

festival review

'Yours in Sisterhood': Rethinking the Feminist Archive at the 2018 Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal

Lola Rémy



Like the statue of Apollo, emerging from the Mediterranean off the shores of Gaza after centuries (maybe) underwater (*L'Apollon de Gaza*, Nicolas Wadimoff, 2018, 78 mins), many films from the 2018 Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal (RIDM) festival focused on the labour of unearthing old materials archived away. In different ways, the films document this labour, as well as the materials' political potential to move us despite their temporal distance. Indeed, by inviting experimental filmmaker and archivist Rick Prelinger to a series of screening sessions and master classes on the theme of "Archives, Popular Documentary, NYC," RIDM encouraged a reflection and discussion on the intersection of documentaries, archives, and urban landscapes. Some films follow the vein of Prelinger's *Panorama Ephemera* (2004, 90 mins) by reflecting on the public history of specific countries through the lens of found footage. For example, Kristina Konrad's *Unas Preguntas* (237 mins) and Ruth Beckermann's *The Waldheim Wal-*

tz (93 mins) both use public archives and personal footage from the 1980s to reflect on the history of Uruguay and Austria, respectively. These films bring forward a reflection on democracy and social movements with hindsight. In *The Image You Missed* (93 mins), Donal Foreman takes a more personal approach to the matter by entangling footage shot by his late father, documentarist Arthur MacCaig, with his own, in order to revisit a part of Irish history in parallel with his complicated relationship with his father. On the other hand, in two powerful experimental documentaries—Salomé Lamas' *Extinction* (85 mins) and Talena Sanders' *Between My Flesh And The World's Fingers* (31 mins; unfortunately paired with the unabashedly masculine *4 Years In 10 Minutes* by Mladen Kovacevic)—it is the landscape that comes to bear the trace of history, becoming a public and private archive. Whether it is in the form of decaying soviet architecture, or in the paths and mountains of Montana, both films create an intimate, essayistic vision of history. San-

ders' film turns to the life and work of American poet Mary MacLane by interlacing archival footage and re-enactments, superimposed with text from her diary. What is striking from this juxtaposition of text, archives, and footage of nature is the contemporaneity of MacLane's writings on sexuality and nature. In a Q&A, the director expressed her intention to recall the sensuality and physical embodiment of her texts in the filmic form, engaging in a dialogue with them through time. However, for this review, I chose to reflect on a documentary that expands the concept of archival film, and which deeply moved me, as it resonates with my concerns as a scholar and a young woman: *Yours in Sisterhood*, directed and produced by Irene Lusztig (2018, 102 mins).

Lusztig's earlier films, *Reconstruction* (2001, 90 mins) and *The Motherhood Archives* (2013, 91 mins), prominently feature archival materials in the form of found footage. In *Reconstruction*, she turns to the history of her maternal grandmother in 1960s Romania, using archival footage of a government-sponsored propaganda film to weave her personal history with the wider history of authoritarian regimes and their modes of representation. *The Motherhood Archives*, on the other hand, is entirely composed of found footage throughout the 20th century on the topic of maternal education. Through these archival materials, Lusztig reflects on the ways in which media, educational, and industrial films have shaped the discourse surrounding pregnant women's bodies as sites of control, surveillance, and knowledge. With those two films, Lusztig has established herself as a major figure of feminist archival documentaries. But unlike *The Motherhood Archives* and *Reconstruction*, *Yours in Sisterhood* does not feature found footage, and the archival materials in question are performed, rather than displayed on the film.

Indeed, each sequence of the film features a frontal shot of a woman reading a letter that was sent to the feminist magazine *Ms.* in the 1970s.¹ One by one, across the United States, each woman reads and reacts to a letter that was written in the same place 40 years earlier. The letters vary in content, from how to explain feminism to fellow 13-year-olds, to complaints about the lack of intersectionality of some articles, advice on domestic abuse and divorce proceedings, descriptions of harassment at work and in the streets, and praises of a self-sustaining life in the woods. They present a

panorama of women's concerns—private and public—in the 1970s, that still ring surprisingly true today. In a manner typical of feminist archival films, Lusztig interlaces public and private history through the archive.² The reactions of the readers to the contents of the letters stage an impromptu intergenerational dialogue, revealing the actuality of the archives' materials. The readers, like us, are visibly moved by the letters, whether they tell very personal stories or rant about public concerns. Like us, they all react on the spot, and construct a reflection on the history of women inside the United States and the timeliness of this documentary. In an interview with Julie Wyman, Lusztig addresses the double temporal effect of the film:

There is also kind of a double listening in *Yours in Sisterhood*—the people who read letters are spending immersive time listening to the voice of someone from 40 years ago (by putting it into their body several times in a row over several takes), and then I listen/make space for their contemporary response (Lusztig 2018 b).

The performance of the archival materials releases the affective potential of the archive. The film offers a negotiation with history that is embodied and in constant evolution. In this, it comes close to Mariam Ghani's foundational statement that archives are "more than the sum of their materials." They need to be understood in performative terms, including the labour and performance of their "archivists and administrators, janitors and historians, redactors and readers and others who at various times perform the archive for its public." She adds: "[e]ach performance refracts the archive through the performer's interpretation, and each is then reflected in the archive, as the interpretation becomes another record, or another path through the record that can be retraced" (Ghani 2015, 52). *Yours in Sisterhood* is another record of the *Ms.* magazine archive, inscribing the labour and performance of its readers: the women filmed, the director, and us. This vision of the archive as a constantly evolving object, subjected to the ordering of all the people encountering it, opens it in turn to the future, as noted by Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever* (1996).³ With her film, Lusztig opens up the archive to a multiplicity of interpretations and voices, and refuses to order it in an authorial way.

