table emphasize commonality. Though rendered in particular anecdotes, the final sum of the women’s experiences is the impression of a collective, systemic problem. Further, their stories are not lore of the distant past, but imminently relevant to Joyce’s own present.

The final issue around the lunch table is the topic of women’s liberation. “You aren’t really liberated if you walk around with feelings of guilt,” declares one woman as others nod their heads in agreement and the sound of dishes clank in the background. She continues, “You’re truly liberated if you can carry on a career and feel that you’re doing the right thing for yourself and your children.” In sync with the word “liberated” the film cuts to a tracking shot of Joyce. The camera follows her from behind as she walks briskly and balances film equipment in both arms. Here, Joyce is literally “carrying on a career;” the camera races to keep pace with her. At the mention of “feeling that you’re doing the right thing,” however, Joyce opens a door and begins to pass through. Read in the context of the voice-off, this shot of Joyce poses the matter of her liberation as a possibility: Joyce carries on a career. Once inside the house in the next shot,

²⁹ Chopra recounts that once the group of women began answering her question they couldn’t stop. When she and Weil later showed them the footage of the conversation, they apparently launched into it again, commenting on each other’s responses. For Joyce, it was as if the filmmakers had “opened a floodgate,” as if those women had never had an opportunity to reflect on the issues before (*Interview*, 17 February 2010).

however, Joyce no longer carries her equipment/career. Instead, she is met with a wailing baby and coos at her sympathetically. It is impossible to know if “feelings of guilt” carry over into the scene with the baby, but certainly the present tense footage of Joyce leaves the matter of liberation open to interpretation. Is such a thing possible for women of Joyce’s generation in ways not possible for her mother’s? Or, rather, does the guilt trip remain exactly as it was?

A few scenes later, Joyce is again traveling and working. This time, however, she leaves the baby at home. Over shots of Joyce as she grabs luggage and enters the school where they are filming, she admits, “As long as she’s with me, all I’ll think about is her. And if I don’t have her with me, then I can be a person again.” For Joyce, in this scene, being a “person” is synonymous with being a focused professional; that is, Joyce must resist that sticky, affective maternal web that threatens her ability to be fully in work.³⁰ As I see it, the film wavers on the matter of Joyce’s liberation, situating her as maternal subject of feminist politics rather along a continuum, where the past and the present exist simultaneously and in proximity. Similarly to *Riddles*, the temporality of maternal subjectivity exists within a knot of matrilineal time. Rather than engage a notion of maternal subjectivity as dependent on a process that begins with the child’s birth and progresses by means of maternal-infant differentiation, both *Riddles* and *Joyce* emphasize interruptions, gaps, and the weight of the past on mothers’ relationships with their children. In *Riddles*, the formal conventions of the film make this nonlinear and nonteleological temporality explicit. However, even *Joyce at 34*, which depends on the structure of calendrical time, asserts the maternal, feminist subject in a constant struggle with past, present, and future, as well as cultural expectations, personal aspirations, and economic determinations. In both cases, too, the obvious pleasure of being-in-labor must be resisted in order for the mother to realize her access to

³⁰ Ironically, of course, Joyce’s film takes place at a school full of children. As the filmmakers work to prepare the room for the shoot, setting up lights and sound, children cry, shout, and complain in the background.

freedom in the public realm of action. Yet, *Joyce at 34* stresses this more emphatically and imbues its presentation of Joyce's being-in-labor with shades of frustration, guilt, and regression in particular ways.

