Women Filmmakers
Refocusing: Talking about (and with) Women Filmmakers
Jacqueline Levitin, Judith Plessis, and Valerie Raoul

The Origins of This Book
When we first came together in 1998, we realized that we shared a desire to refocus on women’s filmmaking – to take stock of what has occurred, what has been gained, and what directions feminist film theory has taken since the early 1970s. At that time, a lost history of women’s filmmaking resurfaced in film festivals and the first feminist film journals appeared, provoking excitement and debate. We wanted to recreate that initial excitement by organizing an international women’s film conference, along with a women’s film festival. This book is the final stage in a series of projects that arose from our first meeting, including the events entitled “Women Filmmakers: Refocusing,” held in Vancouver in March 1999.¹ We designed the conference-festival to cross several boundaries – between disciplines, between countries, between theory and practice, between universities and the community, and between those who make films and those who see and write about them. Our own backgrounds have been conducive to achieving this dialogue: Jacqueline Levitin is a filmmaker and scholar attached to the School for the Contemporary Arts and the Women’s Studies Department at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Vancouver; Judith Plessis is the Director of Language Programs in Continuing Studies at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, and her doctorate in Comparative Literature focused on women filmmakers; Valerie Raoul is in French and Women’s Studies at UBC, and she has an interest in feminist film theory and francophone filmmakers. We saw this as a unique opportunity to pool the resources of our two local universities in order to bring together both local and international filmmakers and academics. We were delighted by the interest our initial call for papers aroused and the quality of the many proposals we received – any fears we had beforehand that the enthusiasm might no longer be there were soon allayed.

The papers accepted ranged over time and space, covering various issues related to women making films and films by women in many parts of the
world. With the support of local consulates and cultural associations, such as the Goethe Institute, and from local filmmakers through Women in Film and Video Vancouver, the original idea for a conference expanded into two weekends of presentations, one weekend at each university. Thanks to government and university funding, we were able to invite several well-known directors to attend and also some prominent academic specialists in women and film from the United States, France, and the United Kingdom as well as Canada. Collaboration and support from the Pacific Cinémathèque in downtown Vancouver allowed us, over a two-week period before and between the two weekends of presentations, to screen films by women not readily available in Vancouver. The result was a series of events that attracted many film enthusiasts and feminists from all walks of life. However, the division of the conference into two parts, while enabling more people to participate, also posed the problem of how to divide the topics.

**Women Filmmakers: A Dual Focus**

Our solution was to focus on Europe, film history, and feature films for the first weekend (at SFU’s downtown campus) and on postcolonial contexts and documentaries for the second (at UBC). Although this distinction enabled us to separate the papers, panels, interviews, and master classes into two programs, there was still considerable overlap between the two weekends. For example, the importance of immigrant, or second-generation, filmmakers in Europe is as much an aspect of the postcolonial context as is the expansion of filmmaking in countries that were formerly colonies. Several of the directors who agreed to attend and to be interviewed, including Deepa Mehta and Pratibha Parmar, have roots in both the East and the West. Furthermore, issues related to technology, funding, and distribution sprang up in all the sessions. The presence of Ann Kaplan, a specialist in film history, theory, and postcolonial contexts, was invaluable in enabling us to connect the two weekends. Patricia Plattner, who represented Switzerland at the first weekend, also contributed to the second weekend through the screening of her film *Made in India*.

The fact that the events took place in British Columbia added a further dimension to the discussion, since our province has a multi-ethnic population, including a rich First Nations culture. “Central Canada” sometimes still seems to treat British Columbia like a colonial outpost. While predominantly Western, Vancouver is located between North America and Asia, both geographically and culturally, and the city has a strong Asian presence. Canada’s other official language and culture, French, seems less relevant here. However, since all three of us have connections to Quebec or France, we wanted to emphasize the significance of the fact that Canada produces films in both languages. The conference revealed some fruitful connections between British Columbia and Quebec, and the Canada Council provided a
subsidy that enabled us to benefit from the presence of Quebec documentary filmmaker Nicole Giguère. Swiss filmmaker Patricia Plattner and French academic and film critic Caroline Eades provided a European francophone perspective, and several papers were presented in French and translated for this volume. Cultural diversity was broadened much further by representation from British Columbia’s First Nations community, which has a number of strong emerging women filmmakers, and by filmmakers of Asian origin who make films both here and abroad.

