Life Writing On-Screen: Contemporary Feminist First-person Documentary

The subject of this paper is contemporary first-person film and video documentary by women directors. My aim is to situate this work in light of major changes that have occurred during the last 10-15 years in both the documentary genre (eg, critiques of older forms of documentary evidence; a preference for subjective footage; the director’s on-screen appearance as providing a new kind of truth; an overall critical approach to historiography) and in feminism, and to discuss the work’s characteristics. Like feminism, first-person work by women directors has witnessed an outpouring of material by and about subjects traditionally at the margins of the field, such as Black women/ women-of-colour, lesbians, and indigenous women, whose influences on the genre have as of yet not been sufficiently accounted for. I want also to explore the idea that this (largely independently-funded and lower-budget) first-person work has not developed in a vacuum but alongside of changes in commercial / blockbuster documentaries by directors like Michael Moore and Nick Broomfield, that famously feature their director within the frame. Similarities and differences between these practices will be examined: is feminist first-person documentary still relevant, now that Moore and Broomfield are on the scene?

A topic I especially want to focus on is the function of “memory” as it emerges in some of these films and the role of memory for an individual, family, or culture. My understanding of “memory” is borrowed from anthropologists Michael Lambek and Paul Antze, who want to displace the (to them, unanswerable) question, What is Memory?, and focus on the function or performative role that “memory” plays. The autobiographies I look at are predominantly organized around a search for individual, family, and/or cultural history. The form taken is initially akin to a detective story, with time spent amassing evidence – relatives’ testimony, home movie footage, photographs, and so on. However in each of the works, before the search can be completed, the information-gathering process falters. Impediments emerge, and gathering evidence turns out to be vastly more difficult than it initially appears. Ultimately, the protagonist ends up having to question her desire to create an “accurate” historical account, and set about re-creating the salient evidence herself. At many different levels, “memory” is not a “thing” to be had, but a process, exercise, or practice.

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1 I.e., She Don’t Fade, The Body Beautiful, Remembering Wei Yi-fang, Remembering Myself: An Autobiography, The Wash: A Cleaning Story, and B.D. Women, about African-American and African diaspora experience; Who’s Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway?, Memories from the Department of Amnesia; History and Memory, Halving the Bones, and A Place Called Home, about Asian-American and Asian diaspora experience; The Devil Never Sleeps, about Latin American experience; Navajo Talking Picture, Real Indian, Black Sheep, and Terra Nullius, about Native American and Indigenous Australian experience; Naomi’s Legacy and Fresh Blood about Jewish experience; and numerous works about lesbian experience (the aforementioned Naomi’s Legacy, She Don’t Fade, Remembering Wei Yi-Fang, Black Sheep, B.D. Women, as well as Tender Fictions, Sink or Swim, Hide and Seek, Juggling Gender, Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter, and videos by Sadie Benning).
Filmography (selected)

(note: copies of relevant DVDs/ videos will be provided for seminar participants to peruse)

_A Healthy Baby Girl_ (Judith Helfand, US, 1996, 57 min.)
_A Place Called Home_ (Persheng Sadegh-Vaziri, US/Iran, 1998, 30 min.)
_B.D. Women_ (Inge Blackman, UK, 1994, 20 min.)
_Black Sheep_ (Louise Glover, Australia, 1999, 26 min.)
_The Blonds_ (Albertina Carri, Argentina, 2003, 89 min.)
_Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter_ (Deborah Hoffmann, US, 1994, 44 min.)
_Daughter of Suicide_ (Dempsey Rice, US, 1999, 72 min.)
_Fresh Blood_ (b.h. Yael, Canada, 1996, 55 min.)
_Halving the Bones_ (Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury, US, 1995, 70 min.)
_Hide and Seek_ (Su Friedrich, US, 1996, 65 min.)
_I Wonder What You Will Remember of September_ (Cecilia Cornejo, 2004, 27 min)
_Memories from the Department of Amnesia_ (Janice Tanaka, US, 1989, 13 min.)
_Naomi's Legacy_ (Wendy Levy, US, 1994, 26 min.)
_Navajo Talking Picture_ (Arlene Bowman, US, 1986, 40 min.)
_Real Indian_ (Malinda Maynor, US, 1996, 8 min.)
_She Don't Fade_ (Cheryl Dunye, US, 1991, 24 min.)
_Sink or Swim_ (Su Friedrich, US, 1990, 48 min.)
_Tender Fictions_ (Barbara Hammer, US, 1995, 58 min.)
_The Body Beautiful_ (Ngozi Onwurah, UK, 1991, 23 min.)
_The Devil Never Sleeps_ (Lourdes Portillo, US, 1996, 82 min.)
_The Wash: A Cleaning Story_ (Eve Sandler, US, 1999, 9 min.)
_Through the Skin_ (Elyse Montague, US, 2002, 18 min.)
_Who's Going to Pay for These Donuts, Anyway?_ (Janice Tanaka, US, 1992, 58 min.)