Whereas *Riddles* traffics between a focus on Louise as an individual maternal subject and the assertion of sexual difference writ large, *Joyce at 34* crucially retains its focus on the singularity of Joyce's experience in contrast to the equally particularized experiences of other women. That is, although *Joyce at 34* projects a feminist re-imagining of the transition into motherhood, and draws meaning from a reflection on Joyce's matrilineal heritage, the film limits its reflection to Joyce's story without attempting to extrapolate meaning about the lives of mothers in general. The use of voice-over in particular secures the film's focus on Joyce's experience as an individual.³¹ In the voice-over that bridges the shots of the opening sequence it is Joyce who reflects on her own state of being and having. In voice-over, Joyce speaks not only to the images on screen, but to an un-projected inner life provoked by her transformation. The highly subjectivized voice-over then collaborates with the image track to constitute Joyce as a complex subject who has authentic access to her own experiences and the ability to narrate the significance of her thoughts and actions. If this mode of storytelling in *Joyce at 34* leaves intact the notion of an Enlightenment subject who is autonomous, sovereign, and self-original, the voice-over nonetheless effects an important feminist endorsement of self-authorship and the authority of experience crucial to second wave discourses. The re-appropriation of the voice-over in women's documentaries such as *Joyce at 34* challenged a previous model of documentary

³¹ Chopra confirmed that her intention was not to make a "feminist" film about motherhood per se. Rather, she describes her motivation to make the film as "selfish artistry." That is, after working on many films with the founding figures of direct cinema (including Richard Leacock and the Maysles brothers), Chopra wanted to make her own film. When she was in her eighth month of pregnancy, a friend first suggested that she make a film about herself and her baby. Joyce initially scoffed at the idea. "It seemed too narcissistic." It was the viability of the topic that eventually attracted Chopra to the idea of making a personal documentary (*Interview*, 17 February 2010).

filmmaking in which the male voice connoted authority and held exclusive power to interpret projected images.³² Here, it is Joyce who reveals *and* interprets her own actions and experiences, and she does so from a subjective location that challenges patriarchal myths about women's relationship to their bodies, their capacities to reproduce, and their proper functions in the domestic and public spheres.³³ The intervention should not be under-estimated. In the documentary landscape of the late 60s and early 70s, which was crowded with films about mostly male, public figures, Chopra's film was the first to assert the public significance of one woman's personal journey into motherhood.³⁴

That Joyce in 1971 should claim expertise about her own experiences, particularly with regard to reproduction, must have resonated powerfully in a landscape of feminist liberation activism dominated by a focus on reproductive rights. As Jennifer Nelson recounts in *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, radical feminists of the New York-based Redstockings women's liberation group focused heavily on the right to abortion as central to women's autonomy in the late 1960s. Although abortion rights figured throughout the decade as a political issue, feminist activists insisted for the first time that women be at the center of the debates, hearings, and legislation governing women's reproductive rights. At stake in the Redstockings' discourse on abortion was the notion that women take their rightful place as "the

³² Doane elaborates on the use of voice off and voice over in cinema with a short section on documentary in "The Voice in Cinema." She writes, "In the history of documentary, this voice has been for the most part that of the male, and its power resides in the possession of knowledge and in the privileged, unquestioned activity of interpretation" ("The Voice" 42).

³³ For Kaplan, however, "The voice-over speaks directly to the spectator, constitutes the spectator as an empty space to be filled" (*Women and Film* 43).

³⁴ Chopra remembered that when the film first screened in New York City in a double booking with *I.F. Stone's Weekly* (Jerry Bruck Jr., 1973) theatergoers assumed that the film would be about James Joyce (*Interview*, 17 February 2010). As Alisa Lebow remarks in her review of Jennifer Fox's *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman* (2007), "Indeed there have been numerous feminist first person films as well, most of which raise at least some aspects detailed in Fox's project, having to do with gender roles of the "modern" woman. The very first film of this type was *Joyce At 34* (1972), which attempted to reconcile the roles of mother, wife, and filmmaker" (442).

primary subjects driving the movement” rather than “objects of political discussion” (Nelson 23). The vital claim developed by the Redstockings held that women had sovereign rights over their own bodies and that abortion was a crucial tool for women’s ability to control their fertility. On February 13, 1969 a small group of women organized by the Redstockings stormed legislative hearings on abortion law reform in New York City. The group of speakers invited to testify to legislators at the hearings was comprised of 13 men and one woman, a nun. Outraged, the Redstockings passed out flyers on the streets that declared, “The only real experts on abortion are women” (Nelson 30). Inside, women stood and shouted, “What better experts are there on abortion than women” (Nelson 31).