Being involved in the North American Free Trade Agreement with the United States and Mexico, Canadians are as aware as anyone of the worldwide domination exercised by the American commercial film industry. Vancouver is sometimes referred to as “Hollywood North” because of the number of American movies filmed here. The relative absence of material on American filmmakers in this volume reflects an initial decision to prioritize women directors working elsewhere in the world. This focus is introduced through Ann Kaplan’s chapter on the history of women in film, which provides background on developments in Europe and Hollywood. Kaplan also comments on filmmaking by minority women in the United States, reminding us that the United States is itself a “postcolonial” context. Her chapter reflects the shift in emphasis from the centre to the margins in her own extensive work on women in film, which is symptomatic of the evolution of women’s participation in filmmaking. Our focus on Canada rather than the United States also enables us to maintain a balance between makers of feature films and makers of documentaries. Again, while the second weekend included more discussion of documentary filmmaking than did the first, it must be remembered that many of the directors featured in this book make both types of film, and, in many cases, their choices are governed by practical considerations rather than personal preferences.

The conference incorporated eye-opening discussions of funding for film production, commercial distribution, and technical advice to fellow filmmakers, as well as theoretical debates about the role of women filmmakers in relation to feminism, politics, and mainstream culture. When the time came to solicit submissions for this book, we realized that our original dual focus did not do justice to the crosscutting debates that continued well after the conference. Consequently, we have regrouped topics, while attempting to maintain the combination of academic discourse and practical experience that enlivened the presentations. Papers were selected and, for the most part, have been extensively reworked to focus upon the themes chosen for the various parts of this book. Material has also been added to complement those papers we have chosen to include. Ann Kaplan provided an expanded version of her Vancouver Institute presentation on the evolution of women’s participation in film production. This overview leads into a collection of material grouped around issues rather than geographical
areas or time frames. In keeping with our original objectives, a unique feature of this collection is the inclusion of informal accounts of personal experiences from several remarkable filmmakers who participated in public interviews and gave master classes. The result reflects the level of excitement generated, while producing a coherent synthesis of the main debates that emerged over two weeks of animated discussions among people from across the world.

**Conversations with Directors, Analysis of Films, and Theoretical Frameworks**

The book is divided into eight parts, each representing a transition from one focus to the next. In Part 1, Kaplan’s historical survey and the chapters by Angela Martin, Donia Mounsef, and Catherine Fowler provide a historical and theoretical basis for the discussion that follows in subsequent parts. Kaplan’s insights here, based on her work on film and the “imperial gaze,” illuminate later sections on minority filmmakers. Angela Martin dissects the terms “auteur” and “authorship” and questions how they have been employed in discussions of women filmmakers. Mounsef focuses on film history in France, looking at the relation of women filmmakers to experimental, avant-garde movements that go beyond film. Fowler discusses the work of several prominent directors and the changes that have occurred in their films, in relation to the evolution of feminist film theory.

Part 2 looks more closely at several European filmmakers who may be considered to be auteurs. German director Helma Sanders Brahms (introduced by Steven Taubeneck) made an exceptional contribution to the first weekend, not only answering questions at film screenings, but also generously sharing her personal experience as a filmmaker in Europe. We have juxtaposed her contributions with an interview given by Margarethe von Trotta a year before at the University of Victoria, along with Siew Jin Ooi’s detailed analysis of one of von Trotta’s earlier films. The careers of these two well-known writer-directors traverse the contemporary history of women’s filmmaking. Sanders Brahms talks about the obstacles she has faced (and still faces), not only due to her gender in the male-dominated world of film production, but also due to the type of films she chooses to make. Von Trotta lucidly discusses the interaction of politics and aesthetics in her films. The chapters by B. Amarillis Lugo de Fabritz and Corinn Columpar analyze continuity and change in the work of two other major directors who are both auteures, Agnieszka Holland and Sally Potter. The work of the filmmakers discussed in Part 2 relates to the issues of continuity and change raised by Catherine Fowler in Part 1.

