



Unidentified archival image.  
Courtesy Women Make Movies

## The Last Days of Women's Cinema

Patricia White

Claire Johnston's "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema," with its injunction that "women's cinema . . . embody the working through of desire," has shaped my thinking about this "archive for the future" and the curious temporality it suggests.<sup>1</sup> In an essay very much of its moment—1973 (hear it in the dogmatic insistence that "we reject any view in terms of realism," even in the term *countercinema* itself)—Johnston made an influential argument for looking back at the work of women directors in the Hollywood industry. At the same time, it was future-oriented, characterizing women's cinema as emergent—as unpredictable as desire itself. How does invoking this "archival" document in the current moment frame the question of the future of feminism, culture, and media? For me, it is important to recall that Johnston's theorizing accompanied feminist practice—women's filmmaking and the curating and exhibition of this work. *Notes on Women's Cinema*, the pamphlet that included Johnston's essay, grew out of the Edinburgh Film Festival's 1972 Women's Cinema Event, which she co-organized with Laura Mulvey and Lynda Myles.<sup>2</sup> Yet the canonization of "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema" in feminist film scholarship tends to elide this festival context.

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How do we go about placing women's cinema (especially given its evocation of place, the connotations of cinema as a place to see films) in an archive for the future? I am thinking of the concrete, material practices and spaces of 1970s "cinefeminism," the women's films and festivals, as well as the publications and distribution and activist organizations that sprang up not only in Great Britain and the United States but also in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Mexico, and elsewhere. I am also thinking of current production and the exhibition spaces and critical practices that earlier activity made possible and through which we can project a future (for) women's cinema. *Camera Obscura's* thirtieth anniversary volume seems an appropriate place and occasion to make these connections. Confronting the journal's current expansive sense of feminism, culture, and media studies (secured by the vibrancy of the scholarly field it helped to establish) with the publication's historical emphasis on cultural practices of women's media (its origins in the 1972 publication *Women in Film*, the "Women Working" feature of its early issues) makes evident the work that still needs to be done to support the role of women's media in feminist social transformation.

In 1975, in the early years of the feminist film movement, dozens of women's media groups gathered in New York City at the Feminist Film and Video Conference and produced a "wom-anfesto," which turned up in the uncataloged archives of Women Make Movies: "As feminists working collectively in film and video we see our media as an ongoing process both in terms of the way it is made and the way it is distributed and shown. . . . We do not accept the existing power structure and we are committed to changing it by the content and structure of our images and by the way we relate to each other in our work and with our audience."<sup>3</sup> While media produced by women has increased exponentially in the intervening decades, concern with a feminist restructuring of the social and material relations of production and exhibition is much less salient. The DIY women's video chain letter Joanie 4 Jackie addresses contemporary barriers to the circulation and exhibition of women's work by using mail order and the World Wide Web. The project responds to a diffuse and saturated media

landscape, constructing virtual collectivity while ceding the ground of cinema as collective public space.<sup>4</sup> MoviesByWomen.com takes a different tack by alerting its listserv subscribers to theatrical premieres of work directed by women, in the hope that opening weekend box office receipts will increase such work's cultural clout.

Perhaps the most instructive case of an organization devoted to fostering the infrastructure of women's media is Women Make Movies itself, through the history of which one can take the measure of shifts in media, culture, and feminism. Ariel Dougherty and Sheila Paige founded Women Make Movies in 1972 to teach film production to New York City women and girls. They had first used the name Women Make Movies for a group of women working together on such films as *The Trials of Alice Crimmins* (1970–1971), which was screened on street corners and even in front of the courthouse where the trials took place.<sup>5</sup> This innovative exhibition strategy underscores how the organization, despite its name, looks beyond production to the wider social experience of media. A few years later, the extraordinary demand for Women Make Movies's 1976 production *Healthcaring: From Our End of the Speculum* (dir. Denise Bostrom and Jane Warrenbrand) encouraged the entry into distribution, which came to be and remains the organization's focus. Debra Zimmerman, director since 1984, found out about Women Make Movies at a women-only screening in an upstate New York barn.<sup>6</sup> Exposure to some of the hundreds of films and videos by and about women in the current catalog promises similar experiences of discovery.<sup>7</sup>

