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Celebrating 40 Years



WMM@40
WOMEN MAKE MOVIES

Looking Back and Forward: A Conversation about Women Make Movies

Debra Zimmerman and Patricia White

In the summer of 1984 I interned at Women Make Movies, working closely with Debra Zimmerman, the organization's relatively new director and then sole employee. When I returned in 1988 to work in distribution, the organization had moved to Soho and taken on significantly more films and staff. I eventually joined the board in 2001 and currently serve as chair.

As a teacher and scholar, I owe much of my perspective on feminist film to what I have learned from the staff, board members, filmmakers, consultants, funders, programmers, and nonprofit film professionals with whom I have come into contact through WMM—no one more than Zimmerman. An intense presence with a seductive voice and an infectious laugh, she taught me how to hail a New York City cab, read a budget, see more festival films in one day than would seem humanly possible, and turn a passionate commitment to women and film into a vocation.

This is a distillation of our conversations in late summer 2012, as Zimmerman juggled real-estate issues, negotiations with a

folding nonprofit to take on dozens of their fiscal sponsorship projects, and preparations for the Toronto International Film Festival.

Interview

Patricia White: *This is WMM's fortieth anniversary—next year will be your thirtieth anniversary as director. Can you speak to how far the organization has come since you started?*

Debra Zimmerman: I am thinking about when you first walked through the door, after I became director—the entire WMM could fit into my office now. The poster of Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (US, 1983) was in the office—we distributed her earlier film *Regrouping* (US, 1976). Somehow *Born in Flames* is reverberating; it was kind of like the past and the future and the present all twisted into one.

Yeah, it was set in the future—about now—and their African American president really was a socialist!

Back then, imagining WMM as it is now is like imagining that we'd have an African American president—quite unbelievable. There was a moment back then—a decade, really—of cinematic exploration combined with feminist theory that was so exciting. And it goes to the heart of the beginnings of WMM under my leadership. That intersection of politics and theory defined us. I wonder where films like that are now. In a positive way, though, today we see a kind of activism that connects back—to the seventies, maybe, not the eighties—and a real desire for social impact. But I miss it.

When I came back to work at WMM we were releasing Surname Viet Given Name Nam (dir. Trinh T. Minh-ha, US, 1989). For me that film was a bridge between that kind of theoretically engaged filmmaking and the global embeddedness and transnational emphasis that characterizes so much of the collection now. That was a pivotal moment. But that was a feature film and we struggled to put it in theaters. It has had an incredible life in scholarly and nontheatrical settings. But I think the landscape has

changed—some of that experiment with form has had to go into art films that are at least semiviable theatrically.

Yes, how can you keep those two things going at the same time? I think about *The Gold Diggers* (dir. Sally Potter, UK, 1983) as the end of something—it was about pushing theory into practice as far as it could go until it was devoid of pleasure for many people—though not for me!

Or me!

If there is another film that encapsulates a time of change, I think it would have to be personal filmmaking—films like *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* (dir. Deborah Hoffman, US, 1994) or *A Healthy Baby Girl* (dir. Judith Helfland, US, 1997).

The catalog is full of such films that engage documentary ethics in so many ways, but there's still an imbalance in terms of which filmmakers get public recognition.

We are in a time right now of the million-dollar documentary—the multimillion-dollar documentary—and for some reason, women have not been able to bring that personal element into their big documentaries.

The distributors of those films are not nonprofits.

The issue is more that the films are softened around the edges.

I wanted to ask you about a comment that you made at the workshop on WMM at the 2012 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Boston, a sort of good news, bad news statement.

What I said was that I'm really happy to be celebrating our fortieth anniversary, and I'm also sad because it makes me think about what it means that we're still as needed as we were forty years ago. . . . We were supposed to go out of business! We're a project that by its very nature was meant to stop when equity is reached, but equity hasn't been reached by a long shot. Certainly there's so much to celebrate. When I came to WMM, I could count on one hand the

number of women directors working in Hollywood. I remember being on a panel with Michelle Parkerson in Chicago at the Women in the Director's Chair Festival, probably around 1985, 1986, and being able to count on two hands the number of African American women directors that we could think of, much less those working in Hollywood. Now there are more women than I can count making movies, yet the statistics are still very, very bad. We're talking about a decrease or at least stasis since 1998 in the number of women directors who are in the Directors Guild of America. We're talking about celebrating when we see a film festival that has more than 25 percent women, like Sundance does. So these things make me question whether it's a time to celebrate or not.

