AESTHETIC LEARNING: AN EXPLORATION OF A RADICAL AESTHETIC IN FEMINIST DOCUMENTARY FILM

by

PAMELA A. ROGERS

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Department of Educational Studies

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date August, 1996

ABSTRACT

This study emerged from a curiosity about the powerful affect of feminist documentary film and an interest in transformative learning approaches. Three films of Studio D–the former feminist production unit of the National Film Board of Canada [NFB] were explored: *Goddess Remembered (1989), Burning Times (1990), and Full Circle (1992).* For methodology, I used an adaptation of autobiography, film and literary criticism and I explored the aesthetics of these films. Beginning with an in-depth look at the characteristics and criticisms of feminist documentary film, I identified the feminist perspective as having a transformative influence on traditional documentary styles. In my analysis, I defined and articulated the aesthetic quality of the films. This quality is defined as a radical aesthetic. The definition also includes a suggestion that an asethetic experience is spatial. I argue that the radical aesthetic, in its spatiality and feminist analysis, is able to evoke yearning, creative inspiration and a sense of place in viewers, particularly women. The analysis identifies the characteristics of the radical aesthetic and the significance of this on transformative learning experiences for women. The study claims that this radical aesthetic enhances two crucial stages in transformative learning. One, since an aesthetic experience is spatial, a space in which a learner can think, imagine and act is created. Two, in its provocative quality, a radical aesthetic assists women to become aware of and connected to a subterranean layer of self-knowledge that is seldom acknowledged in typical transformative learning approaches. I discuss the importance of this layer of knowledge in stimulating and sustaining transformative

learning. Implications for practice include a discussion on the need to understand the role and the power of aesthetics in learning. Here a set of questions was created that can be used to explore the aesthetic experience of other films. Recommendations were made for further study on the relationship of aesthetic learning and feminist pedagogy. Given the spatial experience of aesthetics and the importance of space for women, other research was suggested to look at the role of place in learning.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In your light I learn how to love,
In your beauty, how to make poems.

You dance inside my chest,
where no one sees you,

But sometimes I do, and that
sight becomes this art.

Rumi, Persia (1207-1273)

To my many wonderful, loving family of friends, I dedicate this thesis:

Christine Stewart, Priscilla Boucher, Linda Power, Roneen Marcoux, Jennifer Khamasi, Mousa and Asraf, Salah and his family, Iraj, Malek, Barb LaBrasseur, members of my women's group past and present. . .

My family of origin: my mother for her strength, my father for his sense of aesthetic, and my sister for her spiritual geography. . .

My committee: Shauna Butterwick, Tom Sork and Ray hall: thank you for believing in me. And Pamela Courtenay-Hall for her special encouragement on her trips to the store. . .

And Especially, I thank my Friend–Kathy Paulsen–who, unfortunately, but gracefully, Died before she could finish her Thesis. I thank her for cracking open my heart and letting in the light. . .

Without all your love and support, I could never have accomplished this thingly. . .

Thank you from the dance inside my heart. . .

Journal Entry: January 1995

I am thinking back to the first time that I encountered feminist thought. It was 1988. Growing up in an isolated community in northern B.C. did not provide me with much opportunity to experience the concepts of feminism first hand. The only discussions I ever heard about "feminism" were from the media. Personally, I knew the pain and limits of being a woman in this society. I had experienced the pain of oppression from sexist and misogynist values and practices; however, I had not met feminist resistance to that oppression, and I had not encountered feminist ideology. Nor had I experienced women taking power and celebrating their lives as women.

When feminist thought confronted me for the first time, I recall thinking: Who are these women? How do they think like that? Where do those thoughts come from? These feminist thoughts went far beyond the simplified distorted versions of feminism I had encountered through the media. They went beyond my experience, beyond my imagination. There seemed to be a collective voice, resistant and grounded in a consciousness that both celebrated and cared for women. It was a consciousness that I did not have. But one that I wanted.

I left the country and came to the city to study at university. The varied and numerous bright lights in the city have become a metaphor for my learning about many new things. But the light shone brightest of all on the first International Women's Day celebration I attended. Sitting in a darkened classroom at the university, I watched ***Goddess Remembered*** *and* ***Burning Times****. I was both stunned and shocked. I witnessed information about women that I had never heard before. I saw sights that I had never seen before. The provocative music and images resonated in my bones. I was filled with a haunting yearning. Beyond exposing the daily oppression of*

women (an oppression that I was only just beginning to become aware of) these films connected me and the contemporary feminist struggle with the struggle of women all over the world and through ages past.

I realized at that moment the information that I was exposed to in these films had been deliberately and consciously denied me. This realization made me angry and suspicious. What did I know? How did I come to know what I knew? Why did I know one thing and not another thing? What was left out?

Sitting in the darkened classroom, watching these two films made by Studio D, the National Film Board's feminist production unit, a light turned on in the darkest part of me—the part of me that was filled with shame and loathing for myself as a woman. I have never been the same because of what I saw and heard that day. I became connected to deeper, subterranean feelings in my soul. I began to question deeply. I began to imagine. . .

CHAPTER I-INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND TO THE THESIS

The Purpose of This Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is explore the ways in which documentary feminist film in general and the "Women and Spirituality" trilogy in particular can be a powerful educational tool. I have chosen the films from the Women and Spirituality Trilogy—*Goddess Remembered (1989), Burning Times (1990), and Full Circle (1992*—because they are among the top four most popular films produced by the former Studio D of the National Film Board of Canada (National Film Board of Canada, 1995).[1] In its feminist analysis and docu-drama style, the trilogy provides a good representation of Studio D's work as well as feminist documentary film in general.

These three films seek to portray and extend an understanding of women's culture. They celebrate womanhood, and yet the oppression of women within the complexity of patriarchy is never out of sight. While feminist pedagogy was not the main focus of this thesis, I consider feminist documentary film to be a part of feminist pedagogical strategies. Generally, feminist pedagogy is concerned with the process of socialization as well as what occurs in institutions, especially schools. Similarly, feminist documentary film focuses on the social conditions of women, be that from a historical analysis or a contemporary issue. These films take a historical look at the position of women in Western European society. They link the historical subordination of women and nature to the present day subordination of women and the destructive quality of Western industrial development. They are provocative films because they

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[1] In March 1996, after producing feminist films for 22 years, Studio D was permanently shut down due to budget cuts.

offer shocking new information about the history of women in Western society. I have had numerous personal experiences with these films in the ways that they have been a catalyst for change, not only in my own life, but in my women friend's lives as well.

bell hooks (1994b) writes, "where can we find a body of feminist theory that is directed toward helping individuals integrate feminist thinking and practice into daily life?" (p. 70). I claim that feminist documentary film in general and this trilogy in particular offer such a site of integration. However, the films are not without limitations. They have been criticized as unconvincing because they do not provide enough evidence for the claims made (Stockland, 1991). Many of my feminist friends have expressed some concern that these films essentialize women and increase the stigmatized dualist thinking that aligns women with nurturing traits and men with destructive ones.

In this chapter I briefly outline how I came to this thesis, its purpose and its outline. I also describe the methodology that I have developed. In this work, I have drawn from feminist film criticism and autobiography. I have studied the films, read their transcripts, and examined their particular aesthetic quality. I used a mixture of self-reflection of personal responses, and personal journals to assist my understanding and analysis of these films.

In Chapter Two, I examine feminist documentary film as well as the role of film theory/criticism. I describe the characteristics and intentions of feminist documentary film. Specifically, I discuss the use of the forms cinéma verité and realism and I investigate the impact of feminist analysis on these forms. I also discuss the feminist notion and process of identity issues, everyday life, collectives, and finding women's voices. Finally, I include a brief

discussion of the issues within feminist documentary such as desire, audience position, production and distribution, and educational intentions.

In Chapter Three, I provide a context for the films. I briefly examine the history of the National Film Board [NFB] and more specifically, the development and formation of Studio D. I consider the social and political climate of the day that facilitated feminist film as a genre and the creation of Studio D. I explore how the formation of Studio D was linked to the women's movement and to the emergence of feminist film as a genre.

In Chapter Four, I concentrate in-depth on the Women and Spirituality Trilogy produced over four years: 1989 to 1992. In this I examine three films: *Goddess Remembered, Burning Times, and Full Circle*. Specifically, I claim these films' most powerful attribute is their radical aesthetic. Then, I define what I mean by a radical aesthetic and examine this aesthetic in the context of these three films.

In Chapter Five, the conclusion, I discuss the implications of a radical aesthetic in radical pedagogy, particularly feminist pedagogy. I discuss the role of a radical aesthetic in stimulating and sustaining transformative learning. I provide a set of questions that could be used as a guide to facilitate a learner's aesthetic experience. While this set of questions is designed for these particular films, I hope that these questions can be adapted for other feminist films and learning experiences. Finally, I suggest other research ideas that could be followed to examine the relationship between aesthetics and learning.

An Adaptation of Feminist Film Criticism and Autobiography as a Methodology

I adapted the methodologies of feminist film criticism and autobiography for this study. Feminist film criticism can be described as a methodology that emerged out of feminist film theory in an attempt to stimulate dialogue and discussions concerning the image of women in cinema. Specifically, feminist film criticism has opened discussions in order to understand, resist and transform the representation of women in cinema. In general, feminist film criticism focuses on the aesthetic quality of a film and/or constructs a cultural/political analysis situated within a historical context. For this thesis, I chose to examine the aesthetic quality of these films from a personal, "autobiographical" perspective.

According to bell hooks (1988) autobiography can be implemented as a method of inquiry that enables the author a unique opportunity to "look at [one's] past from a new perspective and to use this knowledge as a means of self-growth and change in a practical way" (p. 159). It can be motivated—as it was for me—by a "longing to tell one's story." I discovered as I told the "story" of my relationship to these films that I was somehow telling the story of my life. I found myself becoming connected to a yearning deep inside of me—a place and a feeling that I had long ago lost touch with. I uncovered and named my pain and oppression, especially revealing was my and confronting my fear of change. I also encountered joy and beauty. I found parts of myself that I did not know I even had. I came face-to-face with my resistance, survival and growth. During the process of thinking and writing about the evocative qualities of these films, I, like hooks before me, experienced "both a sense of reunion and a sense of release" in the telling (p. 158).

I chose these films because of their powerful impact. As I mentioned earlier, I first encountered *Goddess Remembered (1989) and Burning Times (1990)* at the University of British Columbia on International Women's Day, March 8, 1991. That encounter left me deeply questioning my knowledge and the position of women in Western society. Then, in the spring of 1992, a neighbour advertised in our community newsletter a showing of *Goddess Remembered* and *Burning Times*. I attended along with other community members, mostly women. After the separate viewings, we had several long discussions about the films. We talked about our shared yearning for a place where women could come together and talk about issues that concerned us. Six months later, we formed a "Women and Spirituality Group," similar to the groups that are referred to in the films. We have been meeting for three years. These personal experiences both informed and continue to inform the development of ideas used in this thesis.

Because of my personal experiences, I related to the women in the films and to their concerns. However, I wanted to understand at a deeper level what I was seeing and experiencing in these films. Therefore, I turned to the literature on feminist documentary film. From this I developed a characterization of feminist documentary film elements, concerns and issues. In the literature, feminist documentary film is distinguished from other documentary forms in several ways. The most significant is the application of a feminist analysis to traditional cinematic forms. Traditional forms are often hegemonic in their unified construction of "truth". However, feminist analyses undermine this hegemonic tendency and create a radical, alternative product. Because the films are made by women for women, the spectator is positioned differently from other documentary films and pleasure/desire is evoked in non-conventional (feminist) ways.

Specifically, the films pay greater attention to issues of women's identity within patriarchy, to the realm of the every day, and to the development of women's voices.

Keeping these characteristics in mind, I re-watched the films and searched for themes, elements or pools of interest that attracted me. Using a feminist perspective and my understanding of feminist documentary film, I began to interpret the elements and themes that stood out in the films. I searched for themes that supported the literature and for themes that were unique. I noticed that the films had a powerful effect on me and evoked certain feelings and thoughts that haunted me during my study. I decided to focus on understanding my experience instead of specific "themes" or "elements" of feminist documentary, although these aspects are not entirely separate from the evocations I was responding to. The choice to focus on my experience of watching these films took me back to the literature. I found the words and analysis to understand my experience of watching these films and their evocative power in literary and cultural criticism. My understanding was particularly influenced by four womens' writing: bell hooks, Nicole Brossard, Susan Griffin, and Allison Jaggar.

I first understood that I was responding to the aesthetic power of these films by bell hooks' (1990a) articulation of aesthetics: "aesthetics is more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming" (p. 104). It was from the idea that aesthetics is a constructed space that I became interested in examining in detail the aesthetic of these films. Berenson (1950) writes about an aesthetic experience as a moment a "viewer is at one with the work of art," (as quoted in Bollas, 1993, p. 41). I suggest this moment of "fusion" may be a moment when time seems to stop. Because an aesthetic experience appears timeless, an aesthetic experience can be experienced spatially. In a

world that provides/reflects little space for women, I claim that this sense of space is crucial for women because it provides a sense of room for movement, be that for feeling, thinking or acting. Bollas (1993) suggests an aesthetic space/moment is an "area between complete subjectivity and complete objectivity" where we "negotiate our precarious oscillations between illusion and reality" (p. xxii-xxiv). He goes on to point out that an aesthetic experience is a space where one can "rendezvous" with the "self and other (text, composition, painting)" (p. 41). I argue that this aesthetic sense of space becomes a place on which critical learning and thinking can grow. I claim that the experience of aesthetics is spatial and has a powerful significance for women.

In my attempt to write about this aesthetic quality, I followed my "feelings" in a form of thinking that Susan Griffin identifies as connected to emotion and one that does not imagine objectivity to exist. I, like Griffin before me, discovered "a different sense of clarity, one achieved through feeling, in which [my] thought[s] followed a direction determined by pain, and trauma, and compassion and outrage" (Griffin, 1979, pp. 34-35). I noticed that the film's aesthetic qualities evoked a yearning in me that connected me to a subterranean level of knowledge deep inside that was rich in previously unarticulated knowledge, creativity and inspiration. This level was also laden with a molten bed of conflicting emotions, especially fear and anxiety about knowing and speaking.

To guide me on this feminist and aesthetic path, I drew from Allison Jaggar's claim that "feminist emotions provide a political motivation for investigation and . . . determine the selections of problems as well as the method by which they are investigated" (Jaggar, 1989, p. 161). My struggle on this path became how to confront my own internalized sexism and the fear of my knowledge so that I might be able to acknowledge and speak about the spectacle of

women's power present and evoked in the films. In order to quell the internal conflicts and find a way to speak coherently about feminism as well as to articulate my own feminist perspective, I relied heavily upon the writing of Nicole Brossard, a Québeçois writer.

A prolific writer, Brossard specifically struggles to write about women. She urges women to write about women, to want to be women, and to want women. Because she finds the traditional approach of writing unable to fully capture or articulate women, she has invented a style of writing and analyzing. Her work, *Picture Theory* (1982/1991), is particularly suited to interpreting film images, especially images of women. While her ideas generally guided my analysis, I specifically found these words to be particularly inspiring: "we have to want her in our own words, this very real integral women we are, this idea of us, which like a vital certitude, would be our natural inclination to make sense of what we are" (Brossard, 1989, p. 390).

Using the literature and my personal responses as a guide, I developed an analytical framework around the notion of a "radical aesthetic." I documented my personal experience, self-reflection, and conversations with friends in a personal journal. Throughout this thesis, I have continuously asked myself various questions, such as: "What am I feeling?" "Where does this feeling come from in my life?" "What is this about?" "What does this mean to me?" to guide my thinking and analysis. I have used my personal journal to record much of this self-reflection, these responses and reactions to the films. The data sources for this thesis include the films, their transcripts, my journal entries, several tape recorded conversations with friends about feminist film in general and Studio D's work in particular, and informal telephone and personal conversations with Studio D producers, marketers, and filmmakers. I have included some of my reflections in the form of italicized journal entries.

I constructed an analytical framework around the notion of a "radical aesthetic." I claim that a radical aesthetic consists of several evocative qualities: it evokes a sense of yearning in the viewer, it both utilizes and stimulates creativity and imagination, and, it evokes a sense of place in the viewer both geographically, in place and in body. I claim that these evocations bring a woman's subterranean knowledge to the surface that motivates, inspires and guides a woman's transformative learning.

Personal Perspective

I admit outright my personal position: I call myself a feminist and attempt to act and think like one. My idea of a feminist is a woman who recognizes women's oppression, that women have different (and similar) experiences, and that consciousness-raising is one way to become politicized. As a feminist, I choose to understand, to resist and to transform social and political practices that oppress all people, especially women. As a feminist, I am interested in finding ways to celebrate my womanness. As such, I have a vested interest in the outcomes of this research. I support feminist education, therefore, I am interested in finding ways to justify and critique feminist educational projects.

One of the struggles I have encountered because of my feminist position, and one that has had a significant impact on my research, is the continuous encountering and confronting of my own internalized sexism, and the fear of speaking and writing about my knowledge. I, like hooks (1988), found that writing about my knowledge was "to leave a trace" and was frightening (p.156). I survived a childhood of trauma and violence by adopting strategies of invisibility and those strategies became called into question during the personal journey and struggle of writing

this thesis. Before I could think and write clearly about feminist educational initiatives, I have had to quiet the chaotic roar of conflicting internal messages about women's power in general and feminist strategies in particular.

Finally, I am a white single-parent woman and have lived in poverty most of my life. While I do not attempt a class or race analysis here, this background has influenced my thinking and analysis. I am aware that part of the power of these films for me is that they give me a connection to a heritage that I never knew I had. My parents fled from the United States to Canada when I was a young child. While I was growing up I did not know my relatives and I was taught to be ashamed of my country of origin (as well as my relatives living there), the United States. My idea of my heritage began when I was eight years old, when my parents immigrated to Canada.

In her struggle to survive a childhood full of terror and violence, Maya Angelou spoke of how creative acts by authors and artists were like "handholds through the darkness" (Markova, 1993, p. 7). Their work inspired her, shaped her thinking, exposed her to what could be possible. For me, the aesthetic experience of these films created a space deep inside me where I found that I could begin to imagine/envision a new way of thinking and being—one that resists oppressive practices, begins healing, and most of all, honours women. Among my friends, Studio D has been criticized for their white, middle-class bias. Studio D's work has been ignored and marginalized in the feminist film literature. Yet, for many years this was the only publicly-funded feminist production unit in the world. The diverse and unique body of work (over 100 films) that Studio D has produced over 20 years stands as a testament, albeit partial and imperfect, of many women's struggle and resistance to overcome oppression and to articulate

what it means to be a woman in Canadian culture. Theirs is a vital body of work. However, it is far from complete and given the fact that Studio D was recently shut down, I am concerned about what will happen to Canadian feminist visions and voices in film and alternative educational initiatives.