Part 3 turns away from filmmaking careers and authorship to concentrate on the ways in which the filmmakers’ choice of film genre affects the production and reception of their films. Retaining a focus on Europe, four
chapters address the work of some women filmmakers who have gained access to commercial markets by using popular film genres. Kathryn Barnwell and Marni Stanley focus on how Doris Dörrie uses comedy to convey a somewhat ambivalent critical message in *Nobody Loves Me*, a film that raises issues of sexual orientation and race relations. Brigitte Rollet and Caroline Eades survey how a younger generation of women filmmakers in France has successfully appropriated male models such as the road movie. Josette Déléas concludes this part with a discussion of Lina Wertmüller's original use of the grotesque, discerning the gender critique beneath Wertmüller's seemingly misogynist veneer. Today, few would condemn women filmmakers' attempts to succeed in the mainstream. The question for the feminist critic now is rather: How can success be achieved? And what is the balance sheet of gains and losses in achieving popularity? The examples here demonstrate that women are finding creative ways of succeeding – and transforming cinema in the process. In their discussion of women's contributions to the mainstream, all the papers in this section highlight the particularities of the gender-race-class dynamic in their corner of Europe, bringing out the diversity of locations in relation to mainstream culture in general, as well as to commercial cinema.

The choice of whether or not to join the mainstream is frequently governed by the need for access to resources to make films at all, a constant preoccupation of both the filmmakers interviewed and the film students who participated in the conference. Part 4 concentrates on issues related to the conditions of production, including training, funding, and distribution. These have changed radically for filmmakers from Eastern Europe, many of whom have moved to the West and now make films in English, as is illustrated in the case of Agnieszka Holland. Janina Falkowska and Ute Lischke both provide information on the effects of political upheaval on filmmaking in Poland and in the former East Germany. Elsewhere, the possibilities of filmmaking are limited by having to work in a small country, such as Switzerland, with a limited public that is itself divided into several language groups. Suzanne Buchan and Swiss filmmaker Patricia Plattner discuss government funding and its limits, the problems associated with working in the shadow of a dominant culture, and the need to gain experience through associating with filmmakers from and in other countries.

Part 4 concludes with excerpts from two lively panel discussions, each with four participants. In the first, which deals with feature films, Canadian filmmaker Anne Wheeler and Helma Sanders Brahms share their experiences of mentoring younger women filmmakers, while Patricia Plattner and Caroline Eades comment on the problems faced by emerging young directors in a francophone context. The second panel conveys the animated debate that took place among several Canadian documentary filmmakers: Nicole Giguère from Quebec, Brenda Longfellow from Ontario, Loretta Todd,
a First Nations filmmaker living in British Columbia, and Aerlyn Weissman, now of British Columbia, who has made documentaries with a lesbian focus. These sessions provided filmmakers with some practical and personal lessons, and it gave others an unusual opportunity to eavesdrop on conversations that revealed the daunting but exhilarating situations women filmmakers constantly encounter.

**Border Crossings**

The next three parts of the book focus on filmmaking by women in non-Western contexts and the representation of minority women in countries with a dominant culture. Part 5 looks beyond Europe and North America to discuss women filmmakers in Kenya (Beatrice Wanjiku Mikora), Malaysia (Gaik Cheng Khoo), Argentina (Rita de Grandis and three graduate students from UBC and SFU), Cuba (Susan Lord), and China (Yue-Qing Yang). While film cultures are still barely emerging in some of these contexts, in others they are already well established. As was the case for some of the European filmmakers, the choice of what language to use in a film is often a central issue. The audience to be addressed affects both resources for production and the distribution and reception of the films. Representation of women in these films by women draws attention to the differences as well as to the commonalities of women’s experiences around the world. In many cases, the filmmaker’s perspective is informed by training or living abroad, as in the case of director Yue-Qing Yang, who lives in Vancouver but continues to make films in her native China. Her films deal with topics that she would probably not address if she made them in Vancouver. The chapter on her experience of making *Nu Shu: A Hidden Language of Women in China* is reprinted from the Vancouver-based feminist newspaper *Kinesis*.

