Feminism and Documentary. Edited by Diane Waldman and Janet Walker. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 365 pp. ISBN.

Feminism and Documentary is the fifth volume in the Visible Evidence series published by University of Minnesota Press, which has previously included Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary (Holmlund & Fuchs, 1997), Technologies of Truth: Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media (Miller, 1998), and Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions (Citron, 1999). While not formally linked to the Visible Evidence conference held annually at UCLA, the series shares a rigorous commitment to shifting the theoretical paradigm around the understanding of non-fiction culture generally.

For its part, Feminism and Documentary is invested with the ambitious goal, as its editors note in their introduction, of exploring the disciplinary implications and cross-fertilizing possibilities of the conjunction of feminism and documentary. Including both established and new academic voices, the anthology avoids the plague of most anthologies which aim to be historically inclusive or representationally exhaustive. Feminism and Documentary makes no such claims. Indeed, its only nod in the direction of the “pioneer” approach to feminist history is a fascinating essay on the role of Frances Flaherty (wife of the documentary director Robert Flaherty) in the initiation of the Flaherty seminar. More a collection of new approaches to documentary, the anthology is divided into thematic sections: Historicizing Documentary; Filmmaker/Subject: Self/Other; Gender, Nation and Documentary Returns; and innovative (Auto) Biographies which are preceded by useful introductory remarks. Ranging from personal, diaristic accounts of filmmaking to meticulous text-based readings of canonical (male-authored) documentaries to boosterist accounts of new feminist video art, the anthology incorporates a variety of writing styles with the usual dramatic highs and lows. The surprise is that the anthology holds together so consistently as a cogent and coherent body.

Certainly the coupling of feminism and documentary has been complicated by the specific trajectory of feminist film theory which, from its incarnation in the 1970s, has historically been divided between the high psychoanalytic orthodoxy of Screen and Camera Obscura and the more politically inflected venture of journals such as JumpCut. If the evolution of feminist documentary theory was inhibited by the foundational anti-realist prejudice of the psychoanalytic camp which argued, famously, in the early manifestoes of Laura Mulvey and Claire Johnston, that women’s cinema had to be allied with avant garde, materialist practices, writers such as Ruby Rich, Michelle Citron, and, most elegantly, Julia Lesage insisted that documentary (even in its ostensible realist incarnation) was crucial to the project of building alternative political culture. Indeed Feminism and Documentary owes a tremendous (and here unacknowledged) debt to Julia Lesage whose 1978 essay, “The Political Aesthetics of Feminist Documentary Film” (a staple reading in my Women and Film classes for close to 15 years), represented the first sustained effort to unlock the ingrained couplet of naiveté and realism and to think deeply about the political affectivity of women’s documentary practices of the period. Lesage’s inclusion here as the final essay in the anthology testifies to the singular longevity of her commitment to feminist documentary theory.

If Lesage always insisted on the theoretical complexity of feminist documentary, it was precisely because while acknowledging that documentary was a representational practice that involved conventions, the appropriation of narrative codes, and genres, there was a crucial political stake involved in that representation that distinguished it from fictional modes of signification and that stake had to do with the indexical relationship of documentary to the “real” stories, experiences, histories, bodies, social protest, and memories of its subjects. Feminism and Documentary takes off from that insight, while expressly main-
taining the tension and paradoxical status of the ever-shifting distinction between fiction and non-fiction.

Written more than 20 years after Lesage’s original intervention, Feminism and Documentary moves in the direction of repairing the schism between the two founding schools of feminist film theory. While several of the essays explicitly rely on the importation and appropriation of the tools of psychoanalytic criticism, all are grounded in the understanding that documentary is not exempt from the psychic regimes of fantasy, projection, voyeurism, and the gendered politics of the gaze. This crossover is most obvious (and oddly) apparent in Susan Knobloch’s Mulveyan reading of Pennebaker’s Don’t Look Back but it is also carried over into the essays by Michael Renov, Silvia Kratzer-Julifs, Anahid Kassabian & David Kazanjian, Laura Marks, and Julia Lesage with their insistence on thinking through documentary practice as a relationship to “new subjectivities on display” (Renov); sadomasochistic sexual fantasy life and fragmented consciousness (Lesage) of women’s art videos, or even Marks’ endeavour to displace the semantics of fetishism from its psychoanalytic definition. Psychoanalytic insight is also elegantly deployed in the essays on Turkish and Armenian documentaries as a radical historiography which understands history as a process of secondary revision imbued with transference, melancholy, loss, and projection.

While the gesture of reparation marks the new methodologies on display, the general orientation of the editorial project and individual essays is towards a political modernism in which aesthetic innovation and self-reflexive formalism are strategically positioned as the preferred embodiment of the conjunction of feminism and documentary. As new methodologies proliferate in the new anthology, the field of documentary itself is expanded to include experimental film, video art, and performance. Classical realist and conventional vérité practices make an appearance only as objects of critique and deconstruction as in Paula Rabinowitz’s vigorous (and debatable) dismissal of Michael Moore’s Roger and Me and Barbara Kopple’s American Dream as “squeamishly maudlin and trite.” More to the point, in its orientation around political modernism, the anthology is curiously silent on the issue of the political economy of documentary, audiences, and the intensifying impact that the medium of television is having on the shape, form, and subject matter of documentary production. That is, perhaps, a small quibble to make about an anthology whose breadth and rigour will make it an enormously useful compendium on the subject for years to come.

References

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