

## International Inter-University Symposium

University of Grenoble-Alps/University Lumière Lyon 2/University of Tours

### WHEN WOMEN FILM: DOCUMENTARY IN THE IBERIAN PENINSULA AND THE LATIN AMERICAN CONTINENT

#### Organization

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#### Location

University of Grenoble-Alps (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> October) / University of Lyon 2 (4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> October)

#### Call for Papers

In recent years, the documentary genre has found new dynamics as well as new audiences in Europe and in the south of the American continent. The success of the many film festivals in these regions that focus on documentary proves it. However, this renewal is not accompanied by a paradigm shift in the mapping of gender. The narrative of film history perpetuates the subalternity of women filmmakers, as well as the unequal division of labour that attributes subordinated functions in the filmmaking process to women (Morissey, 2011). Thus, filmmakers such as Alice Guy, who gives an important place to women in her films, or Esther Choub, pioneer in reusing images, have only been belatedly taken into account by film history, often due to the initiative of other women.

While there are periods of greater presence before the 1920s, during the following decades, only few female filmmakers are acknowledged by film history and, in most cases, present a succinct filmography, with temporary gaps.<sup>1</sup> Documentary shows a production that, although modest and unknown, is regularly maintained throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the historical period of the 1970s, during which feminist movements,<sup>2</sup> inserted in more global struggles (anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, equal rights and rights for minorities), contribute to mark a break in film history. In fact, the second great incursion of women in documentary, a practice little recognized by film history, takes place in the heat of those historical moments of contestation.

New schemes of thought were needed, and women became aware of the fact that the dominant discourse had closed the door to women's point of view, and therefore to the process of subjectivation "by which the constitution of a subject is produced" (Vihalem, 2011). In a time of struggle that also questioned hierarchies and power, initially in England and then in the United States, feminist thought examined dominant cinema, mainly that of Hollywood, exposing the hegemony of a culture based on the male gaze, to which the gaze of the female spectator has been subordinated. They perceived the "duplication" proposed by dominant cinema: "on one hand, *women*, and, on the other, a "feminine" constructed by the text of the film that has nothing to do with the existence of real women" (Reynaud, 1993). This awareness, theorized by British and American thinkers, introduced a discontinuity in the unfolding of film history, demystifying its narrative. Although the corpus analysed by them primarily focused on fiction films, their critical point of view brought new themes and characters (Nuñez Domínguez *et al*, 2012). Their analysis, their commitment, and also, in many cases, their praxis resonated with the set of social, cultural and ideological struggles of Marxist inspiration that arose in all fronts of the artistic field.

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<sup>1</sup> Such as Mary Field and Laura Boulton from the USA; Ruby and Marion Grierson – sisters of John Grierson – and Jill Craigie from the United Kingdom; and, from Canada, Judith Crawley and Jane Marsh. In France, the names that are part of film history are Germaine Dulac (avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s), Nicole Vedrès, Jacqueline Audry and Agnès Varda.

<sup>2</sup> In Western countries, the history of feminism is complex and plural due to its diversity of references and times, even considering that there were big "waves" (Studer, 2004).

In order to change the old world, to liberate from and give a different face to it, it was necessary to rethink the dialectic between visible and invisible. Women documentary filmmakers did not always develop new forms, but they certainly developed new ways of working with new actors in social life. Faces without legitimacy appeared on screens of the so-called "women's films" - feminists may or may not claim that name - offering portraits of women rarely seen on screen. Their testimonies and words formed a personal and unique filmic corpus that hardly entered into film history. However, although feminists effectively lifted the veil on taboos (sexuality, contraception, abortion, violence), these filmed testimonies must be reinstated in a political and social history of documentary film. Consequently, it is legitimate to ask how documentary could ignore those films made by women from a politicized perspective. What can we do with a type of cinema that makes the subject, including its corporeality, a significant primordial instance, based on: "[...] one of the leading ideas of the feminist movement, the idea that the personal is political and theoretical, that every intelligent and useful discourse must necessarily postulate and take into account the subjective factor"? (Braidotti and Degraef, 1990). Has not cinema allowed another "sexed reading of the world," in the words of Florence Rochefort (1995)? This disturbing, if not subversive, reading confers a heuristic value to documentaries made by women. Militant cinema questioned the hierarchies, while the perspective proposed by women during the post-68 decade sowed a political disorder whose absence in historical posterity challenges us today.