Joyce at 34 emphasizes this notion of women’s expertise and control of their own bodies. Although the timeline of the film’s diegesis begins with a Joyce who is already pregnant, the film consistently emphasizes the notion of choice that drives Joyce’s understanding of and commitment to motherhood. Recall that in the film’s final scene, Joyce makes her ability to choose whether or not to have a second child explicit. Another scene features a conversation about women and motherhood that takes place in a consciousness-raising group. One of the women featured vehemently opposes motherhood, which she imagines would take over her life and relegate her to reading child psychology. She states firmly, indeed emphatically, “I don’t want that.” Beyond the narrative, however, the film asserts Joyce’s control over her own body through its visual self-reflexivity. As the filmmaker, Joyce quite literally controls the image, circulation, and manipulation of her body. The aesthetic politics and this particular use of self-reflexivity thus serve a feminist body politic in which women demanded control over their own biological and in this case cinematic re-production.

Joyce at 34 also shares the impulse of U.S. second wave feminism to make matters of the body and matters of the home central to public, political discussion. As Nelson recounts,

“Challenging the sexual division of labor in the household or negotiating power in the bedroom was considered a feminist political act” (23). Yet, this manifestation of domestic politics differs from its treatment in *Riddles*. In Joyce’s intact, nuclear, heterosexual family, the boundaries between work and labor are permeable; not only do both take place frequently within the domestic space, both parents pursue professional careers that exceed a definition of work as alienated, waged, and outside. Joyce’s labor is also the material for Joyce’s work, and these sometimes exist simultaneously in the home, evident in one poignant scene in which Joyce works at the editing table while Sarah calls for her from the walker near the floor. Joyce’s husband’s work and labor are also occasionally over-determined in the film. While Joyce is out of town, for example, her husband discusses a screenplay with a colleague in his home study and simultaneously feeds the baby.

During another significant sequence in the film, the father is filmed discussing the challenges wrought by the gendered division of labor within the household. At issue is an argument about who should perform the repetitive, life sustaining labor required for the maintenance of the household: dishes, childcare, food shopping. Joyce’s husband recounts his wife’s insistence on the fact that both parents are “workers” – why should Joyce “give up” time to do the food shopping? The father admits that from his perspective, he has constraints and professional requirements that exceed the mother’s. Yet in the end, he surmises, “It’s really easier for me to go and spend an hour and half in the morning shopping than spend all my life fighting her.” The visual track attests to the father’s dutiful labor with shots of him choosing vegetables, pushing a shopping cart, and trimming the baby’s fingernails. What this sequence reveals is both a debate about the artificial fastening of gender to labor and work as well as the father’s obvious resistance to acknowledging the validity of Joyce’s claims. Moreover, the questions raised by the division of labor and work in this scene take place decidedly outside the problem of economic

need. The fact is Joyce wants to work, sees herself as a worker, and devalues labor as a distraction from pursuits that in the end are framed as self-sustaining and self-affirming. This notion of work is not one that corresponds to the problems of wages, workplace nurseries, and union activism made manifest in *Riddles*. Rather, in the middle-class discourse on work and labor in *Joyce at 34*, it is intellectual and artistic labor that are privileged modes of self-actualization for both genders.

Reading *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *Joyce at 34* through a lens that seeks commonality rather than difference brings to the center of the discussion notions of a feminist political subjectivity grounded in motherhood. Both films adamantly assert feminist subjects defined by motherhood, but never exclusively. Motherhood in both films is a state of becoming contingent upon familial relationships as much as exterior systems of power, knowledge, and commerce. Joyce and Louise are mothers, but they are also daughters, wives, workers, and friends. In neither case does motherhood represent an idealized mode of female self-actualization. On the contrary, motherhood constitutes a problem for both women, albeit distinctly. For Joyce, the central complication pits her maternal desires against her professional ambitions. For Louise, motherhood causes an irreparable rupture in her marriage and yet buttresses a new configuration of connections between her and other women. In Joyce's life motherhood interferes with her ambition to be "a person" and "a filmmaker." In both cases, motherhood brings the women into situations of conflict, opportunities for action, and instances of redefinition of self and other.

