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Ann Hui

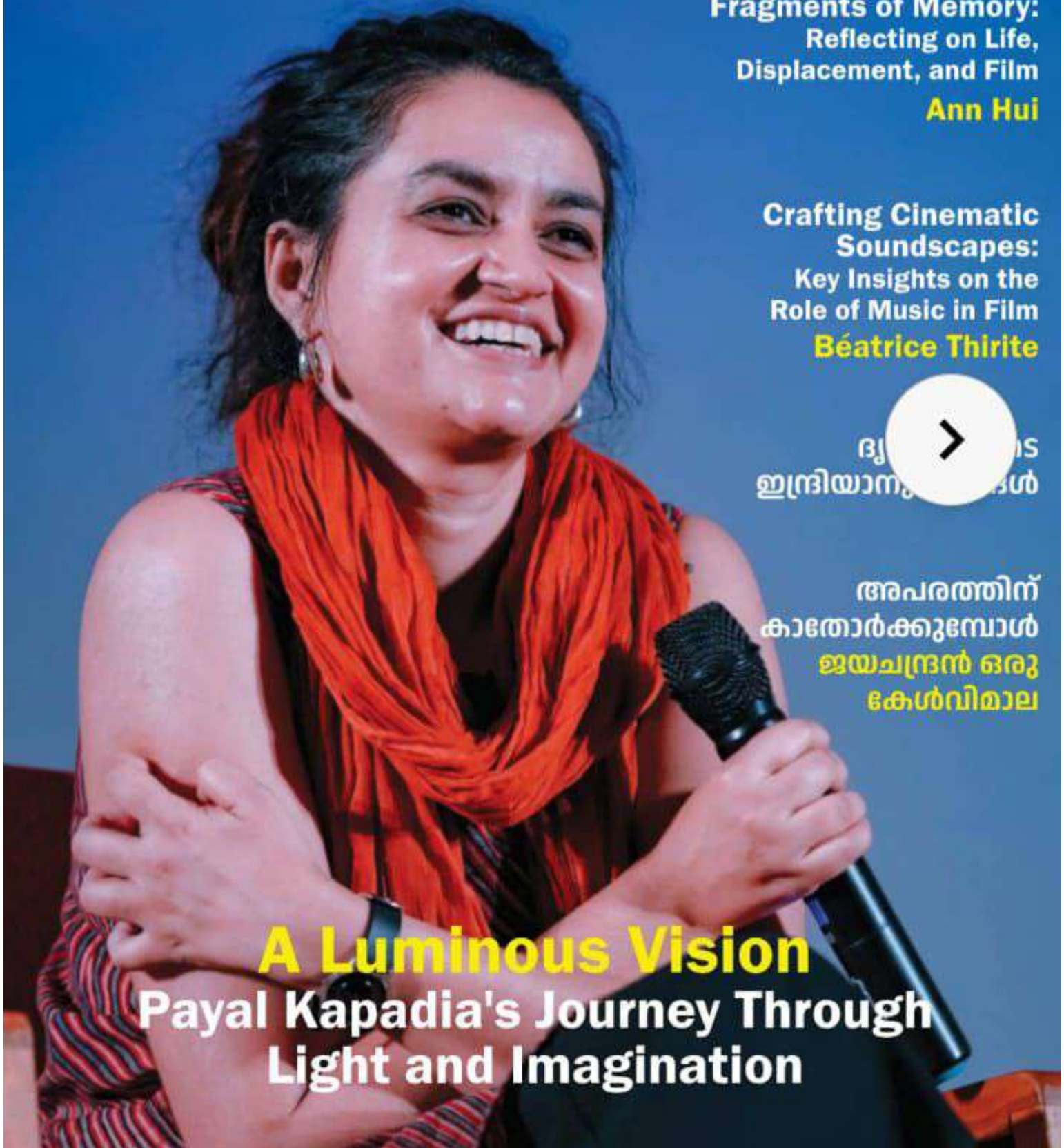
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ലേഖകരുടെ അഭിപ്രായം സർക്കാരിന്റെയോ അക്കാദമിയുടെയോ ആയിരിക്കണമെന്നില്ല. അവയുടെ പൂർണ്ണ ഉത്തരവാദിത്വം ലേഖകർക്ക് മാത്രമായിരിക്കും.





