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## Female Authorship and the Documentary Image / Female Agency and Documentary Strategies

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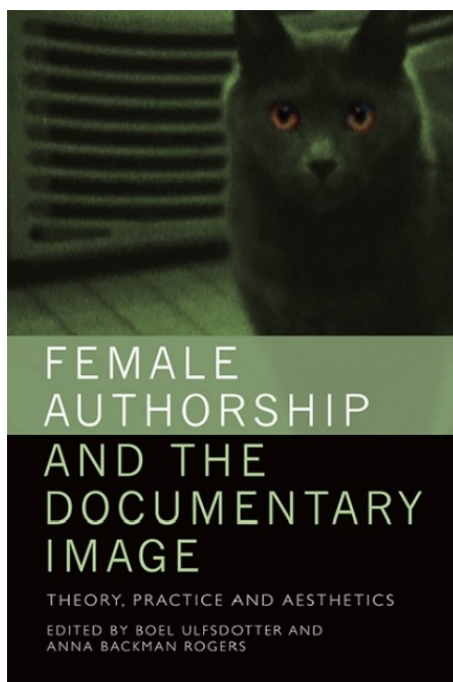
## Female Authorship and the Documentary Image/ Female Agency and Documentary Strategies

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At a time when women's access to shaping the public discourse through the exercise of their agency remains a precious commodity, the volumes edited by Boel Ulfsdotter and Anna Backman Rogers – *Female Authorship and the Documentary Image* and *Female Agency and Documentary Strategies* – come as important and necessary contributions to the field of film and media studies.



In their 2005 edited collection *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman proposed a similar study dedicated to the work of women engaged in experimental filmmaking. Petrolle and Wright Wexman described their volume as ‘a sustained analysis of the fruitful juncture of aesthetics and politics in both pioneer and contemporary experimental moviemaking by women’.[1] The writers affirmed the importance of the visibility of women filmmakers as a condition for the strengthening of ‘the presence of female subjects who wield power in public space, [and the] enlarging of the public presence of women as cultural agents’.[2] The volumes coordinated by Ulfsdotter and Backman Rogers continue this project by looking at women filmmakers’ contributions to the production of documentary film and non-fiction media, and ‘from the perspective of multiplicity and cultural diversity’ (*Female Authorship*, p. 2).[3] The articles address topics that Belinda Smaill identifies, in her introduction to the *Female Authorship* volume, as significant absences from film studies: ‘the relationship between feminist approaches and documentary film’, ‘the history of the female documentarian’, and ‘the importance of the nonfiction mode for feminism and female filmmakers’ (p. xiii). The volumes include contexts of female authorship and agency made manifest within forms of nonfiction media spanning documentary film and video, photography, and multimedia installation, and through technology-enabled platforms like Instagram, blogging, television streaming, and radio shows.

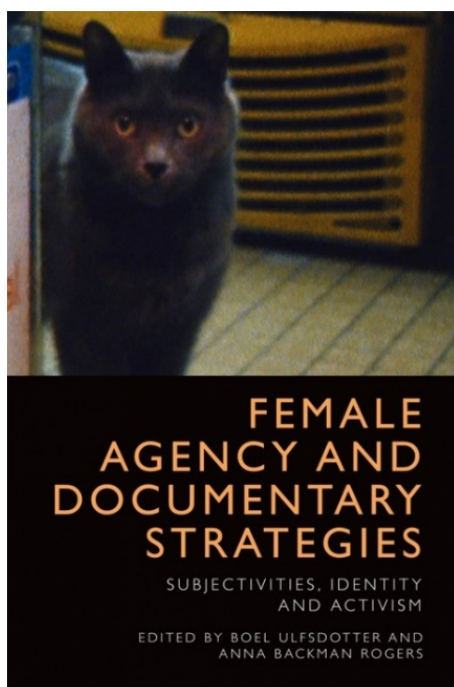
The three-partite structure of each volume allows the readers’ immediate orientation and alignment of interests around and along the following themes: Documentary Practice; Documentary Theories; Female Authorship and Global Identities; New Media and Activism; Relationality, Selfhood and Subjectivities; Identity Politics of Documentary. This organisational frame, while conceived as to ‘preclude a focus on historical chronology or choice of technical medium’, suggests a thematic trajectory that follows a specific contextual development – from approaches that centre on the theory, practice, and aesthetics of the documentary image in the first volume (*Female Authorship*, 3), to analyses of forms of creative agency manifest within a female activism enabled by the use of media technologies in the second volume (*Female Agency*, 3). I propose to bring into light the richness of thought both expressed in, and occasioned by, these texts by exploring a series of specific concepts – one of many possible – as approached from distinct angles by different authors across the two volumes (with one exception at the end). While necessarily selective, the review will perform thus a parallel reading of

