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## **Spare Rib and Subversive Stitching: Feminist strategies to making documentary films**

This paper will explore the impact of feminist film making histories and approaches on a collaborative project carried out by three women. Sam Scott was a printed textiles graduate who now works in the design industry; Sam Broadhead a writer and a stitcher was her tutor and Sharon Hooper was a film making and a colleague. The resulting short film, *Spare Rib and Subversive Stitching* (which can be loosely defined as a subjective documentary), was originally made for an exhibition *The Process Continues* (2015) at Leeds College of Art about archives and their use in education. It's a short, no-budget film, capturing a conversation between two women about the influence of *Spare Rib* (1971-1993) magazine and Rozika Parker's book, *The Subversive Stitch* (1984) on their sewing practice and their politics. Prior to publishing her book, Parker was writing about the relationships between craft, textiles and art in the late seventies and this was situated alongside other feminist discourses (work; sexuality; violence; control over reproduction; education) within *Spare Rib*. Rozika Parker's methodology was constructed using historical research and narrative testimonies from fellow stitchers. The predominance of women's narrative in *The Subversive Stitch* and the predominance of women's narrative in the film structure both the form and content. The sharing of personal experience whilst linking that to larger political and cultural stories is an important aspect of the film. Erben (1998, p.14) said that socio-historical reality can be captured through a complex and singular account about one person's experience. This led us to consider not just cross- generational feminism and women learning from our feminist and embroidered past, but also the practice of feminist filmmaking and documentary making in particular.

In *Spare Rib and Subversive Stitching*, the teaching process enables one participant (Sam Broadhead) to rediscover her personal archive of *Spare Rib*, artefacts from an 'analogue' age. Through the sharing of her archive with her student she begins to reconsider herself through the lens of her younger, more radical self. Watching this sharing of experience and the impact this has on the practices and politics of a younger stitcher (Sam Scott), has led me to consider how we tell such narratives on (digital) film and those strategies employed by feminism and documentary filmmaking. The discussion develops by revisiting some of the approaches made by the film makers Agnes Varda (b.1928) and Jane Campion b. 1954) and how these have informed the discourses and representations within *Spare Rib and Subversive Stitching*.

Unlike embroidery, which prior to Parker's work was seen as an unimportant domestic practice taken up by women, filmmaking was largely dominated by men until radical uprisings in the sixties and second wave feminism in the seventies encouraged more women filmmakers to organise themselves, often independently, and pick up a camera. The relative low-cost and accessibility of 16mm film meant many women began making films about the concerns of women (Waldman & Walker, 1999, p.5). However, already marginalised as a film form, feminist critique paid less attention to the documentary and instead focused on Hollywood narrative cinema and alternative strategies for representation that included

concerns about film form and radical aesthetics (Waldman & Walker, 1999, p.6). The documentary became associated with *Cinema Verite* or direct cinema. It was seen as merely capturing reality, although a reality not often visible, and this was of less interest to feminist theorists than feminist counter cinema. Male dominance in the film industry was accountable for 'the figure of woman as spectacle' (Mulvey, 1975; Cook et al, 2007). However, avant-garde techniques, influenced by Brecht, such as those argued for by Johnstone used intervention from the filmmaker (Waldman & Walker, 1999, p.7) as a means of disrupting the gaze, Mary Kelly and the Berwick Street Collective's *Nightcleaners* (1975) being a good example of such a film. Like MacCabe (1974), Johnstone paid attention to Brecht's discussion of the division between labour and leisure and all leisure supporting capitalist mode of production, part of the patriarchal structure oppressing women (Johnstone & Willemsen, 1975). Feminist film theory re-appropriated films made by, and about women and feminist interrogations of the canon (just as Parker's work on embroidery critiqued the field of art history). Psychoanalysis was often employed as a critical tool in order to deconstruct dominant modes of representation of women (Mulvey, 1975; Doane, 1982).

