

Katharine Stevenson is a third-year student of English Literature at New College of Florida, with a background primarily in British literature, as well as Latin language. She writes: “In my fourth year, I will be researching and writing a thesis focused on Charles Brockden Brown and his British contemporaries. I hope to begin studying literature at the graduate level in the fall of 2010.”

Film Form and Narrative in Women's Avant-Garde and Documentary

Female directors often use creative and original film and narrative forms in order to contribute new examinations of women's issues in avant-garde and experimental documentary films. Sheila McLaughlin, Ngozi Onwurah, Su Friedrich, and Maya Deren all use their own variations on form and narrative to draw women's issues to their audiences' attention in She Must Be Seeing Things, The Body Beautiful, Sink or Swim, and Meshes of the Afternoon, respectively. Not only does each film bring to light different feminine issues, but each also displays different forms and techniques utilized by the directors.

In She Must Be Seeing Things, Sheila McLaughlin uses complex combinations of narration and film form to create "a place where the equivalence of look and desire- which sustains spectatorial pleasure and the very power of cinema in constructing and orienting the viewer's identification- is invested in two women" (Laurentis 227). The two

protagonists of the film, Agatha and Jo, highlight issues facing homosexual women in a heterosexual, male-dominated society. Agatha is paranoid that her lover is cheating on her with men, she is insecure about her own sexuality after being raised in a strict Catholic household, and she is insecure about her own lack of masculine attributes, even going so far as purchasing a dildo to make up for what she feels that she lacks as a lover. Jo is also insecure about her sexuality, as the audience learns through her diary, in which she has catalogued her many encounters with men over the years.

McLaughlin's use of narrative to express these issues consists mainly of voiceover. Throughout most of the film, there is conventional dialogue between characters. This dialogue ceases when Agatha reads from Jo's diary. While she does not read out loud, the reader hears her voice as she absorbs Jo's words and forms pictures of them in her mind. These voiceovers contribute to the viewer's uncertainty about whether what Agatha and Jo see is always real. The fact that Jo never narrates the film leads the audience to view Agatha as a more prominent character, and perhaps as more the protagonist than Jo. Teresa Laurentis writes that "If the most immediate reference of the title's 'she', conveyed by the narrative and emphasized by the opening shot of Agatha

looking off-space... is undoubtedly Agatha, nevertheless Jo, too, is seeing things in or through her films" (Laurentis 226).

The film forms used to convey both women's uncertainties are complicated. Agatha is obviously "at once [producing] and [being] assailed by images, hallucinations, 'things', that are symptoms of her own mental world or psychic state rather than events in the real world" (Laurentis 225). It is never made clear whether Agatha's imaginings of Jo's unfaithfulness are due to her uncertainty about Jo's sexual orientation, or whether she simply finds her fantasies erotic. McLaughlin uses "a series of alternating shot/reverse-shots and jump cuts" to portray particular scenes, such as that in which Agatha sees Jo kissing a man on the street, as hallucination. When Agatha dashes to the sidewalk and the camera cuts to the kissing couple, it is plain that the woman is not Jo after all (Laurentis 278).

Jo, on the other hand, converts her own imaginings into film form. As she reads a novel, she simultaneously creates a film of it, called 'Catalina.' Scenes from this 'film-within-a-film' are interspersed throughout She Must Be Seeing Things, with no introductions or breaks. The audience is free to decide for themselves whether these

scenes are from Jo's movie itself, or simply from her idea of what the film will be. The 'Catalina' story has many parallels to Agatha's rebellious life; rebelliousness being one of the traits that Jo is attracted to in her partner. Like Agatha, Catalina is repressed by the Catholic Church, runs away from her home, and becomes a less-feminine female character. Jo's fascination with the two women's stories (both Catalina's and Agatha's) must be considered when noting that "whether imagined by Jo or actually being shot on location, or finally edited by Jo in the cutting room, all the scenes of the film-within-a-film are intercut with shots of Agatha..." (Laurentis 228). The audience must decide for themselves what is real and what is not, and are forced to consider the two women's situations in life and their pasts, both of which are highly influenced by their sexuality, the issue which McLaughlin means to address. "The demand to make lesbians visible... renders lesbian static, makes lesbian into an image, and forestalls any examination of lesbian within context" (Villarjo 6). McLaughlin manages to "make lesbian visible" while keeping her characters intriguing and dynamic, addressing lesbianism without making it her sole focus.