Significance of this Study

Looking at feminist education is exciting and offers an opportunity for new interpretations and understandings of the world we live in. These films provocative in their feminist re-visioning of history and the linking of the past with contemporary social practices. These films have had a powerful affect on me and using an autobiographical approach allowed me to explore this experience. This not only gave me an opportunity to understand myself and my own struggle (learning process) to change my life, but also the opportunity to deepen my feminist awareness and position. Most significantly, however, I think this study helped me understand and articulate the process of transformative learning more fully.

By grounding this study in personal experience and a feminist stand-point, I attempt to keep this work accessible and practical to readers and educational practitioners. My ultimate goal is to inform adult educators and other teachers about the benefits of feminist documentary film as a powerful educational tool.

Limitations of this Study

There are several limitations of this thesis which are hopefully balanced by the strengths of using an autobiographical approach. Interviews with a variety of different women would have broadened my study and offered a more extensive understanding of how and what sort of meaning women, in addition to myself, derive from feminist documentary films. I have examined three films produced over a four-year period. Readers should be aware that these three films stand as one body of work among a much larger collection. Other studies involving more films and other directors over a longer period of time would be necessary to gain a fuller understanding of the complexity and diversity of Studio D's work.

In the next chapter I provide an introduction and overview to the relatively small genre of feminist documentary filmmaking. This chapter in intended to give the reader an understanding of the historical development of feminist documentary film as well as a general description of the distinctive characteristics of this type of film.

CHAPTER II-FEMINIST DOCUMENTARY FILM: 1970 - 1990

In this chapter I first provide a brief overview of feminist filmmaking as a genre and the development of feminist film theory and criticism in Western culture. [2] Then, I will focus in detail on one particular type of feminist filmmaking: feminist documentary. Here, I describe the characteristics of feminist documentary film, as well as feminist educational intentions. Although a documentary approach was enthusiastically embraced by feminist and non-feminists alike at the height of the women's movement in the 1970s, over time this approach has been ignored and marginalized. I provide an overview of the criticisms which have contributed to this rejection and argue that documentary approaches became submerged by the proliferation of academic and theoretical attention to dominant mainstream films and, to a lesser extent, the symbolic experimental forms of film.

The Emergence of a Feminist Film Genre

> *If patriarchy can take what exists and make it not, surely we can take what exists and make it be. But for this we have to want her in our own words, this very real integral women that we are, this idea of us, which like a vital certitude, would be our natural inclination to make sense of what we are. (Nicole Brossard, 1989, p. 390)*

Feminist Documentary Film Making: Socialist Beginnings

Feminist filmmaking began within the second wave of the Women's Movement in the 1970s. It was directly influenced by the Women's Movement and the tradition of socialist

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[2] Although some Canadian sources exist, Canadian film theory has been and continues to be marginalized in the film literature.

documentary filmmaking. Socialist filmmaking, which had a small presence in industrial societies such as Britain and United States, has as its presupposition

> the belief that art has a role to play in challenging the economic and social relations engendered by capitalism, in identifying the interests of the exploited and oppressed, and in assisting in the process of transforming society in order to meet the needs of the majority of the population, including women. (Harvey, 1990, p. 371)

Drawing from this belief and the intentions of the Women's movement, early feminist documentary film projects were primarily concerned with influencing the social conditions of women. In general, these films deliberately attempted to capture and to articulate women's issues within patriarchal society. Early documentary style projects attempted to (re)define women's experiences or (re)define our understanding of society from feminist standpoints. The filmmakers optimistically believed that the identification and representation of women's oppression would motivate audiences to affect change. These films were a deliberate political effort to create "a new space . . . for women in women's terms" (Lesage, 1978, p. 505). Feminists in general argued that women's images were created by men for men's desire and feminist filmmakers in particular claimed that through the alternatives created by feminist filmmaking, sexist representations (and sexist social practices) of women could be transformed. Most attention, therefore, addressed the absence or misrepresentation of women in film. In order to confront sexism, films were made that 1) centred on women, 2) presented women as "real", and, 3) presented women positively. These early feminist documentary projects were

deliberately attempting to create a visual "womanspace" and a space that was intimately connected with broader feminist social and political activism. [3]

Development of Avant-Garde

Soon after feminist documentary began to exert its presence, other approaches to feminist filmmaking emerged. Most notably, the avant-garde and deconstructionist approaches sought to re-create a women's language/culture through analyzing and deconstructing the codes of mainstream cinema. Specifically, this meant abandoning traditional filmic forms. Claire Johnston (1973a) put forward the concept of "counter-cinema" which argues that feminist film

> must challenge the depiction of reality; it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of the cinema/depiction of reality must be also interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected. (p. 29-31)

Avant-garde filmmakers disagreed with the socialist documentary claim that "reality" could be represented. They claimed, instead, that the "*truth* of women's oppression [could] not be *captured* on celluloid with the *innocence* of the camera; it [had] to be constructed/manufactured" (Johnston, 1973a, p. 28). [4]

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[3] Some examples of this early work from the United States are: *Growing Up Female* (Julia Reichart and Jim Klein, 1969); *Janie's Janie* (Geri Ashur, 1971); *Joyce at 34* (Joyce Chopra, 1972).

[4] Some examples of early feminist avant-garde or feminine écricture include: Canadian—*Water Sark* (Joyce Wieland, 1966); *The Central Character* (Patricia Gruben, 1979); and European—*Thriller* (Sally Potter, 1979); *Daughter Rite* (Michelle Citron, 1978); *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Ackerman, 1978).

The Emergence of Feminist Film Theory and Criticism

The application of feminist theory to film specifically interrogates and investigates the construction and representation of women in society. Problems concerning representations, narrative structure, spectator positioning and access have taken on new dimensions when considered from a women's point of view (Straayer, 1984). Not limiting their investigation to the small but growing body of feminist films, feminist film theorists and critics began drawing from the theoretical realms of feminism, semiotics, psychoanalysis and structuralism to develop "a body of knowledge that could account for the way cinema in general reproduces sexist ideology" (Stern, 1990, p. 150). Through "reading against the grain" (Bovenshen, 1977) classic Hollywood narrative films were, and continue to be, deconstructed in order to produce crucial hitherto unknown feminist perspectives and knowledges. Feminist film theorists and critics have directed their attention almost exclusively to Hollywood mainstream cinema, examining the ways in which cinema does not simply "reflect the world, but rather mediates, represents ideas *about* the real" (Stern, 1990, p. 150).

Within these theoretical discussions, feminist film theorists and critics focus on the construction of subjectivity rather than the reflections and analyses of everyday experiences that documentary attempts to elucidate (Root, 1990). To this end, documentary films have been overlooked by feminist film theorists and critical discussions alike. Despite its clear intention to educate, feminist documentary film has not attracted the attention of educational theorists or researchers either. Most of the critical attention has concentrated in media studies and the deconstruction of fiction films. It is important to mention, however, that during the early years of feminist filmmaking, film theorists and critics were more intimately connected to feminist

filmmaking practice. Today, this relationship is hardly connected with the majority of feminist film theory and criticism coming almost exclusively from the academic realm, not from the realm of feminist film practice. The feminist film critic, Ruby Rich (1994) is concerned about the "growing acceptance of feminist film as an area of study rather than a sphere of action" (p. 28).

Feminist Documentary Film: 1970s

Feminist documentary filmmaking is a cinematic genre congruent with a political movement, the contemporary Women's Movement.

These words were written in 1978 by Julia Lesage in a definitive article describing the genre of feminist filmmaking, which, in its emergence, utilized a documentary form. As these words convey, feminist documentary filmmaking was, at least initially, intimately connected to the Women's Movement. The documentary form—a combination of traditional realism and the more recent development of cinéma vérité—was the immediate choice for several crucial reasons. In the following section, I examine the characteristics of these forms and the ways in which they particularly suited feminists' resources and educational intentions. Generally, documentary approaches were, and continue to be, used by feminists as a tool for raising individual consciousness and affecting social change. Mainly because of its reliance on these forms, documentary approaches have been dismissed by feminists both as a subject of inquiry and as an area of practice. The central premise of my thesis is that when feminist intentions and feminist analyses are applied to realism and to cinéma vérité forms, these traditional forms are transformed aesthetically into a form that challenges, resists and re-constructs classic realist representations of women. I claim that this aesthetic is radical and offers viewers, especially

women, a visual space in which they might powerfully yearn, radically think, and creatively imagine. I claim that the aesthetic of feminist documentary film creates images and ideas where women can see who they are and what they might become despite living in a patriarchal society.

Feminist Documentary Form: A Combination of Realism, Cinéma Vérité and Feminist Analysis

Realism

In film, realism strives to represent people and things as they are, to reflect, as a mirror, the "real" world. Influential French film critic Andre Bazin has argued that,

> the mechanical nature of photographic reproduction makes film an objective medium ideally suited to recording the real world . . . realist qualities of transparency and fluidity, and ambiguity . . . work together to approximate our experience of non-filmic reality. (Freiberg, 1991, p. 336)

An illusion of reality is achieved through invisible editing and cutting techniques. These techniques involve cutting from one shot to another "so unobtrusively that viewers are virtually unaware of the change in the camera's position" (Konigsberg, 1987, p. 174). In other words, the manipulations of the camera, director, editing, etc. are obscured in the final product. Realism's transparency can work so smoothly that often "whatever the camera turns to, the audience accepts" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 286). The constructed aspect of the film becomes lost and the representation appears "natural" or "true." For women, who are generally either absent or misrepresented by the oppressive stereotyping in mainstream cinema, the naturalism of realism is particularly problematic.

Western society is dominated by a plethora of visual representations. The "mainstream" Hollywood film relies almost exclusively on realist techniques and dominates nearly every theatre in the world. Hollywood's production of images and form and their particular coded meanings pose a formidable force in cultural values. Because of this, many feminist film theorists and critics have argued that realist techniques can never be a successful strategy of resistance or a revolutionary art (Johnston, 1973a; Kuhn, 1990; Michel, 1990). However, I argue that feminist documentary did not develop out of Hollywood realism. It grew out of a *socialist* realist tradition which relies on realism and cinéma vérité in such a way that intention and subjectivity are not obfuscated. Within socialist realism, intentions and analyses are openly declared and representations resist dominant norms and values and provide crucial alternatives.

Cinéma Vérité

Developed by French filmmakers in the 1960s, cinéma vérité, meaning "camera truth," refers to a type of documentary style that attempts to disrupt the unity of realist forms. Ideally, cinéma vérité involves less intervention/manipulation of the director/editing and involves more participation of the film subjects. Generally, cinéma vérité style strives to create a sense of

> immediacy, spontaneity, and authenticity through the use of portable and unobtrusive equipment and the avoidance of any preconceived narrative line or concepts concerning the material. (Konigsberg, 1987, p. 50)

Distinct from direct cinema,[5] cinéma vérité involves the filmmaker characteristically "questioning and probing those interviewed, provoking subjects to expose themselves in a

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[5] Direct cinema is a technique in which there is little or no intervention by the director or editing. The camera is left running to record, in real time, "reality." The camera does not follow the action, rather, much of the action occurs outside of the frame with the presence of this "action" perceived only through recorded sound.

spontaneous and truthful way" (Konigsberg, 1987, p. 50). Camera movements are often shaky, indicating a hand-held camera and spontaneous shooting rather than scripted and set up, tripod shots. The image is often grainy, indicating natural light, not staged and lit sets. These stylistic characteristics closely resemble live, "on-the-spot" news reports and as such, signal some sort of "truth" or "reality." Audiences have come to read these stylistic characteristics as indicators of "truth." However, similar to Hollywood's version of reality, this "reality" can also be problematic. For example, documentaries often require just as much scripting and staging as does fiction film. The cinematographer, editor and director make many decisions about what will be presented and what will not.

British writer Paskin (1990) observes that realism and cinéma vérité seem to be the best medium for truth-telling because audiences have come to associate these forms with a certain level of "truth" or "reality," and that they tend to be straight-forward rather than symbolic in the communication of meaning. British film theorist and critic, Christine Gledhill (1978) argues that realism is often the "first recourse of any oppressed group wishing to combat ideology promulgated by the media in the interests of hegemonic power" (p. 462). For women who are becoming aware that the female image most often expresses male fantasy,

> it becomes the concern of that group to expose the oppression of such images and replace their falsity, lies, deceptions and escapist illusions with reality and truth (p. 462).

Some early feminist filmmakers believed, and I support them, that these approaches were able to expose hitherto unidentified aspects of women's personal experiences which could be "viewed as part of women's wider social and cultural oppression, and used as a means of raising consciousness" (Paskin, 1990, p. 124).

However, many influential feminist film theorists such as Johnston, (1973a & 1973b); Kuhn (1990); and McGarry (1975) have dismissed the documentary approach as simplistic, and uncritical in the way its form does not challenge the audience to be critical (Michel, 1990). These critics claim that simple assertions of the "truth" reinforce the dominant ideology and hegemonic consciousness. Although some of this criticism is valid, dismissing feminist documentary films seems to undermine general feminist principles and specific filmmaker's intentions and efforts. To ensure individual and social change remains buoyant, a diverse body of feminist knowledge and awareness is needed.[6] I claim that the aesthetic quality of feminist documentary created by a feminist analysis stimulates audiences, especially women, to begin questioning their understanding of the position of women in society. This questioning is the first stage of developing a critical consciousness. Because of this, I believe that feminist documentary film contributes a distinct and important voice in the overall feminist cultural discourse.

Feminist Intentions and Feminist Analysis

> *Radical critical consciousness is a learned stand-point, emerging from awareness of the nature of power and domination that is confirmed experientially. (hooks, 1994, p. 362)*

I claim that feminist intentions and analyses transform the limitations of the documentary forms of realism/cinéma vérité and create a cinematic form that provides alternative images and meanings that are capable of resisting and challenging the dominant representations of women.

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6 The work of Trinh T Minh-Ha deconstructs notions of "truth" and constructions of subjectivity. See *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics.* (1991) London: Routledge

Feminist documentary film does not simply replicate an unchallenging form. Rather, it is informed by and articulates varied feminist perspectives and analyses which, I argue, contributes a distinct and diverse cultural presence in the mass of popular culture. For example, many feminist documentary films reveal the influence of a radical feminist political perspective in the way that womens' oppression is identified as a result of male domination and "reality" is "reconceptualize[d] from the stand-point of women, making visible the invisible" and emphasizing the gendered structure of society (Humm, 1990, p. 184). Further, radical feminist politics is evident by the formation of feminist production units, such as Studio D, women-only crews, and feminist distribution systems. There is a deliberate attempt in creating these alternative institutions to develop a presence of "Womanculture" in order to generate social change (Humm, 1990).

The influence of socialist feminism is evident in projects that emphasize women's historical and economic oppression in patriarchal society. These projects do not recover women's history so that women (and men) may simply know more history but usually link the past with the present in order to politicize women and develop male allies. The development of a relatively unique women's cinema where women control all aspects of film production and distribution is a goal of many socialist and radical feminists as well as cultural feminists. Related to the socialist documentary belief that art can be used to challenge hegemonic conditions of a dominant society, cultural feminists are concerned with creating a visible and vital independent aesthetic for women in cultural projects. I argue that the three films in this study provide an example of a such an aesthetic.

Modelled on the basic principles of feminism, feminist filmmakers deliberately sought to raise consciousness, empower women and affect social change through personal and collective transformation. The primary objective of feminist documentary filmmaking is to articulate/express a feminist analysis to society in general and to women in particular. The media plays a major role in defining what it means to be a woman in this society, therefore, intervention in this realm is crucial. Given the associations of "truth/reality" with documentary approaches, feminist filmmakers, at least initially, enthusiastically and idealistically believed that their audiences would critically "see" the position of women in society and, from this exposure, be motivated to work together to alleviate women's oppression. To a large extent, through the public process of filmmaking, the regimes of knowledge production were revealed and confronted.

When oppressed people, such as women, discuss their conditions, they begin to invent solutions in order to make the needed changes in society. They begin to name their experience as a cultural construction, moving from a dependent stage of thinking into a critically conscious one, capable of transformative action. I believe that feminist analyses transform the limitations of realist techniques and writers such as Gledhill (1978), Kaplan, (1991), and Ruby Rich, (1994), argue that this form is appropriate and useful to the feminist cause. Ruby Rich (1994) writes that,

> one of feminist filmmaking's greatest contributions is a body of films about women's lives, political struggles, organizing . . . [The films] function as validation and legitimization of women's culture and individual lives (p. 37)

Kaplan (1991) points out that much of the critique of feminist documentary filmmakers use of realism has come from critiques of realism in fiction films and, as such, it cannot be simply

applied to documentary. Most feminist critiques of realism are made from a semiotic/structuralist position, one which "makes the signifier material . . . all there is to know" and this can be as problematic and limited as believing "representation could affect behaviour directly" (Kaplan, 1991, p. 133). Kaplan points out that in their unconventional images and content, feminist documentary films usually evoke "an *active* response . . . one that has potential for challenging assumptions about what we come to expect from cinema and adding to what we know about the world" (p. 136). Stern (1979/80) writes that

> feminism as a subject has a quite different status from psychoanalysis, politics or the avant-garde . . . as a political movement . . . it is bound to produce a different audience from the one usually occupying the space of special events and to provoke different questions with respect to the theory/politics relation (p. 90).

Characteristics of Feminist Documentary Film

Feminist documentary film is characterized by many feminist concerns and issues. One of the underlying motivations and intentions of feminist documentary film is to make visible the systemic oppression of women in patriarchy as well as to make visible the culture of women. To achieve this, the film focuses on the particular (personal): the experience of women in patriarchal society, including issues of identity and voice—women (not) speaking. As well, the context—the everyday realm that plays a role in defining women. Along with self-identification through (auto)biography and voice, women's experience/identity also includes notions of desire. Film stimulates and constructs desire which is a part of women's identity as well as the audience identification of women. With these considerations in mind, feminist filmmakers have developed a distinct critical treatment of the filmic elements of form, sound, and images.

Meaning is created by the film itself, through audience identification and/or interaction with the visual critical analysis as well as through the pleasures and emotions evoked in the feminist spectacle. In this section, I look specifically at how feminist intentions and analyses characterize feminist documentary film.