Documentary, “Reality” and Questions on Gender:

Mapping Experimental Indian Feminist Documentaries at the Turn of the 21st Century

Hemantika Singh

This paper examines the evolution of feminist documentaries in India, tracing a shift from social-issue-based films in the 1970s and 80s to more experimental works at the turn of the 21st century. The author analyzes how these later films challenged the traditional "objectivity" claims of documentary filmmaking and explored gender issues through innovative techniques.

Introduction

Upon tracing the history of feminist documentary practices in India, we find that the social issue-based films of the 70s, with their conventions stretching well into the 80s, became the first, and significant, strain for the representation of the then discourse on women's issues like sexual violence, domestic

labor, wage gap etc. This was an urgent political agenda for feminist filmmakers in that context. But while exploring women's issues, gradually, personal gendered experiences became pivotal when weaving a narrative for screen. And so, by the late 80s and early 90s, documentary practices about questions on/of gender experienced a shift from

previously broad issues to localized, everyday personal narratives of women, but with some connections with the previous mode.

Both the social issue and the personal portrait documentaries predominantly surfaced with a distinct type of “truth” claim. But a new cluster of experimental feminist films in the decade following the turn of the century began to question these claims of “objectivity”, so inherent within the way documentary cinema was institutionalized. Thus, this new group of documentaries complicated the gender discourses going beyond the representation of the “real”. And from the standpoint of the current digital context, these categories present a useful framework to understand the diverse feminist political articulations and a move in the ideological emphases in the Indian feminist documentaries that the turn of the 21st century brought about. This paper tries to map the shift in generic conventions that paved the way for the new experimental feminist documentary.

I would like to begin with a brief history of Indian documentary cinema and the emerging questions on/of gender. The next sections discuss the feminist interventions in the sphere of cinema, and especially debates around feminist documentaries. The final segment offers an in-depth analysis of two pioneering works - Paromita Vohra's *Morality TV aur Loving Jihad: Ek Manohar Kahani* (2007) and Amar Kanwar's the *Lightning Testimonies* (2007) to understand the intricate interconnections between documentary, “reality” and questions on/of gender and sexuality.

Documentary Cinema and Questions on/of Gender

In the Indian context, documentary films evolved with a clear distinction from the fiction film industry, in that of its ideological drive, networks of creators, production values, screening alternatives etc. charted their own select trajectories throughout film history. The scholarly works that cover the history of the

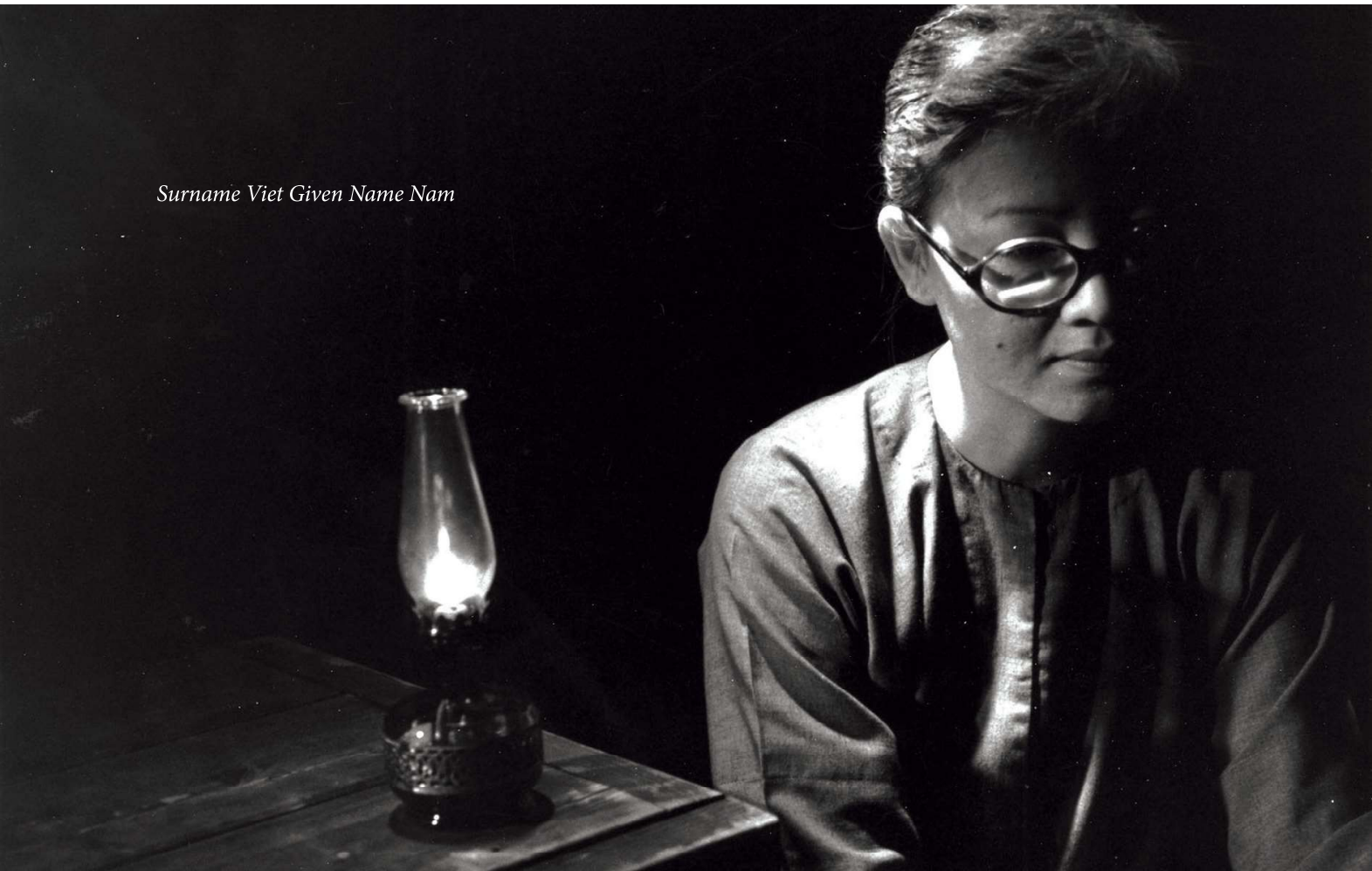
Indian documentary film, try to put together the checkered chronicles of its growth and expansion.