By reading the two films for the ways they manifest a shared commitment to rethinking motherhood from a feminist perspective, we also challenge the opposition between experiment and realism in feminist filmmaking of the seventies. Both "experiment" and "realism" strain under the weight of the many diverse and particular cinematic practices that are said to construct each term distinctly. Each term of the dialectic depends on a falsified generalization of the other

term. In fact, both films “experiment” with formal conventions. *Joyce at 34* borrows strategies from direct cinema as well as narrative film. As much as *Joyce* is a documentary about one woman’s life, it is also a highly conceptualized “story” constructed out of staged, directed, and manipulated footage. As much as *Riddles* seeks a new language for feminist subjectivity by working against traditional codes and conventions, refusing pleasure, and interrupting sexist gazing practices upon women’s bodies on screen, the film also deliberately engages “real” politics and documentary aesthetics that emphasize content in addition to form. Finally, by emphasizing the shared focus on a maternal, feminist subjectivity we allow the films to reveal diverse political discourses. Read outside of the paradigms constructed by the critique of realism in seventies film studies, these two films manifest multiple layers of feminist politics. Beyond experiment and realism, *Riddles* and *Joyce* suggest that at stake for seventies feminism was the renegotiation and re-politicization of the figure of the mother. Taken together, the two films speak to the ways “becoming mother” is a process defined by the mother’s relationships with her children and families, interlocking oppressions that constrict choices within and outside the home, and nonlinear temporalities that fold women into political locations that resist tidy notions of progress and development.

Conclusion: The Real Imagined Impossible

“In the wake of the postmodern critiques of the 1980s, feminists have been struggling to develop theories of the subject that are adequate to a feminist politics.”

- Kathi Weeks, “Labor, Standpoints, and Feminist Subjects”

Throughout this dissertation I have argued that what I call a “re-vision” of seventies feminist documentaries must be a project of particularization, which acknowledges the diverse aesthetic, narrative, and political aspirations of individual films, rather than a project that forwards general claims about a comprehensive archive. In the last decade, feminist media scholars have been hard at work recuperating, re-visioning, and reconsidering their own past. Both *Signs* in 2004 and *Camera Obscura* in 2006 engaged in published conversations about the “state of the discipline.” These self-reflective projects also contributed new versions of the stories a newly defined field, often called “feminist film and media studies,” now tells itself about itself. Titled, “Archive for the Future,” the collection of essays published in three issues of *Camera Obscura*, consistently work in both directions: opening up new pathways for the future, and reaching back to reassess the practices, theories, and trends of the past. Not surprisingly, both *Signs* and *Camera Obscura* grapple explicitly with the seventies and, in particular, the cross-fertilization between the context of women’s liberation activism and the influx of French post-structuralism as a crucial and constitutive beginning that nonetheless produced dogmatic theories and prescriptive modes of engagement within feminist film theory.

Within feminist film studies, it seems that this story of origins requires consistent repetition and re-evaluation. Indeed, my own project begins with yet another version of this tale. Something about these events (cultural, theoretical, and political) that transpired in the seventies

keeps feminist film theorists looking back. By 1984, Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams had already titled their anthology of “feminist film criticism,” *Re-Visions*. In the introduction, the authors convey a new urgency about taking stock of the field, identifying its trends, and disavowing many of its newly recognized dead ends. In its first decade, feminist film theory was already worried about its legacy, a tad embarrassed about its blind spots, and yet committed as ever to formulating theoretical pathways into the future. The work of re-vision then, is a vital feminist methodology that I participate in throughout this work. I call my own project a “Re-Vision” as a way of being self-reflexive about the act of creating new versions of feminist stories about the filmic, activist, and theoretical production of the seventies.