The Feminist Particular: The Personal and The Everyday

Re-examining history from a woman's perspective, re-stating previously unarticulated knowledge from a feminist stand-point, and creating *écriture féminine*,[7] are but some of the ways that feminist analyses understand and articulate women's experiences in patriarchal society. Feminist documentary films work to

> convey a new and heightened sense of what *woman* means or can mean in our society—this new sense of female identity being expressed both through the subject's story and through the tangible details of the subject's milieu. (Lesage, 1978, p. 515)

The narration usually takes a woman's stand-point and is told from the woman's (autobiographical) point of view or in conversation with the filmmakers. Women (filmmakers and/or their subjects) are striving to speak in a "new way", a woman-identified way (Lesage, 1978, p. 517). The women on the screen tell their own stories, eliminating the traditional male "voice-of-god" narrator. This telling is a re-claiming of space as women analyze, criticize, and articulate often for the first time, the structure of society as it has been experienced by women. Although autobiography is a source of knowledge that has been generally dismissed, Edgerton

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[7] Ecriture féminine is a term in French feminist theory for women's writing. Its foundations are in criticism and it claims that women's writing is a particular discourse: "closer to the body, to emotions and to the unnameable, all of which are repressed by the social contract" (Humm, 1990, p. 59). See Cixous (1976); Wittig (1976); Iriagary (1974, 1977).

(1993) writes that autobiography is a form of knowledge that exerts "a profound influence on those who encounter [it]" (p. 221). Taubman (1993), writing about identity formation, claims that in autobiography one does not create one's experience but captures it. Thus autobiography as a means to self-knowledge is possible since a dialectic exists between the narrative and the actual experience (p. 32). This dialect creates an important validation of experience in that it provides "both the ground for action and what is to be transformed: (Taubman, 1993, p. 32) not only for the women in the film, but also for the audience. When women tell their stories on film, their speaking allows them an opportunity to re-define their experiences and to challenge their own understandings of their position in society as women. Their speaking also offers those of us who listen and identify with their stories the same opportunity. Listening is a part of dialogue. As we listen, their stories become our stories; we can also talk to each other about our (their) stories.

> *The politics of experience, and location, yield, not surprisingly, the most forceful stories. (Nichols, 1994, p. 15)*

We see and listen to stories that take place in the everyday—the seldom seen private, domestic world of women's lives and their personal interactions. The settings are usually the inside of women's homes or in their backyards which not only require less equipment, time, and money, facilitating the production of feminist films, but also contributes to the understanding of women's experience/identity. This visual feminist analysis of women's (everyday) experience expresses feminism's fundamental political tenet: *the personal is political.* It also "makes strange" the everyday, disrupting conventional perceptions and providing an opportunity to re-view, as in re-see ordinary experiences. Women watching these films usually find the analysis

new, yet some how familiar. "The act of naming previously unarticulated knowledge, of seeing that knowledge as political" has a consciousness-raising effect on women viewers (Lesage, 1978, p. 515). Naming makes visible the invisible, and with a feminist analysis, exposes the gendered structure of society. Particularly important here is the way in which naming previously unknown experiences allows women to begin visualizing a shift in the socio-political relationships which ultimately encourages action.

Stepping Westward *(excerpt)*
There is no savour
more sweet, more salt

than to be glad to be
what, woman

and who, myself,
I am, a shadow

Denise Levertov

Much has been written about the pleasures of watching films. The ability of film to evoke emotion is well known. Film theorists draw from psychoanalysis in their explanations of how simply looking can be pleasurable. Scopophilia (pleasure in looking) works on the Freudian psychoanalytical principle that people find it satisfying, in a voyeuristic/narcissistic sense, to look (from a safe distance) [8] at other (objectified) people:

> [C]uriosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form

[8] Much has been written about men's disengaged, "objective" approach to gaining knowledge. However, what I mean here by distance comes from Susan H. Edgerton (1993). She talks about the risk of learning as being synonymous as the risk of loving which must be predicated in a unique situation of listening. Drawing from Kristeva (1987), Edgerton claims that there is a resistance to knowing as "love (learning) calls into question the very notion of identity" (p. 223). This calls into question two things. First, a learner must feel safe enough to simply listen (this is especially so in unique situations such as feminist documentary film). Second, learners must feel safe enough to risk confronting their identities. Film can provide a sense of safety because of the literal distance between viewer and screen. Feminist film can deepen this sense of safety because it presents something that is recognizable and understandable even though it may also be explosive and challenging.

and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world (Mulvey, 1975, p. 17).

Mulvey has raised many challenging questions about the relationship between the (female) spectator and the images on the screen. In her ground breaking essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), Mulvey claims the camera's (audience) gaze (in narrative film) is constituted for male (sexual) pleasure. The camera lens provides the director (and therefore, the audience) with a provocative roving "key hole" that expresses male (sexist) attitudes and sexual fantasies. Typically, mainstream narrative film depicts women in fragmented, particular close-ups of women's body parts that reflect a male notion of sexual pleasure. Mulvey raises many important questions about the role of the unconscious in the structure of film, the compelling pleasure of viewing films and how these phenomena are linked to the formation of social and cultural norms in audiences.

In 1975, Mulvey advocated feminist filmmakers move beyond oppressive filmic structures which utilized a voyeuristic male gaze. She suggested that feminist filmmakers invent new filmic forms that did not produce a voyeuristic gaze, but that deconstructed the conventional (male) sense of pleasure in order to represent women in an unoppressive way. She argued for radical film approaches that evoked displeasure, rather than pleasure, providing justification for more experimental approaches in film. While she does not mention documentary approaches, I suggest that they do offer audiences a pleasurable viewing experience that is not necessarily oppressive to women. I believe that feminist documentary does not work as a pleasure tool, emulating and performing for a male gaze. Instead, I suggest that feminist documentary offers

women a potentially empowering gaze which is capable of evoking a radical desire [9] in women viewers. It is generally evoked from images of women—speaking, creating, and celebrating their womanness. It is a stimulation of pleasure that is not the typical male (sexual) pleasure. This occurs in part because the images are constituted for an audience of women by women:

> An important source of pleasure for the female spectators . . . lie[s] in the construction of the female body not only as strong, but also as capable of being shaped and defined by women themselves. (Kaplan, 1989, p. 54)

Emotion plays a significant role in the pleasure of film. In particular, the emotions expressed in feminist documentary film often arouse deep emotions in the women watching. To see or hear one's innermost feelings expressed on film in a public setting can be more than simply pleasurable, it can be validating, emotionally cathartic and inspirational to further growth. A direct treatment of women, including their strengths and ordinariness, is rarely witnessed in film. By paying critical attention to emotions, women are able to deepen their self-understanding and make sense of their position in society.

Women viewers may identify with the representations, yet, because of the unobscured feminist analysis, it remains possible to critique and to analyze (theorize) the representations. Women interacting with other women collectively, as audience, as subjects, as creators, is, as Lesage (1978) writes, a "coming to (creating, seizing) knowledge" (p. 521). It can be transgressive, generative and healing. The viewer (woman) is not oppressed by the gaze. The feminist analysis disturbs the potential voyeurism of the camera or the unity of the editing. "Reality" is not presented as cohesive or unified, it is analysis. It offers a space for

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[9] I link this idea of radical desire to a broader radical aesthetic which I discuss in detail in the analysis.

interpretation. As Braderman (1978), a feminist teacher who uses feminist film in her teaching, writes

> when speaking of identification with feminists, I don't necessarily desire a unified, coherent identification but I desire to connect to a body of thought, a body of women, who care for themselves because they are, no less and no more, women. (p. 576)

The focus on the feminist particular—the personal as well as the contextual—creates a representation of women that is not available in mainstream images. (Auto)biography, emotion, scopophilia and the direct treatment of women work together to create a distinct film that can be an empowering and invigorating emotionally and intellectually for women.

> *The magic of words, that which proceeds to elaborate thought and emotion, that which transforms, which motivates beings, the being I am or she who I could be, or, further still, she who I desire to be to the point of becoming her in an unalienable present, to the point of being what happens to me, that is, what I am. (Nicole Brossard, 1989, p.389)*

Audience Position: Women (and men)

> *[T]here is a different relationship with what's being filmed or who's being filmed which I hope would necessitate a different relationship between who's watching the film and who's made the film. (Mayne, 1978, p. 96)*

Much of the knowledge about an audience's relationship to film and their experience in watching film has been investigated from a psychoanalytical or structural framework. From these analyses, which have been applied primarily to fiction films, the film codes or signs have been constituted as all there is to know, ignoring the activity of the audience (Kaplan, 1991). What is needed is a theoretical approach that considers the viewer's position as much as the film's language and structure. The "text" of the film is a dynamic and dialectical process so that watching the film becomes a moment of signification rather than a static container of significance (Brannigan, 1981). As a dynamic entity the film becomes a "symbolic process that

engages the subject in an exchange of meaning. In this exchange, 'reality' can be named, unnamed and renamed" (Brannigan, 1981, p. 56). This process of exchange is integral to feminist analysis, feminist documentary, and feminist revolution.

Kaplan (1991) observes that spectators are positioned differently between fiction and non-fiction films. Generally speaking, people watch documentary film to learn something, not to "escape reality" or be entertained as in fiction film. The audience usually has an interest in the subject, if not the form. I suggest that there are several elements in feminist documentary that engage women viewers and initiate a process of exchange in meaning, deepening the learning experience: feminist analysis, scopophilia response to unconventional content, and audience discussions.

First, I suggest that because of the feminist analysis, feminist documentary film offers a unique feminist visual spectacle which, as Singer (1990) writes, "tak[es] me outside myself and transport[s] me somewhere else I have never been and could not have known about because such a place did not exist prior to the cinematic event" (p. 62). While Singer's remarks are in reference to fiction films, I suggest that they could be said of feminist documentary film as well. Feminist culture portrayed in feminist documentary film *is* a fiction in patriarchal society—it does not exist in many women's everyday lives. Presenting and knowing women as strong and capable, worthy of respect, is at the heart of feminist struggle. Feminist documentary films offer, albeit briefly and partially, a glimpse of how life might be lived if feminism were integrated into everyday social life. They offer a "fiction" that can be transformed into a reality of alternatives by the audience.

Second, the scopophilic experience of film viewing ensures an active viewer (Mulvey, 1975). While documentary visuals can often become boring with "talking heads", women speaking in feminist documentaries often speak in new and disturbing ways about new and disturbing things that can provoke and engage the audience. Feminist documentary images "re-order the signs within [film] conventions, giving us unfamiliar images of women; we make unfamiliar identifications, sympathies and alliances and are given new perceptions" (Kaplan, 1974, p. 52). There is potential for an especially profound learning experience for a woman (and a man). Often the female viewer identifies with the women characters.

Third, filmmakers intend that discussions follow and these are usually possible given the non-formal viewing places such as the public library, women studies classrooms, and homes. Like the film itself, where subjects and filmmaker talk, after viewing, the audience becomes an extension of that filmed dialogue which deepens and extends the learning experience. Occasionally, the filmmakers attend screenings in order to discuss the making of the film, their interpretation and the issues presented. Their presence goes a long way towards de-mystifying the privileged position of filmmakers and connects them to the audience. Audience feedback is frequently used to inform the filmmakers of other projects as well as what are other concerns for women. It is often through and during this discussion period that some women decide to organize and to act. Actions can be as organized and enduring as forming permanent groups or organizing protests but they also can be as individual as one woman going to the library and finding out more about a particular issue. A feminist visual spectacle, scopophilia response to unconventional content, and audience discussions demystify film representations and concretize the filmic experience. Feminist documentary films function aesthetically to re-organize viewer

expectations produced by mainstream (patriarchal) narratives and initiate a critique of them (Lesage, 1978).

Educational Intentions

Generally, feminist documentary films intend to educate women and men to the knowledge that women suffer systemic injustice in our society because of their sex. These films, however, also reveal how much women have to gain and contribute by re-engaging in society and emerging politically active. Feminist filmmakers attempt to raise audience consciousness to this fact, but especially women's consciousness. This is done through a variety of approaches that have already been mentioned such as historical re-workings, (auto)biographical projects and a focus on specific issues or concerns. In educational approaches that seek to affect change it is when learners are provided opportunities to discover/uncover their own latent (and practical) knowledge that they will become empowered and thus, stimulated to act differently affecting personal and social change (Freire, 1970). According to Belenky et al (1986) women respond best to learning situations that help them recognize/realize/connect with their latent knowledge and those situations that allows them to use their everyday knowledge. As mentioned earlier, feminist film can offer an opportunity for women to identify with and/or critique the represented images, a potentially a profound learning experience, considering that often female viewers relate to the women in the film as "intimates . . . extensions of [their] worlds" (Modleski, 1984, p. 69).

Many feminist documentary films were conceived and used as organizational tools with the hopes of activating women (and men) to form politically active groups. Educators, John Elias and Sharan Merriam (1981) claim that critical educational approaches strive to make people

aware of harmful and unjust social structures. Increasing critical awareness enables learners to affect change because, according to Elias and Merriam, there is a very close connection between "knowing and acting" (p. 145). For feminist filmmakers evoking a critical consciousness means raising audience awareness to how dominant discourses and systems, especially the media, work to oppress women. In this way feminist documentary films have generated change. Making critical sense of one's situation is transformative. Organizing and exerting political pressure is an act of transformation.

In the beginning of feminist documentary filmmaking, filmmakers saw making films as an "urgent public act" (Lesage, 1978, p. 508). In order to transgress the boundaries of women's submerged knowledges, unique conditions had to be met and/or created. Women-only production crews were formed not only to develop a feminist film production distinct from other film productions, but also to facilitate the making of films that might never have been made with male crews. Women-only crews involved the development of a deep "trust between the women filmmakers and woman subject" (Lesage, 1978, p. 508) and they were made possible by the collective working methods. The collective methods allowed the subjects a degree of participation and control in the filmmaking process. However, not only were feminist filmmakers interested in collectively representing women's (their own) stories on film, they were also concerned with training women in the art of feminist filmmaking.

Given their limited access to theatrical distribution and lack of funding, feminist filmmakers made 16mm films to take advantage of established educational film circuits through libraries, schools, churches, unions, and YWCAs (Lesage, 1978). Supportive institutional structures were needed to assist the filmmakers' goals. In the situation of oppositional film

practices, public institutions "form the conditions under which films are, or are not, made and seen" (Kuhn, 1994, p. 173). For example, securing funding was and continues to this day to be a chronic problem for women filmmakers, feminist documentary or otherwise. Obtaining funding to make the films is difficult enough, however, securing money and (places) for their distribution and exhibition has posed an even greater barrier. There are many feminist films in existence that have had no public showing. The majority of the film literature reviewed thus far seems to be unaware that several permanent publicly funded feminist documentary production units exist. Given the rise of public television networks, feminist documentary film has exposure to new audiences: people who watch television.

An Overview of Feminist Documentary Film: 1980s-1990s

> *Women's documentary film offers a new freshness to film world: unity, discovery, energy, and a brave 'we're-here-to-stay' spirit. (Ruby Rich, 1994, p. 28)*

Since its emergence, feminist documentary film continues to exist, however, the enthusiasm and optimism of such work has been submerged in the rise of other interests and projects. During the early years, it was believed that documentary as a form would thrive—it has not. From 1975 onward, the women's movement became further specialized as women explored their differences and the complexity of gender politics. In film production, theory and criticism, there was a definite shift; "a specialization, increased institutionalization, [and] a backlash of 'human' liberation . . . a period of normalizing" (Ruby Rich, 1994, p. 41). Feminist film theory and criticism became mostly concerned with issues of form in narrative film. While this emphasis offers useful insights into the concepts of subjectivity and truth, it has often become too abstract (Nichols, 1994).

In the 1990s, feminist documentary filmmaking evolved to a docu-drama style incorporating dramatizations and re-creations. This evolution has occurred largely because of audience preferences. Kuhn (1990) writes that "feminist political positions and aesthetic strategies which had once been easy to define as 'against the mainstream' have become partially incorporated within it" (p. 153). Some of Studio D's more recent work reflects this evolution.

This chapter has provided a brief discussion of the major concerns and characteristics of feminist documentary film. In the next chapter I describe the Canadian context in which Studio D was formed as well as provide a brief overview of their work for the past twenty years. I also introduce the three films of this study—*Goddess Remembered, Burning Times*, and *Full Circle* by way of a synopsis.

CHAPTER III-THE CONTEXT

National Film Board

In this chapter, I provide a brief history of the National Film Board of Canada, its intentions and approach to documentary filmmaking. I outline the turbulent social and political climate in Canada in the 1960s, including the Women's Movement. I discuss the relationship of the NFB's unique Challenge for Change program to the creation of Studio D. I briefly describe Studio D's work for over twenty years. Finally, I introduce the three films used in this study and provide a synopsis of them.

The Indelible Grierson Touch

The National Film Board of Canada was created in 1939 under the leadership of John Grierson with the financial and political co-operation of the Government of Canada. It was an institution primarily charged with the responsibility of interpreting Canada to both Canadians and the world. The filmmakers at the NFB worked to create a body of work that was identifiable as Canadian. As a result the films were designed to resist the hegemonic ideology of the dominant Hollywood film and the pressure of American culture as a whole. The films were also intended to help Canadians emotionally "connect" to each other in a country where expansive geography and increasing political tensions created a social climate of isolation (Evans, 1991). It was hoped that the films would serve as a "thread that [would tie Canadians] spiritually and intellectually to their society" (Evans, 1991, p. 108).

Grierson believed passionately in the power of film to act as an agent of social change, as a stimulant or motivator of individuals/citizens to a greater participation in the democratic process. The attraction was to focus on everyday people and everyday "reality," which would be presented "comprehensibly with images to which people related" (Evans, 1991, p. 69). It is no surprise, then, that Grierson and the filmmakers chose a realist approach over a narrative or fictional approach. Grierson advocated the superiority of realism over fiction because he believed that realism had the ability to "naturally" capture "reality with a new intimacy" (Grierson, 1966, p. 199). This approach of capturing and interpreting "reality" with the filmmaker as an objective, neutral observer, became the hallmark of the National Film Board.

