

RETURNING THE GAZE

Bernadette Wegenstein,
Professor of Media Studies at
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documentary filmmaker, asks
is there such a thing as a
feminist documentary?

Yes. There is such a thing as a feminist documentary. But it is not an easy genre to define, as can be said of almost anything in regards to feminism and other 'isms', which are usually practices and ideologies with a particular oppressed past that prevented them from 'being' or 'becoming' something on their own, and without referencing a mainstream that they either distanced themselves from or had to redefine. It takes time for feminist documentary, as it takes time for any 'isms', to become something, to invent a mode of expression that is a *sui generis*, and that was not there before. And that finally needs no comparison, no origin, no home, but that just is.

Empathy: Emotion Over Action

The genre of the investigative documentary, the evidence collecting documentation, where the subjective becomes objective, the empathic rage that turns itself into accusation, and us viewers into witnesses, is historically a male genre. There isn't the space to go into details here but Claude Lanzmann's SHOAH (1985) was a true forerunner of

Is the camera an extension of their or our views? The gaze is an expression of our combined views ...

the investigative *vérité* doc, which today is one of the most prolific and successful documentary genres underwritten by predominantly male documentary auteurs such as Errol Morris or Alex Gibney. In SHOAH Lanzmann unveiled and shared the trauma of Holocaust survivors, taking them through their pain, and participating in the creation of this subjective-objective truth that functions like a trial by inserting his 'voice of prosecution' into the picture and at times even putting himself in the film.

I want to ask: what was a feminist documentary strategy of that time and

how does it compare to Lanzmann's? In May 1978 a feminist collective in Rome documented the first rape trial to be on camera in Italy. The trial was about Fiorella, an 18-year old girl who denounced an acquaintance of hers, Rocco Vallone and three other men, to have gang-raped her. The trial became famous as it slowly turned itself into a trial against the defendant Fiorella, whom the lawyers of the male perpetrators represented as immoral and 'deserving' of abuse. I want to quote the collective of female filmmakers covering the trial, *Gruppo Collettivo Femminista Cinema di Roma*, who said: 'we want to explain and not justify ourselves.'

In the film, the filmmakers are completely invisible. The camera is in the hands of different women documenting the events, there is no one cinematographer at work but rather an empathy-creating camera movement that is astounded and shocked about what she sees and witnesses, along with over 12 million viewers who watched this on Italian television.

The best way to describe this cinematic approach is with the concept of 'feeling-seeing' that was analysed by Jill Soloway,

creator of Trans-Parent and many other feminist narratives, in her 2016 TIFF master-class on 'The Female Gaze'.

For my documentary THE GOOD BREAST (2016) I thought a lot about the notion of feeling-seeing and how something like that would translate into a filmic approach that included my feminist interpretation of breast cancer treatment and especially cosmetic surgery practices in current breast cancer treatments. I started from the history of surgical breast cancer treatment since the radical mastectomy invented and practised since the late nineteenth century by William

Halsted, one of the founding fathers of JHU's Medical School. In my research I found that a mastectomy does not actually have survival benefits – although it has other benefits, such as the opportunity to reconstruct a breast. From that I formulated a guiding principle for my cinematic approach that focused on the loss of the breast not as medical necessity but as sacrifice. With this concept of feeling-seeing in mind I imagined the loss of the breast as a Christian sacrifice and the operating room as a cathedral.

Participation

I now want to talk about the question of participation and the missing female presence in the tradition of feminist documentary filmmaking. Of course the big moment of participation came with the *cinéma-vérité* movement of the 1960s and the ethnographic documentary style of Jean Rouch's CHRONIQUE D'UN ÉTÉ (1961). The camera became a provocateur, a stimulator of conflicts, it did not hide its presence. While this cinema is definitely more feminine in the sense of Jill Soloway's seeing-feeling, it is not, however, feminist in nature (even though there are certain auteurs of that era who are more interested in female characters such as the Maysles brothers). And what about a presence of the female filmmaker? Self-documentation of the female author/performer is not a new invention of just documentary film practice. We know this practice from Agnès Varda's or Chantal Akerman's important documentary work, and also from the predominantly female performers in the 1960s and 1970s such as Gina Pane or Marina Abramovic who staged a participation in women's lives, bodies, and feelings through performance art.

And what has feminist documentary filmmaking as interventionism to offer in this regard of a participatory cinema? This is where I want to go back to the 1960s and this time to the 'feminist' or 'queer' filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini and his COMIZI D'AMORE (1964). In Eleanora Danco's documentary N'CAPACE (2014) the characters are presented as if they were 'paraded' by the filmmaker. She lines them up, and often times exposes them, similar to Pasolini. The feminist moment in this documentary is when we find out about the characters' sufferings



The operating room as cathedral. A still from THE GOOD BREAST (2016).

and their problems, such as the old lady who tells the story of her husband abusing her, almost 'by coincidence' and by 'participating' in her story-telling through the filmmaker.

A feminist documentary is speaking for, with and through the character. The body is used as a tool prioritised over the technology, the camera even. All these scenes are built out of the presence and the relationship of the characters with the film team, or the director who is either seen or heard behind the camera crew. Is the camera an extension of their or our viewpoint? I think the gaze is an expression of our combined views, the filmmakers with the characters. We merge with the character more than a 'male' documentary cinema such as Werner Herzog's, who presents his characters 'in front' of him.

Returning the Gaze

The female gaze always means returning the gaze: *I see you seeing me*. The film asks: 'how does it feel to stand here and to be seen?' Soloway says, 'we don't write culture – we are written by it.' But what can we do when we want to be the subject, and name you as the object? It's not a gender reversal. This is the socio-political justice of art making. This is politics.

So the female gaze and feminist documentary is also a political tool. We can decide a heroine's journey. And in my film DEVOTI TUTTI (2017), I decided to tell the story of St Agatha through her point of view, doing something that was never done before since all the stories we hear about her have only ever been told by men. According to the myth, in 251 AD, 14-year-old Agatha of Catania,

Sicily, was propositioned by the powerful Roman governor Quinziano. She refused him, and was brutally punished for her refusal by breast amputation. Ever since, she is venerated in Catania as the one girl who stood up to patriarchy by saying 'no!' Giving Agatha a voice and 'returning the gaze' is a daring thing to do and it creates a lot of complications, because we are facing such new questions as 'whose voice is it' and 'whose viewpoint?' But in DEVOTI TUTTI, I want to see Agatha gaze to gaze with her Devotees. How did she become Saint Agatha, and how did this feel to her?

Cinema is nothing but fakery, whether it is documentary or fiction, and there is no distinction between these two realms other than that they are different art forms. As the philosopher Stanley Cavell put it, the real distinction is not between the fictional and the factual but between film as art and film as document. But even these lines are blurred within feminist documentary practice, because this practice comes from a place of embodied emotion over action, from a place of participation with the document of the film – turning this document into an expression, and from a place of fantasy that there might be something like a 'non gaze' or a 'truth gaze' that could be returned. And yet, all the fakery and the lies that cinema tell us – are revealers of the many truths of life.

In the first documentary proper from 1922 by Robert Flaherty, NANOOK OF THE NORTH, everything was staged. 'One often has to distort a thing in order to catch its true spirit', said Flaherty.

Bernadette Wegenstein