Yue-Qing Yang was not the only filmmaker to participate in the conference whose life and work cross continental divides. Part 6 brings together the experiences of four filmmakers, all present at the conference, who have different connections to India. Deepa Mehta resides in Canada and makes feature films in India, where her work has provoked violent controversy. Pratibha Parmar is of Indian/East African background but has spent most of her life in England. She has made controversial documentary and experimental films dealing with topics such as lesbianism in India and racism in Britain. Raman Mann and Patricia Plattner have both made documentaries about women’s struggles for empowerment in India, but with very different resources and results. Raman Mann lives in Delhi and, primarily with government funding, makes educational films. She has travelled to Europe and Canada to receive awards and to search for financing for projects that are addressed primarily to Indian women and that have an immediate impact in India. Patricia Plattner, in contrast, went to India with an all-woman European crew to make a feature-length film of great beauty. Her aim was to
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raise awareness of Indian women workers’ successful organizing by addressing women in the West and other parts of the world.

Pratibha Parmar’s films address issues related to minority women in England. Patricia Plattner’s film Piano Panier deals with communication between “majority” and “minority” women: a Swiss woman living in Geneva visits the family of her Portuguese immigrant friend only to discover cultural alienation in reverse. These issues of border-crossings and cross-cultural communication are central in films by minority women filmmakers and are a major focus throughout these discussions. Increasingly, gender cannot be considered apart from race and class. For this reason, in Part 7 we have grouped together chapters by Carrie Tarr (on the representation of women of North African origin in French films), Lesley Marx (on the work of White South African filmmaker Katinka Heyns), and Elena Feder (on films by Latina women in Canada). We have also included an interview with Jewish Mexican filmmaker Guita Schyfter (raised in Costa Rica), who discusses the depiction of divisions within the Jewish community in Mexico in her film Like a Bride.

Changing Perspectives in Canada

While several Canadian filmmakers are already represented in the earlier sections, Part 8 takes a closer look at various dimensions of women’s filmmaking in this country. Tribute is paid to the enormous contribution of documentary and feature filmmakers in Quebec in complementary overviews by Nicole Giguère and Jocelyne Denault. Another francophone filmmaker, Carole Ducharme (originally from Quebec and now living in British Columbia) contributes an interview about making Straight from the Suburbs, a short and highly original film that demonstrates the effective use of parody to challenge homophobia. The introduction to First Nations women filmmakers in British Columbia that follows begins with an article by journalist Ken Eisner (reprinted from the Vancouver cultural newspaper the Georgia Straight). It deals, in part, with the work of Loretta Todd, who also contributed to the panel discussion in Part 4. Michelle La Flamme’s chapter situates the work of some emerging Aboriginal women filmmakers in British Columbia in the context of postcolonial theory and the struggle for recognition of First Nations’ identities. Such topics were among those treated in many National Film Board films made at Studio D, the women’s studio in Montreal that no longer exists, to the regret of many. Diane Burgess addresses the issues raised by its demise in terms of (1) how best to support feminist filmmaking and (2) how gender frequently disappears as a category. Whether or not the disappearance of gender is desirable is one of the central questions raised by Ann Kaplan at the beginning of this book. In the concluding chapter camerawoman Zoe Dirse tackles tough issues when she asks, Does it still make any difference when it is a woman wielding the
camera? How does the feminist critique of the male “gaze” hold up, when examined by a practising camerawoman?