In one of the most recent “re-vision” projects, Corinn Columpar and Sophie Mayer take note of a “decisive shift” that has been taking place in feminist film theory. Shifts, too, have been often declared within feminist film studies. In *Re-Visions*, the editors also signaled a shift that was taking place in the early 1980s. At that time, the editors wanted to reassess the notion of difference, “re-vising the old apprehension of sexual difference and making it possible to multiply differences, to move away from homogeneity, away from the same” (14-15). In the contemporary landscape, difference of course remains a critical node of thinking. Indeed, as my project bears out, representations and confrontations with notions of feminist difference have been at the heart of activism, theory and practice since the inception of the second wave. Shifts, in other words, may signal new accommodations or newly prioritized frameworks of thinking, but they never actually refer to complete beginnings or endings. That is why it so often makes sense to postulate returns and revisions, reconsiderations and reformulations. Once lines of thinking have been opened, they might trend in a certain direction, but they never actually close down other possible routes, paths not taken, projects left unattended.

Such is the assessment made by Columpar and Mayer. The editors identify the contemporary shift as catalyzed by “a return of the repressed” in which many of the concepts “sidelined” by apparatus theory are rising to the surface: emotion, sensation, corporeality, and pleasure. Tellingly, Columpar and Mayer subtitle their anthology, *There She Goes*, with a phrase that stresses praxis over theory: “Feminist Filmmaking and Beyond.” The editors conceive of their anthology in terms of a “virtual cinematheque” in which they “curate” “connectivities and flows between artists and texts” (7). The anthology clearly makes manifest a new arrangement of desires within the field of feminist film and media studies where fluidity, connection, affect, and artistry come together in ways that continue to play off the attenuation of past, present, and future. *There She Goes* does not take up the films at the core of this dissertation. However, my revision of feminist documentary films of the seventies clearly fits into the shift Columpar and Mayer claim is taking place within the field. Repressed in the mid-seventies by the anti-realist trend in film theory, feminist documentary films return in this project as instantiations of neglected possibilities, problems, and concerns relevant to feminist film theory as well as beyond the discipline in feminist studies more generally conceived.

Throughout this dissertation, I have undertaken multiple approaches to feminist documentary films that resist the frameworks erected by psychoanalytic and semiotic film theories. My reading practice has been concerned with the ways that films such as *The Woman's Film*, *Self-Health*, *Janie's Janie*, *I Am Somebody*, *Joyce at 34* and *Riddles of the Sphinx* exceed their characterization either as “verité” or “experimental” films. Where I insist on the relevance of realist conventions, such as hand-held cameras, talking head sequences, grainy film stock, natural lighting, and synchronous sound, I focus on the ways these strategies work towards the projection of political fantasies, aspirations, and claims that speak to the imaginaries of seventies feminisms. Here, too, I work against homogenizing claims about “realism,” “the women’s liberation

movement,” or even “feminism,” to offer a nuanced take on feminist interventions regarding consciousness-raising, body politics, and motherhood, for example. In my version of “re-vision,” I also resist the over-determination of film form and film politics, which I read as scaffolding the critique of realism in seventies film theory. Rather, I seek political meaning within but also beyond the limits of the frame. I address questions of distribution, exhibition, and reception, as well as the dialogical exchange between films, audiences, critics, and theorists. Close readings of films and feminist movement rhetoric generate a re-vision that strives for nuance and works against flattened periodizations of prior decades.

