

Feminist Film-making: Theory and Practice

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I got into film the easy and crazy way: I said to a friend, let's make a film — and she agreed. It wasn't quite like that, although just about.

Jill Johnston, a writer and feminist whom I admired, was coming to town and my friend had been asked to videotape a public reading. Although my friend didn't know anything about Jill Johnston, after a couple of hours of excited talk she agreed that we should make a movie about Jill's trip to Toronto. Jill also agreed.

Neither my partner nor I had made a film before. A year and a half later — which included incredible learning, anxiety, work, excitement, and \$20,000 — we had made a creditably professional and feminist 30-minute *cinéma vérité* documentary called *Jill Johnston October 1975*.

At that time, current feminist discussion emphasized the presentation of new images of women which would counteract the unrealistic sex objects and victim images of women in Hollywood films and television. Documentaries (the predominant form of political film) would present images which could provide alternative role models — autonomous, self-determining, achieving feminists, or just 'real' ordinary women with whom an audience could recognize a shared experience.

Moreover, a feminist film would be produced in a feminist manner. Collaboration, flexibility of roles, and equality of participation would reduce the alienation of the process for both crew and subject.

Jill Johnston October 1975 was not only a portrait of a political figure from the women's movement addressing feminist issues. We had made every attempt in the filmmaking process to eliminate the charges of objectification which are rightly laid on so many documentary filmmakers. The all-women crew had been with Jill constantly, becoming her friends and home base while she was in Toronto, and she had publicly stated that she was enjoying the filming. As for the crew, although areas of technical expertise had been specific, collaboration and collectivity had been the norm. (I admit that some of that collaboration had been necessitated by the lack of filmmaking experience of the co-directors, but for me at least it was also equally a principle developed through years of working collectively in women's groups.) In the editing also we felt that we had been sympathetic, truthful and fair to our subject.

However, in the intervening time I came to question the level of feminist analysis which we had manifested in the production of that film. *Jill Johnston October 1975* was a time capsule, a voice from a recent era in women's lives, not only in its content but in form. I began to question the aims and methods of feminist filmmaking anew.

My questions had nothing to do with the treatment of our subject in *Jill Johnston October 1975*, however, or even with the process. They concerned the nature of documentary, particularly *cinéma vérité* documentary, and with its status as a media product.

Cinéma vérité is a particular style of documentary filmmaking that came into prominence in the early sixties and now dominates the mass of TV and commercial documentary production. Its premise is simple: that the camera merely records what happens in front of it. Joan Churchill, one of the best cinematographers of this style in the world, put it clearly: 'I

don't set anything up, I don't interfere with anything, I just follow what happens.'

A simple premise, but the skills involved are enormous: to be able to follow action as quickly as it happens and to record it accurately, to be unobtrusive, mobile, and alert at all times, to move smoothly while at the same time watching out for composition, light, shadows, sound, and so on. The footage that results has, at its best, a completely spontaneous feel. Swish pans, zooms that may end up slightly out of focus for a second, a momentary glimpse of the sound boom, or slightly rocky hand-held tracking shots only contribute to the spontaneous 'reality' effect. It all adds up to the opposite of the perfectionist techniques of the Hollywood illusion, and these codes have come to signify that we are observing untouched reality.

But is it really reality? First of all, there's the famous Heisenberg effect: that the introduction of any new element into a situation changes that situation. And that may be more true of the introduction of a camera than of almost any other element. Even the most seasoned performers may change their behaviour when cameras are pointed at them. And certainly the presence of a film crew loaded with equipment which in itself is a highly mystified technology is a factor that tends to alarm or fascinate: suddenly we're news, or performers. Moreover, in the context of a film projected on a screen larger than life, even normal behaviour takes on a resonance, an import, a *meaning*. Passing a joint becomes a statement of a lifestyle, dancing becomes a performance, sitting quietly talking becomes an 'intimate moment', personal views become representative.

So much for recording untouched reality. And again we must question the status of the final product. For non-fiction films, *cinéma vérité* is still the dominant mode. It has its own set of codes which we all recognize by now, and those codes signify reality, truth. But the film is edited in such a way that action is continuous and smooth, fictional spaces are created, appropriate reactions are cut in where necessary (eg. to cover a sound cut) even if they occurred at different times, and an inadequately miked voice may be replaced (through post-dubbing in the studio) by that of a stranger. 'Reality' has been fragmented — cut — and reassembled, with the aid of all the conventional devices which render that fragmentation virtually invisible. So a new illusion is created, a new fiction. And that new fiction is consumed just like TV commercials, the national news, or Hollywood movies.

Thus no matter how feminist, how willing, collaborative, or enjoyable the process may be, the transformation of that experience into a film product changes it considerably. An image is appropriated; a person becomes an object to be looked at, consumed.

This may be true of all film. We're right back to the start again: how to make political films politically.

After months of thinking and reading, I set out to make a short film, this time real fiction. The central questions for me at the time were: (1) how to deal with the illusionism of cinema and our cultural lust for the illusion of reality; (2) how to circumvent the editing process, which ellides space and time invisibly; (3) how to allow the characters, the subjects of the film, to remain whole — unfragmented — and to collaborate in the creation of the film (a principle I still find *simpático*); and (4) how to acknowledge the inevitable voyeurism of the camera and of the audience.