Ngozi Onwurah's 1991 film The Body Beautiful combines a double narrative form and fantasy sequence to address the issues of race, age, and loss of perceived femininity. By 'double narrative form', I mean that both the mother and daughter characters in Onwurah's autobiographical film have voices. Onwurah's mother sometimes narrates the film particularly after her mastectomy surgery, and in turn by Onwurah herself, particularly when struggling to understand her mother's post-mastectomy identity. The testimony of each character is unique and poignant, and each thoroughly explores two issues in new ways: interracial relationships, and the loss of a breast, one of a woman's most female attributes. The double narrative allows for interracial relationships to be examined from the points of view both of a participant and of the product of one such relationship, and for the loss of the breast to cancer to be examined from the points of view of both a victim and of an observer. It should also be noted that the voice of the daughter in the film is Onwurah. The viewer sees that the filmmaker is "also [a co participant], along with subjects..." (Waldman & Walker 14).

Onwurah's fantasy sequence in The Body Beautiful serves to shock the audience into recognition of the mother's interracial relationship with Onwurah's father, the reality

of mastectomy, and of the reality of female aging. “Realism is also the first recourse of oppressed groups wishing to counter vicious stereotypes or lies”, and so the viewer can see that Onwurah’s filmmaking is evolved when it comes to addressing her mother’s oppression (Waldman & Walker 12). Onwurah’s fantasy sequence, portrayed as a daydream in her own mind at the age of seventeen or eighteen, uses the audience’s own shock, and possibly abhorrence, to illustrate the reactions of others that her mother faces or has faced every day of her life. The audience must recognize it’s own reaction to seeing a black man with a white woman, to seeing a young man with an old or aging woman, and to seeing a woman without a breast, as bigoted. The voice of Onwurah’s mother reminds the audience that she is indeed a person, a woman, and that her age and the loss of her breast can never take those characteristics away from her. As illustrated by the sexual nature of the fantasy sequence, her age and surgery do not make her non-sexual, either. Despite the way others view her body, she does not lose her gender and sexuality according to society’s opinion and wish that older women are not sexual and that women without a breast are not feminine.

Su Friedrich's feminist documentary Sink or Swim addresses the issue of a father's absence, and its negative effects on his wife and female children. Friedrich uses segmented narration and film form to document her relationship with her father, from a pleasant one in her childhood, to a resentful one in her youth, and to final resignation as she grows older and realizes that she can never regain the bond with him that he has destroyed over the years.

Friedrich's autobiographical documentary is divided into twenty-six segments, each one titled with a word beginning with a letter of the alphabet in reverse order. The segments each address a different incident concerning her father, from Friedrich's infancy to her life as a grown woman. The division of the film forces the viewer to consider each instance on its own, without trying to string every chapter together into a 'life story' in which the meaning is lost in the timeline of events. This separation makes each event extremely obvious to the audience; one event cannot be blended with another, and none of them can be ignored. Friedrich manages to highlight each one of her father's slights and faults, each of her reactions to them, and their profound effects on her later in life.

Waldman and Walker write, “The depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is affected.” Friedrich interrogates the depiction of reality by choosing film footage that never exactly illustrates her narration, as does footage in conventional documentaries. The audience has no way of knowing whether the girls shown in the film are actually Friedrich as a child, or whether the treetops in the film actually come from the beach she and her father visited, and so on. The film, seemingly only loosely related to the voiceover, does not take attention away from Friedrich’s detailed narration, and the viewer must consider the significance of the film footage on its own, without assuming that it simply corresponds directly to the voiceover.