But the number of films that WMM distributes or supports is much greater today. And it's not necessarily the case that the women in WMM's collection or fiscal sponsorship program are Hollywood-bound.

That's right, that's right. What I find interesting is the growth of women's film festivals around the world, particularly in developing countries, in former Soviet republics—even in the US. This is under the radar in the film world because these are community-based festivals. In New York we have not one big but four smaller women's film festivals—including two African American women's festivals. I am finding out about festivals all the time—in Ljubljana, in Chile. I'm proud that WMM has actually played a role with some of them: Women Make Waves in Taiwan and Film Mor in Istanbul started with WMM films. We decided that any group that wanted to have a festival would be given films for free the first year and we'd come and help present them. We've done that in six to eight places. This year we worked with the Sierra Leone International Film Festival to create a women's film section, and this month I am on my way to Monaco to present five documentaries focusing on human rights issues at the MINI Film Festival. It's sponsored by BMW and we are collaborating with a conference called "Grace, a Symbol of Change," about Princess Grace's legacy! This really represents the breadth of audiences' interest in seeing

feminist film. And this year with our fortieth anniversary we are doing events in Bolivia, Sheffield in the UK, Dallas, St. John's in Canada, South Africa, Sarajevo, and Iceland, just to mention a few.

Can you give a sense of the change in scale of the organization?

I think the early 1980s catalog probably had about forty films. The collection now is around 550 films . . . we've kept it fairly stable. Every year we pick up between eighteen and twenty-five films, and that means deaccessing films every couple of years. I'm thinking that we need to make these archival films available for streaming on the Internet; we're hoping to get a grant for it. There are films that are still significant historically but really no longer appropriate for active distribution. For example, there were so many films that were made about Latin America, about Nicaragua and El Salvador, back in the day.

What about the size of the organization's budget?

When you were an intern at WMM and I was the director, I remember there being a budget figure for \$54 for the year in Xeroxing costs. That's probably because we were getting free Xeroxing from somewhere! The change in scale is just insane. We have a spreadsheet of every year's income in distribution from the mid-eighties until now, and I think this past year was about \$1.5 million, and back then it was about \$26,000. We are a stable organization . . . [though] we change all the time and we get better, I think, at what we do. We have thirteen on staff. That's part-time and full-time, and we have a couple of consultants that work with us on a regular basis.

That stability is also extraordinary given that WMM receives very little government support.

At this point, with the recent cuts, our funding from the government is probably less than \$100,000 a year. So it's way less than 10 percent. When you include forms of earned income besides distribution, like the Production Assistance Program, I think it's some-

thing like 2 to 3 percent of our total budget, which I'm so proud of. I was just asked last week, in an interview for a fortieth anniversary event at the Dallas Video Festival, what I am most proud of. Nobody's asked me that before. And the answer—I realized after watching the Republican Convention that it was a little scary [laughter]—but what I was most proud of was that I created jobs. It's actually possible to make a living working in women's film, and that to me is an extraordinary thing.

And this stability is maintained despite the vicissitudes of media culture. It's a wonder that there's still a viable educational film market.

We have always been ahead of the curve in the films we acquire because of our filmmakers, but I don't think we can be ahead of the curve in terms of format. We've seen formats come and go, like CD-ROM. Of course institutions take a much longer time to respond to technological changes than the consumer market does. What WMM is more than anything is a content aggregator—aggregator being one of those buzzwords of the 2010s—but we are one, and we are a brand; as long as there continues to be a paucity of films directed by women that represent women in a feminist way, there will be a need for some sort of WMM distribution program.

Going back to that dual mission of production assistance and distribution, it is not about finding films on certain topics for a market. Obviously you have to market and package things; but this truly is independent work, it represents filmmakers' formal inventiveness, their cultural perspectives on the material, their ambitions about how to use the medium, and that's a tricky balance—to have political commitment and aesthetic commitment and a business model that weathers all these technological storms.