These are the solutions I came up with and tried to put into practice in an eight-minute piece called *Gertrude and Alice in Passing*.

(1) *The pro-filmic event: what we're watching, and our desire for that event to appear to be reality.* My solution was to manifest a time-warp of a particularly theatrical nature. The characters which the audience watches would be historical figures (Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas) in costumes that would have a flavour of period but would not be realistic. The car they drove was a cream-puff of a 1940 Mercury convertible. The actors (Jackie Burroughs and Anne Anglin) came primarily from theatre, and their experience, as well as the demands of the situation, made the pro-filmic event take on a rather staged or fantasy quality. There was no way that the audience could suppose that this was a chance or real happening.

(2) *That old trickster, editing* – which normally operates smoothly and invisibly to create a fictional time and space. In *Gertrude And Alice in Passing*, space and action would be consistent and whole: the camera (in another car) would approach the actors' car, overtake them and drive parallel to them, gazing at them for the course of the scene to be acted out, and finally pass them to drive off. Each scene would be complete in one shot, and the same shot would be used each time, so that the audience could become accustomed to the pattern, and the joins would be expected and apparent.

But the illusion of time was unavoidable. Thus I had to somehow foreground the passage of time. The solution was to try to suggest the passage of an immense length of fictional time in a very short actual time. The relationship of Gertrude and Alice would go through stages that suggested an evolution through about five years, from nervous first outing in the first scene to dialogue which indicates that they've lived together for some time in the final scene. Meanwhile only eight minutes of actual time (including end credits) had passed, and the continuous driving made that seem even shorter. There would be none of the conventional codes (dissolves, fades to black, etc.) to indicate ellipse.

(3) The solution to the editing question formed a partial answer to that of *fragmenting the actors' performances*. Normally scenes are shot in many takes, and the best bits are cut together to suggest a seamless whole. The idea of each scene being done in one shot allowed the participants to be left whole, even though they might repeat the scene several times so that the best performances could be chosen. And all of the action and dialogue was improvised by the actors around the central idea – the closest we could come to collective collaboration in a highly structured situation.

(4) *Voyeurism.* It's clear that the camera is always in the position of voyeur, 'watching' either events created to be watched or events which *seem* to be happening unapprehended. The audience also is inevitably in the position of voyeur.

In a classic fiction film, the audience is given a privileged 'look': a spectacle is created for us, and various combinations of make-up, lights, camera angles, and camera movements are used to enhance that spectacle, often in combination with cinematic codes which signify the opposite – ie. codes which naturalize the spectacle by creating the illusion that we are watching reality. In fact as audiences we demand that; we complain about even the most fantastical film if it doesn't appear to be 'real' or 'realistic'. There's a double-edged pleasure here: we're sophisticated enough to delight in knowledge of elaborate special effects, for example, but there's no pleasure if those special effects aren't convincing. We have to 'believe' that Superman flies, while at the same time we derive satisfaction from 'knowing how it's done'.

In addition, the audience is invited to participate in the film by identifying with certain characters. This secondary identification (the first is always with the camera) is created largely through point of view shots. We come to identify emotionally and psychologically with characters at certain moments by seeing what they see, from the angle of their gaze. Recent film theory has pointed out that in most Hollywood films, the audience (both male and female) normally shares the male protagonist's gaze at the female form, which is often fragmented or 'flattened' into an icon (again through camera position, lighting, and lack of perspective or background).

So. In order to acknowledge, even foreground, the question of the inevitable voyeurism of the camera and the audience, I would eliminate those point of view shots that promote a secondary identification with characters, and hope to bring the audience to a gradual realization that they are (and have all along been) seeing through the 'eyes' of the camera.

The situation would be the one I remember from my childhood as a specifically voyeuristic pleasure: driving down the highway as a passenger in a car, peering into overtaken cars to fantasize about the lives of the passing strangers. The camera would be that passing voyeur, and would never deviate from this position. No person would be shown as the looker, although voices from the camera car would gradually reveal that the point of view is that of a camera.

Although I wanted to foreground the position of the audience and camera as voyeur, I didn't want that to be too uncomfortable, sinister. The final scene would therefore be constructed so that the presence of the camera would not only be acknowledged, but would appear to be a benign intervention. Gertrude and Alice are overtaken in a quarrel (which incidentally indicates the length of their relationship through mention of mutual friends, events of daily life together, and the recurrent – historically true – problem of Gertrude's wild driving which inevitably careened past the turning while Alice was shouting out directions). So they're quarrelling when we approach, but Gertrude interrupts the fight to acknowledge our presence, for the first time making it explicit that our gaze is that of a camera. She begins to ham it up (as Gertrude always did) and cajoles and jokes Alice into getting into the picture. Smiling for the camera, their quarrel is ended; our intervention as watchers has provided the happy ending for everything.

And that's the story of trying to make a feminist film which has no overt political content. I can't say whether it's successful or not. I don't want to review my own film, except to praise Jackie and Anne's acting and the incredible hand-held camera work of Dennis Miller.



Jill Johnston October 1975 and *Gertrude and Alice in Passing* are available for rental or purchase from the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, which incidentally has an excellent collection of other films by Canadian women filmmakers. 406 Jarvis St., Toronto, Ont. M4Y 2G6