

"International Women's Film Festival":

Film festivals, like other serialized activities, announce their thematic through their unraveling. And although the films and video presented in the International Women's Film Festival are decidedly different from one another, they are nonetheless linked by their desire to represent women and minorities through sounds and images that interrupt popular portrayals.

The 27 films included come from the U.S., China, Canada, Brazil, Britain, South Africa, West Germany, and Australia. They can be generally identified as documentaries, "experimental" works, and more-or-less narratives. The documentary genre facilitates the quick delivery of "facts," but, of course, the naming of truths and fictions is a problematic venture. The most ambitious documentary work carries a critique of its own pronouncements, and challenges any investment in pompous profundities. *Reassemblage* (1982), by Trinh T. Minh-ha, is presented as a "critique of the anthropological eye." As the camera shows us the people and landscape of Senegal, the filmmaker's voice questions the Western definition of underdevelopment, adding that the spine of documentary is the belief that reality is an explanation to itself. The popular notion that the best way to be objective is to copy reality meticulously is countered by the filmmaker's belief that what she sees when she looks through the camera is life looking back at her. This disavowal of authority works to deflate the sureness of knowledge that usually dominates the anthropological view. The same kind of scrutiny is applied to sociological methodology in *Bred and Born* by Joanna Davis and Mary Pat Leece, which focuses on four generations of women from a working-class family in London. The female researcher probes their role in the family, with particular emphasis on the mother, but she also questions her own position as researcher (the authority) and her use of people to foreground what really interests her. Conventionally shot footage is combined with still photographs and historical reenactments, resulting in a

loosely ordered compilation of domestic duties, oppressions, and pleasures. Ana Maria Garcia's *La Operación* eschews the self-critical position but is nonetheless a forthright chronicling of the mass sterilization of the women of Puerto Rico. Its concise delivery of statistics and historical backgrounding makes for a tightly knit and educative presentation. Had such cinematic information been previously available to the women of Puerto Rico, the government's systematic sterilizations would not have been accomplished so handily.

There are some who doubt the ability of critical documentary and narrative work to comprise what they think can be called a feminist film practice, and believe that such a practice, involving work that does not reproduce existing representations, can only be named "experimental." Of course, to produce an image that never existed before suggests an act of "creation," and this notion of creativity and poetic originality marks much experimental film work. Su Friedrich's *Gently Down the Stream* (1981) silently crops, frames, and fragments the image in order to displace the possible singularities of a photo-text reading. Pictures are interrupted by words etched into the frame with a painterly enthusiasm which seems to thrive on repetition. The text is not rendered in a tightly printed typeface nor in a perfect-penmanship script, but rather with a shaky hand suggesting the primers of childhood. It tells of Friedrich's dreams, and is coupled with images that suggest an open field of desires and uncertainties. *Light Reading* (1978), by Lis Rhodes, is another black and white film which conflates linguistic and poetic strategies with highly estheticized virtuosities. The spoken text, sometimes rigorously punning, sometimes sweetly poetic, edges the stunning yet cloying visuals with a ribbon of irony which skews apparent meanings and prevents a tumble into unadulterated sentiment.

Perhaps it can be said that this racing seriality of still images comprises its own kind of narrative, a connection of visual placements. This question of what is or

isn't narrative brings us to a group of films that seem to illustrate a more conventional notion of the story line, though they still work to contradict the depictions that have buried women and minorities in a blurred cloak of "otherness," in the usual morass of comforting stereotypes. *Illusions*, by Julie Dash, is an impressive depiction of a young black woman passing for white and intent on making it in the Hollywood of the early '40s. Another black woman is hired by a film studio to record the voice that will later seem to emit from the mouth of a white vocalist, the star of a musical extravaganza. Dash's film focuses on the connection between the black voice and white representation, between action and illusion. Smoothly shot and intelligently written, it is an admirable attempt at dealing with "the shadows that dance on white walls," with racism and illusion in the image industry.

On Guard, by Susan Lambert, looks at another kind of industry, that of a multinational medical corporation. Four lesbian activists sabotage an industrial empire intent on controlling the reproductive rights of women. The story builds into a nicely honed thriller, which idealistically portrays a succession of successful covert maneuvers accomplished through female bonding. This same female bonding takes on outrageously wacky proportions in *Hearts and Guts* (1982), Ana Carolina's exuberant tale of rude girls on the rampage. This ribald picturing of students and teachers running amok in a Brazilian girls' school is a witty take on women hot to transgress, on sexual forthrightness, tinged with an astute contemplative edge. That this entire episode is unveiled, in the film's finale, as the randy hallucination of a male academic is a major hitch in what is otherwise a kitty heaven of smartly sassy physical and cerebral exchanges. Nevertheless, although in need of editing, *Hearts and Guts* is an ambitious, well-wrought film which certainly deserves commercial release.

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