Today there are many more films and videos being made by women, all over the world, in all sectors of production. Some reward Johnston's hopes; many more could be characterized as what she and her cocurators called "simply films made by women in a man's cinema."<sup>8</sup> But how are these works shown and received in order to make a difference and connections? Women's film festivals such as Films de Femmes in Créteil, France (established 1979), and Chicago's Women in the Director's Chair (founded in 1980) are among the surviving showcases specifically for women's work. More recently, Taiwan's Women Make Waves (2005 was its

twelfth edition) and the Women's Film Festival in Seoul (founded in 1997) have emerged as vital sites, while a number of European and North American events have folded (including festivals in Montreal, Seattle, and Washington, DC).<sup>9</sup>

But in the current mediascape, films by women with aspirations to public recognition through theatrical exhibition require exposure at industry-oriented festivals such as Toronto and Sundance in North America. These sites reward scrutiny as, in a sense, accidental archives of the current contours and potential reach of women's cinema. Cameron Bailey, one of the principal programmers of the Toronto International Film Festival, notes that including women's work has been "part of the festival's mission from years and years back," due in part to the feminist commitment of the programmer Kay Armatage during her long tenure there. But, he speculates, "as feminism has faded from view generally and in popular culture," it is "harder to find programmers who will 'out' themselves." Consequently, programming women's or other identity- or regionally based work is now less of a conscious, quantitative effort than something "taken into account" in other programming strategies.<sup>10</sup> Toronto's 2005 edition was a place where a big-budget women's picture like *North Country* (US, 2005)—about the first successful sexual harassment class action lawsuit, by Niki Caro, the director of the Maori girl power hit *Whale Rider* (New Zealand/Germany, 2002)—shared space with *Sisters in Law* (Cameroon/UK, 2005)—Kim Longinotto and Florence Ayisi's documentary about women court officials in a small town in Cameroon (a Women Make Movies release)—and opening-night film *Water* (Canada/India, 2005)—Deepa Mehta's highly anticipated depiction of the historical treatment of Indian widows, whose early production had been shut down by Hindu fundamentalists. All three feminist works have received North American releases—a significant result of festival programming politics. But without efforts to shape reception discourses, their divergent enunciative strategies and responses to transnational feminist practice tend to be evened out in the "art house humanism" of wider circuits of exhibition.<sup>11</sup>

I am not arguing that we should go back to organizing separate festivals or women's events at major festivals, but advocacy and critical attention are still needed. Women represented about 20 percent of the directors in the Gala and Reel to Reel sections in which *Water* and *Sisters in Law* were showcased at Toronto in 2005. Sundance touted a record 25 percent women directors in the competition sections of the 2006 edition.<sup>12</sup> The numbers game is of course not the most nuanced way to think about women's roles in cinema, but issues of basic equity are still so glaring that it seems a legitimate place to start. At the other end of the commercial spectrum in the US, women comprised only 7 percent of all directors working on the top 250 grossing films domestically in 2005, according to an annual study conducted by Martha Lauzen.<sup>13</sup> If women are underrepresented among directors of the world's "best" films and the biggest sellers, the range and numbers of women's work at the festivals and on the art house and cable TV screens, whose programming they determine, is unprecedented. Like archives, festivals are concrete spaces where cultural capital is banked—but festivals are also commercially oriented. Will these women's films get distributed, and if so, how? How will they be written about? We need a public sphere in which transnational women's media and conversations about its limits and promises can shape the future. The many women's organizations—publications, production collectives, training programs, distributors, exhibition venues, and festivals—that sustained the early feminist film movement have disappeared or transformed themselves. *Camera Obscura's* pages can be a place of preservation—not of outmoded aesthetic prescriptions or unrealistic anticapitalist manifestos for women's cinema, but of this energy, attention, and social vision. Claire Johnston embraced both entertainment and politics in "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema." Acknowledging the constraints of the current commercialized niche-market climate of women's cinema, attention to historical and global institutions and practices (including those of publishing and writing) can still reverse a potentially postfeminist future.