I locate the central incommensurability between psychoanalytic and semiotic film theory and women’s documentaries of the seventies in their competing notions of political and cinematic subjectivity. Whereas feminist films anticipated live spectators in the context of shared viewing practices, movement politics, and dialogic exchange, the cinematic subject imagined by psychoanalytic and semiotic trends in feminist film theory was constituted as an effect of the signifying practices of the text. These heterogeneous projects conceived of their political interventions distinctly. Nor was each “side” properly discrete, nor the notions of subjectivity generated in practice and in theory respectively homogenous. As my chapters bear out, a range of feminist political subjects emerge on and beyond the screen of feminist documentaries. Where I have investigated and mobilized concepts such as identification, experience, collectivity, and maternity to literally flesh out the feminist subjects that emerge in my re-vision of these documentaries, I do not claim to offer a comprehensive theoretical account of feminist subjectivity. As the quote from Kathi Weeks above makes evident, the elaboration of a notion of subjectivity compatible with feminist aspirations remains very much a work in progress in feminist studies.

My own intervention into the collective thought project on feminist subjectivity is to suggest the cultural, theoretical, and activist remainders of the seventies, such as feminist documentary films, continue to exert pressure on the present – pressure, that I read as indicative of some unfinished feminist business. In particular, in my engagement with *The Woman's Film*, *Self-Health*, *Janie's Janie*, *Joyce at 34* and *I Am Somebody*, I sense that we need more expansive ways of thinking through the concept of experience. And not just the concept of experience, but the ways experience figures as *constitutive* of subjectivity, in feminist documentaries and movement rhetoric, by the act of imagining a revolutionary alternative to the present and speaking it in one's own voice. This is different from arguing that a knowing subject has unrestricted and unmediated access to pure and self-original knowledge from within. Resistance to theoretical projects that naturalize the Western, Enlightenment subject has fueled generative fires throughout feminist theory, which I support. And yet, consistently burned at the stake is any notion of subjectivity that mobilizes experience as a possible foundation for either thought or action.

In *The Woman's Film*, *Self-Health*, *Janie's Janie*, *Joyce at 34* and *I Am Somebody* women speak directly the camera and they speak to each other about their lives, their activism, their families, and their fantasies. First-person narration is a critical modality of feminist documentary films, whether this occurs in voice-over as in *Joyce at 34* and *I Am Somebody*, or whether this happens in synchronous sound as in *The Woman's Film* and *Janie's Janie*. In my readings, this self-referential impulse in feminist documentaries captures the second wave feminist aspiration to create both authentic and collective modes of thinking through patriarchy and capitalism. Yet, more often than not, the women on screen experience and describe tremendous transformation. These are not merely static, “positive images” with which other women could identify (although they are also that). Feminist documentaries also enact feminist

politics through collective modes of production, distribution, and exhibition. And feminist documentaries, above all, screen transformations, realizations, and becomings.

Writing self-reflexively about academic mourning and nostalgia over the loss of the revolutionary imaginaries of the late sixties, Wendy Brown stresses how a collective investment in “an emancipated world to come” saturated the political landscape with a belief in transformation. She explains, “However problematically this formation of political life carried at its heart attachment to both political and individual transformation, a deep conviction about the possibility of making humans differently, and pleasures in the power of both critique and of collective action” (108). For Brown, “revolutionary feminism” embedded a promise that “becoming” new men and women was not only possible, but also imminent. It is a promise, she admits that is both philosophically and political naïve in retrospect, but nonetheless revolutionary, willing to cast off the shackles of the past and fully arrive in a new and different future. This is the vision of feminist subjectivity transmitted through the work of experience in women’s documentaries, which not only screen imagined becomings, they imagine inciting new becomings. The feminist documentaries considered in this project come out of the revolutionary impulse described by Brown – the one we must consistently disavow in present investigations lest our scholarly interest in materials that share this impulse also be interpreted as “naïve” and “problematic.” These descriptors resound throughout critiques of second wave feminism, feminist documentaries, consciousness-raising novels, and politically-motivated realist art in every media. The hasty and embarrassed dismissal of these moments and objects indeed suggest that something akin to a return of the repressed is at work.