Not surprisingly, much of the Film Board's early work ignored many peoples and their issues. For example, First Nations people, women, people of colour, and other marginal groups and issues, such as rape and other violence to women, were absent from most of the films made before 1970. Even when focusing on the "everyday" person (citizen) or a particular cultural interest, the films reflected a white, middle-class male bias that ultimately distorted the whole "reality" of an issue or particular group. To the artists' credit, however, many quality films were made year after year despite the government's benevolent mandate and financial restrictions. At best, budgets were often cut and, at worst, the entire Film Board worried about being closed down. [10] Never knowing if or what amount of funding would be provided contributed to insecure working relations for the staff. It was and continues to be essential to the Film Board's survival

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[10] There was virtually no support for Canadian independent filmmakers for many years. For many, the NFB was considered a secure haven for Canadian filmmakers.

that the filmmakers and the Commissioners be able to justify the relevance of their work to their audiences and to their government.

Transitions and Change: The Challenge for Change Program

Tensions always existed between the filmmakers' creative desires, government agenda and financial will. It was not until the social and political turbulence of the 1960s in which many of the filmmakers were active participants that the filmmakers were able to wrest more control over projects both in terms of film technique and content. Here the influence of Québécois cultural revolution brought new techniques such as cinéma direct/cinéma vérité to the Film Board. Their expressions resisted the hegemonic tendencies of realism. For example, the omnipotent voice-over was replaced with the subjects' voice, speaking for themselves in dialogue with the filmmakers. During the 1960s, many NFB filmmakers became self-reflective and critical of their previous work and particularly of the Film Board's national agenda. In addition to this, the second wave of the women's liberation movement, the emergence of feminist film as a genre, and the formation of Studio D forever changed the Film Board.

The 1960s was a time of social upheaval. Canada followed America's declaration of war on poverty in 1965. At the Film Board some filmmakers were interested in using film as an organizing tool for social action which, in many ways, was a reiteration of Grierson's ideology. However, they were not organizing for national unity but rather, social justice. Some used direct cinema for personal projects, while others explored themes which hovered "dangerously" near Marxist ideology (Evans, 1991, p. 101). The latter caused the government great concern. In order to maintain control of the direction, the NFB administration thought directing attention to

assisting disadvantaged individuals and regions of Canada seemed a particularly appropriate way back to the politically safe "public good" agenda.

The program, known as the Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle, was formed in 1969 in order to assist citizens to define and to take charge of their social dilemmas for the purpose of addressing social inequities and regional disparities (Watson, 1970; Kurchak, 1972; Dansereau, 1977; Evans, 1991). In collaboration with "everyday" people, these projects attracted activist artists who believed that cinéma vérité, which relied on the subject's speaking for themselves, was the technical approach that would address the issues of inequality among the disadvantaged groups/regions of Canada. This program, its focus and film techniques, as well as the government's support was pivotal in the creation of Studio D in 1974.

In 1971 Canada completed a Royal Commission on the status of womens' concerns and issues and the United Nations had declared 1975 the International Year of Women. With the Royal Commission's report and the UN designation of International Year of Women, women officially became a disadvantaged group. Kathleen Shannon was a filmmaker with the Challenge for Change program and was responsible for the series, *Working Mothers* (1973), which explored the "difficulties faced by mothers who work both inside and outside the home" (NFB, 1991, p. 43). Fuelled by her own feminism, and frustrated with the few projects that depicted women fairly or had women at the centre, Shannon was successful in securing a separate women's unit within the English Branch (Scherbarth, 1986). Thus, Studio D was created in 1974. [11]

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[11] Studio D was in the unique position of receiving public funding for over 10 years until Regards des femmes, a French equivalent was formed. Thus, Canada was the only country in the world until 1984 to publicly support women-centred, feminist film work.

Studio D

In its feminist orientation, Studio D was set up to challenge traditional (patriarchal) thinking and mainstream representations of women, to "bring women's perspectives to films, and to provide opportunities for Canadian women to move into motion-picture occupations traditionally dominated by men" (NFB, 1991, p. 3). However, Shannon supported the NFB traditions of filmmaking in crucial ways. For example, Shannon's feminist approach to filmmaking continued the Grierson tradition of minimizing the individual filmmaker for the purpose of building a collective sense of filmmaking. Feature lengths were shunned in favour of shorts as Shannon believed that feature length films tended to advance a filmmaker's career rather than foster a sense of community among the films' subjects and filmmakers. As in other feminist documentary approaches, Shannon especially supported "interactive" film in which the subjects were full participants with the filmmakers in the creation of the film (Evans, 1991, p. 168). While this is a feminist strategy it also continued the tradition established by social action documentaries in which film was understood as a tool for social change. Shannon remarked that:

> At Studio D we don't consider ourselves as filmmakers belonging primarily to a filmmaking community, as many of our colleagues do. We consider ourselves first as women, Canadian women, working at this time in history . . . to move towards the goals we share with our constituency . . . it is not just the making of the film but the using of it that is a natural extension of the process to which we are committed. (Shannon, Biography, no date, NFB archives, Vancouver, BC)

While Shannon and her feminist colleagues made films that were consistent with many of the NFB traditions in form, Studio D's work challenged and continued to challenge the NFB's approach to filmmaking as well as general societal attitudes towards women. Studio D radically

attempted to depict and integrate a feminist perspective into a public institution as well as to articulate this perspective for public consumption. Parallelling the women's movement and the development of contemporary feminism, Studio D filmmakers produced and continued to produce, until their recent closure, films that visually articulated feminism and linked women's oppression to broader socio-political practices.

> Racist and sexist prejudices and stereotypes flourish only in people's ignorance of each other's true selves. That's why it's urgent that our media start to reflect the real diversity of our population, and give access to the stories and perspectives of Canadians of all backgrounds and, in particular, the women. (Shannon, Biography, no date, NFB archives, Vancouver)

Rooted in a feminist politic which states that the *personal is political*, Studio D films attempted to alleviate women's oppression by exposing and naming it within the context of our everyday lives. Like other feminist documentarists of the day, Studio D filmmakers believed that this exposure would provide the viewer with a new lens or perspective with which to perceive and understand society. In short, the filmmakers were hoping that their work would successfully challenge the dominant discourse that marginalized women and their concerns and build a tangible feminist consciousness in society. To this end, Studio D adopted an explicitly feminist mandate which they maintained, despite the risks and difficulties, to the very end:

> Grounded in women's culture, politics and values, Studio D productions are designed to engage audiences, provoke discussion, and raise consciousness; they are conceived as tools for social change and empowerment. (NFB, 1991, p. 3)

The First Decade: 1970 - 1980

Studio D's initial work parallelled the emerging feminist documentary film genre of the 1970s. These early projects were specifically concerned with defining women's experiences or redefining our understanding of society from a woman's stand-point. Biographical and locally

based, these films embodied the political intentions of the early feminist filmmakers: Often, there was a special trust between the filmmaker and subject, and shared political goals. However, in their focus on the individual, many of these films have been criticized for losing sight of the larger social and political context and its influence on women's lives. They have also been criticized for their idealism in assuming that viewers would become politicized, (and active) when viewers encountered women's stories of oppression.

A sample of this type of film from this period include: *Augusta (1976)* by Anne Wheeler, a portrait of an 88-year old Shuswap woman; *I'll Find a Way (1977)* by Beverly Shaffer, a portrait of a 9-year old girl born with spina bifida disability;[12] *Mother of Many Children (1977)* by Alanis Obomsawin, the depiction of a First Nations' matriarchal culture; and, *Some American Feminists (1977)* by Luce Guilbeault, Nicole Brossard, Margaret Wescott, a historical discussion of the second wave of feminism in America.

The Second Decade: 1980 - 1990

The second decade exploded the relative obscurity of Studio D with the back-to-back release of two controversial (and award winning)[13] films: *Not a Love Story* (1981) and *If You Love This Planet* (1982). These two films elicited strong criticisms from many sectors of society in Canada and United States, including feminists. *Not a Love Story* drew the attention of American feminist film critics and theorists, and placed Studio D "on the map." However, the attention was highly critical and dismissive. Directed by Bonnie Sherr Klein, this film, intended

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12 This film won an Academy Award plus 10 other prestigious film awards from various other countries. (NFB, 1991, p. 19)

13 *If You Love This Planet* won an Academy Award in 1982 along with 5 other prestigious awards from film festivals from around the world (NFB, 1991, p. 32).

to portray the "addictive" nature of pornography and to "enlighten" a prostitute (as well as the audience) to a feminist perspective. However, in my opinion, this film provides the viewer with uncritical examination of pornographic images and a badly-acted moralistic sub-plot. The film *If You Love This Planet* (1982) directed by Terri Nash featured a lecture by Dr. Helen Caldicott warning of the dangers of nuclear war combined with archival footage of Hiroshima. Although this film won numerous awards, it provoked the Canadian and American governments and was banned for a brief period in the United States. At this time, Studio D filmmakers began to make more issue orientated films, leaving behind the biographical projects. They also began to do more collaborative work with independent filmmakers. Studio D maintained a feminist mandate for all independent filmmakers who submitted film proposals:

> Our chief objectives are to support women of diverse backgrounds and regions of Canada who wish to speak on film in their own voices; to produce and distribute films which analyze and challenge the influences which limit women's potential; to influence social, political, economic, and environmental realities by bringing feminist visions to all issues (Studio D Guidelines, no date, NFB Archives, Vancouver, BC).

The feminist filmmakers at Studio D always struggled to survive (Scherbarth 1986). Informed by radical feminist politics, the filmmakers lobbied long and hard for women-only crews, achieving this dream in 1983. They justified such a demand by claiming that some of their films could never have been created if men had worked with the crew. Many of their subjects would only participate with women-only crews, for example in films that dealt with sensitive issues, such as rape and violence. Further, Studio D filmmakers claimed that men often did not understand what they, and other feminists were trying to achieve and therefore undermined the feminist approach during the project.

A Women's Market Development Group (WMDG) was formed in the early 1980s to promote Studio D's work but also to develop connections with grassroots women and independent filmmakers. The chief mandate of this group was to maximize "the creative use of these works, and encourage private and public debate around women's full economical and political equality" (NFB, 1991, p. 4). Their activities included

> high profile public screenings; local cable television programming; media blitz days for students; on-going liaison with educators; promotions in women's journals and magazines; special outreach and deposit programs for women living in rural and isolated communities; organizing and participating in local and national women's film and video festivals; and participating in local and national women's conferences. (NFB, 1991, p. 4)

A Federal Women's Film Program (FWFP) came into being at this time (1981). Basically, it was a coalition of Regard des Femmes, the French equivalent of Studio D and federal government departments and agencies (NFB, 1991). Its commitment was "to produce bilingual films and videos by, for, and about Canadian women . . . [to raise] issues of concern . . . [and] to provide an impetus for discussions of social reform" (NFB, 1991, p. 4).

While Studio D was becoming more firmly established within the organization of the NFB and garnering more visibility in society as a result of their controversial films, they continued to challenge the NFB administration and the government. In 1984, Studio D was practically dismantled in a thorough administrative restructuring. Their discretionary budget was cut nearly in half, and 6 of the 10 permanent directors were shifted to other Studios. The amount cut was to be used by independent filmmakers because, the administration argued, Canadian "women shouldn't have to conform to Studio D's [feminist] 'philosophy' to inherit their cultural resources" (Scherbarth, 1987, p. 12). Ironically, this re-structuring and these statements were

made at a time when one-half of Studio D's budget was already going to independent filmmakers.

Throughout Studio D's tenure there had always been much resistance to their work in terms of unfair budgets, including cut-backs, unfair reviews by media, and little support from CBC-TV in the distribution of their work. While Studio D only received 10% of the English Branch budget, according to a matched, random sample of NFB films, the "average Studio D title [was] booked twice as frequently in Canada as the average NFB production in 1986" (Scherbarth, 1987, p. 12). Often male reviewers did not understand Studio D's work and frequently panned their work: "The importance of these films has been overlooked, derided or misunderstood by male film critics" (Landsberg, 1987, p. A2). The Film Commissioner François Macerola expressed a concern that Studio D's work only presented one viewpoint (Evans, 1991, p. 300). The Director general of English production, Peter Katadotis, took issue with Studio D making films for small community audiences, "which is what Studio D considered its central goal" (Evans, 1991, p. 302). Nor were Studio D filmmakers entirely supported by their colleagues in the feminist movement. In the 1980s, the feminist movement became fragmented and specialized. Writers such as Gaskell and McLaren (1991) observe that the diversity sought within feminism does not necessarily guarantee the inclusion and/or participation of all women:

> Women of different classes and racial and ethnic groups do not necessarily share the same political interests. Women can oppress and exploit other women and can benefit from the subordination of others (male and female) . . . a 'woman-centred' approach may alienate many women from the feminist movement. Despite sexist discrimination, exploitation or oppression, many women feel their lives are important and valuable and that the significance of this is not recognized by a feminist movement dominated by white, middle-class women (p.10).

The following is a sample of the films that characterized the second decade of production:

1. *If You Love This Planet* (1982) Dir. Terre Nash. This film records a lecture given to American students by Dr. Helen Caldicott, nuclear critic. Winner of an Academy Award and 8 others. Banned in US briefly and labelled "political propaganda." CBC refused to air it until after it won the Academy Award (Scherbarth, 1985, p. 110). Winner of five awards.

2. *Abortion: Stories From North and South* (1984). Dir. Gail Singer. This film captures the difficulty a woman encounters when faced with an unwanted pregnancy. Draws from historical references, cross-cultural experiences. CBC refused to air this film claiming it did not provide a "balanced" approach to the issue (Scherbarth, 1985, p. 121). Winner of 4 awards.

3. *Feeling Yes; Feeling No: Institutional Package/Family Package*. Dir. Moira Simpson. This film is part of an educational package on the prevention of sexual assault of children used in Canadian schools. Winner of one award.

4. *Goddess Remembered* (1989). Director: Donna Read. This film is the first in the series entitled, *Women and Spirituality*. A poetic documentary that examines the "pre-historic" time period in the European region. Reveals that social systems emphasized the interconnectedness of all life and centred on goddess worshipping.

The Final Years: 1990 - 1996

Studio D's final decade began with marked optimism. The administration stated the priorities of the National Film Board as "environment, racial relations and women's cinema" (NFB, 1990, p. 45). Addressing the charges of exclusion, a New Initiative Program for women was formed in 1991 which directly addressed the under-representation of Indigenous women and women of colour. Out of this initiative came films such as, *Sisters in the Struggle* (1992) and *Long Time Comin'* (1993). A catalogue entitled *Black on Screen: Images of Black Canadians, 1950s - 1990s*, featuring Black films in Canada, not limited to the NFB, was also produced.

Far from the benevolent agenda of producing films for the "public good" or in the "national interest" Studio D and the rest of the NFB have become well-known for producing provocative, and controversial films. According to Evans (1991) producing provocative films is in the national interest because some of the Film Board's most controversial works have proven to be ahead of public opinion which only later catches up to them. Despite Studio D's success, there continued to be considerable backlash directed at them. The distribution of *Burning Times* prompted a protest from the Catholic Civic Rights League. Spokesperson, Robert Eady, demanded that the film be banned. His complaint to the CRTC was that *Burning Times* was spreading malicious hatred about the Catholic Church. When he was not successful with his complaints at the CRTC, he took his case to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which eventually ruled that there was "no breach of the CRTC anti-hatred regulations in *Burning Times*" (Laurence, 1992, p. 39). Eady also wrote letters to MPs demanding that the government "shut down Studio D" (Stockland, 1991, p. 6B).

What will emerge from the NFB in the future given the large federal cutbacks remains to be seen. For Studio D, however, it is the end. The federal cutbacks in March 1996 proved to be too great and Studio D was shut down. In suport of the closure, the present administration felt that women's issues and concerns could be adequately addressed by the other studios (Stikeman, 1996).

A sample of the films made after 1990 include:

1. *Burning Times*. (1990) Dir. Donna Read. This film takes a critical look at the emergence of patriarchy, the misogynist ideologies within Christianity and capitalism. It makes links between these ideologies, violence toward women and the destructive attitude toward the environment. It claims that the witch trials ended with 2-9 million women burned at the stake.

2. *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*. (1993) Dir. Lynne Fernie, Aerlyn Weissman. This is a film about lesbians in Canada and the popular images of lesbianism circulating in the 1950's and 1960's.

3. *Balancing Act: Families & Work in the 90's* (1993) Dir. Helena Cynamon. This film provides a first-hand account of working women and men. It offers an inside look at the positive impact of structural change in the workplace.

4. *Sisters in the Struggle*. (1992) Dir. Dionne Brand, Ginny Stikeman. This is a film about contemporary Black women activists involved in the movements against racism and sexism in Canada.

5. *Them That's Not*. (1993) Dir. Christene Browne. This film takes a look at the state of poverty among women and children in Canada. It examines racism, sexism, the threat of our national economic state and the lack of incentive and encouragement by the welfare system.

During its existence Studio D produced a sizeable body of work. For women, nowhere in Canada is there such a body of work that can compare. The diverse stories of women, and the critical feminist analysis, has successfully challenged the dominant discourse and offered alternative visions/understandings for women and society. Specifically, the strength of Studio D's work is its ability to aesthetically reorganize viewers' expectations and understandings, particularly women's. For this study, I have chosen to focus on three films and examine in detail their aesthetic qualities. In the following section, I provide a brief description of the films.

Synopsis of Films

There are three films in the trilogy directed by Donna Read: *Goddess Remembered (1989), Burning Times (1990), Full Circle (1992)*. The trilogy focuses specifically on Women Spirituality groups as a medium for personal and social change in the broader context of earth-based religions. The main thesis of the trilogy advocates for reverent connection: to oneself, to each other and to the earth. The series begins with the claim that ancient Celtic societies were once goddess worshipping societies based on egalitarian social processes. Because of their ability to create life, women were in a position of honour and respect in these early societies. The trilogy gives shape to ancient women-honouring cultures and traces their decline to the present day position of women. Traditional understandings of history are challenged. The demise of women honouring cultures is linked to the rise and domination of patriarchy and later, to the industrial paradigm. The central message in the trilogy is that only through re-connecting to the ancient belief that views all of life as sacred, especially women, can oppressive social and political systems be changed so that healthier, ecological systems can emerge and function.

Goddess Remembered (1989) is the first film in the trilogy. The focus of this first film is the "prehistoric" time before the "official" history of civilization began and the place is the European/British region. This first film emphasizes the ways in which the ancient pre-historical goddess religions were linked to a social and political system of respect and honour towards the earth, each other, and especially women.