During these years, occupying a place meant taking the other out of darkness; very soon, however, the creative and poetic potentialities of the camera-tool were also put at the service of the pleasure of inventing non-narrative documentary forms, detached from any militant commitment. Then an experimental production arises, and although it is not new in film history (remember Germaine Dulac or Maya Deren), it intensifies itself to constitute a very inventive corpus of documentaries. In addition, the access to video cameras, which women have used since the 1970s (Poissant, 1997), also multiplied the volume of films produced and the diversity of alternative practices (Duguet, 1981). The political convulsions that characterized the 1960s and 1970s were followed by radical changes in artistic practices, whose critical dimension consisted in breaking the barriers between disciplines (painting, photography, cinema, dance) through crossbreeding, hybridization, and insertion. New forms of art emerged - Fluxus, *Land art*, *Body Art*, conceptual art - that sought to redefine hierarchies and question the boundary between art and life, and "upset our ordinary relationship to reference" (Caillet and Pouillaude, 2017) through a way of doing that has not yet been exhausted. These new territories of experimentation, often associated with the personal and even bodily dimensions (as in *Body Art*), have seen women assert themselves and take a completely new place in the art world. From the point of view of documentary as an art form, female artists have experimented at different levels and in different ways to bring to the forefront their experiences of space (domestic, public, private, natural), of time (constrained, repetitive, biological) and of the body (exposed, physiological, violated, re-appropriated), providing new gestures of diversion and recovery of a *power to create*. Articulated or not in a political project, these strategies of representation have been a favourable ground on which the inventive and creative dimension of women has been affirmed.

The historical, technical and aesthetic framework characteristic of documentary production of interest for this symposium shares a violent history, marked by dictatorial, military and repressive regimes in deeply unequal societies. Even if today Spain and Portugal fully belong to Europe, their economic and social structures have brought them closer to the countries of the southern hemisphere for a long time. In spite of this common heritage, all Hispanic and Lusophone countries present a major division, linked to a long colonial history that began in the sixteenth century. Such shared aspects as well as social and economic archaisms have had an impact on documentary films produced in territories with extremely polarized societies led by oligarchies that are resistant to the development of democracy (Malamud, 2005). Therefore, these aspects outline the transnational horizon that characterizes the

present symposium, which will seek to put in evidence the shared visual culture as well as the specificities corresponding to each country and to each continent. In a global way and with the exception of some periods, these historical conditions have been particularly unfavourable to women. Thus, in the twentieth century, the Iberian Peninsula, which only experienced brief periods of freedom, lived under the oppression of conservative dictatorships, Salazar's "Estado Novo" (1933) in Portugal and Franco's "national-Catholicism" (1939) in Spain. These dictatorships subjected women to the double yoke and double censorship of patriarchy and the Church, and therefore the struggle for obtaining rights was more difficult. Few women ventured into the almost exclusive male field of cinema. If we look at history since the arrival of the cinematograph in Spain, we can register the names of "pioneers" - a term that should undoubtedly be reconsidered (Soto Vázquez, 2017) - such as Rosario Pi, considered the first Spanish filmmaker, or Margarita Alexandre, known for having co-directed a documentary (*Cristo*, 1953). In the 1950s and 1960s, under Franco, a name emerges in fiction cinema, that of Ana Mariscal; later, in the aftermath of the dictatorship and during the democratic transition (1975-1982), the number of filmmakers never ceases to grow. During the Transition, one can recall the documentary and political lesson of the diptych of Cecilia and José Bartolomé (*Después de...*, 1979-1981). The militant dimension has been central in women's documentary cinema and has shown a growing interest in the question of the Other, whose experience they could share (Waldman and Walker, 1999). The commitment of the few women documentary filmmakers was placed in the contexts of the demands that emerged in the middle of the Cold War, and accentuated by the dictatorial regime they opposed to (Helena Lumbreras and the Collective Class Cinema). The relations of domination were questioned, and this tradition closely linked to the history of documentary has not yet disappeared in a Spain marked by successive crises in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: whatever its economic, cultural, identity, ideological or memorial nature, these crises have been re-appropriated and thought by women (Margarita Ledo, María Ruido, Mercedes Álvarez, Isabel Coixet and, by experimental cinema, Eugenia Balcells), in various formats and different temporalities. In Portugal, the establishment of a film industry is difficult for various reasons, economic and sociocultural (Bénard da Costa, 2011), and the fact that the dictatorship lasted until 1974 strongly restricted freedoms. However, a few names emerge, such as Maria Emília Castelo Branco and Bárbara Virgínia, who produced the only feature film directed by a woman under Salazar's dictatorship (Pereira, 2016). In the 1970s, women joined production teams, such as Noémia Delgado (*Mascaras*, 1976), who worked with the Portuguese Cinema Novo and whose documentary work has an ethnographic dimension. This trend will be strengthened throughout the 1980s to form the first real generation of women filmmakers with Margarida Gil, Monique Rutler and Solveig Nordlund (Pereira, 2016). In the following decade, the names of Teresa Villaverde, Catarina Mourão or, later, Susana de Sousa Dias can be mentioned. In the cinema of this period, the very diverse themes are related to the oppression of women in conservative societies, drugs and poverty in metropolitan areas, and also to memory. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is also a new generation that mixes genres ignoring the boundaries between film, art and essay (Cláudia Tomaz) or that clearly displays their LGBTI + activism (Raquel Freire).