### Notes

1. Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema," in *Notes on Women's Cinema*, ed. Johnston (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973), 24–31.
2. Lynda Myles served as the director of the Edinburgh International Film Festival (EIFF) from 1973 to 1980. Thanks to EIFF for locating the original program.
3. Pennee Bender, "Women Make Movies: Portrait of a Grassroots Women's Organization in the 1970s and 1980s" (unpublished manuscript, Department of History, New York University, 1990), 12. Bender notes that nearly seventy groups were in attendance at this conference, which was co-organized by Women Make Movies.
4. Joanie 4 Jackie introduces itself and its mission thus: "Joanie 4 Jackie is a free, alternative distribution system for women movie makers—all of them. Every woman who submits her tape is accepted." The project is a new incarnation of Miranda July's Big Miss Movieola: "Dearest Movie Revolutionary, The newfangled Joanie 4 Jackie team is hard at work sending out mailings, applying for grants, and posting flyers in your local bingo halls and hair salons. We are here to inform you that Joanie 4 Jackie is up and running. She is anxious to receive entries. She is hungry. She needs your movies to survive." Joanie 4 Jackie, [www.joanie4jackie.com](http://www.joanie4jackie.com) (accessed June 2006).
5. Dougherty recalls that the group included Pat Bertozzi, Marion Hunter, Ellen Gurian, Sarah Stein, Cabell Smith, Sheila Paige, and herself (personal communication, 3 September 2006).
6. Debra Zimmerman, interview with the author, New York, 7 January 2000.
7. Women Make Movies, [wmm.com](http://wmm.com) (accessed June 2006).
8. Edinburgh Film Festival Program, 1972.
9. Alexandra Juhasz, "The Future Was Then: Reinvesting in Feminist Media Practice and Politics," *Camera Obscura*, no. 61 (2006): 52–57. Juhasz applauds the vibrancy of women's film festivals in Seoul and Taiwan and calls for increased attention by feminist film scholars to the sites of women's film production.

10. Cameron Bailey, telephone interview, 1 October 2005. Angela McRobbie describes postfeminism as “invoking feminism as that which can be taken into account” in “Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4 (2004): 256.
11. See my essay “Cinematic Solidarity: The Films of Kim Longinotto,” *Cinema Journal* (forthcoming).
12. Sundance’s various competitions featured such feminist films as Hilary Brougher’s *Stephanie Daley* (US, 2006), in which Tilda Swinton’s pregnant forensic detective investigates a young woman accused of infanticide; Lauren Greenfield’s vérité portrait of a clinic for the treatment of anorexia nervosa, *Thin* (US, 2006); and the Lebanese director Jocelyn Saab’s *Kiss Me Not on the Eyes* (Lebanon, 2005), about female sexual autonomy in Egypt. In contrast, the staid and much smaller New York Film Festival (NYFF) included just one feature film by a woman in 2005—Dorota Kedzierawska’s *Jestem (I Am)*, Poland, 2005—among its twenty-five features. However, NYFF 2004 opened with the quite feminist Agnès Jaoui’s *Comme une image (Look at Me)*, France, 2004 and featured Lucretia Martel’s *La niña santa (The Holy Girl)*, Argentina, 2004, and the 2006 edition of New Director/New Films, programmed by the NYFF programmers in conjunction with the Museum of Modern Art, included six features with women directors or codirectors, accounting for 24 percent of the features.
13. Lauzen’s studies can be accessed through New York Women in Film and Television’s Web site, [www.nywift.org/article.aspx?id=79](http://www.nywift.org/article.aspx?id=79) (accessed June 2006). The Guerrilla Girls’ Oscar billboard campaign in conjunction with MoviesByWomen.com also uses similar statistics ([www.guerrillagirls.com/posters/unchained.shtml](http://www.guerrillagirls.com/posters/unchained.shtml) [accessed June 2006].)

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