**Refocusing the Kaleidoscope**
The answers to these questions connect concerns about representation and appropriation, voice and gaze, ideas and their realization. The panorama that emerges from this book reveals different trends, either towards or away from the mainstream, and varying levels of commitment to or rejection of the label “feminist.” Whatever their position in this regard, none of the directors included here denies that being a woman has made a difference to her career as a filmmaker. While there are far more women making films today than there were before, the numbers can be deceiving. The battlefields of the film industry are still strewn with the stifled ambitions of women directors who only manage to produce one film. Ideological issues around what and how to film are still all too frequently eclipsed by material questions of funding and survival. Initiatives that, two decades ago, targeted women in order to enable them to compete with men, have largely disappeared. Today’s multichannel universe can seem both rich in opportunity and poor in realization. Both female and male filmmakers find themselves scaling down the scope and vision of their projects when presented with the alternative of making no film at all.

Whether a feminist message, or even a “woman’s point of view,” can still be conveyed without falling into stereotypes is debatable. Technological developments may again favour women filmmakers, as they did in the 1970s, now that new advances make digital equipment more portable and less expensive. Women still enjoy the possibilities of the margins and experimental filmmaking. Problems of distribution remain, however, as we discovered – literally to our cost – when it came to organizing screenings. Many of the films by filmmakers represented in this volume are difficult to obtain, and the small number of viewers able to see them contributes to the lack of attention given to them in film criticism.

For that reason alone we are delighted to present this book, which will provide many more people with the opportunity to hear directly the stories of women who are actually making films and have a wealth of professional expertise in various aspects of film production. This focus on the perspectives of women directors departs from most studies, where the films are the main object of analysis. The directors remind us that theorists and critics must not forget that practical issues and technical innovations determine aesthetic effects and are also behind the successful delivery of a political message. The range of films that women are making across the world is extraordinary. As recently as the 1970s it seemed possible for a film festival to cover all aspects of women’s filmmaking. That is certainly no longer the
case, even for one category of films. Similarly, in the 1970s the books devoted to women in film could be counted on one hand, whereas today they fill many library shelves. The chapters presented here provide a rich sampling of the wealth of thought and experience that is now available on this topic; however, they also demonstrate that women filmmakers still have difficulty making their work known.

With this in mind, we have, wherever possible, included information on how to gain access to materials on both film and video. In some instances, two dates are given for a particular film. The earlier of the two usually refers to the year production ended while the other refers to the year the film was released. However, discrepancies can also result from the fact that films are often released in different countries at different times. The bibliography collects references of general interest from all the chapters and includes works published since they were written. This book will, we believe, be useful in both Women’s Studies and Film Studies courses; it will also be of interest to theorists, practitioners, and film enthusiasts of both sexes. We hope it will introduce lesser known filmmakers to a wider public as well as help in reassessing the work of some well established women directors. Our aim is to break down the barriers between women who make films and those who see them, between Film Studies and Women’s Studies, and between theory and practice. But above all, we believe these essays and interviews demonstrate the excitement generated by an amazing wealth and variety of films by women and are a tribute to their achievements.

Notes

1 Sneja Gunew (Women’s Studies and English, UBC) was also part of the original conference organizing committee, and its practical success was largely due to the efforts of Jo Hinchliffe, the administrative assistant at the UBC Centre for Research in Women’s Studies and Gender Relations. The production of this book also owes much to the generous support of UBC Continuing Studies through the UBC Writing Centre.

2 The French and Mexican Consulates both paid for visiting speakers to attend, as did the Goethe Institute and the Swiss organization Pro Helvetia. The French Consulate and Alliance française also contributed.

3 The conference was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and we also received grants from UBC and SFU. Ann Kaplan was at UBC for ten days, funded through the Cecil and Ida Green Visiting Professor Programme; she returned under the same program to give a course at UBC in January 2001. Students from both UBC and SFU were funded through a provincial work-study program to assist with transcribing audio- and videotapes, as well as to help prepare the manuscript.

4 The chapters by Déléas, Eades, Mounsef, and Rollet were originally written and presented in French and were translated for this book. The section by Denault was added after the conference.

5 “Auteure” with an “e” is used in Quebec. We are adopting this spelling as a way of differentiating women’s output, bearing in mind Angela Martin’s discussion of “auteurship.”