

CHAPTER 2: THE PRINCIPLES OF FEMINIST FILMMAKING

While researching this video book I ran into a remarkable quote by Tania Field: “Alice Guy-Blaché was not only the first woman filmmaker in the world, she was the first person to make a film with fictional subject matter.” The quote shocked me. Not because I doubted a woman could have made the first fiction film but because I’d never heard of her. I kept reading, a little angry, a little embarrassed, but mostly exhilarated to learn about this woman, who in 1896 directed “La Fée aux Choux” and with great foresight used birthing images as she literally gave birth to a new artistic genre.

Guy-Blaché went on to have a spectacular career, directing and producing over 1,000 films while working for French film pioneer Léon Gaumont. She moved to America in 1907, where she opened her own successful studio, birthed and cared for two children, and was tormented by her husband’s infidelities. As Field reports, when her former boss, Gaumont, wrote a history of his company, he left out her contribution. She contacted him and he agreed to correct the omission but never did. After decades of trying to resurrect her legacy, Guy-Blaché received the French Legion of Honor in 1953. In spite of that moment of recognition, Guy-Blaché has been, as Field puts it, “betrayed by the history books and forgotten.”

This chapter deals with the moving image production approaches of Guy-Blaché’s heirs, the feminist filmmakers working today. I define feminist filmmaking by discussing the six principles that shape it. It is these principles that I argue represent an ideal methodology for Rhetoric and Composition’s own moving-image production. Before discussing the principles, let me address the always-slippery term “feminist.”

When explaining why they don’t call their *Opening Spaces* methodology feminist, Patricia Sullivan and James Porter assert that they “do not think that such approaches to research must necessarily be conducted only by women or focused only on the study of women.” Unlike the version of feminism Sullivan and Porter mention, the feminism this video book espouses is closer to that described by Susan Delagrange, “Feminism pays attention to equality and justice, to difference and empowerment, to access, to gender, but also to race, class, ethnicity, religion, ability, and other categories in which individuals or groups are under-represented, misrepresented, or not represented at all” (176). Although many feminists address gender through their work and activism, others are interested in fostering social justice in different areas.

Not every woman director is a feminist. The term becomes particularly murky when looking at the past. Although some of legendary filmmaker Dorothy Arzner’s films have what we read as feminist messages today, that does not mean that Arzner, who made films from 1920 to 1943, identified as a feminist. Equally problematic is

translating Western versions of feminism to other cultures. As Beti Ellerson explains, Senegalese filmmaker Safi Faye “never considered herself a feminist but rather a woman affirming the rights and opportunities of women.” Even though that definition fits some Western versions of feminism, “Faye sees the concerns of Western feminists as unrelated to the specificities of African women.” And yet, we don’t need to identify as feminists to make films that others interpret as feminist.

There is a key distinction I want to draw here between a feminist film and the feminist filmmaking approach. The film is the product itself and the approach is the process of making a film. It is the latter I’m concerned with in this video book. Just like we don’t need to identify as feminists to make feminist films, we don’t need to identify as feminists to make films and videos through feminist filmmaking. What is needed instead is an interest in diversity, ethics, social justice, and the wellbeing of participants. These are characteristics that are often valued by rhetoricians, making the approach a natural fit for our field.

As a methodology, feminist filmmaking is particularly concerned with how those behind and in front of the camera relate to one another and with creating a final product that everyone involved in the production is satisfied with. Like Sullivan and Porter, those practicing feminist filmmaking are also aware that neutrality is not “a viable concept” when telling our own or others’ stories. In spite of that fact, feminist filmmakers strive to provide what Sullivan and Porter call “fair and even-handed accounts” of the subjects covered by their films. In order to do so, feminist filmmaking engages in six principles. These principles are not rigid rules but rather guidelines. They constitute a complex balancing act, but one that is worth the effort in terms of improving the filmmaking experience for everyone involved, as well as the quality of the resulting film or video.

As I describe each principle, I draw brief connections to rhetorical theory to begin the dialogue between Rhetoric and Composition and feminist filmmaking. This dialogue will continue throughout the rest of this video book as I apply the feminist filmmaking principles to rhetoricians’ film and video production and tenure and promotion practices.

Now we’re ready to define our first principle:

1. Foster Diversity in Front of and Behind the Camera:

Sullivan and Porter explain that the key principle of postmodern ethics is the call to respect difference. For feminist filmmaking, that call goes even further by asking filmmakers to foster difference by hiring crewmembers of diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, race, and sexuality. The same applies to those in front of our cameras.