In this project, I have put film theory in conversation with feminist theory as I grapple with concepts such as work, politics, feminism, race, and subjectivity. Among political theorists, such as Hannah Arendt, Nancy Fraser, Kathi Weeks, and, in this conclusion, Wendy Brown, I

have found modes of thinking that, I believe, more suitably address the imaginings and becomings of political subjects within and beyond the cinematic frame. In this way, I remain committed to the vision of cinema espoused by feminist filmmakers in the late sixties and seventies of film as a “tool” for political action. I also address something that worries Jill Godmillow in her 2002 essay, “Kill the Documentary as We Know It.” Godmillow, who directed the feminist documentary *Antonia: Portrait of a Woman* (1974), expresses passionate concern about the continued dominance of the “classical realist documentary form,” and in particular, the way the films in this mold still “claim the pedigree of the real, and all the attributes and privileges of the real” (4). In Godmillow’s assessment, this kind of attachment to “the real” is “documentary’s albatross” and keeps the form locked into a pornographic spectacle, which in today’s cinemas, allows spectators consume their fill of the dispossessed and disadvantaged and slink out the theatre whispering, “Thank God that’s not me.” What irks Godmillow in particular is the way it seems documentary aesthetics have plodded along in their realist course without seeming to acknowledge “the last twenty years of continental theory, cinema theory, or by any kind of critical or political thinking” (4). Godmillow’s dire assessment begs the question: Does the realist documentary think *at all*? Does the form make possible thinking in ways that are not regressive, conservative, or complicit with the status quo? Indeed, I have argued that precisely the opposite, that revolutionary imaginaries are sometimes made possible in the interaction with feminist documentaries.

Although Godmillow’s assessment of the state of the art provokes important considerations about contemporary tendencies in documentary (and in particular the exploitation of the dispossessed) there is a problem of gross overgeneralization in Godmillow’s characterizations of documentary. After all, in her description of classical documentaries, these are films that produce, “sober, unauthored texts, texts through which the world supposedly tells

itself, without any ideological intervention from its authors” (3). She calls in response for films that “utilize, *self-consciously*, photographic images from the archive of the real” (3, emphasis mine). However, as I have made evident in my discussion of *Joyce at 34*, for example, self-consciousness and self-reflexivity can also work to guarantee what Roland Barthes called “the reality effect” of realist documentaries.³⁵ In *Joyce at 34*, a filmmaker self-reflexively contemplates the construction of her own image making on screen, and yet, the film would easily fall into Godmillow’s repudiated category of classical documentaries. Self-consciousness, that is, does not offer a ready solution to the problem of so-called naïve transparency that Godmillow here rehearses. Further, the problem, as I see it, is not that documentary film has turned a deaf ear to academic scholarship on concepts we might assume Godmillow has in mind: ideology, realism, critique, subjectivity. Rather, this scholarship has been inadequately responsive to the kind of thinking taking place in some realist documentaries.

Work in both directions is necessary, I argue. We need more nuanced ways of describing and apprehending realist documentaries, particularly, since as Godmillow makes clear, the form stubbornly and curiously maintains dominance despite invective critiques from the academy. This work, much of which is on the horizon of renewed cinematic engagements with realism described in the introduction, would benefit from a sincere engagement with feminist documentary films, as many of them both speak to the limitations of the form as well as its political urgency and contemporary relevance. Rather than assume that the dismissal of women’s documentaries was an inevitable byproduct of more enlightened theoretical postulations, we should return to them generously, wondering what they might tell us about how realism thinks, dreams, and imagines the real, the imaginary, and the impossible.

³⁵ See Barthes’ essay, “The Reality Effect” in which the structuralist critic demonstrates how the use of “conventions” (elaborate descriptions of excess details) create a “reality effect” in nineteenth century realist novels. “A new verisimilitude is born,” writes Barthes, “which is precisely realism, by which we mean any discourse which accepts ‘speech acts’ justified by their referent alone” (147).

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Biography

Shilyh J. Warren was born in Seattle, Washington on December 31, 1974. She received her B.A. in Women's Studies from Dartmouth College. In 2002, she completed a Master's Degree in Comparative Literature. In 2008, she was awarded the Evan Frankel Dissertation Fellowship from the Graduate School at Duke University.