Read weaves together artifacts, archaeological evidence, and interviews with scholars and practitioners to verify the presence of matrifocal societies as well as to re-create a sense of that ancient time when everyday lives were fundamentally connected to the earth. Through the close-

up of goddess figures and cave paintings Read evokes the woman-revering values of goddess worship. Women were honoured through their association with Mother Earth, the procreator of all life. Because of their intimate knowledge of the earth, women gathered herbs and other plants to not only heal themselves and their communities, but also to nourish them. Women were fundamentally connected in every way with nurturing and sustaining life and were revered for this role.

Read, along with other women interviewed in the film, depicts how today women in spirituality groups become empowered through re-claiming their history and participating in life-honouring rituals as their ancestors once did. Women who participate in these spirituality groups use them as a way to affect change, both personally and collectively. They join other environmentalists, peace activists, and feminists in their concern for more ecological approaches to industrial development and political systems. For women in these groups, their spirituality and political activism are one and the same.

Travelling to Peru, Mexico, Africa, United States, Greece, Canada, and England, Read shows how many of our present day celebrations, such as May Day and Halloween are remnants of the time when women and the earth were honoured in pagan rituals. That these celebrations have endured centuries of time and attack from the church and the state attests to the tenacious power of the goddess, thus, the potential of power of women.

Burning Times (1990) is the second film in the trilogy. It covers the time period from the Roman empire to present day and focuses primarily on witch culture, both past and present. Particularly powerful is Read's depiction of the transition of goddess religions to patriarchal power. As in *Goddess Remembered*, Read primarily draws upon artifacts for evidence but this

time she also draws from written documents. Reading from diaries and focusing on actual relics, Read re-creates scenes of tortured and dying women at the patriarchal hands of the church and the state.

Feminist scholars interviewed make the disturbing claim that during the transition from earth/women honouring societies to patriarchal societies, perhaps as many as nine million women were killed as witches. This time period, more familiar to us as the renaissance, is re-defined by feminists as the women's holocaust. The film shows how the emergence of a patriarchal system, combined with the domination of the church and the ideology of capitalism, did not simply destroy and devalue women's position in society but also an entire way of life—the more egalitarian, agrarian life style of the goddess worshipping cultures. In the film, the history of women's oppression is linked to the destructive industrial paradigm that dominates Western society. As begun in *Goddess Remembered*, women's spirituality groups are further explored, showing how women can re-claim/re-cover their lost power through their participation in these groups.

Full Circle (1992) is the final film of the trilogy. This film takes on a more personal tone as Donna Read narrates the experience of making the previous two films. The setting is often, but not always, Canada. Canadian women—theologians, writers, therapists, First Nations women, Metis women—appear for the first time. The role of ritual is highlighted as a way for women to re-claim their lost history and re-gain connection to their lost power. Read provides us with several examples of earth—and women—honouring rituals from around the world. Read shows how the ancient myths, which are integral to ritual, once honoured women but were re-written during the emergence of patriarchy in order to justify the honouring of men and war and

the de-valuing of women and nurturing political processes. The film describe how women who participate in rituals are able to re-create and re-imagine themselves both personally and collectively. They re-write and re-claim myths that were once theirs. This film emphasizes the need for an ecological approach to life, one that honours both the earth, each other, and ourselves, especially as women.

In this chapter I outlined the significant socio-political forces in Canada and the NFB that gave rise to the formation of Studio D—the only publicly funded feminist production unit in the world for many years. I provided a brief overview of their work spanning twenty years of production. I also introduced the three films of the study.

For this study, I chose to focus on the aesthetic quality of feminist documentary film. From the literature and using my responses to the films as a guide, I identified the aesthetic quality as radical. In the next chapter, I define what I mean by a radical aesthetic and provide some examples from the films by way of a descriptive analysis. This discussion also includes the implications of a radical aesthetic for women's learning in the context of feminist pedagogy.

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When I watch these films, I am disturbed out of my typical experience of watching film, not simply because I encounter disturbing new information, although that is part of it. No, I hear something that makes me sit up and listen: I hear women speaking. I hear (and see) women speaking in a way that never ceases to surprise me. Even after watching these films 20 times or more. I hear women speak of things and in ways that I seldom hear in my daily life. And yet, somewhere inside of me, I respond. I am familiar with what they speak about.

What makes their perspective so surprising and disturbing? They seem connected to something powerful; they seem connected to themselves as women. That is not what I experience when I think of myself as a woman: I often feel shame and revulsion. These women seem to be able to not only celebrate their womanness but understand themselves as women in an exciting way.

I lean towards the films, towards the women. Deep inside me, my sense of self explodes. These films leave me with an aching, a yearning swells deep within me. I want to know myself fully, as a woman. Twenty viewings later, the films continue to evoke this powerful yearning inside of me . . .

CHAPTER IV-IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF FILM TRILOGY

Introduction to the Analytical Framework: A Feminist Mandate and a Radical Aesthetic

Studio D 's feminist mandate:

> *Grounded in women's culture, politics and values, Studio D productions are designed to engage audiences, provoke discussion, and raise consciousness; they are conceived as tools for social change and empowerment.* (NFB, 1991, p. 3)

In this chapter I argue that Studio D's intentions and feminist mandate combined with the filmic elements of feminist documentary create a distinct and powerful aesthetic—a radical aesthetic—which I claim is the most significant attribute of these films. It is the presence of this radical aesthetic that disrupts the hegemonic tendencies of cinéma vérité and realism to create an exciting filmic form that is capable of transforming viewers, especially women. I begin by defining what I mean by a radical aesthetic and then I explore the ways in which this aesthetic is expressed through the feminist treatment of the filmic elements of sound and image. Unlike the feminist film critics who criticize these types of films as being simplistic and naive, I believe that the radical aesthetic present in these films creates a provocative and complex site for learning, one which is charged with potentially transformative learning experiences for all viewers, but particularly for women.

A Radical Aesthetic

> *The integral woman is radical. My senses origynate in her. She shares in their integrity. Time, space, belong to her; she is female symbol for all of us, 'symbola,' a reconnaissance sign of recognition. Figure, image, metaphor, with the meaning she gives to words, she always makes and in/core/porates sense. The light is coherent. When I saw you right in the middle of a sentence, it occurred to me I was naturally inclined toward you, as real as the idea I have of us, as real as the energy which speaks me emerging from our life stories. (Brossard, 1988, p. 115)*

While Brossard is writing about an encounter with women's writing, I claim that this gesture of "leaning towards women" is aesthetically evoked in Read's work. The dictionary defines aesthetic as the "study of beauty in art and nature; distinguishable from the useful, scientific, or moral, based on or determined by beauty rather than by practical or moral considerations" (Barnhart, 1990). hooks' definition of aesthetics goes beyond this traditional meaning to include the practical and the useful realm—the world best known to women. She writes of aesthetics as "a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming" (p. 104). I argue these films create an aesthetic space for women. Feminist filmmakers and writers alike make deliberate moral and political decisions in their art. In this case, they strive to make women "visible" and comprehensible in a setting that traditionally distorts women's presence. They strive to make visible and comprehensible the social, political and cultural processes that attempt to constrain, confine, and contain women in a subordinate position. The product of their efforts results in a new aesthetic.

The term "radical aesthetic" does not appear in the film or education literature.[14] It is my term for the powerful effect these films had on me. I define a radical aesthetic as a space where yearning, creativity, imagination and sense of place is evoked. I found a way to interpret my experience by watching these films within a literary and cultural critical framework. As introduced in Chapter One, a radical aesthetic evokes a space, a dynamic space where viewer and film meet and interact. It is an active space created in and by the films, and by the viewer who watches the films. While hook's notion of aesthetic refers to racism, it could also be said that

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[14] It can, however, be found in feminist art literature, although, I did not review this literature. I developed my own idea of a definition. During my study, much to my surprise, I encountered the term "radical aesthetic" in bell hook's (1990a) work on race, gender and cultural politics. She uses this phrase specifically to define a black aesthetic: strange and oppositional. My idea of radical aesthetic is not this. However, there is some overlapping of meaning, particularly in the notion of oppositional strategies.

sexism and misogyny have created an aesthetic that "wounds us, a way of thinking about beauty that hurts" (hooks, 1990a, p. 113). It is also geographic—a space where "behaviour and space are mutually dependent" (Ardener, 1981, p. 12). As discussed in Chapter One, an aesthetic experience is a space where the tension between reality and possibility can be played out. It is a pedagogical space, therefore, where participants, as learners, find room to yearn, think, and imagine. We need spaces of resistance, such as those created by Studio D to overcome the pain of both our present and pasts. We need "spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality" (hooks, 1990b, p. 147).

In the next section, I explore the following aspects of a radical aesthetic: 1) yearning; 2) creative/imaginative; and, 3) a sense of place that is evoked with a focus on the feminist particular. For each aesthetic quality I begin with a definition then I provide examples from the films where this quality is expressed. Throughout this discussion I weave the implications of a radical aesthetic for transformative learning. This exploration does not capture all the complexity or all the possibilities of this aesthetic in these films. Rather it is intended to begin a discussion and, therefore, should be considered partial.

Yearning

> *In this world-weary period of pervasive cynicism, nihilisms, terrorisms and possible extermination, there is a longing for norms and values that can make a difference, a yearning for principled resistance and struggle that can change our desperate plight. (Cornell West, as quoted by hooks, 1990)*
>
> *Women yearn for change and will make great sacrifices for it. (Lydia, as quoted by hooks, 1990)*
>
> *The fear of freedom is strong in us. (Greer, 1970, p. 11)*

A radical aesthetic evokes yearning. It evokes a yearning for knowledge, for knowledge as understanding, for knowledge of the self. It is also a yearning for love, not blind love, not in love, but loving. That is, going beyond "the limits of one's own identity" (Kristeva, 1987, p. 2). To love is to learn. "Love and learning are marginal passages. Love (learning) calls into question the very notion of identity" (Edgerton, 1993, p. 222). To know ourselves as women is frightening. We resist but we are fascinated so we are compelled. In loving and learning we both fear and desire "to cross the boundaries of the self" (Kristeva, 1987, p. 4).

This yearning also includes a yearning for safety: a safe place for women to open, to confront. Safety can come in the form of distance, a distance in which we can re-view ourselves. Safety can also be in the form of company, the company of women who trust one another. And in the need and desire for safety, there is also a yearning for courage.

Yearning also evokes a desire for integration, for wholeness, for connection. An integration does not ignore or reject the dark side of life, but embraces it as part of identity. "I am also what I am not" (de Lauretis 1996, Lecture). In Western society, hating ourselves or others hating us because we are women is part of being a woman—the internalized social processes of misogyny. Surviving the historical and contemporary pain of violence directed deliberately toward women because we are women is also part of being woman. Resisting and confronting misogyny and violence against womanhood is part of being woman, and it is also part of what women must learn. Therefore, yearning is not necessarily a nostalgic feeling for something that once was: it is political. It involves the "struggle of memory against forgetting" (hooks, 1990, p. 147).

Yearning evokes hope. Hope is defined as a "feeling that what one deserves will happen" (Barnhart, 1990). All life deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. The feeling of hope can inspire and guide a woman's personal and collective activism for social justice. To be hopeful is to be radical. All too often traditional as well as contemporary images of women objectify and dehumanize women, depriving women of feelings of hope.

The sound (music), image, narration and interviews in these films evokes yearning. In the next section, I discuss how yearning is created through 1) the haunting spiritual sound of Loreena McKennitt's **music**, 2) particular **images** that re-cover and re-create women's place in history, 3) **women speaking** for themselves, speaking about their desires and struggles for a woman's consciousness in a patriarchal world, and 4) **narration**—the telling of the seldom heard story of women's lives in the past.

Yearning as Evoked by Music

Loreena McKennitt's music is used as a theme song in each film. Although each theme song is slightly different, McKennitt's music has a number of consistent and powerfully distinctive qualities. With respect to voice, McKennitt uses a compelling combination of Celtic sound and religious chant or drone which creates a haunting and spiritual trance-like atmosphere in the films. Her instruments—the cello and harp—provide dynamic contrasts: the cello's rich, sombre melancholy tone and the harp a clear, light sound.[15] McKennitt's music is similar to the traditional sacred music of the Gregorian chant, but her music is not as contained. It is water,

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[15] Other important pieces of music, such as drumming, individual women and choral singing or chanting, and on-location singing are also used throughout the film series. However, McKennitt's music is the main source. (See Appendix A—Music Content Sheet, 1990).

free flowing. In her own words, McKennitt (1989) says she strives with her music to create a yearning: "the earth's yearning for release from the oppression of the human hand . . . a yearning toward love, liberty and integration."

Each film is introduced by and concludes with a unique theme song from McKennitt. The repetitive use of her music in all the films is significant because it provides a continuity between each of the three films. Her music, intertwined with the Read's depiction of women's spirituality, builds a foundation of women-centredness and a yearning for women-centredness on which the films rest. It serves as an important trigger for the viewer's memory of the previous films. The repetition builds to create a site where, in the end, there is a sustained body of women's knowledge as well as a sustained yearning for more knowledge about women. Also, the repetition of the Celtic sound evokes a particular history and connects the viewer/listener to an ancient time. As a white Western European woman of Celtic descent, I become connected to a past that I did not know I had. For myself, McKennitt's music evokes a yearning to know my history as a woman.

Her music, with its haunting drone, sad cello and light harp reminds me of the loss that women have suffered: the loss of an understanding of our histories and the loss of women to oppressive social regimes. The beauty and sacredness of the music reminds me of the power of women: their strength to survive, in silence and in isolation, the oppression of their past and the continued strength of many who are presently surviving pain because they are women. That this beauty can be about me as a woman fills me with a yearning to know myself as a woman. It also inspires me to think that I am worthy of attention. This yearning to know myself as a woman pushes back the internal negative messages that I have accepted from my culture, messages that

tell me that I am unknowable, that I am not worthy of knowing. This yearning dissolves the despair of my internal disconnection/alienation, connects me to a sense of hope, and to my buried and forgotten dreams. When I dream, I envision that I am worthy of something other than being a victim. When I dream, I envision a way out of my oppression. I am inspired to act, to resist.

Yearning as Evoked by Image

In the re-telling of history, Read gives us images of sacred and ancient landscapes that are better known in classical history as places of male power and domination. For example, we are shown sweeping circular overhead shots of the Mayan pyramids in Mexico or the earth mounds in England. The traditional association of women with these places is of virgins being sacrificed for male rituals. Seen within the feminist analysis and context of the films, however, these images evoke a yearning to more fully understand women's association with these places and their sacred power. Re-visioning of history from a woman's perspective, these images claim these places for women and their power.

Other sacred images are shown such as caves in the shape of vulvas, the hypogeum in Malta, and ancient female figurines. We are told that these images came from cultures where women were visible and honoured. The female figurines shown are not today's stereotypical images of women. They are full-bodied, grand and strong women, obviously held in high esteem by the artist and the culture of that time. They are the sacred symbols of women's power and abilities. Today, the only association of a sacred woman in Western culture is the heavily shrouded virgin Mary. Her body must be covered because it is considered sinful. Women's bodies in Christianity are not celebrated. The images of the ancient female figurines shown in

the films revere women's power of fertility; they celebrate women's abilities and activities. In Western Christian culture, women's virginity, passivity and obedience to male desire what is most honoured.

Throughout the series, Read presents these sacred ancient female figurines in a particular way—extreme close-up shots and McKennitt's music in the background. This montage provides the viewer a contemplative moment, a new spectacle, an intimate moment/gaze that disrupts the "telling" of women or narrator talking. "I was engaged in a face to face confrontation with the sun: such an abundance of light disintegrates the gaze" (Brossard, 1991, p. 134). The sight of these sacred, strong bodied women fills me with an ache for a loving relationship with my own body. I am reminded of the loss of pleasure I have had with my own body. I am aware of the stands I have taken in order to care for my body in the "undesirable" shape that it is. The images of the sacred full-bodied women evoke a yearning for our bodies to be fully woman, without shame. They evoke a yearning for women to care for their bodies, each other's bodies, to have their bodies cared for because they are women. In the media where images of women proliferate, women have been objectified and constructed for male pleasure. Because these images dominate our visual world, the media plays a major role in dehumanizing women's identity. For some of us in Western culture, instead of spending our energy appreciating our "non-desirable" body types, we spend our energies resisting the domination of objectified media images. This is why it is so important for non-stigmatized, non-stereotypical, and creatively alternative images of women be available in the media. Johnston (1973b) observes that women experience the profoundest contradictions in the media where "women are appealed to *and* manipulated" (p. 2).

Read also shows us images of women dancing, either by themselves or together. Women dance in earth-celebrating rituals that hearken back to the ancient time when earth-honouring cultures existed. They dance to celebrate all of life: their womanness and their ability to create and contribute to life as well as in death. The images of women dancing evokes a yearning for women to be able to celebrate their lives as women.

Yearning as Evoked by Narration

> *When words well worn in the same place suddenly to break short circuiting the emotions . . . the idea . . . the concept . . . hope . . . (Brossard, 1986)*

Through the voice of a woman Narrator, Read and her film crew, re-tell the untold story of Western women's buried and forgotten history. We are told of women's presence as well as their destruction. We are told of our ancestor's oppression and survival, their despair and their joy. A feminist re-examination of archaeological evidence such as the Gnostic gospels, artifacts, and art reveal provocatively different historical interpretations from our traditional understandings of history. As the Narrator wryly observes in *Goddess Remembered*: "history has been written by the winners." The narration in *Goddess Remembered* explores and exposes ancient earth and life honouring cultures, focusing primarily on the presence of women. The Narrator introduces the trilogy in *Goddess Remembered* with the re-telling what is known about the earliest human life on earth:

> The spiritual journey of Earth's people began with the idea of the goddess, universally called the Great Mother. We know that thousands of years before the Bible was ever written, creation stories centred around a goddess. The reverence our ancestors once felt were the primal power of the female is reflected in those dimly lit times of the prehistoric ages, when the power to give and nurture was supreme.

Throughout the trilogy, Read shows us numerous ancient female figurines that have been unearthed from the Stone Age which depict women in a position of respect and honour. Learning that there was a time and a place when women were held in high esteem for their contribution to society fills me with a yearning for such a position of respect today. This information fills me with a yearning to understand what happened to women that they became so devalued.

The Narrator in *Burning Times* explores the transformation of these creation-honouring cultures into patriarchal systems. She claims that this change occurred because of the rise of the misogynist power of the Christian church and the profit ideology of capitalism. Misogynist thinking and practice became sanctioned by the state and the Christian church. The Narrator in *Burning Times* explains how the subversion of women's power (and the destruction of their lives) was politically linked to the rise of the power of the Christian church, and the emergence of capitalism. It was the destruction of a whole way of life, a way of life that was earth and life honouring:

> It was a time of social upheaval. As trade expanded, land owners pressed for the confiscation of peasant land. People rebelled as they were driven off their farms and into cities and towns. Those who demanded reform were branded enemies of God . . . It was an age that marked rise of the bureaucratic state and the emergence of capitalism. In cities all over Europe, a new profit ethic was beginning to take hold.