A government body responsible for the production of documentaries in India, Films Division (FD), was established in 1948. The FD, which was formed under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, visualized documentary as a mode of public information and education (Garga 130). The 1970s, the time of global and national turbulence, saw the rise of independent documentary filmmakers like Anand Patwardhan and an angry critique of state brutality in his films like *Waves of Revolution* (1974).

In the post-emergency era, with the rise of Television, what followed was the gradual decline of the state-sponsored documentary. But video technology in the 1980s opened spaces for more economic and diverse filmmaking practices. The 1980-90s also saw the entry of several women documentary filmmakers like Deepa Dhanraj, Meera Dewan, Manjira Datta, Reena Mohan, Nilita Vachani, Madhusree Datta and the Jamia-based Mediastorm group, focusing on questions around women's work and wage, regressive societal practices, women and communalism etc. Several of them were associated with the women's movement in the country and that close engagement refracted through their works.

For many subsequent film-makers, this opened up several possibilities of how documentaries could become a political way of feminist storytelling. The 2000s, especially saw scores of women filmmakers and technicians like Iffat Fatima, Nishtha Jain, Nisha Pahuja, Saba Dewan, beginning to explore previously uncharted cinematic territories. The contemporary scenario has also provided spaces for cheaper and more accessible film production strategies and multiple, often unexpected, avenues of cinematic reception.

The Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) became one of the significant



platforms for documentary production. A not-for-profit body for film financing, it was established in 2000 in a tripartite partnership between the PSBT, the Ford Foundation and Prasar Bharati, the national public broadcaster. The PSBT continues to fund over fifty documentaries a year. According to its specific policy guidelines, half of their films are made by women filmmakers. Noted documentaries on the gender questions produced by the PSBT include *Ladies Special* (Nidhi Tuli, 2003), *Much Ado About Knotting* (Geetika Narang Abbasi and Anandana Kapur, 2012), *My Sacred Glass Bowl* (Priya Thuvassery, 2013) *Mardistan: Reflections on Indian Manhood* (Harjant Gill, 2014) and *Being Bhaijaan* (Samreen Farooqui and Shabani Hassanwalia, 2014). Beside the PSBT, other organizations like India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) also support the production of documentary films. IFA is a not-for-profit, grant making organization that supports practice, research and education in the arts in India.