Feminist filmmakers want to tell the kind of diverse stories that mainstream media rarely provide for viewers. Chinese American filmmaker Valerie Soe explains, “[T]he images of Asian Americans that I saw on television and in mainstream films were nothing like the people I knew in my family and my community” (252). When working to fill that gap, she tries to create complex, nuanced characters like her own family (252). Creating better representations for our own diverse experiences is a strong drive for feminist filmmakers. Berlin-based Namibian filmmaker Naomi Beukes-Meyer is working on a film series about African lesbians in exile. Her impetus was watching fellow African women in Germany and knowing that “they all have a story as to why they’re in this country but these are stories that will never be told on prime time TV” (Colgan).

Just as important as telling diverse stories is hiring diverse crewmembers. As filmmaker Giovanna Chesler explains, “[W]hen we crew up without considering gender and race in hiring,” we are complicit in the “racist and sexist set culture that has been created by Hollywood.” She goes on to explain: “In my own work, I’ve lived up to my promise to create feminist sets, hiring four female [directors of photography], trans and feminist male gaffers, female and feminist male sound recordists, and grips of many genders.” Although Chesler hired diverse crewmembers from the start, actor-turned-producer Dawn Davis did not realize the value of that practice until a male director abandoned her film during preproduction. She replaced him with a woman director and hired a crew made up mostly of women, explaining, “I felt that I could let my guard down, that I had a voice, and that my vision for the film finally mattered.” She invites women filmmakers “to become activists in and through our art, by showing up and creating something of our own.”

In other words, the very act of hiring a diverse crew is activism. This may sound like an exaggeration, but it isn’t. Martha Lauzen has kept track of the roles women play on and off screen since 1998 and in almost two decades the numbers have barely fluctuated. In 2014 women comprised only 11% of writers, 7% of directors, and 5% of cinematographers in the top 250 films. The percentages for films screened at film festivals that year are better, with women comprising 22% of writers, 23% of directors, and 10% of cinematographers. However, these numbers are devastating when considering that, as Gabrielle Kelly asserts, “roughly 50% of film school graduates in the US are women, so there is no shortage of potential women directors.” The same stands for writers, cinematographers, and other crewmembers.

Echoing Davis’s sentiments, Peruvian filmmaker Patricia Perez states, “I always try to work with Latina/os, yes, because it’s my background. I think we should always support each other” (Hidalgo, “Perez”). Palestinian filmmaker, Annemarie Jacir concurs, proud that one of her films “was entirely funded by Palestinians and every single one of the producers involved is Palestinian” (Shakerifar). In both cases, the filmmakers hired crewmembers who felt strongly about the films because

they belonged to the populations the films dealt with. Similarly, when hiring my four-person crew for *Vanishing Borders*, my feature documentary about four immigrant women living in New York City, I chose a Latina cinematographer, a Latino sound person, a white female production assistant, and a German/Philippina for the behind-the-scenes footage you're currently watching. The crew resembled the immigrant women in front of the camera and their shared experiences added to their commitment and passion for the film.

For the soundtrack, I worked with Ricardo Lorenz, a Venezuelan expatriate like myself. The score he composed reflects the hybridity of immigration by mixing sounds and instruments from around the globe to create coherent, yet amalgamated melodies that embody the wonder and confusion of immigration. I doubt that someone who had not experienced immigration could have captured the feeling of it as accurately as Lorenz did. Not only is it important for feminist filmmakers to hire diverse crews for the sake of supporting women, people of color, and queer people working in film and video production, the diversity of people in front of and behind the camera enriches our projects.

2. Engage in an Ethics of Interdependence with Crewmembers

Royster and Kirsch assert that “feminist rhetorical scholarship ... is being done quite regularly by colleagues working together rather than alone” (43). As with rhetoricians launching into their projects alongside others, feminist filmmakers aim to collaborate with crewmembers in ethical and egalitarian ways. Before becoming a director, Chesler worked on various sets where she was the only female crewmember. She explains that she was openly excluded from crew-bonding rituals like drinking beer on set after work. Male crewmembers would ask her whether she could lift the equipment or would comment on her back tattoo. She explains, “These comments collectively shamed me and made me feel an interloper in a male space.” One of the benefits of hiring diverse crews is that it reduces exclusionary behaviors, but bullying is a symptom of a more pervasive problem with the way a set is run.