> The witch hunts were a business. They were profitable. For each witch trial there'd be meticulous bookkeeping. Every single step of the witch trial would be costed . . . it provided amazing employment opportunities for lawyers, for judges, for people who would sit on the tribunals (Barbara Roberts, *Burning Times*)

> The witch craze involved the destruction of a way of life that had endured for thousands of years. In villages all over feudal Europe, women and men worked side by side. Theirs was a religion of rural life and changing seasons, of oral traditions and beliefs passed on within families . . . With the arrival of Christianity, belief became a way of life.

> Everywhere in Europe churches were built over pagan shrines, and goddesses turned into saints . . . Pagan celebrations that once affirmed the people's connection to the land gradually took the guise of secular carnivals, and the festivities were led by men. The European world had been turned upside down.
>
> History books call it the Dawn of Western Civilization, the golden age of Greece. For the man, it was the beginning. For the woman, it was the end.

The Narrator tells us that the myths were re-written, that the symbols that once honoured and revered women were re-claimed and re-written by men in power:

> Athena was redefined. Once the goddess of wisdom and love, she became the goddess of war. The violent and the erotic became linked as they never had before. Man, said men, had always been the natural master of the earth. He was now also the procreator. Athena sprang fully armed from the brow of Zeus. Eve was born from Adam's rib. Female inferiority forever was proclaimed by the book of Genesis. *(Burning Times)*

In Western iconography and mythology (and in cinema), women have been most often portrayed as virgins, whores or mothers. Brossard (1986) observes that the amazon, the witch, the feminist who challenges the system has been suppressed or punished. Images of powerful woman have come to represent evil. The Narrator in *Goddess Remembered* goes on to point out that

> it is not to be imagined that women accepted the subordinate status peaceably. There were pockets of female resistance that gave rise to legends of Amazons. But the male soon asserted his total domination, and so it has been for 3,500 years.

Knowing that women resisted the subordination connects my struggle with their struggle, connects feminist struggles with ancient struggles. Through this connection, I feel a sense of solidarity. The telling of women's power and the subversion of their power creates a yearning for women's power. It also creates a yearning for safety because, as the Narrator points out, women

resisted domination and died for that resistance:

> Long after Roman times, women continued the ancient traditions of the old religions . . . They were leaders, counsellors, visionaries and healers. In Europe, their villages knew them as wise women. The Christian Church and state branded them as witches, and condemned them as worshippers of the devil . . . By the time it was over, women's power had become associated with darkness and death . . . The wild-horned god of the old religion had been transformed into the devil, and women were said to be more susceptible to his charms. Women were irrational. They were driven by their passions. If sexuality was a sin, then woman was the greatest sinner of all . . . Few people realize that the Christianization of Europe resulted in the loss of millions of lives . . . Out of religions persecutions came the witch hunts. 85% of those killed for the crime of witch craft were women. (*Burning Times*).

Through this re-telling, the viewers come to realize that "there was a whole other tradition of knowledge and learning that has been suppressed because it had political implications" (Starhawk, a modern witch, in *Burning Times*).

Women's ways of knowing and being were targeted:

> The Inquisition announced that no one did more harm to the Catholic faith than midwives. They eased the pain of labour, God's punishment for Eve's sin. They interfered with God's will through the use of birth control and abortion. New laws proclaimed that any woman who dared cure, without having studied, was a witch, and must die. Since most women were barred from university, the rise of the male medical profession was guaranteed. Women continued to practice, but now they did so in fear of their lives. It was the testimony of male doctors that sent many to their deaths.

My world is turned upside down when I hear that perhaps as many as "nine million women died over a 300 year period" in the "Woman's Holocaust." I am shocked into silence. The women with whom I have shared these films tell me that they, too, become speechless on hearing this. I understand at that moment, in a painful, blinding clarity, the depth and the extent of the misogyny during that time. A misogyny that stretches to this time, to my life. I am filled with a yearning for love.

The subordination of women today remains a legacy to the institutionalized attacks on women during this time. The fact that many women are making some gains in society stands as a testament to women's resistance and struggle and especially, our ability to survive. I am filled with a yearning to make sense of my life as a woman in a patriarchal society, to make sense of the historical events that have shaped my personal consciousness as a woman, and to those that have shaped society's consciousness, and will shape future generations. As an adult educator, I yearn to understand how to create and participate in socio-political and educational processes that do not teach people fear and hatred, but help people build trust with each other and themselves, to help people realize their dreams, and their fullest potential. I yearn to participate in educational activities that include all versions of history, not just the so-called "winners."

Women's resistance and ability to survive many forms of oppression are emphasized in the final film *Full Circle*. The Narrator explains that by participating in old and new rituals, some women today are able to re-claim their lost (her)stories and become re-connected to forgotten and submerged knowledges. Ritual involves bodily participation and women who participate in them find ritual empowering. As was done to them 4000 years ago when the fathers of patriarchy re-wrote the myths, some of today's women, such as filmmaker Donna Read and others in the film are actively re-mything, re-claiming their lost heritage and power. They are changing their own lives and the lives of other women. As the Narrator in *Full Circle* explains, Western women's history, "once lost, is being reclaimed by a new generation of women." She goes on to tell us that there are many women, such as the ones featured in the film and the filmmaker herself, who are "looking to the future, a future in which the voices of women will be heard, and the power of women will no longer be feared." Becoming re-united with our

history evokes a yearning for women to keep telling and re-telling our story, to get our stories into educational curriculums. It evokes a yearning to speak, to not be silenced.

Yearning as Evoked through Women Speaking

> *I have never liked to talk about myself as if I always had the feeling that there is nothing special to say about my private life when really that is all that matters: how we are born, how we play, how we laugh, how we cry, how we die. (Brossard, 1986)*

In these films women speak in their own voices and women read the words of other women. In the films, "real" women, not actors or characters, speak about their experiences as women in patriarchal society. They name their pain, their joy, their frustrations, their alienations. They speak as feminists. One of the deepest pains Western women express in these films is how we have been alienated from ourselves and each other. The memories of our destruction are embedded in our lives, although we may not entirely be conscious of the details. When we come into contact with our repressed history, we realize that our struggle for justice is ancient. And although our entire history is not known to us, we are familiar with the struggle. Tita, a gardener and housewife, says in *Full Circle*:

> Probably one of the things that occurred during the time of the burnings was that women were made to mistrust each other. I mean it was like a whole reprogramming of women at that time. We have to work very, very hard to go right back to the level beyond thought to erase that corrupt imprinting. Women were stripped of all their contacts with any kinds of power. We have to get back to where we can trust each other. All of the women's group efforts that are going on are mainly to learn how to trust one another, to work together.

This evokes a yearning in women for trust, trust of themselves and each other. Trust can be built upon connection or a sense of solidarity that is possible through learning about one's history. This evokes a yearning for self-knowledge. For example, some women in the film have built up

this solidarity and self-knowledge through studying and re-interpreting the ancient female forms found from ancient cultures. Charlene Spretnak in *Goddess Remembered* observes that this process has been empowering for her and contributed to her political activism. She finds that solidarity with women and self-knowledge is difficult to hang onto in today's alienating patriarchal society:

> It is a very interesting process for each of us who have studied the artifacts from goddess cultures. That on one hand you say, yes, this is the female, this is in myself as well. And yet there's such a distancing, because we then step outside the library or our house and have the opposite messages coming at us of what woman is. And so it's a very gradual process of actually taking into our own being what the messages are, what the teachings were.

While patriarchy may not represent a monolithic or unified oppressor, Spretnak says that fear is at its core:

> I don't think you can understand patriarchy unless you look at the fact that fear is at the core. Fear that female sexuality will somehow become this chaotic force, that Nature will become this chaotic force overtaking us. So we have to have everything very tightly controlled and hierarchically ordered (Spretnak, *Goddess Remembered*).

Coming to understand that dominant social processes are designed to keep certain belief systems in a prominent place and keep others in a subordinate place articulates the political implications of women's disconnection from each other. Seeing and listening to the women in the films speak about their disconnection and isolation in a complex patriarchal society evokes within me a deep yearning to be fully present, to be connected to my own power as a woman, and to be connected to other women for the purpose of building up solidarity, and community. I am filled with a sense of what I have lost as a woman: a (loving) relationship with myself and with other women.

The films also provide seldom heard women's voices from the past. Excerpts are read from old diaries and they speak directly of the pain of the women's struggle/oppression of the time. In *Burning Times*, the Narrator reads from Rebecca Lamp's letter written in 1590. She was imprisoned for the crime of witch craft and is about to die:

> Oh, husband, they take me from thee by force. How can God suffer it? My heart is nearly broken. Alas, alas, my poor dear children, orphaned. Husband, send me something that I might die, or I must expire under torture. If thou canst not today, do it tomorrow. Write to me directly.

Reading from the records of the time, the Narrator in *Burning Times* describes the procedure for torturing women whose knowledge and ways of being were a threat to the emerging religious and governmental powers of the state:

The torturer made her sit on the rack, undressed her and applied the thumb screws. When the thumbscrews were applied to the toes, she cried out louder than before. The inquisitor inserted the mouth pear and demanded that she confess. When it was removed, she told her story. Ten years ago it happened that the devil came to her in the guise of a man. First they danced, and then they dined, and then she and others knelt before the goat and kissed him. Here she named eight neighbours.

In order to survive, women were forced to betray each other. This misogynist heritage is part of what underlies women's distrust of each other today. That we used to speak against each other not for each other evokes a yearning for healing, trust. It evokes a yearning for opportunities and situations where women can build up trust and confidence for each other, where women can confront their own internalized misogyny. Historian Thea Jensen claims that

there was a Woman's Holocaust:

> We're never told this, but this was the women's holocaust. We did have a women's holocaust, and this was it. The low number is 2 million; the high number that people use is nine million over 300 years (*Burning Times*).

This information is intense and evokes intense feelings especially when the link is made between the Woman's Holocaust and women's subordinate position in Western society today. Something unique is demanded of the audience. The usual experience of watching films, (fiction films) requires a suspension of disbelief. We agree for a short period of time to "accept" the filmmaker's fantasy/dream. However, with documentary film, we are expected to believe what we are watching. Yet, when we hear the horror of the history of violence against women, our belief is suspended. Often viewers cannot believe their ears. Yet, for many women, there can be recognition, and fascination. We do know this place, this place where women are not safe, where many women have been hated and destroyed by many men supporting a system. In her study of the relationship between men and women in Western society, Germaine Greer (1970) observed that "women have very little idea of how much men hate them" (p.245).

Our thinking is shocked when we think of the hatred beneath the patriarchal system that supported the eradication of powerful (knowledgeable) women. De Lauretis (1996) says that the spectator is often like the dreamer unable to physically move or intervene sitting in the audience, passive by the visual spectacle, however, in feminist documentary we watch (listen) with horror and disbelief. We become active spectators: we cry out. Many women cry in recognition of the pain and struggle of women's lives. But at the same time, women can celebrate their ability to survive. With this awareness, women can develop a deep thinking, a new critical awareness, the courage to resist.

Susan Griffin, a feminist historian and Starhawk, talk about women's resistance and survival:

> Part of the knowledge that is passed on [from woman to woman] is the knowledge of how to survive, how to survive whole, how to keep the spirit whole, the body whole, and our relationship between each other and to the earth whole and that is the tradition we keep alive. (*Goddess Remembered*)

Read shows evidence of resistance to women's oppression historically and presently. Not everyone during that time accepted the murder of women. The Narrator explains in *Burning Times* that a Jesuit priest, Frederick Von Spee complained about the system of torture, claiming that it merely produced the answers it sought:

> Why do you search so diligently for sorcerers? Take the Jesuits, all the religious orders, and torture them. They will confess. If some deny, repeat it a few times. They will confess. Should a few still be obstinate, exorcise them. Shave them. Only keep torturing, they will give in. Take the canons, the doctors, the bishops of the church, they will all confess.

Some women in the film articulate the power (resistance) that their current feminism provides them, yet, how difficult that resistance is at times. Barbara Roberts speaks of how difficult resistance is for women:

> It's very difficult to find out what is our own experience, to find our own authority, to find our own voices. And secondly, once we've found it, it's very hard to hang onto it. It's hard to remain true to it. And it's also very scary when we think about what often happens to women when we do find our own voices, and we proclaim our own experiences and our own truth. And we refuse to tell lies about it and to submit. (*Burning Times*)

In the spectacle of resistance portrayed in the trilogy, the films, too, are a site of resistance, a site where women speak together, name their experiences in patriarchal society, overcome their sense

of isolation. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, communities of resistance are needed in today's society:

> *Resistance, at root, must mean more than resistance against war. It is a resistance against all kinds of things that are like war. And there are so many things like that in modern life that make you lose yourself. So perhaps, resistance means opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted and destroyed by the system. The purpose of resistance, here, is to seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly . . . I think that communities of resistance should be places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness. (Hanh, 1978, p. 122)*

The films can become a community of resistance in that they inspire the audience (of women and men) to resist. They offer a place where women (and men) can begin to heal themselves, in interaction with one another, of the pain of oppression.

Imaginative/Creative

> *But for this we have to want her in our own words, this very real integral women we are, this idea of us, which like a vital certitude, would be our natural inclination to make sense of what we are.* (Nicole Brossard, 1989, p. 390)

> *[L]iving a childhood without a sense of home, I found a sanctuary in "theorizing", in making sense out of what was happening. I found a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently.* (hooks, 1994, p. 61)

I define a radical aesthetic as imaginative, creative. It explodes traditional and familiar meanings. It offers new possibilities, alternatives, visions. It inspires and evokes desire. Inspired with creative possibilities women can re-cognize, and re-think ourselves. In this re-cognition, there is thinking with feeling and feeling with thinking (thought and rationality are not

separate from emotion). It is a place which evokes critical thinking, self-reflection and analysis. It leads to the formulation of new understandings, new ways of being, new theories. For some women, it will be an affirmation of their present presence. For others, it may stimulate what has yet to be expressed: women as women.

Feminist documentary film is an art form informed by feminist politics. It is a type of art that includes a political analysis describing how women are constituted and constrained through cultural social practices. It is a form that deliberately creates an "aesthetic designed to subvert the consumption of women" (Barry & Flitterman-Lewis, 1987, p. 107). The decisions about how to make these films, their content and focus, have been informed by many womens' political and artistic visions: a feminist re-interpretation of historical artifacts and archaeological evidence, feminist artistic choices made by Read and her crew. These aspects contribute to an aesthetic that is provocative, creative and imaginative.

Read, her film crew, and particular feminist scholars interviewed in the film take classical art forms and artifacts and re-interpret and re-present them. This involves prehistoric female figurines, cave paintings, sculptures, statues and written documents. Read uses these art forms and archaeological artifacts to provide evidence for women's participation historically and artistically. She also uses these objects to affirm a feminist analysis. The actual evidence becomes linked to the feminist analysis, the film's text. Often this re-interpretation is disturbing. It deconstructs traditional and familiar meanings, and presents new perspectives. In these films, the re-interpretation disturbs our notion of women being silenced or absent historically and artistically. Women are linked to sacred (public) space and women's activities in the everyday realm are revealed. The feminist focus on the everyday defies the notion that traditional history

was a place of grandeur and great happenings. The everyday, the realm of women, is redeemed. For some viewers a feminist re-interpretation will be an affirmation of what is already known, for others it will be a provocation for thinking and understanding differently. This is feminist analysis in action. This re-interpretation conceptualizes and articulates visually an alternative world view. It stimulates re-thinking, thinking beyond familiar understandings.

This vision of women is expanded by other feminist artistic choices by Read and her crew. Read frames the art forms (cave paintings and drawings that depict women) and artifacts (female figurines) in extreme close-up and close-up shots. In each film, the framing of art forms and artifacts is repeated. These close-ups are a part of a feminist political strategy. The focus on the particular (which I discuss more fully in a next section) re-invents the objects of history, and of art. It facilitates the creation of new meaning because the art objects are pulled outside of their old contexts. Read takes them from a patriarchal past and puts them in a new, woman-centred space: feminist documentary film. The art objects have new contexts, new meaning, one which includes women.

Another distinct artistic choice is the use of silhouettes throughout the trilogy. Read films silhouettes of women dancing on roof-tops in the opening of *Goddess Remembered*, and silhouettes of dancing women out in the desert at the closing of *Full Circle*. The silhouettes represent the darkness that women have experienced and endured living in misogynist societies, the darkness of the Women's Holocaust. So much of what is woman has been suppressed in the darkness of misogyny. We do not know ourselves fully and what we know is a small version of what we are capable. Young (1990) writes, "[a] space surrounds us in imagination that we are not free to move beyond; the space available to our movement is a constricted one" (p. 146). We

have come to fear, justifiably so, the darkness of oppression. In these films, however, darkness is embraced by the silhouette; it is not split away from women's idea of women. "I am me and also what is not me" (de Lauretis, 1996). Seeing a woman's dark form dancing suggests a re-integration and an acceptance of darkness. Only through a healing of pain can women fully live in present and have new visions for the future. hooks (1990a) states that we must learn to think about darkness (especially, blackness) differently in order to "talk about it in a new way" (p. 113). The silhouette is a metaphor for women's strength and survival. The silhouette is dark, yet, it exists within the light.

Brossard (1986) speaks of women: "we can be encouraged by her beyond our limits we're travelling inside ourselves and with our imaginary woman" (1986). The silhouette of women dancing evokes desire. They seem wild and whole. In these silhouettes, I can find myself. The silhouette represents the unconscious—that which we are unaware of or do not consciously know—and yet, is still a part of us. The silhouettes evoke the vision for what has only been imagined. The repetition of silhouette throughout the trilogy builds an iconography which leads us to deeply wonder, fantasize, and imagine. Curiosity is evoked which "transforms the spectator from a passive consumer into an active producer of meaning" (Barry & Flitterman-Lewis, 1987, p. 117).

A spectacle of feminist creativity permeates these films and provides a critical perspective that questions reified categories and definitions of women. Women are inspired to re-think, to self-reflect on their knowledge and position in society. "One cannot resist unless one has a vision, a tradition, a faith" (Hanh, 1988, p. 128). Through their feminist analysis and feminist creativity these films strive to offer women a new vision built upon feminist traditions

and restore women's faith in their abilities individually and collectively. What would happen if women began to trust themselves, their own perceptions, *their own desires*? What would happen if we followed what we felt, did what we desired? (Griffin, 1979).