Maya Deren’s avant-garde masterpiece, Meshes of the Afternoon, relies solely on its own unique form and symbolism to illustrate Deren’s take on oppressed femininity and the masculine other. The film’s intense symbolism and dreamlike divergence from reality make it extremely striking and memorable, not to mention demanding of the viewer’s skills of analysis and interpretation.

While Deren herself “... cautions against a traditional psychoanalytic reading” of her film, it is easy to interpret Meshes of the Afternoon in psychoanalytic terms, since

“psychoanalysis... figures psychic structure as a fusion of fantasy constructs and real remembered experience” (Turim 85), (Waldman & Walker 24-25). There seem to be fewer more accurate ways to describe Deren’s film other than as “a fusion of fantasy constructs and real remembered experience.” It is so intensely dreamlike, and dreams are indeed a combination of personal fantasy and actual remembered events.

However, one important aspect of Meshes is that the viewer can interpret the film for him or her self. The lack of narration leaves no outside explanation for the surreal events and symbols in the film, and so the viewer unschooled in psychoanalysis is forced to interpret Deren’s meanings in his own way, according to his own reference points with regard to Deren’s symbols. The complicated form “elicits and even demands an attentive and thoughtful spectator” (Turim 77). In my opinion, the film’s Teiji Ito soundtrack, added in 1959, takes away from the viewer’s ability to contemplate the film’s intense events on their own. The music, while it may be meant to sound grating and repetitive, is distracting because of its unfamiliarity and interruption of Deren’s narration-free silent work.

In Meshes of the Afternoon, Deren “[draws] broadly and creatively on the European avant-garde”, combining other styles with her own to create her own personal voice in the film (Turim 80). The choices of symbols and setting are purely her own, but other aspects of the film, such as the tilting of walls and stretching of limbs, are borrowed from the surrealist movement. Her uses of symbols, not her choices of symbols, are borrowed from the poetic symbolist movement (Turim 80). “Deren infuses the personal with her experience as a woman. She then arranges the force of experience into a form that evokes connections to shared cultural experience, to the inheritance that is the legacy of ritual” (Turim 82); for example, drawing on her own penchant for the use of children’s games and rituals in the scene of her various selves seated around the kitchen table, drawing keys from the center.

By combining vaguely familiar elements such as these with vaguely disturbing symbols like knives, unhooked telephones, and the strangely imperfect home, Deren builds up a steady feeling of anxiety in the audience and in the film that culminates in the shattering of the mirror that she breaks while lying on the bed, her lover standing over her, with a knife that was once a flower. The alienation of the male other is made definite

in this scene, as it is revealed that the shadowy mirror-faced figure represented the male all along. Deren's symbolic death at the very end of the film cemented, in my own interpretation, the male's negative effect on the female self. The beached mermaid seemed to represent the woman trapped in the home by the male, her creative energies, like her breath, permanently stifled.

Sheila McLaughlin, Ngozi Onwurah, Su Friedrich, and Maya Deren each contribute their own methods of bringing to light various women's issues in She Must Be Seeing Things, The Body Beautiful, Sink or Swim, and Meshes of the Afternoon. The form of each respective film is different, as are the styles of narration, but they each succeed in addressing the issues they are influenced and driven by, from female aging, to being a sexual minority, to loss of a father figure, and beyond. Each film and director adds to the genres of experimental documentary and avant-garde film with their own unique techniques and styles, but they are all united in their feminist perspective.

Bibliography

Laurentis, Teresa. "Film and the Visible." *Bad Object-Choices. How Do I Look?: Queer Film and Video*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1991.

Turim, Maureen. "The Ethics of Form: Structure and Gender in Maya Deren's Challenge to Cinema." Nichols, Bill. *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Villarjo, Amy. *Lesbian Rule*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003.

Waldman, Diane and Walker, Janet. *Feminism and Documentary*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.