the two volumes as enabled by conceptual associations across various articles. In an attempt to suggest various points of entry into such conversations, I will refer to the following five concepts: collective authorship, preoccupation with the position of the filmmaker, attention to the position of the viewer and the notion of implied bias, interactive authorship, and new media narrative constructions. While pertaining to the general theory and practice of nonfiction media, these focus points are particularly relevant for the perspective on female authorship and agency, as they implicitly attend to issues of visibility, public platform accessibility, and control of representation for women filmmakers.

The significance and continuous actuality of collective authorship is addressed in Elizabeth Coffman and Erica Stein's 'New Day Films: Collective Aesthetics and the Collection', a historical account of the New Day Films collective, characterised as 'both a dominant US independent educational film distributor and one of the few surviving feminist documentary collectives so important to the early 1970s' (*Authorship*, p. 24). The article exposes the nuances of the tension between the collective's goals of feminist activism and its operation as a collection, an organising structure virtually at odds with the affirmation of specific ideologies, and suggests a productive resolution visible in the filmmakers' achievement of a collective aesthetics (p. 30). The authors mark important moments in New Day Films' navigation and appropriation of different platforms. One such achievement is the enduring identity of the group against its seeming dilution through an ahistorical, nonspecific curatorial treatment of its works during the collaboration with MOMA (p. 33). Another remarkable development is the group's creative seizing of digital technology for the recalibration of the strained relationship between collective production and structural collection into a positive interdependence enabled by the streaming of interactive documentaries on digital platforms (p. 35).

Coffman and Stein also explore the collective's engagement with teaching production skills to women, and its commitment to distributing materials meant to transform audiences into a politically active community. These are attitudes visible also in the work of Hong Kong-based Taiwanese-American scholar and film director Vivian Wenli Lin. In her conversation with Boel Ulfssdotter, 'Visualising Our Voices', Lin talks about her transition from documentary film director to participatory media producer occasioned by her co-founding of *Voices of Women Media* in the Netherlands in 2007, a media

and women's rights organisation set to address the absence of voices of marginalised women (*Agency*, 127). In their projects, VOW Media engaged migrant sex workers, undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, and victims of human trafficking – women discussed about but not included in the discussion, or in Lin's words, 'women invisible in society but visible to the public' (p. 128). According to Lin, the stringency of women's right to self-representation comes in the wake of a new type of ethical responsibility to both subject and audience regarding the recording and exhibition of images through pervasive digital platforms (p. 127). Through the results of her practice and research, Lin demonstrates that the process of self-representation allows women's access to platforms for their affirmation of identity, artistic expression, and necessary political and social advocacy (p. 133).



The filmmakers' awareness and navigation of their own position in the process of filmmaking, while touched upon by several authors, constitute the structuring questions of two articles. In her analysis of Kim Longinotto's documentary films 'Speaking About or Speaking Nearby? Documentary Practice and Female Authorship in the films of Kim Longinotto', Rona Murray focuses on the filmmaker's orchestration of the emotions visible in the frame

through the use of a 'language which communicates the "human eye" behind the camera' (*Authorship*, pp. 90-93). At her turn, in 'Other Women: Thinking Class and Gender in Contemporary Brazilian Documentary Film', Carla Maia looks at contemporary Brazilian documentary films in order to identify the significance and effect of documentary filmmakers' different understanding of their relationships with their subjects (*Agency*, p. 114). Both articles make implicit arguments for the directors' cautious but engaged self-effacement that takes into account and nurtures the affects manifest among the subjects, and between these and the director. The authors build these arguments on a rhetorical effect structured on similar elements: a descriptive-analytical element is followed by a component of criticism, leading to a formulation of the argument.

Murray's approach is a nuanced construction advanced through questions meant to challenge and test the solidity of the analytical edifice, as well as through careful balancing of the framing of her points. As such, she talks about the possible but questionable relation between Longinotto's observational works of social concern and the filmmaker's own troubled biography (p. 91). She salutes Longinotto's use of fictional conventions as a source of observational simplicity and direct emotion (p. 92), but notes the risk of them being read as objectifying effects (p. 97). Finally, Murray tackles the positions critical of Longinotto's approach and reaffirms the filmmaker's complex ways of constructing 'a variety of spatial relationships to her female "protagonists"' (p. 95), 'a finely balanced constructed space, constantly threatening to implode' (p. 101).