These film financing possibilities opened

up spaces for new entrants in the documentary scenario and many women filmmakers and practitioner-academics on the field. But it is also important to mention that these funding opportunities could have also created certain production constraints. For example, the PSBT had strict guidelines regarding the duration of documentary films and to indirectly have to follow certain censorship norms as films were regularly screened on Doordarshan and its then associate channels like Lok Sabha Television and NDTV 24x7. Often there were also unwritten constraints of global funding which pushed for a more “character centric”/ “human interest”/ “softly political” genre of documentaries¹.

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1. This point was elaborated in the researcher’s interview with the noted contemporary documentary filmmaker Shilpi Gulati. Gulati referred to the push from international financing bodies, in the contemporary context, to focus on one unique (or two) individuated narratives rather than the emphasis on a community or a broader issue as a whole.

Further, new digital technologies also played a significant role in documentary filmmaking and in feminist cinematic intervention. For feminist documentary cinema, the transition, first from film to video and over the last few years to microensors and expedient digital interfaces has made the process much cheaper and way more mobile. New trends in gathering and editing footage over cellphones and laptops and an explosion of software that are available for free, or even pirated torrents of the paid ones, online have helped with the formation of smaller film crews blurring the technologically demarcated roles for production, post-production and all else between. Newer online platforms like YouTube, Vimeo etc. also became a space rid, of censorship problems and began to be used by many documentary filmmakers to showcase their work sans the prying eyes of the censorship board.

Theoretical Interventions

In the interrelationship between gender and the moving image, the feminist interventions began and significantly expanded in the 1970s, drawing from and contributing to the women's movements and the changing mores of the gender discourse. With a growing number of women film practitioners entering the documentary scenario and nascent yet concrete initiatives like women's film festivals, forums for discussions, journals and magazines brought about a distinct feminist wave in the then cinema scenario. There were a significant number of academic works responding to gender questions in mainstream cinema. For example, Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (1973) and Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974) documented the representational politics of female characters in Hollywood films.

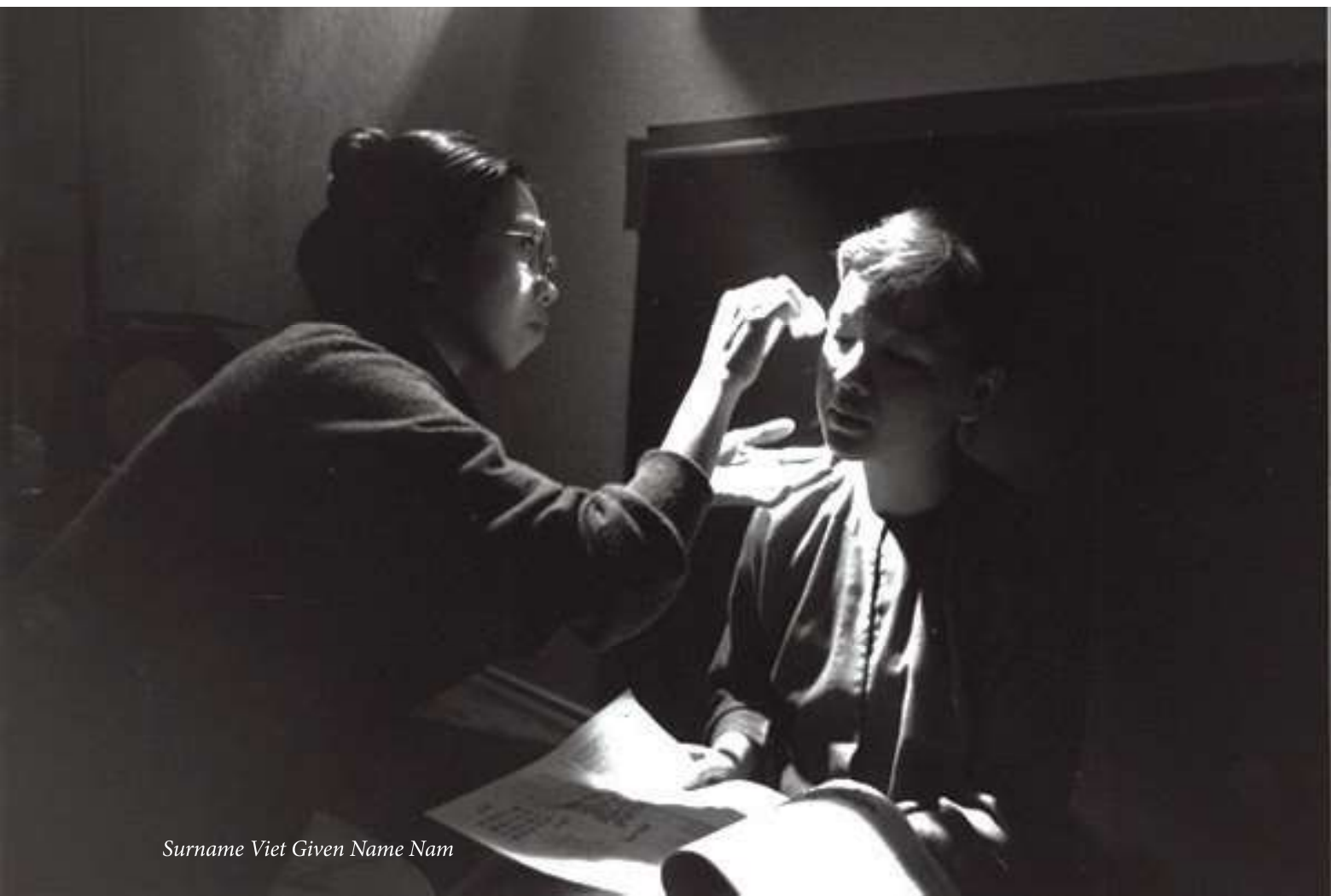
In the 70s and 80s, several women filmmakers took up documentary film practice owing to this format's low production