The vastness of the Latin American continent and its great diversity makes difficult the study of film country by country, with some beautiful exceptions, such as Mexico, where "the film industry [...] has been the main film phenomenon of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while this pre-eminence only comes back to Brazil in the second half," according to Paulo António Paranguá (2003). The historian goes on to mention Argentina and the emblematic case of Cuba. They are countries with cinemas at the periphery, which are known for their documentary film history, often ascribed to contemporary historical reality, which defines their originality, according to Silvana Flores (2014). However, the New Latin American Cinema has been very little interested in the situation of women and has not led to a significant development in the number of women documentary filmmakers, even though the name of Nora de Izcue stands out. Examples include Argentinian Dolly Pussi, Cuban Sara Gómez, Venezuelan Margot Benacerraf, director of the legendary *Araya* (1959), and Colombian Marta

Rodríguez, who is still active. The dynamics of emancipation and justice that guided many of these directors are found in collectives of women filmmakers who have developed working methods on the real. This was the case of two collectives that shared the same name, Cine-Mujer, in Mexico in 1975 (Rashkin, 2015) and in Colombia in 1978 - a country particularly rich in women documentary filmmakers (Paranaguá, 1996) - and that have taken the risk of addressing, in conservative countries, issues such as rape, abortion (*Cosas de mujeres* by Rosa Martha Fernández, 1978), or the experiences of women from slums (*La mirada de Myriam* by Clara Riascos, 1986). In Brazil, a country with a prolific production, the artist Lygia Pape, and her experimental films, Letícia Parente (video artist) and Carolina Teixeira interrogate society's violence in their country. Experimental cinema, in its documentary dimension, finds its full achievement in the productions by Argentinian Narcisa Hirsch, under the sign of "experience" (Sayago, 2013).