The Feminist Particular: Women in Space/Place, Women In Body

> *Feminism remains very much a politics of everyday life. The edge is there: the sense of struggle, the weight of oppression and contradiction (de Lauretis, 1986, p. 12)*

> *To write 'my body' plunges me into lived experience, particularity: I see scars, disfigurements, discolourations, damages, losses, as well as what pleases me. (Rich, 1986, p. 215)*

> *Inspire, aspire, emotion imagine the unthinkable geography, the ardent form (Brossard, 1986)*

I claim that a radical aesthetic is geographic. It is embedded in geography. We respond in places, to places. According to geographer Relph (1976), "to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know *your* place" (p. 1). Women's experience of space/place, both literally in their lives and symbolically on the film screen, is geographic. The radical aesthetic in the films uses setting/place and is about setting/place. The radical aesthetic in these films is not simply, however, a physical geographical experience based on a particular use of setting, it is extended to a geographical experience of a woman's body having a place in society, and also having a sense of place in their bodies. It is about women's subordinate place in society, and their resistance to that place. It is also about making new space for women, a space that reflects women.

The everyday realm, the realm most women have been relegated to, has been aesthetically considered as ordinary and banal; it is often overlooked as insignificant. It is a space/place not

necessarily considered beautiful, powerful, or capable of evoking transformative experiences. However, for Western feminist thought, women's "personal, lived experience is intensely political and immensely important politically" (Humm, 1990, p. 66).

Women in Space/Place: The Everyday

> *To me the land . . . is always there, waiting for me, and it's part of me, way inside me; it's as much me as my own arms and legs. (the words of a farmer to Robert Coles, 1971, p. 411)*

In this section, I examine how Read's representation of earth's elements—earth, air, fire, and water through the portrayal of nature contribute to the radical aesthetic. Through the beautiful and tactile cinematography of the landscape, Read redeems the everyday realm as an aesthetic place by evoking topophilia (love of place) in the viewers. Read's portrayal of beauty is not traditionally romantic. Her depiction of nature deconstructs traditional (and sexist) filmic views of nature, revealing the everyday realm as a site of political action and transformation.

The Elements

Read uses the sounds and the images of the elements—earth, fire, air and water—repeatedly throughout the film. In ancient societies these elements were understood as being created by Kali, the Great Mother. They were considered the "building-blocks of all substances living or dead, organic or inorganic" (Walker, 1983, p. 272). These elements were considered the foundations of all knowledge. At this time, the body and knowledge were linked. For example, water was credited as creating "the blood stream . . . fire [the body's] vital heat . . . the

earth produced the solid parts of the body and air animated [the body] with breath" (Walker, 1983, p. 273). In her deliberate use of the elements and accompanying text, Read infuses present day landscapes with this ancient perspective. She repeats close-ups of water running, the sight and sound of wind blowing, fires burning and geological wonders throughout the trilogy which evokes a sense of human connection to the earth as well as the timelessness of this connection.

Read uses the sight and sound of water throughout the trilogy. One example that stands out for its tactile quality occurs in *Goddess Remembered.* Read shows us a slow pan of a close-up of a woman's barefeet walking on the beach. The waves come up over her feet. The sand shimmers in the golden light of day. We hear the sound of the ocean and the Narrator tells us that

> Many years ago, women of strong purpose passed this way. The women of Crete, like their predecessors in Malta, continued and refined longer than anyone else the Stone Age worship of Nature and fertility.

The close-up and slow pan captures an intimate, everyday gesture of walking on the beach. It evokes a sense of timelessness and a connection to the earth and to our past.

Read's use of the sight and sound evokes an aesthetic sense of destruction and pain. Early in the film *Burning Times*, we hear the sound of the fire burning and women screaming as we are told that women were burnt at the stake for the crime of witchcraft. The sound and images of fire are so graphic that one can nearly smell the smoke. Later, we are shown women gathering around a fire. We hear the sound of the fire snapping and crackling, a dog howls in the distance. We glimpse a shadowy moon. The Narrator reminds us it was dangerous for women to gather in groups

> There is evidence that women did meet in groups to participate in the old rituals and to exchange news. But as the witch persecutions reached their height, meetings like these

> became more and more dangerous. Women who gathered at night were thought to be evil, an idea reinforced by the art and literature of the time. (*Burning Times*)

From this scene we get a sense of the darkness that separated women from each other, from a place of value in their society.

The image and the sounds of the earth are presented through everyday landscapes, panoramic views, caves, trees as well as everyday sounds of birds, dogs barking, and crickets. These elements create a strong sense of geography/place. The sound and images of these everyday elements gives the viewer a more tactile and visceral sense of being in nature. Memories of being outside are stimulated. The everyday is not fragmented or abstract on a distant screen, it is poignantly present in the room with us. According to Yi Fu Tuan (1961), "awareness of the past is an important element in the love of place" (p. 99). Read's tactile depiction of everyday elements evokes an awareness of the past, be that a personal memory or an awareness of our history on the planet. Read's final words in *Full Circle* link the earth's processes with the process of making the film. She re-states the ancient and forgotten knowledge of the earth as life-force:

> the earth is alive. Its life beats in my heart and flows through my veins. Through all the forms of ritual and the varied philosophies I've encountered on my way, one truth stands out. No matter who we are or where we live, we all stand on common ground, our planet—earth.

Landscape and Environment

Read shows us many different landscapes throughout the trilogy. The act of looking at landscape expresses the relationship between the earth environment and human society (nature/culture). Historically, the natural world has been interpreted as female. According to

feminist geographer Gillian Rose (1993), women and nature have been traditionally represented through masculine fantasies:

> the sensual topography of land and skin is mapped by a gaze which is eroticized as masculine and heterosexual. This masculine gaze sees a feminine body which requires interpreting by the cultured knowledgeable look; something to own, and something to give pleasure. (p. 98-99)

I discussed the notion of a male gaze, constructed primarily for male pleasure in the context of film theory in Chapter Two. Read does not objectify or solidify the dichotomies of nature/culture in her portrayal of nature as she does not with her portrayal of women. She comes close with the associations of the earth nurturing "mother" and the destroyer "father", however, she finally manages to resist this construction. Her depiction of the landscape does not romanticize the natural world as a passively beautiful place, an object of pleasure for an active male gaze. Instead, Read presents place as both beautiful and practical. She achieves this by showing women interacting with nature during their sacred rituals either at panoramic mountain tops or in each other's back yards. She shows women's (and men's) concern for the environment, a concern that is political, not romantic.

The concern for a human connection to the earth is present in the many images of landscapes. We are shown panoramas of pastoral valleys and hills, dotted with sheep. There are sharply focused silhouettes of trees against the skyline, ruby-throated sunsets, and pounding surfs. These images evoke a yearning for an intimate, integral relationship with the earth, one in which all of life is honoured, especially women. The women interviewed in the film speak of how they yearn for a society that is more ecologically concerned and how their yearning inspires

their political activism:

> We're very much involved in social change groups and people who are suffering because of the way North Americans live. (Charlene Spretnak, *Full Circle*)

> We are a diverse group here, but we all agree that caring about the earth is a political as well as spiritual issue. (Donna Read, *Full Circle*)

Read travels to eight different countries and films different landscapes. Concern for the environment is expressed by women speaking of the link between their caring for the earth and their political activism. Most of the women speaking about their activism occurs in their homes, sitting around their kitchen table. This explodes our idea of home as a quiet, ferreted away space where nothing political occurs. Their activism/spirituality often is stimulated, organized and sustained in the everyday realm of their kitchens. In the words of Charlene Spretnak in *Goddess Remembered*:

> It's simply women in a neighbourhood who might meet once a month . . . to celebrate things that are happening in their lives . . . to mark the passages of the sun, the moon, the earth . . . it's our creativity, it's our expression of who we are and what we feel and how we relate to the earth and to the people we love . . . it's very much grounding ourselves and reaching out to help the current situation get better.

Women in Body

> *she is born from a phrase skin language surrounds her a woman expresses herself in her body it's a sensation not forgotten in the representation of space when the idea sees the day s/lash in the brain the metaphors where the heart is catch fire under the effect of a coherent light.* (Brossard, 1991, p. 178-179)

> *language will reproduce with you in the folds of skin this endless version of your body from now on unalterable because I know how to move with you in the volume* ***torrere*** *coherent light skin the sentence rises into the eyes a projection of the self in* (Brossard, 1991, p. 182)

The radical aesthetic in these films articulates women's resistance to the constraints on their lives by binarisms of public/private, rational/emotional, mind/body, nature/culture so central to Western thought. Post-modern/poststructuralist movements in feminism have embraced the body as a locus of knowledge (Schlatner, 1994). Much of women's everyday knowledge and, particularly the body as a site of knowledge and learning has been overlooked. However, feminists stress the importance of everyday as well as the body as a site of knowledge:

> The everyday routines traced by women are never unimportant, because the seemingly banal and trivial events of the everyday are bound into the power structures which limit and confine women. (Rose, 1993. p. 17)

> I, woman, am affected directly and in my everyday life by what has been made the subject of woman; I have paid in my very body for all the metaphors and images that our culture has deemed fit to produce of woman. (Braidotti, 1989, p. 105)

Feminism's fundamental tenet—**the personal is political**—is grounded in a focus on the personal (particular)¾a continuum from the everyday realm of women to women bodies. A radical aesthetic, in its focus on the feminist particular, disturbs and critiques dominant perspectives and understandings of knowledge and provides the viewer with access to subjugated knowledges. A radical aesthetic connects the viewers to the knowledge that women are inextricably connected to their lived experiences, and that they have their own geographies.

Read shows women using their bodies as a place/space where women can learn about themselves, and the cultural structures that contain and construct their lives. Read's multiple (re)presentation of women and their bodies offers women in the audience a site where they can "recover," and discover themselves. I claim that women's bodies are represented in the films as, 1) ritual, 2) artifact, 3) geographic space, and 4) silhouette.

Body as Ritual

> The fundamental belief in ritual is that the body is the clearest, purest expression of self . . . which must feel change before the intellectual or soul self can change. The body is recognized as the means for making conscious interconnection and unions that were unconscious or suppressed. (Turner, 1978, p. 229-230)

This belief about ritual's power has political implications for women in such a woman/body-hating society as ours. Women using their bodies in ritual helps them to redefine and to transfer power. Ritual is a way of "imparting information which has been unavailable to women and actually suppressed for hundreds of years" (Turner, 1978, p. 227). Because women have been oppressed in place, a priority for women practising rituals is to find a safe space for their bodies:

> everything is very much safe space, and it's a time for strengthening, healing and really encouraging each of us to go further and further in our work. (Charlene Spretnak, *Full Circle*)

Ritual is "a special vehicle of communication for feminists; ritual speaks a visceral language of the restoration of symbols and provides an opportunity to utilize them personally" (Turner, 1978, p. 228). These films show women and their bodies engaged in ritual as a way to learn and to confront their position in society. In this safe space women are able to confront their alienation from themselves and each other, from their (self) knowledge to become fully present:

> I think for most of us as we grow older and as we attempt so many things concretely in the world, we end up separating ourselves from that original sense of at-oneness with the natural world. So when I say that ritual ends our alienation from the planet, what I think is that it returns us to what we really are. It returns us to the place where we are really connected—with each other, with the universe, with nature. (Margo Adler, *Full Circle*)

Women are shown in the films using ritual as a way to make changes, to heal and to affect change for themselves and for their communities. According to activist Thich Nhat Hanh

(1978), "the purpose of resistance . . . is to seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly" (p. 122). Shulamith Liechtman, a counsellor tells us in *Full Circle* that her women clients use ritual as a way to heal and to resist:

> I think it's very important to look at the fact that people need ritual . . . women who had been most let down by society, by the system, by the church, by our God the Father, the schools . . . these were the women who began to tell me that they had gone to a witches' meeting, or that they had gone to a chanting weekend . . . I began to understand that they were looking for something and that they had a form of self-expression that was self-healing. And that the healing was a part . . . had to do with the ritual.

Starhawk also speaks about her (and others) personal empowerment through ritual:

> When women get in touch with our own power from within, we find we do have the ability to do many, many things . . . For me, part of my commitment . . . has also been a very active political commitment. (*Burning Times*)

Ritual is a strong theme in these films, and it is also a form of feminist art. These films, in their visually stylized evocative characteristics, and repetition of particular elements such as music and silouhettes are themselves a form of ritual. The films are a ritualized space that is woman/bodied, woman-centred, and viscerally evocative. A viewer's body can become engaged with and stimulated by the feminist spectacle while watching the films, especially if the viewer is a woman. That these films as videos can be watched repeatedly deepens and expands the film's sense of ritual: [16]

> Ritual setting and experience [has] an ability to break through the present . . . lead to discovery and creativity . . . potent source of invention . . . extreme intensity, sometimes ecstasy, openness to possibility and revelation. (Turner, 1978, p. 227)

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16 These films are more readily available on video than on film. They can be rented from any public library or they can be purchased at an inexpensive price from the NFB. Because of this accessibility, it is possible to see these films repeatedly.

The ultimate goal of ritual and of these films is to facilitate transformation. The film's ritualized feminist (re)presentation of women's bodies opens up a space for women where alternatives can be experienced and imagined.

Bodies as Artifacts

> *Now with intensity, will I root myself in the place that resembles me. Now with intensity will I initiate myself to other women. The roots are aerial. The light which nourishes them, nourishes, at the same time, the tender shoots (the culture) and the root. The root is integral and aerial, the light coherent. (Brossard, 1988, p. 106)*

Throughout the trilogy, Read repeats several stylized montages that include McKennitt's spiritually evocative music, extreme close-ups of ancient female figures, and text. The sculpted or drawn female figures often depict women in every day life as well as in positions of sacredness and reverence. The figures are often full-bodied, very different to the thin, child-like images of "desirable" women that dominate our visual world today. Starhawk tells us in a voice-over as the camera shows us a slow pan of these figures:

> We very rarely see women of power who look just like ordinary women look. We need the kind of images of the old goddesses that say, 'hey, there are many sorts of beauty, there are many sorts of power.' And primarily we need images that say women's power, female power, the power of bringing life into the world in many ways, not just physical birth but all of our creativity, is what we need in the world. It's not something to be feared. (*Full Circle*)

The extreme close-up shots and slow pan of female figurines, a focus on the particular, provide viewers opportunities to recontextualize the ancient images of women. The montages, a pause in the documentary action, provide a creative space for women viewers to re-cognize themselves and to re-imagine themselves. The notion of sacred includes women and invites

women to make the link between these ancient sacred figurines to themselves. The spaces in the film stimulate the expression of the unexpressed: women defined by women. It arouses women's desire: for reverence, for healing, for wholeness, for women desiring to be women:

> *The part of pleasure inscribed in language is the one that **amazes** at the very moment when pleasure converges. At the turning of a word, the brilliance of a woman who makes sense: image quivering with the whole body. Reality condenses in abstraction, the skin works, acoustic relief, I hear the 'nnameable (sic) without knowledge of the words I pronounce: I see her coming. The nature of sentences is limitless visual information running over our bodies at the speed of light. It's the embrace, then when women are separated, virtual again let's reconstitute the original woman from aerial roots. (Brossard, 1991, p. 163)*

Body as Geography

> *true landscapes loosen the tongue in us, flow over the edge of our thought-frame. They settle into us . . . there are true landscapes that pry us from the edge and force us onto the scene. (Brossard, 1990, p. 24)*

I use the term—body as geography—to mean a sense of body in place as well as bodily sensations. Geographically expressing women's oppression, body as geography would allow thought to be directed by the feelings of "pain, and trauma, and compassion and outrage" (Griffin, 1979, p. 35). Paintings are shown depicting women burning alive in town squares. Shots of torture equipment and sounds of women screaming reveal that women's bodies were targets of violence and derision, particularly in public places. The films evoke such a geographic feeling in the body.

In contrast, Read also shows women's bodies as geographically participating in rituals or talking casually to the filmmaker, comfortable with themselves. Women are shown in their backyards standing together and touching each other's bodies to feel/sense/know themselves and each other. Women are shown touching each other's bodies, learning to trust again, erasing the

"corrupt imprinting of our pasts" (Tita, *Full Circle*). As mentioned earlier, there are also views of sacred female figurines where women's bodies are shown as sacred. But whether honoured or violated, or activated politically and powerful, the presentation of women's bodies in these films moves them beyond constraining stereotypes, forward into new life and into new identities. Women are portrayed in all aspects of life, being fully active in their communities. Women's bodies are re-claiming spaces that have been traditionally proscribed. Read shows women walking alone, comfortable in the wilderness and comfortable together. They walk in the very squares where once they were burned to death.

Body as Silhouette

As I mentioned earlier, Read uses silhouettes of women's bodies throughout the trilogy to confront traditional beliefs about women, to re-claim meanings and to expand one's imagination. She uses silhouettes where we expect to see shadows. Through silhouette, women become a metaphor for themselves. The silhouette is a bodily metaphor for the subordinate position that women hold in patriarchal societies. Read does not use shadows. Women are not shadows nor in the shadow of men. They are their own matter. The silhouette is matter and women matter.

Read inverts familiar iconography of the shadow. In Plato's *Republic* the shadows on the wall of the cave represent pale versions of "reality." Plato argues that we are shacked by the constraints of our beliefs and social structures to accept these shadows as all there is to know and that we must be shown "reality" (knowledge), which is situated just behind us by some wise enlightened philosopher (by some director in the darkened theatre of life?) However, *his* version of "reality" (knowledge) is idealized as an essence that is, unfortunately, unobtainable, however,

must be pursued. Read inverts this notion of reality with silhouettes. While the dark forms are like shadows, they are not shadows. There is no split between the real and the ideal. They are women's bodies, an extreme presence of women's bodies, not irretrievable like a shadow. The shadow is taken on by the body. The dark reflection is one and the same: ideal and living form are linked. Desire in Plato's version is pursuit (of an ideal). Desire in Read's version is presence—women are intensely present.

The silhouettes are beautiful, and visceral. The silhouettes of women are often dancing on roof tops or in natural settings. They are not trapped in place, as in Plato's cave. They are in places that are open and freeing. Silhouetted women dance in places that represent freedom and celebration. In Ingmar Bergman's film of morality and mortality, *The Seventh Seal*, characters are silhouetted on a hillside dancing in a dance of death. Read portrays women dancing a dance of life on the hillsides.