Maia's comparative analysis proposes a more direct oppositional structure, in which she identifies and contrasts the effects of the use of sociological and performative film techniques for the portrayal of women trapped in contexts that are emblematic for a systematic gender, class, and race-based oppression. According to Maia, in the first three films analysed, women are seen from a distance, as passive and stable on their positions of victims, through a clinical approach that reaffirms the class distance between filmmaker and subject (p. 119). The featured film, *Like Water Through Stone* (Marília Rocha, 2009), is the vehicle for Maia's argument for a filmmaker's meaningful attitude, as Rocha assumes and performs her role of mediator through discreet interventions that mark her in-between status and expose the differences. Similarly to Longinotto's work in Murray's reading, for Maia, Rocha's film 'preserves an offscreen space that leaks into the on-screen space [...] and creates a gap [able] to shelter the characters' own indeterminacy' (p. 124).

In their respective articles, Sophie Mayer and Anna Misiak each analyse the ways in which the filmmakers' approaches of their subjects reflect on, respond to, and address the position of the viewer. In 'To::For::By::About::With::From:: Towards Solid Women: On (not) Being Addressed by Tracey Moffatt's *Moodeijt Yorgas*', Sophie Meyer introduces the Australian filmmaker Tracey Moffatt's film *Moodeijt Yorgas* (*Solid Women*, 1988) as a project aimed at 'contesting historical erasure, contemporary misrepresentation by settler culture', and devaluing women's law by the internalisation of settler patriarchy within Aboriginal communities (*Authorship*, p. 160). The writer places Moffatt's film within the late 1980s forms of Aboriginal feminist activism, where Aboriginal-authored film and video rely on traditional forms of expression and communication in order to build an act of indigenous resistance to commodification (p. 162). Mayer argues that through its construction, *Moodeijt Yorgas* refuses modes of reading anchored within Euro-Western categories: the film eludes conventional representations of femininity (p. 163), or established hierarchical distinctions between reality and fiction (p. 164). Geared towards a Western audience, the film's performative structure teaches the viewer how to listen in the absence of straightforward storytelling (p. 167), how to perceive the English subtitles of the voiceover narration as the marker of a knowledge both allowed by, and refused through, translation (p. 167), and how to navigate its documentary form through 'its artful, joyful blending of performative and informative modes' (p. 168).

Anna Misiak's article 'From Visceral Style to Discourse of Resistance: Reading Alka Sadat's Afghan Documentaries on Violence Against Women' focuses on Afghan documentary filmmaker and activist Alka Sadat's filmic work dedicated to the fight against gender inequality and violence against women in Afghanistan (*Agency*, p. 137). According to Misiak, Sadat combines analytical and observational techniques in order to speak with, rather than for, her filmed subjects, while resisting the Western perception of an essentialised gender dynamics in her country (p. 137). Like in Mayer's analysis of Moffatt's work, Misiak places Sadat's films and biography within a theoretical context defined as alternative to that established within, and expected by, international audiences. Sadat, writes Misiak, 'resists Eurocentric categorizations of the Islamic female other', through films that address non-gender-specific audiences and disallow readily available interpretations framed through attitudes of victimisation, romanticisation, and Islamophobia (p. 139). Sadat's films require viewers' recalibration of their criteria for validating the

Afghan social dynamics in order for them to perceive the complex context of a society where gender identities are not negotiated but imposed (pp. 142, 150). Misiak notes Sadat's awareness of the danger of a reductive representation as she cautiously negotiates between an educational voiceover narration and varied observational accounts that bring in a range of male and female voices (p. 151). Within a work of cultural translation performed from the position of the insider, Sadat's gaze captures contextual nuances that force the viewer to 'suspend the rhetoric of the empire' and face the complex reality of Afghan women that are more than victims or heroes (p. 151).

A specific reflexive interactivity as visible in forms of authorship understood as a triple collaboration – between filmmaker, subject, and viewer – is at the centre of the articles written by Sharon Daniel and Gail Vanstone, authors that magnify the refracting effect of their writings as they both reference each other across volumes. Unconventional in form, Daniel's text 'More than One' is a nonlinear performative presentation of, and reflection on, the methodology and theoretical approach of her new media documentary practice (*Authorship*, p. 40). Unsettled and unsettling, the article announces its project as that of an argument embodied in its design, and a political gesture that, while informed by the author's 'forms of exclusion experienced as a woman', is reluctant to the idea of a female specificity of documentary image and authorship (p. 41). The text, that defies the book format and reads as a map constrained by, and fragmented across, the pages' layout, contains Daniel's first person account of her theoretical and practical approach as a political artist dedicated to telling the truths of impacted communities. Fragments from interviews Daniel took with incarcerated women, quotes from theoreticians preoccupied with the relation between politics and aesthetics, and selections from the art critic Pieter Van Bogaert's essay written in response to an exhibition of Daniel's installation work contribute to an intriguing tapestry. The text both suggests and enacts a simultaneous deciphering from multiple positions – that of the women subjects of Daniel's documentary work, that of the author relating her process of mind in first person, and that of the viewer that is summoned to select, analyse, and synthesise by both the nonlinear/non-readerly quality of the text and the inclusion of Van Bogaert's intervention.