cost and more importantly the "truth claim" ascribed to it for countering mainstream cinema's misrepresentation of women. While noted feminist scholars like Julia Lesage et al advocated these kinds of traditional realist feminist documentary practices, several others like Claire Johnston and Laura Mulvey, heavily criticized the realist format with a call for an altogether new language to present women's narratives. These intricate debates among feminist scholars and documentary filmmakers were later discussed in other works like Patricia Erens's edited volume *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism* (1990) and Diane Waldman and Janet Walker's anthology *Feminism and Documentary* (1999).

Feminist Documentary: Debates and Experimentations

In the history of feminist documentaries in India, one can clearly identify the dominance of issue-centric films through the first two decades (70s and 80s). And further, from the 90s to the early 2000s, there came a significant change from the issue-based documentaries to the sphere of the personal, the intimate, the everyday; and, to newer experimental films. Although harking back to the broader issues tabled in the decades preceding this turn, filmmakers also began to experiment with the protocols of the non-fiction genre by creating experimental works that documented the gender questions in innovative ways. This acted as a precursor to our current digital context where we perpetually find image makers redefine what's considered non-fiction. For their time, these films began to explore a move away from the generic conventions of formats that documented gendered experience, leading to new ways of asking questions and novel forms of seeking answers.

When we look at the global history of documentary cinema, From the late 20th century onwards, there was an intensified scepticism about the "objectivity" and "truth claim" of social issue and personal portrait



Surname Viet Given Name Nam

documentaries. Noted documentary scholar Barry Keith Grant wrote: "...questions concerning the camera's physical presence, along with the issue of whether and to what extent the camera exploits or documents its social actors, have been hotly debated issues concerning both Griersonian-style and observational documentary. ... Although the immediacy of observational cinema made the stylistic conventions associated with the Griersonian tradition seem outmoded and ideologically suspect, manipulation in documentary inevitably is a matter of degree. For although documentaries are factual, they are never objective or ideologically neutral." (97)

The doubts around documentary objectivity were renewed by both a group of new films and academic interventions from the late 1980s. This was probably symptomatic of the times of increase in images after television and video, as Linda Williams aptly remarked: "The contradictions are rich: on the

one hand the postmodern deluge of images seems to suggest that there can be no a priori truth of the referent to which the image refers; on the other hand, in this same deluge, it is still the moving image that has the power to move audiences to a new appreciation of previously unknown truth" (Grant and Sloniowski 386).

These academic writings destabilized the dominant idea of documentary as the cinematic articulation of the "real". Several feminist filmmakers and theoreticians contributed to these churnings, through their documentary works and interventions. Scholars like Claire Johnston severely criticized the realist feminist documentary strategies and advocated for a new experimental cinematic language to rearticulate gender concerns. This political project was revitalized by the interventions and cinematic works by feminist filmmakers like Trinh T. Minh-ha et al from the late 1980s. Trinh T. Minh-ha asserted: "There is no such thing as documentary—whether the term designates a

category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques. This assertion—as old and as fundamental as the antagonism between names and reality—needs incessantly to be restated despite the very visible existence of a documentary tradition. ... In a completely catalogued world, cinema is often reified into a corpus of traditions. ... On the one hand, truth is produced, induced, and extended according to the regime in power” (Renov 1993, emphasis mine).