This symposium will examine the effects and consequences of the multiple experiences that we have described in this brief overview, necessarily incomplete. Nevertheless, we can only note that, everywhere and in all times, women filmmakers have produced documentaries that mix praxis and/or feminist activism. How can we explain that this new production has remained outside the filmic renovation of the years of resistance, of disobedience, and of counterculture? The historical development that we have just outlined will make possible to evaluate to what extent women's documentary production is related to processes of emancipation that are inseparable from the feminist consciousness-raising, and to observe how it transcends national perspectives. This cinema of multiple effects (political, social, aesthetic) allows us to reinvent the representation of women, their thoughts, their desires and their pleasures until subverting the very notion of woman and, in a way, «our perception and definition of the reality [...]» (Colaizzi, 2002). This transnational set of productions traces the horizon of a "minor" cinema, in the Deleuzian sense of the term that suggests a documentary film history that still remains largely incomplete.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Hispanic and Lusophone countries have experienced very rapid societal changes, and when left-wing governments have come to power, "a new relationship with politics" has emerged (Bataillon and Prévôt-Schapira, 2009). They welcomed, and even created, new fields of research, such as gender studies (Babb, 2012), and "decolonial" studies (Quintero, 2010). The miscegenation, but also the racism experienced by blacks and Indians, the role of borders in the Latin American imaginary or the question of violence are not unrelated to the awareness that has led to the emergence of "decoloniality," a concept still very much discussed today. Categorizations, whose implicit stakes draw territories of power, are questioned. Sometimes these approaches become intersectional, which has led to problematize relations of race, class and sex, and documentary bears witness to this. Activist filmmakers, black or Indian women (Gloria Jusayu in Venezuela), have filmed themselves reversing the balance of power, not without encountering difficulties within their own groups. They are a continuation of the practices of women filmmakers from American minority groups (Springer, 1984) and also think of their emancipatory work in a reflexive and ecological perspective in which bodily involvement is meaningful (Cecilia Vicuña, Chile).

The legacy of critical reflection on norms and binary divisions has opened the door to new conceptions that reject both the masculine and the feminine. This thought refers to the rejection of identity assignments, central to the queer project, which has quickly become the subject of academic research and writings on the continent but also in Spain. Cutting-edge texts have been written proposing the elimination of boundaries. From this point of view, the pioneering text by lesbian Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) is an example of a mestizo writing that aims to express a border sexual identity. It must be read from the tradition of writing of a set of materials that have existed, in the history of women and sexuality, in the form of manifestos, essays or hybrid forms. Once again, the weight of the rules provoked the need to question, to pose the question of the place: the place of the creation of dominated groups, of their films and the

written traces of those who are no longer recognized in the category "woman" and interrogate it by proposing other representations. From a transdisciplinary approach, this symposium aims to rethink the epistemological frameworks in the analysis of the documentary image. What narrative strategies and what aesthetics have been implemented to bring to the screen prohibited topics or avoid censorship? What role have women's collectives played in the organization of production? What has happened to them? How have works circulated, or not, among culturally similar countries where powerful television networks exist? How have certain films contributed to the enrichment and redefinition of cultural anthropology, in multi-ethnic societies? How can we think about conservation, restoration and use of documentaries made in video format, which are rarely the subject of conservation policies, on a large scale? What is the investment by institutions (ministries, film libraries, museums, universities, etc.) in the promotion, dissemination and study of such materials and their producers? What role do the many festivals focused on "women's films" play in the dissemination and reception of these films? Finally, what is the impact of LGBTI + claims on documentary production today?

In essence, this symposium will reflect on the ways in which these documentary films, which have been doubly marginalized, as documentaries and made by women, have acted as operations of intelligibility of the world.

### MAIN FOCUSES OF THE SYMPOSIUM

1. History and politics: women's documentary as a stance in a given political context, including from the point of view of colonial and post-colonial issues.
2. Documenting bodies: behind or in front of the camera, the documentary as a tool for study, interrogation, and vindication.
3. Aesthetics of cinema: based on an observation of marginalization, the formal inventiveness of women's documentaries in the history of documentary film.
4. Thinking and writing about cinema: return to the writings of Hispanic and Lusophone thinkers, past and present.
5. Documentary cinema, arts and performance: personal experiences and formal experiments.
6. The question of archives: current status, cultural policies, and strategic challenges.
7. Intersectionality and LGBTI + issues: historicity and new theoretical and practical approaches.

### Useful information

Location: Lyon 2 University and University of Grenoble-Alps

Dates of the symposium: 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> of October 2019

Deadline for sending proposals: April 30, 2019

Replies: May, 2019

To submit your proposals, please use the website: <https://cinedocfemmes.sciencesconf.org>

*In case of technical problems, contact: [sonia.kerfa@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr](mailto:sonia.kerfa@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr)*

*The proposals (in French, Spanish, Portuguese or English) will include a title, a summary of approximately 300 words and a brief biography of the author of 100 words.*

The symposium is part of the GAPP project (Gender and Arts in a Poetic and Political Perspective) co-hosted by Idoli Castro (Lyon 2) and Sonia Kerfa (UGA)

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