Several letters to Ms. echo the debate between black and white feminism that began at the time, with a letter complaining about the silencing of black women's voices in feminist meetings, and another one calling for an ambiguous unity of all feminists under a non-racialized banner. With hindsight, the reader of the former letter points out that a white woman probably wrote it and reflects on the various waves of feminist theory in the past forty years. *Yours in Sisterhood* mirrors the debates that took place in the magazine by presenting a diversity of women both in age and in social, economic, and racial background. Far from calling for unity and uniformity in feminist struggle, Lusztig stages the debates, controversies, and contradictions inherent to the movement, and remains critical of the blind spots of Seventies feminism. In a constant state of dialogue, the film never offers a resolution to the multiplicity of voices on screen. In her director's statement, Lusztig writes that she "wanted to know if this rich collective archive of everyday feminist history and experience could be a catalyst for a new kind of national conversation about feminism today" (2018a). This conception of documentary films as places for conversations on and off screen harks back to American feminist documentaries of the 1970s like the famous *Woman's Film* by the San Francisco Newsreel (1971, 40 mins), which documents consciousness-raising groups where women of different classes and races talk about the daily realities of their lives as wives and workers. As Julia Lesage has demonstrated, conversations between women, and the consciousness-raising group form the "deep structure" (1978, 522) of these feminist films where experience is shared in a politicized way and creates the potential for collective action: "It was and is a political act carried out in the private sphere" (1978, 515).⁴ She adds:

Yet the very act of writing a diary, of writing poems, or of consulting a neighbor woman about how to get along when times are hard [and I would add to write letters to a magazine]—all these are testimonies to the struggle women wage to create a language, to formulate a stable sense of self, and to survive economic dependency on men (Lesage 1978, 516).

Yours in Sisterhood is indeed about creating language, and through it a space open for support and discussion. Openly inspired by this tradition of feminist films, Irene Lusztig stages women talking about and to other women through time, and revitalizes the feminist conviction that conversation is a political space. As she writes: "Feminists have always understood that speaking up, listening carefully, and making space for others to speak is the most powerful way to start to build real change" (2018a). Her film takes women's conversations out of the domestic space of consciousness-raising groups into the public space. Indeed, all the scenes are shot outdoors, with the readers standing near roads or train tracks. In a Q&A following the screening, Lusztig declared that she wanted to stress the importance of transportation for the widespread distribution of Ms. in the United States. The setting of the scenes also emphasizes the opening of women's discourses outside of the characteristic space of the home. The film renders the letters public—both metaphorically and concretely—as we find out in the credits that most of them were never published in Ms.

Read on a teleprompter, the letters lack the materiality typically found in archival films. However, this intangibility is countered by the performative reading of each woman, giving a new face and body, albeit anonymous, to the letter's contents. In *Yours in Sisterhood*, history does not appear with the nostalgia of found footage, but as a trace that is constantly re-embodied and re-interpreted, in a constant state of dialogue and negotiation. This is where the political potential of the film is inscribed. Lusztig claims to have found inspiration for the structure of *Yours in Sisterhood* in the films of Peter Watkins and Heddy Honigmann—*La Commune (Paris, 1871)* (2000, 345 mins) and *O Amor Natural* (1996, 76 mins), respectively—both representing ordinary people re-enacting history and poetic texts (2018 c). However, the very use of the teleprompter and of the frontal medium shot, as she points to, clearly echoes a form of political public address to the nation. Using this technology enables her to give political power to ordinary people and locations, subverting its original use. She had previously worked with this type of format in an art installation for the Museum of Contemporary Art of Santiago (Chile) entitled *Maternity Test* (2014, 14 mins), where she invited women to read a text composited from anonymous *mothering.com* fo-

rum posts, and to react to it with their own stories and experiences of C-section births. Those untold stories of daily lives and experiences, through the apparatus deployed by the film, enter a new register of publicness. Out of the enclosed archives of the magazine, the letters become catalysts for a public conversation on womanhood, patriarchy, intersectionality, and solidarity.

As much as this sentence has been repeated over the past years, I believe that in the Me Too era, we need to make space for conversation across generations and spaces. *Yours in Sisterhood*, with its intersection of private and public address, archival and contemporary knowledge, while being deeply embedded in local spaces, presents a model for a feminist reflection on history and memory. It rightfully calls for a historicizing of feminist activism through an examination of its archives.

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Endnotes

- 1 Irene Lusztig visited the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America in 2014, which houses all the materials of the magazine *Ms.* For further reading, see Farrell 1998.
- 2 See for example Eichhorn 2013, and Torlasco 2013.
- 3 See also Torlasco 2013, vi: "[...] the archives of the so-called digital age—the heretical archive, as I have termed it—can help us imagine an unruly, porous, incoherent legacy, one that undutifully appropriates a certain history rather than attempting to negate it. In this interconnected domain, marginal or overlooked figures [...] return to speak of lost life as much as of life that demands to be lived, subverting the order that holds sway over the relation between intelligibility and existence."
- 4 See also Erens 1988, and Kaplan 1988.