The solution can have a variety of names, but I like how Allison Hoffman phrases it when discussing the practices of Second-Wave feminist, performance artist, and filmmaker Carolee Schneemann. Hoffman writes that Schneemann “envisioned creating larger communities grounded in cooperation and equity. This ethic of noncompetition and interdependence carried over into the production methods of many women artists and filmmakers working during the 1970s” (21). The ethics of interdependence encompasses how crewmembers relate to each other on a feminist set. Undoing hierarchies based on the importance of each crewmembers' position, feminist sets create an atmosphere of egalitarian collaboration.

Filmmaker Mara Ravins writes, “The efforts of every person are crucial and valuable. That hot cup of coffee at 4 a.m. may just be the miracle that lets you complete that last shot of the day.” Even the most menial of tasks are valued

through the ethics of interdependence. Filmmaker Marian Evans goes even further in valuing each crewmember's contribution. For her film *Development*, she used a principle she inherited from filmmaker Sally Potter: "Apart from some generous people who helped with catering, everyone was paid, and everyone was paid the same daily rate." Equal pay sends out a strong message that everyone's work is valued in the same way.

It being my first feature film, I did not have funds to follow Potter and Evans when making *Vanishing Borders*. I did, however, provide food and transportation and created an environment that welcomed and valued everyone's ideas about the shape the film should take. Every crewmember still needs to do their particular job, and in the case of a director, part of that job is to sometimes make decisions that shut out the ideas of others. Walking the line between valuing everyone's input and creating a disciplined set where things get done is one of the trickiest aspects of feminist filmmaking.

3. Engage in an Ethics of Interdependence with Documentary Participants

One of the key questions when it comes to research in Rhetoric and Composition is how the relationship with participants should unfold. Sullivan and Porter suggest that we "contribute something to the betterment of the group or community we are studying." The question of how participants benefit from the experience also interests feminist filmmakers. While actors are often paid for their work, documentary participants traditionally are not. Some filmmakers, like Evans, share or give ownership of the footage to participants. Berry, Selfe, and Hawisher made a similar move when they coauthored the chapters of *Transnational Literate Lives* with interviewees, arguing interviewees "contributed at least as insightfully and fully to our research projects as we ourselves" (Selfe and Hawisher 190). Sharing ownership of a film can be complicated, especially if the project has been funded by outside investors who own part of the final work. As a result, moves like Evans's are rare. Instead, the ethics of interdependence translates into the way in which filmmakers and participants relate to each other during the film's production and postproduction.

Filmmaker Rosylyn Rhee explains, "[A] big lesson I learned is empathy for my subjects. It is so easy to be the 'objective' filmmaker behind the camera observing others through your intense gaze ... It takes deep trust for a subject to allow you to film them, and my hope is to handle that as respectfully as possible." This respect often manifests itself before filming begins. For *Vanishing Borders* the participants and I spent months working together on the questions I would ask them. We also collaborated on the images and interactions we would film to complement interviews and on who would be interviewed to help tell their stories.

Filmmaker and scholar Alexandra Juhasz explains her own take on the ethics of interdependence this way: "Filming real subjects is different from writing about real

people... I record and own a person's videotaped image, to edit and reassemble with other images at will. I have a distinct obligation to and responsibility for that image—both in how I film people and what I do with the footage” (34). Like Juhasz, I am concerned with the ethics of editing, which is why *Vanishing Borders* participants watched and approved every draft of the film, providing input that I followed to make sure they were satisfied with how their stories were told.

The key to my own documentary work is valuing the wellbeing of participants over the final product, or as I like to call it, the Anti-Michael-Moore Approach. Michael Moore is a brilliant filmmaker, whose work has made an invaluable contribution to bringing documentaries to the general public. However, his films are not feminist. When comparing Moore to Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*, Virginia Bonner points out that, while Moore's humor is based on mocking the (at times unwilling) participants, Varda's humor “stems mainly from her discoveries of odd, unexpected connections, found objects, and delightful absurdities... a dog inexplicably sporting an enormous red boxing glove strapped under its chin, a lawyer dressed in full judicial regalia standing in the middle of a cabbage patch” (128). There is no mocking in Varda's work, but rather a desire to understand where others are coming from. Such a desire, mixed with respect, is key to the ethics of interdependence.

The ethics of interdependence is hard work. As Evans explains, “negotiating the documentation of real people's lives with love and care [and] meeting their needs as well as ours, was exhausting.” However, it is worth it. We cannot always share authorship with our participants, but we can make sure they benefit from the final product by having control of how their stories are told.