Daniel translates thus into written text a methodology present in her forms of internet art (participatory media platforms and interactive new media documentary), methodology that Gail Vanstone analyses in her own article "*Scriptrix Narrans*": Digital Documentary Storytelling's Radical Potential'



as an illustration of the concept of '*scriptrix narrans*' (*Agency*, p. 60). For Vanstone, *scriptrix narrans* (italics in original) is an author-filmmaker whose creative process allows her subjects to become 'writers of the narrative', and that produces what Roland Barthes describes as a writerly, rather than readerly, text (p. 59). In this sense, Vanstone sees Daniel's work as a system of collaborative and collective authoring, as well as an interface that encourages the viewer to find her own way within the boundaries of a non-linear territory (pp. 61, 62). Agnès Varda is another artist that Vanstone identifies as a model of *scriptrix narrans*, for the way in which she allows the people she films to condition her filmic texts, and the combination of forms of address that summon the viewer to participate along Varda's own presence in front of the camera (p. 58).

I will close by referring to forms of new media narrative constructions as addressed in two articles included in the section dedicated to 'New Media and Activism' in the second volume, *Female Agency and Documentary Strategies*. In their respective texts, Kris Fallon and Cadence Kinsey navigate around similar concepts as they approach from distinct directions – and focus on different centres of interest – forms of autobiographical constructions enabled by the social networking platform Instagram. In 'The Pencil of Identity: Instagram as Inadvertent (Female) Autobiography', Fallon argues that Instagram takes a distance from 'the database logic of online photography' by allowing 'the logic of linear narrative' (p. 13) as 'Instagram photos are intentionally broadcast to an audience as a series of narrative instalments' (p. 18). At her turn, in 'Archetype and Authenticity: Reflections on Amalia Ulman's Excellences and Perfections', Kinsey builds on the narrative quality of Instagram, as she looks at new media artist Amalia Ulman's Instagram-enabled construction of identity through 'the use of feminine archetypes flashed out through a familiar narrative' (p. 29). According to Fallon, the narrative quality of Instagram allows the users to become creators and distributors of their own images in ways that break with the norms of audiovisual representations. As such, Instagram brings an 'expanded lexicon that enables autobiographical expression without necessitating self-exposure' (p. 10), that allows the exploration of 'a range of subjects/subjectivities beyond the heterosexual feminine ideal' (p. 10), and that suggests a shift of focus from 'one image, or genre of images, to the mode of inscription and recording that the tool seems to produce' (p. 11). Fallon notes that the 'performative [...] dimension of the selfie emerges' (p. 12).

Almost from the opposite direction, Kinsey looks at Ulman's exploration of modes of women's self-presentation online in a project that relies on users' reactions and comments in order to come to life as an online viable object (pp. 23, 25). Present from the start, and unacknowledged by the public, here the performativity defines the work, and occasions Kinsey's discussion of users' understanding of authenticity. Unaware of the constructed nature of the artist's identities, the users shape and validate the artistic act through comments that reveal the expectation of consistency and coherence of one's identity (p. 26), and the correlation of normative correctness with credibility (p. 29). According to Kinsey, the project pushes against this perception of authenticity and proposes the location of authenticity within 'the degree to which performative practices of self-actualisation cohere across multiple sites (on- or offline)' (p. 27).

As recurrent preoccupations for theoreticians and practitioners of non-fiction media, the concepts addressed in these articles build on the necessity of a responsible relationality within both making and experiencing media. The simultaneous publication of these volumes allows for a vast array of distinct voices that reaffirm, from different positions, the relevance of this attitude for female artists. At the same time, this double editorial event stands as an unprecedented platform able to locate, bring in conversation within and across volumes, and further distribute international scholarship on the relationship between female authorship and documentary representation.

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## Notes

- [1] Petrolle & Wright Wexman, p. 13.
- [2] Ibid., p. 5.
- [3] The first reference to an article will specify the volume the article belongs to.