In this chapter I identified the ways in which a radical aesthetic was expressed in the film trilogy. I show how this aesthetic is created from a feminist analysis and feminist treatment of filmic elements. I claim this aesthetic charges the films with a significant quality that evokes yearning, creativity and imagination as well as a geographic sense of place/body. In conclusion, I claim that this aesthetic evokes a subterranean knowledge that contains important information and has implications for transformative learning in general and for women in particular.

In the next chapter I look briefly at the major concepts of transformative learning approaches as expressed by radical and feminist pedagogy. I discuss the role of a radical aesthetic in feminist pedagogy. I provide a set of questions that could be used to enhance an

aesthetic experience for learners. I also suggest further research in order to explore the role between aesthetics and learning.

Journal Entry: December 1995

A radical aesthetic is linked to radical pedagogy. Radical pedagogy generally acknowledges that the first step in helping learners to radicalize and to transform themselves is to start with their own knowledge. I say that a radical aesthetic connects learners to deep layer of knowledge—a subterranean knowledge. This submerged knowledge is full of yearnings, passions and vision. Activating and tapping into this realm will guide and inspire learning far beyond the initial educative moment.

My personal path to change was marked with connections to my deep, hidden yearnings. Through becoming in touch with my yearnings, I found the courage, the way, and the vision to change. I did not need to rationally discover my life was oppressed: I already knew that. What I did not know was how to get out of it. A radical aesthetic connected me to my own experiences, confirmed myself as a knower and helped me re-imagine myself. A radical aesthetic connects me to myself, to my dreams and to my yearnings. I needed to be in touch with an energy that was emotionally powerful enough to challenge the depth of my emotional despair. A radical aesthetic gave me (creative) energy, therefore, courage.

CHAPTER V-DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

How might your life have been different if there had been a place for you? A place for you to go . . . a place of women, to help learn the ways of woman . . . a place where you were nurtured from an ancient flow sustaining you and steadying you as you sought to become yourself. A place of women to help you find and trust the ancient flow already there within yourself . . . waiting to be released . . . A place of women . . . How might your life be different? (Duerk, 1989, p. 45)

In last chapter I discussed the ways in which a radical aesthetic is present in Read's films and what they evoke for viewers, particularly women. I also discussed the type of knowledge that is evoked by this aesthetic. In this chapter, I briefly highlight the major concepts of radical and feminist pedagogy approaches to learning that are concerned with facilitating transformation both in individuals and in social practices. I outline the implications of a feminist aesthetic for radical pedagogy, especially feminist, which gives particular attention to a learner's own (latent) knowledge. I claim that a radical aesthetic learning experience awakens and evokes a subterranean level of knowledge which is crucial for transformative learning. I provide a set of questions that can be used by a viewer or a teacher in order to explore/expand a viewer's aesthetic experience.

This study made the claim that feminist documentary film is a powerful educational tool. In my life, I have found feminist documentary film to be a site where I have confronted powerful learning experiences. I believe the aesthetic quality of these films to be one of their most powerful attributes. In the field of adult education there is a paucity of literature that focuses on non-formal educational initiatives, such as the work of Studio D and the National Film Board.

There is virtually no work that examines the relationship of documentary film and learning nor could I find any studies that examine feminist documentary film as a learning tool. [17] Furthermore, there is little attention paid to feminist documentary film even in the film literature, be that from a documentarist or a feminist perspective. These omissions make this study all the more a beginning to further exploration.

Radical and Feminist Pedagogy: Influencing Change

I have always been interested in educational approaches that foster critical thinking, transform learning and inspire changes. While radical educational approaches have not been the focus of this study, my interest in them provided much of the impetus for it. Radical and feminist education theories, philosophies, and researchers and practitioners share an underlying concern with the relationship between the individual and an oppressive socio-political structure. They both talk of personal empowerment, social transformation and greater participation in an educational experience. However, radical educators and theorists have been generally concerned with the production and reproduction of class through schooling under capitalism while feminist theorists have been more concerned about the production and reproduction of gender politics under a system of patriarchy (Weiler, 1988). For this discussion, I want to keep both approaches in sight because together they form a fairly thorough approach for addressing unjust beliefs and social practices.

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[17] Educational researchers generally direct their attention towards media studies—popular and news media—rather than towards the construction and representation of knowledge in educational documentaries (Ellsworth, 1993).

In order to situate the learning that is possible from a radical aesthetic in the broader realm of educational practice, I briefly outline both radical and feminist approaches to learning. Paulo Freire is the most well-known educator to give formal shape to the process called radical teaching/learning. He developed his approach for the purposes of educating and liberating illiterate oppressed peasants in Brazil. Unlike traditional educational approaches in which the "empty" learner is filled up with knowledge by the "omnipotent" teacher, Freire's approach centres on an individual's experience (and voice) that is extended collectively with like-minded learners and teachers through the discussions of the socio-political construction of knowledge (power). In other words, in a radical approach, learning begins with a learner's own knowledge, and as the learners gain awareness of their own knowledge (power) they also become aware of the social construction of knowledge and the political nature of education. This critical awareness is facilitated by a dialectical, non-hierarchical relationship between the teacher and the learner. As the learners become critically conscious of their own knowledge in a socio-political context, they are motivated to act: criticize, resist, change. This process of transforming (politicizing) learners is called praxis. While Freire's approach has been successful in exposing the classist nature of education, his ideas have been criticized by feminist educators as limited in his conceptualization of oppression which has not considered the gendered nature of society (hooks, 1990).

Contemporary feminist approaches in education came out of the second wave of the women's movement and, initially, these took the form of consciousness-raising groups. Informal groups of women gathered in their neighbourhoods and communities for the purpose of raising women's awareness of their subordinate position in a patriarchal society. These groups were

what Michel Foucault has called 'subjugated knowledges'—knowledges which are deemed illegitimate, or even false, because they are disruptive of the patriarchal system" (Hughes, 1995, p. 251).

Aesthetic Learning: Some Ideas

Approaches in feminist pedagogy are as diverse as feminism itself, but for the purposes of this study, I am concerned with the approaches that emphasize the *personal is political* and *the political is personal*. In particular, I am interested in the approaches that focus on the learner's own knowledge. I found that the film's radical aesthetic evoked a layer of personal knowledge that is seldom present or integrated in the typical radical/feminist process of articulating and naming one's experience. The power of these films is their ability to provoke, and stimulate knowledge at a subterranean level. In order for transformative learning to be deep and to be sustained, I believe that a learner must also be aware of and engaged with this subterranean level of knowledge.

Journal Entry, March 1996

When my dried-up yearnings and creativity were awakened, I found the courage, the sheer strength to confront some of the oppressive belief systems around and inside of me. Even then, the first steps were tentative. Through a connection to hope, I found the energy to initiate change and as hope remained, nourished by empowering experiences, I had the energy to sustain change. A sense of place, like a belonging to myself and to my world, emerged, melting the tight edges of isolation and despair, and leaving a warm texture of healing on my skin, and in my bones, solid and standing there now, amid the memories . . .

mainly comprised of white middle-class women so that class and race were not immediate issues. They were loosely organized, collective, and did not necessarily involve an identifiable leader although many women went on to distinguish themselves later as writers and scholars in the feminist movement. In keeping with radical approaches that critique the socio-political construction of knowledge, women (re)covered their own knowledge as they named their experiences in a patriarchal society and became critically conscious of the gendered nature of society. These womens' experience of praxis—the process of reflection, critical awareness and political action—became a catalyst for broader social and political movements. They lobbied for women's issues or joined other politically active groups, such as environmental and peace groups. Consciousness raising groups played a significant role in the development of Women Studies programs in universities, feminist film, and other feminist practices and organizations. What is identified today as feminist pedagogy emerged from these early groups' activities and institutions (Kenway and Modra, 1992).

While feminist pedagogy is a relatively new phenomenon in the field of education (both practice and theory), it can be argued that feminism in general is a form of pedagogy which has been around as long as women have resisted their subordinate position in society. Feminist pedagogical approaches often parallel radical approaches, particularly in their emphasis on personal knowledge, experience and the notion of praxis, however, feminist pedagogy is distinct in the educational realm in the way it critiques dominant (masculine) forms of education, articulates women-centred perspectives on learning and teaching, and exposes many more aspects of the socio-political, especially gendered, constructions of knowledge (Belenky et al, 1986; Code, 1991; Kenway & Modra, 1992). Generally, feminist education "seeks to liberate

An aesthetic experience such as offered in feminist documentary film helps, as hooks says, in "the struggle of memory against forgetting" not just the historical pain of oppression and the solidarity of resistance and survival, but also the dreams, hopes and inspirations we may have once held. There are so many things in this life that separate us from ourselves, each other and from forming communities (of resistance). We must not underestimate the (daily) damage caused by the isolation and alienation in our capitalist, individualistic society and its increasing fragmentation. Life is difficult and we need places where we can rest, feel safe, become nourished and replenished. An aesthetic experience can offer such a healing place. An aesthetic moment can be a moment when time stops in a hectic world, a moment where we can "rendezvous" (Bollas, 1993) with ourselves. We need healing of the past in order to redeem and reclaim it, in order to become whole, to be able to resist, to form a community of resistance as Hanh describes.

Feminist documentary film is a place where people, particularly women, can return to themselves. It is a good thing to be so moved that we (women and men) cry in our classrooms when we hear/see the injustice in our societies. It is a good thing to become excited and passionate with caring for each other, ourselves. A radical aesthetic inspires us. It inspires learning as we ache for knowledge. It is no small thing to become impassioned with learning. As adult educators interested in transformative learning, knowing the power of aesthetics to motivate/stimulate and sustain learning must not be ignored or underestimated. According to bell hooks (1990a) we must "not deny the way aesthetics serves as the foundation for emerging visions" (p. 112). This society does not provide much space for women and what space there is, does not necessarily reflect women's experiences. Therefore, the opening up of a space that

allows women (and men) some room to think, to imagine, to act is no small thing. It is not a static container; it is exciting, explosive with a provocative feminist analysis.

From this study, I suggest learning that includes a radical aesthetic may:

1) help a learner become more engaged with their learning because it will have more personal meaning;

2) help a learner gain access to layers of knowledge seldom accessible or legitimized in traditional learning situations, thus deepening and expanding the learning experience;

3) enhance a holistic style of learning in which the mind (thought), body (emotion) and spirit are stimulated and engaged;

4) foster a learning environment where self-actualisation is important and learning is seen as a part of healing.

Questions to Enhance Aesthetic Learning

Using feminist documentary film is a relatively simple way to introduce an aesthetic in the classroom, however, it is not the only way. For the purposes of this study I limited my exploration of aesthetics to particular collection of feminist documentary film: the NFB series on Women's Spirituality. In order to facilitate an aesthetic experience, I have created two sets of questions that could be used while watching this type of film. Prior to screening it is useful to ask the viewers/learners to note any moments during the film that they felt any resistance, criticisms or affirmations to either the information being presented or the form of the presentation. These initial responses can be used as a starting point to discussion after viewing. One of the problems that can arise while viewing documentary film, and particularly in feminist

interpretations, is whether or not the viewers/learners "accept" what is being presented. It is as important to explore this scepticism as it is to explore affirmations. After screening, either in a group discussion or individual journal exercises, starting with a viewer's initial response, the following set of questions could be used to explore and deepen one's learning experience:

Personal Responses/Feelings:

- How did you find yourself responding/feeling while watching the film? (Can use as prompts: did you experience any positive or negative feelings, any longings? any resistances? any criticisms? any affirmations?)

- Did the film raise any questions for you? Did it confirm or affirm anything for you?

Inner Reflection:

- Beginning with your responses/feelings and reflecting inward, take one response/feeling at time. Reflect on it. What does this response/feeling mean to you? Does the film evoke any yearnings or creative inspirations for you? If so, what are they? Where do they come from? What do they mean to you? What do you learn about yourself from this reflection?

- What would happen if you acted on some of your yearnings and/or creative inspirations? Would your life be different? If so, in what ways?

External Responses/Actions:

- Think about some of your dreams, inspirations, longings. What are you already doing in your life to realize your dreams, longings or creative inspirations? Who else is there with you when you talk about these? Is there anything in the way? What or who would help you?

- Make a map, using symbols, words, lines, paint, collage, clay, etc. showing your inner self as well as your outer world. Visually create all the things you have, need, want in order to realize your dreams, longings, or creative inspirations.

The pre-screening questions are designed to move the viewer/learner from the position of "passive" spectator to the position of interaction. These questions also begin the process of self-

reflection which can be later explored and expanded by the post-screening questions. The post-screening set of questions is designed to assist the viewer/learner in articulating and expressing their personal responses/feelings, to assist the viewer/learner in making sense of or understanding their responses/feelings within a broader context, and to assist the viewer/learner to develop strategies in order to act on their responses/feelings and understandings in a socio-political context. Without being engaged in some sort of social strategy a learner may become isolated and disengage from their critical awareness. hooks (1988a) warns educators that "awakening women to the need for change without providing the substantive models and strategies for change, frustrates, creates a situation where women are left with unfulfilled longings for transformation" (p. 33).

The fact that these films are on video and readily available from any public library (or the viewer may actually own the films) means that the viewer/learner can (and often does) see these films more than once. Repeated viewings allow the viewer/learner opportunities to re-assess their initial responses. For myself, each time I see the films, I see something "new" or experience a deepening of my understanding.

Other Research Suggestions

Building on this work, further research could explore the relationship between aesthetics and pedagogy, and more specifically, the relationship between a radical aesthetic and radical pedagogy. There are many questions raised concerning the connection between aesthetics and learning that can be explored. For example, is there a substantive link between a radical aesthetic

and transformative learning? Does film provide a learning experience that is more inclusive of women? Does film provide a learning experience that is more inclusive of other learning styles? As a learning approach, does a radical aesthetic facilitate learners in being aware of the tensions in cultural boundaries and ways to overcome them? As an adult educator who is interested in assisting people, particularly women, make changes in their lives, I am especially interested in exploring further the link between aesthetics and adult education. How can adult educators incorporate aesthetics in their pedagogy? What would an aesthetic adult education program look like?

From this study, I suggest that a radical aesthetic evokes particular emotions and energies in learners which ultimately assists them to become aware of their subterranean knowledge. It would be useful to conduct interviews with a group of women (and men) to explore this notion of subterranean knowledge. What other knowledges might be at this subterranean level and what role do they play in learning? As an adult educator, how concerned should I be with this level of knowledge? How might one proceed ethically and safely with students to uncover a subterranean level of knowledge?

As well, further study on Studio D's work and other feminist documentary film is needed to explore the ways in which a radical aesthetic may or may not be present. Research could examine one of the specific aspects of radical aesthetics as outlined in this study. For example, it would be interesting to explore the relationship between a geographic aesthetic and learning. The role of place in learning is only recently being articulated by feminist geographers such as Gillian Rose (1993).

Summary

To summarize, I began this thesis curious about the powerful affect in my life of three Studio D films. First, I examined the general characteristics of feminist documentary film, noting the role of a feminist analysis in creating a distinct aesthetic. Next, I defined this aesthetic quality as radical and described some of the ways in which this aesthetic was present in these films and discussed the implications for women's (self) knowledge. Here, I argued that a radical aesthetic has the potential to activate in the viewers, particularly women, a layer of subterranean knowledge—a knowledge full of yearning, creative energy and a sense of place. Finally, I argued for the usefulness of aesthetic learning through film in helping viewers, particularly women, visualize and make changes, be that personally or collectively. I show that radical and feminist pedagogical approaches that begin with a learner's knowledge would do well to consider the role of aesthetics in activating a deeper level of knowledge.

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APPENDIX A

ONF - POPULARITE DES VENTES PAR ENDROIT (PAR QTE.)

Sales

NO. 1163a-D 27/07/95 PAGE 1
D
PERIOD: 1 APRIL 92 - 31 MARCH 95
PERIODE: 1 AVRIL 92 - 31 MARS 95

DETAIL-DETAILLE [DOMESTIC/DOMESTIQUE]
LOCATION/ENDROIT: TER\O
CUSTOMER TYPE/GENRE DE CLIENT: * ALL
SHIPMENT METHOD/MODE D'EXPEDITION: * ALL
REVENUE CODE/CODE DE REVENU: SALES
SPECIAL PROCESS/PROCEDE SPECIAL: * ALL
TITLE/TITRE: L\STUDIOD_JR.LOK
FORMAT: 113,114,193,194,106,105,116,111
COLOR/COULEUR: * ALL
LANGUAGE/LANGAGE: 00,01,03,91,93

TITLE / TITRE CODE	NAME/NOM	-BC- -CB-	-ALB-	-SAS-	-MAN-	-ONT-	-QUE-	-NB-	-NS- -NE-	-PEI- -IPE-	-NFL- -TN-	-TOTAL- QTY QTE	-TOTAL- AMOUNT MONTANT	
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113C 9190 008	2 BURNING TIMES, THE	119	53	10	30	429	37	3	14		6	701	15,773.23	B.T.
113C 9194 002	3 WHEN WOMEN KILL	80	100	31	21	253	30	16	29		11	571	14823.94	
113C 0189 027	4 GODDESS REMEMBERED	90	39	10	18	373	25	2	8		4	569	12,139.80	G.R.
113C 9192 045	MAKING BABIES	84	69	11	36	247	28	7	22	2	9	515	11586.20	
113C 9192 046	MAKING PERFECT BABIES	84	69	11	35	243	29	7	22	2	10	512	11482.24	
113C 0192 015	TOWARD INTIMACY (OPEN CAPTION)	91	41	9	14	192	26	11	20	3	38	445	12422.45	
113C 9191 001	MISOGRAMS	58	32	11	12	247	29	4	20	3	1	415	12069.11	
113C 0186 054	THIN DREAMS	64	49	18	29	167	14	6	13	1	11	372	9501.80	
113C 9190 097	AFTER THE MONTREAL MASSACRE	57	28	4	17	189	14	4	8		4	325	8182.94	
113C 9192 129	RETURN HOME	55	54	6	12	112	39	2	2	1		283	6238.66	
113C 9191 146	WOMEN IN THE SHADOWS	55	50	23	33	74	11	2	7		1	256	6464.60	
113C 9194 087	MOTHERLAND TALES OF WONDER (PARTS 1 & 2	58	19	6	13	119	16	4	11	1		247	6017.86	
113C 9190 069	DOING WITH THEIR [illegible]	42	23	7	10	122	8	4	17	1	2	236	5918.45	

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