4. Practice Mentorship

As Jacqui Miller reports, early women directors mentored fellow women. Silent film director Lois Weber “nurtured the career of women technicians,” while in Arzner's case, “[i]t was film cutter, Nan Heron who facilitated her promotion to script girl and editor, while Arzner in turn taught actress Bebe Daniels editing.” That practice has endured. Filmmaker and curator KJ Mohr says her first job on a film set “was a life-changing experience. I started out as a [production assistant] and ended up Art Director, and I've never had a job ... where I learned so much.” Mentorship allows crewmembers to learn while working. Because of the ethics of interdependence their creative input is welcome and can lead to them, like Mohr, moving from one position to another.

While making *Vanishing Borders*, our director of photography taught our production assistant how to set up lighting equipment, as well as how to light a set so both participant(s) and background look their best. Although the production assistant received no payment besides food and transportation, she received invaluable knowledge. In a feminist set, filmmaking knowledge is shared between

different members, so that crewmembers leave the project with a stronger understanding of different pieces of the filmmaking process.

5. Practice Strategic Contemplation

Royster and Kirsch discuss strategic contemplation as an approach to feminist historical research. They explain, “[S]trategic contemplation involves engaging in a dialogue, in an exchange, with the women who are our rhetorical subjects” (21). The subjects they are referring to are no longer living, so the dialogue is imaginary. Although some feminist filmmakers also draw from historical subjects, most work with living participants with whom we can have real conversations. While asking for clarification and requesting input is an important aspect of the ethics of interdependence, most documentary participants don’t have the time to sit by our side as we edit and answer our questions. As we plan a project or edit footage, strategic contemplation can help feminist filmmakers take into account the needs and desires of those we are representing on screen.

In order to represent others ethically, we must be aware of our own role as storytellers. Royster and Kirsch explain that strategic contemplation “allows scholars to observe ... their own responses to what they are seeing, reading, reflecting on, and encountering during their research processes” (85). Malea Powell employs a similar approach when she discusses “feeling” archival materials. She explains, “I simply sit and think and feel in relation to the materials at hand. I admitted to myself a long time ago that part of learning to listen to scholarly elders ... was also learning to listen to myself, to my relatives, to the land” (120). It is crucial to realize what feelings a story brings up and to be aware of those feelings as we decide what follow-up question to ask or how to edit certain footage.

Rhee explains that in order to make a film “you have to be comfortable being uncomfortable. So much of making documentary films is embracing the unknown.” Even after the footage has been filmed, the uncertainty remains through the editing stages. Rhee asserts, “Your story can go in so many different directions, and it is intimidating when you have too many possibilities to choose from.” Like Rhee, I found myself with a lot of footage—over 50 hours—for *Vanishing Borders* and it took me a year to even begin to look through it. I needed time to digest some of the emotionally-charged interview content, from one of the participant’s childhood abuse to the death of another participant’s daughter. Once I was able to find ways to make sense of my feelings about the stories and how those feelings could help me represent the participants, I returned to the footage. Even then, I took months off between drafts, thinking of ways to respectfully and ethically tell these stories while remaining true to the participants and to my own artistic vision.

Ravins explains that for her, filmmaking “sometimes feel[s] very lonely, but this process of creativity opens up new frontiers that take me on a true adventure of discovery through the strangest, darkest recesses of my subconscious mind.” Like

Powell, Ravins sees the creative process as being intermingled with her own feelings. Through strategic contemplation, feminist filmmakers make sure that their feelings blend with the filmic stories they tell in ethical, thoughtful ways.

6. Address Social Justice

Unlike the previous principles, which are concerned with the process through which a film is made, this principle refers to the final product by requiring that it address social justice. Not only is social justice a key goal for feminism, but the five principles previously discussed help create the kinds of production and postproduction experiences that lead to rich social justice explorations in film.

Kira Cochrane explains that based on her interviews with “young grassroots activists,” the term intersectionality “seems to be emerging as the defining framework for the fourth wave” of feminism. She interviews feminist Lili Evans, who asserts that intersectionality “recognises that people don’t just lead one-issue lives, all the ways that people are oppressed intersect with each other, and you need a movement that recognises that.” It is the sense that oppression based on race, class, sexuality, age, and/or ability cannot be disentangled from oppression based on gender that inspires many feminists today to interpret battles for social justice of all kinds as feminist moves. Many feminist filmmakers today do work that tackles gender alone, but others address gender blended with other social justice issues, as well as social justice issues that do not overtly engage with gender.