It is the thing I love the most about WMM. When we see a film that tackles a difficult political issue—like *Rachel* by Simone Bitton (France/Belgium, 2009)—in a formally inventive and important way, I get excited. That being said, there are amazing, strong, solid, though perhaps more traditional documentaries being made about important issues that are not being covered by the

mainstream media—or not being covered from a feminist perspective. I am thinking of *The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo* (dir. Lisa F. Jackson, US, 2007), which came out the same month that the issue hit the front page of the *New York Times*. But no matter what the style of the film, it is still so difficult to get them made. Films in our Production Assistance Program take years and a huge diversity of funding sources to get made. *Nerakhoon (The Betrayal)* (US, 2008) by Ellen Kuras took twenty years, *Love and Diane* (US/France, 2002) by Jennifer Dworkin, twelve years. These films are produced independently; they do not receive major grants. They are not produced by studios, they are not produced by television, and they do in fact really represent very individual perspectives.

At the same time I am proud that we still distribute *La nouba des femmes du Mont-Chenoua* (Algeria, 1979), by Assia Djebar, which is going to show at the Museum of Modern Art in November [2012]. And I love that we have a collection that is really irreplaceable in terms of [capturing] the formal experimentation of the eighties—we called it “New Directions.” . . . At the Visible Evidence conference at New York University last summer, an academic teaching film stood up and said that WMM has enabled her to expand outside the US and to have access to an international feminist perspective. I was blown away. I think that what we have been able to do in very selected areas is to build collections that are really nuanced in their breadth. We had collections like “New Directions” and “Punto de Vista: Latina.” Now I think we have one of the most important collections by and about Muslim and Arab women. Post-9/11 we made the films available for free to anyone who wanted to use them. Before launching the offer—we called it “Response to Hate”—we all needed to look at the films to make sure that we weren’t reinforcing anti-Arab sentiment. And I was proud that not one of the films needed to be taken out. Feminism and Islam have an uneasy relationship, but even the films that were most critical of Islam were from a very personal perspective. It’s a complex collection.

When I come to a board meeting I'm so impressed at how present WMM is in the larger film world.

It is very intentional. I believe that WMM should be an advocacy organization and we should do it within the film world. We are much more the women's organization within the film world than we are the film organization of the women's community. So many times people have told us to change our name; I'm sure you were part of those conversations where we talked about changing the name to Women's Educational Media or something like that and we stuck with the name because it is a statement: Women Make Movies. I love to be on a panel like the one on distribution that I'll be on next week at the Toronto International Film Festival. Coming from an organization called Women Make Movies—as one of only four invited speakers—I don't have to say a word about feminism and I am still advocating for stronger representation of women in the film world. And making people aware that there is still a need for organizations like WMM.

And it's not just about who is directing the film. When we started looking at statistics regarding the funding and financing of independent documentaries, we looked at the subject of the film. Of course men making films about men got the most money and women making films about women got the least money. But what might even be more distressing is that those men making films about women get less money than women making films about men. Women's interests are seen as special interests. This reinforces something else people have tried to get us to change over the years—the fact that we distribute films that not only are by women directors but that also look at the world from a feminist perspective—with the broadest definition of feminism possible.

Debra Zimmerman has been the executive director of Women Make Movies since 1983. During her tenure it has grown into the largest distributor of films by and about women in the world and helped hundreds of women get their films made through its Production Assistance Program. Films from WMM programs have won prizes at the last five Sundance Film Festivals and have been nominated for or won Academy Awards in five of the last six years. Zimmerman speaks around the world on independent film distribution, marketing, and financing as well as on women's film.

Patricia White is a member of the editorial collective of *Camera Obscura* and the current chair of the Women Make Movies board. Professor of film and media studies at Swarthmore College, she is the author of *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*, the coauthor of *The Film Experience*, and the coeditor of *Critical Visions in Film Theory*. Her book on contemporary global women's filmmaking is forthcoming from Duke University Press.