Mulvey called for a radical exposure of the cinematic apparatus to disrupt viewers' pleasure through the use of avant-garde techniques (Mulvey 1988). Although this was later revised and qualified by Mulvey, at the time it didn't recognise the potentially mobilising power representation can have on the subject; the confidence-boosting of women seeing themselves as agents represented on screen, that is, identification can be strategically galvanising (Thornham, 2012, p.43). This is not to mention the differing techniques employed within the documentary genre, nor the possible range of topics which need not be 'women's films' to be feminist. Waldman & Walker (1999) argue that the neglect of documentary film by feminist theorists has meant documentary film has not benefited as much as it could have from a gender focussed critique. Feminist film theory has focused almost exclusively on sexual difference rather than the 'messy imbrication of gender, race, class, nation, and sexuality' (Waldman & Walker, 1999, p.10). The negative impact of this is explained by Mohanty (2003), who laments the limitation of feminist theory to sexual difference 'assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination', and moreover, this also *sustains* notions of subordination and '*monolithic notion of sexual difference*' (Mohanty, 2003, p.31). Within Waldman and Walker's pioneering anthology that links feminism and documentary, they refer to Juhasz' argument that due to the interdependence of feminist film scholarship and film distribution, many (feminist) documentaries from the seventies and early eighties are no longer traceable/available (1999, p.10). Thornham further argues, also invoking Juhasz, that there are in fact multiple differences in realist approaches within feminist documentary films, and rather than fixing a unified reality, they point to subjectivity, slippage and the mediation process (Thornham, 2012, p.43 ).

Through the very process of making the film, that is engagement with people, place and situation, documentary filmmakers are highly engaged with their subjects, their topic and questions of how they represent them. Many if not most documentary filmmakers make their film to effect social change (Glynne, 2008, p.27). They are also highly aware, often due

to the marginalisation of the practice, of the need to reach an audience, with consideration to reception and the potential to take action.

Perhaps it is the common perception that documentary is objective with reality unfolding in front of the camera that is ultimately flawed. The lack of objectivity in Grierson's documentaries and those of the General Post Office (GPO) Unit's films have been well documented, especially with reference to their political and class bias. As Winston (2013) argues, impartiality in documentary is useless and flawed. Although more reflexive models of documentary are common place today, challenging the audiences own politics and assumptions (Nichols, 2001, p.128), I would argue there is an under-acknowledged history of feminist documentary makers working in this vein, and it is the oeuvre of filmmaker Agnes Varda, in particular, that has informed our own practice in the making of this film. Orpen believes *all* Varda's films are more 'subjective documentaries' (Orpen, 2007, p.14), and as Varda says herself in an interview, although the topic of her films appeal to her more, they are also about general concerns which appeal to a wider audience too (Varda, 2008). Varda believes as a filmmaker, she has tools to interrogate a topic from her own perspective. She operates anywhere between the ultra-realist (as in *Cleo de 5 a 7* (1962), a narrative film containing a documentary within it), and the obviously staged *Beaches of Agnes* (2008). We are intensely aware of *her* subjectivity as a filmmaker. As she says, she is a woman looking at others (2008). She asks many questions, but doesn't offer just one answer or tell us what to think (Orpen, 2007, p.91). Instead she lets us ponder our own responses.

*Spare Rib and Subversive Stitching* begins with similarities to many of Varda's films. She often uses works of art, normally visual art but sometimes literature as the beginning of her enquiry. Orpen believes her artistic references rather than filmic ones offer a wider point of view (Orpen, 2007, p.6). We are very aware of the filmmaker looking. For example, in *The Gleaners* (2000) Varda looks at and tells the audience her interpretation of Jean-Francois Millet's painting (1857) of female gleaners. Likewise, *Spare Rib and Subversive Stitching*, begins with close up shots of stitching and Sam Broadhead reading from and looking through Rozika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch*. Varda's look, her agency, controls and directs what is captured and played on screen. Likewise, it was really important that the two women in our film were the agents of action, whom were not objectified. Hence, it is through their look and their narratives that we encounter their Parker's work, *Spare Rib* and their experiences.

### Time & Close-Ups

In her analysis of Jane Campion's *Bright Star* (2009), Thornham describes the opening close-up shots of Fanny Brawne and her stitching, shots which influenced the making of *Spare Rib and Subversive Stitching*. She invokes Byatt's words on feminist creative lineage; "intricate knotting and joining and change in tension and direction of a thread', produced like all 'women's art', in 'snatched time'" (Byatt in Thornham, 2012, p.118). In our film, the camera follows the needle as it disappears into the other space behind the material, and then we watch as it struggles to surface at the right point before being pulled through. Thornham describes Campion's close-ups as 'unsettling' (Thornham, 2012, p. 118), perhaps due to the sense of interiority that they convey. Yet this is the very point of our film, to try and embody