As Miller writes, director Weber “is recognised today for her studies of social issues presumed to have particular relevance for women, such as contraception.” Like Weber, many filmmakers today tackle women’s issues, like righting misconceptions about the female experience. Filmmaker Haifaa Al-Mansour explains, “It is hard to be a woman in Saudi Arabia, of course, but through my films I want to show the world how strong the women are in my country ... I don’t think people realise how tough Saudi women are” (Shakerifar). For filmmaker Karen Skloss, social justice work means making a film that helps high school girls reach “the realization that no one can make you ‘okay’ except yourself” (Hidalgo, “Skloss”). Through her films, Beukes-Meyer tries to combat anti-lesbian prejudice. She’s shocked that “in ordinary, everyday city life it is still often frowned upon when two women are affectionate with each other in public,” and her films tell stories that help viewers see lesbians as human beings who deserve the same rights as heterosexual couples.

Just as gender plays a big role in feminist filmmakers’ push for social justice, so do other issues. Filmmaker Daniella Daemy, whose work centers around immigration, writes, “Film is about people we would never normally know about. We may pass them on the street but we won’t know why they are here, what made them leave their home countries” (Hidalgo, “Daemy”). By providing answers to some of those questions, Daemy hopes to create empathy for immigrants. Varda has a similar impetus in *The Gleaners and I*, her documentary about people who consume

discarded food and objects. She says, “When you see these people in the street, you don’t look at them. My idea was ... to let them speak. To show that they have thoughts and feelings and intelligence.” (Bonner 125). As Bonner explains, “Varda’s equal treatment of impoverished and bourgeois gleaners alike creates a connection among diverse people because they value frugality and resourcefulness” (125). Like Daemy, Varda uses the richness of film’s images and sound to give viewers a multidimensional sense of people many of us judge without understanding their motives.

For feminist filmmakers, a work that humanizes an ignored or vilified population fosters social justice, as does rethinking the themes we value in storytelling. New Zealander filmmaker Robin Laing asserts that “many women filmmakers are saying that the big things in life, such as war and violence, have been overvalued and the small events that create the true texture and value of life have been undervalued” (qtd. in Aquilia). Through these details feminist filmmakers tell stories that value alternative ways of engaging with each other. As Heidi Honeycutt explains about Varda’s work, “The small interactions and details, the banal elements, always take the audience and the characters on a greater journey to more substantial themes like love, freedom, death, and happiness.” While some feminist explorations of such themes focus on how others experience them, many filmmakers like Lisa Chodolenko and Jane Campion draw openly from their own lives.

When discussing “Oma Rhee,” her documentary about her mother’s suicide, Rhee states, “[B]y opening up the lines of communication through a creative process, my sisters and I realized just how traumatic our mother’s death was and that we all shared this experience: we did not live with this pain alone.” While the film’s ability to get the audience to think of topics like suicide and sisterhood in a new light is important, its powerful effect on the women it features is as valid in making the world a better place. The number of people affected by a film is not important to feminist filmmaking. Having a small audience who are profoundly affected by a work constitutes a success. Not only is the number of people affected flexible, so is the approach one takes to fostering social justice. From the overly political, like Weber’s defense of contraception, to the very personal, like Rhee’s story of her mother’s suicide, feminist filmmaking tells stories that change the world in a rich variety of ways.

Now that I have explained how the principles of feminist filmmaking work, I will spend the remaining chapters addressing how they can help rhetoricians produce ethical and engaging films and videos and how to argue for that work’s value for the job market, tenure, and promotion.

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NOTE

Behind-the-Scenes footage of *Vanishing Borders* by Michelle Mueller. Additional photography by Josie Keefe.

Unattributed footage throughout the chapter by Alexandra Hidalgo. Additional photography by Nathaniel Bowler and Lindsey Spitzley.

Thank you to NCTE and to all participants at the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication and to Shewonda Leger, whose presentation I feature here.

Thank you also to Olivia Hacker, Priyanka Lobo, Sarah Shaw, Lindsey Spitzley, Matilda Washington, Shane Wynn, Fiovdaliza Volenik, Shewonda Leger, Gina Washington, Kristin Bowler, Nathaniel Bowler, and Than Thein for letting me film them camera in hand. Thank you also to Sarah Shaw who appears here editing.

Sound editing by Alexandra Hidalgo and Sarah Shaw.

SOUNDTRACK

“Beautiful Emotional Moving Ambient Atmosphere Soundtrack 001” by PremiumMusic.

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