to some extent the experiences of the makers. Indeed, for Varda, writing and editing are one and the same, part of the creative process (Orpen, 2007, p.12). In our film, we are perhaps playing with the notion of collaboration and cross disciplinary approaches to work, exploring the link between sewing, the moment of filming and the editing process. Yet, Varda didn't deliberately try to break the conventions of traditional narrative cinema, or 'cinema du papa' as the New Wave filmmakers called it. Orpen believes Varda's use of close-up shots in *Cleo* help to give the perception of time expanding (op.cit. p.26); a time that is 'women's time' or time spent waiting or doing grooming or household chores which rhythmic and repetitive (women's time can be absent or trivialised in dominant filmic or literature discourses) as opposed to masculine time of deadlines (op cit. p.29). Yet for us, women having time to talk to each other and to make is precious time. The too-close embodiment of the subjects' experience positions them as subject and our view is their look. Another understanding of this can be seen in Pollock's (1988) 'Spaces of femininity' where female action is represented in close spaces, often in a domestic setting because these were the spaces where female artists and subjects inhabited. Within the institution, informal inter-generational 'chatting' about our 'embroidered pasts' and stitching are marginalised activities. So within the film *Spare Rib and Subversive Stitching* the stitchers are represented in a space of femininity within an academic context; a narrow, borrowed space at the back of the library where the *Spare Rib* archive can be temporarily displayed and the women can talk and stitch in peace.

#### Audio

The film consists of three strands shared between the two women: a reading from Parker's *The Subversive Stitch*; conversation between the two women; and readings from an undergraduate dissertation written by Sam Scott commenting on Parker's work and that of other theorists. This final stream of conversation provides an authorial voice from a woman of an emerging generation who grapples with her creative practice and its cultural reception. These three strands help to avoid a binary dichotomy of power and subordination so often present in the representation of women. It also acts as a structure to disrupt realist aesthetics of time just unfolding, despite the natural flow of the edited but apparently constant conversation. The different sections are literally stitched together with the sound of the stitching, non-diegetic sound which creates an ambiguity or disruption in the realist mode of representation. However, as Orpen says about the street sounds in Varda's *Cleo* (2007, p.27), this aural subjectivity upsets the authority of the viewer. These rhetorical strategies are an attempt to represent the subjectivity of the film's subjects, sometimes trying to signify the physical experience of their stitching, as well as to represent women as a non-homogenous group.

#### Different representations

For us the representation of two women, one older and one younger, together, comfortable, talking, laughing and stitching adds difference to how women are, in the main, shown. The

older and younger hands are evidence of the ageing process, so often hidden from the social gaze; it reminds us of Agnes Varda when she looks at her own hand with the then novel-to-her digital camera in *The Gleaners* (2007) where she laments the aging process. These women are not clones of each other. The two stitchers, Sam and Sam, have differing opinions over whether they identify as feminists or not. This is an example of what Thornham terms as 'excess' (2012, p.44). At first, this was frustrating to us as filmmakers, as it defied the neat resolution we had originally conceived of; the unproblematic passing of feminist values, experiences and histories from one generation to another and that these would be whole-heartedly accepted. Drawing on Bill Nicols' point that documentaries, like narrative film, use rhetoric as an organising device, and that which exceeds it is as of much significance as that which fits. Thornham argues this allows for a plurality of voices which don't necessarily fit comfortably within dominant feminist discourses, (Thornham, 2012 p. 44). This lack of closure leaves a fractured unity, leaving space for viewers to fill in their own gaps or meaning. Similarly, the subjects' occasional look to camera is another example of excess in this sense, breaking the realist mode. Indeed, one of the cathartic moments in the film is when Sam Broadhead recounts a story of how she stood up and read out a poem from *Spare Rib* in a school assembly; it is also a point where both subjects connect in shared laughter. Thornham takes issue with Kuhn's point that the autobiographical narrative allows the ego to construct a linear, unified self. In fact, Thornham argues, in repeating the story for the camera, there is an element of performative excess (Thornham, 2012, p. 52). Much like Varda's use of mirrors in *Beaches of Agnes* (2008), this performance hints to us the constructed nature of memory and re-presentation of the self.

### Gendered viewing

Feedback from the audiences that viewed *Spare Rib and Subversive Stitching* appeared to be polarised along gender lines. I have observed that all those identifying as women made comments like, 'lovely,' 'beautiful' and 'I am a stitcher and a feminist too', whilst all those identifying as men said either they didn't understand it or it was 'weird'. Perhaps this is because the content, based on the recounting of personal experience and reflection, leads to reflexive thought amongst the audience due to a shared recognition of the issues discussed. Perhaps this shared experience around stitching and memory is simply not meaningful to most men? . The film doesn't have a didactic message or make a definitive assertion, but hopefully is open enough to leave the audience to think about the work, much like Varda does in her films. The feminist discourses of the film were more easily grasped by the female viewers; leaving me to question if women have particular ways of responding and enjoying film as well as having different ways of organising, narrating and making.

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## **Filmography**

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