Trinh’s pioneering documentary *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), about the history of women’s resistance in Vietnam and America, juxtaposes strategies of fiction and non-fictional cinema—staged and spontaneous sequences, scripted and unscripted interview formats etc. Trinh wanted to highlight the politics of documenting and the “form” through which we access the knowledge (Nichols 239). Similarly, Barbara Hammer’s *Nitrate Kisses* (1992) interweaves explicit sexual enactment of four gay and lesbian couples with the silent experimental film *Lot in Sodom* (James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, 1933) to recover the consistently suppressed queer culture. But Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues United* (1989) combines poetry, personal testimony, performances etc. to explore the black gay identity. Though very diverse, all these works significantly troubled and destabilized the classic documentary forms of truth claim, while addressing discourses around gender and sexuality.

In documentary cinema in India, both the state-sponsored propaganda films and politically interventionist works strictly followed realist strategies, leaving very few exceptions which experimented with the film form. But filmmakers like Paromita Vohra across her oeuvre of feminist documentary films, used stylistic elements from television, commercial cinema, animation and even advertisements. In the following section, we will examine two significant experimental feminist works - *Morality TV aur Loving Jihad: Ek Manohar Kahani* and *The Lightning Testimonies* - and how they go beyond the

documentary frameworks to imagine gender concerns.

Morality TV aur Loving Jihad: Ek Manohar Kahani – Multiple Screens and the Many Eyes of Patriarchal Control

Paromita Vohra has been an acclaimed video chronicler of the bustle of metropolises through women’s narratives. Through her lens, her audiences have journeyed across Mumbai, Delhi and other cities to discover the gendered landscape of the everyday experience in urban India. Her oeuvre of documentary films and the questions it foregrounded were often embroidered with humor, comedy, lithe soundtracks and a signature whimsical way of telling gender. Perhaps the film *Morality TV aur Loving Jihad: Ek Manohar Kahani*, released in 2007, was a marker of a shift in how non-fiction storytelling, especially when rearticulating the political - in this context, gender - troubled the form itself. It employed feminist interrogations to question the conventions of the documentary format as codified through the 80s and 90s.

In *Morality TV aur Loving Jihad: Ek Manohar Kahani* (2007), the camera visited small-town India, to be specific Meerut in Uttar Pradesh, where love, desire, sexual agency, and public display of coupledom continue to be under constant scrutiny and most often, strict patriarchal control. Back in 2005, television viewers across India were offered shaky visuals of police personnel brutally thrashing young couples in the small town of Meerut on prime-time television. “Breaking news” across TV channels had ran and reran images of a herd of police officers, led by woman Station House Officer (SHO) pouncing on unsuspecting lovers in Gandhi Baag, a local park and physically thrashing them in full public view. Photographers accompanied the officers, mostly men, documenting candid images of the “sting” that they later called “Operation Majnu”, designed to combat eve-teasing and public indecency.

It is always telling when a documentary isn't merely a record of its time and the events it captured but lives beyond the stipulated shelf-life that conventions dictate be assigned to non-fiction films. After a fresh watch today, Paromita's archive of television news coverage from across local and national news channels on the matter becomes our entry into the film. What follows though, is her protracted pursuit to put together a collage of multiple visual materials that help excavate the narratives left out of the news reports. Morality TV at once shocks and angers the viewer as Paromita exposes the operation as an orchestrated attempt to license moral policing and the stoking of communal tensions by using the patriarchal logic of "protecting" women.

The film carries a voiceover telling us the story of Meenu, a young woman. Unlike voiceovers that supplement the real, with the conventional matter-of-fact tonality, Morality TV carries a woman's raspy voiceover that sounds as a reading of Meenu's story, straight from an issue of salacious pulp fiction that is available on the cheap in most cities and small towns in the country. The voiceover is brazened when talking about desire, warning against its consequences in a morally conservative feudal society built on policing "immoral" love. Paromita superimposes grainy images of sting operations, and news reports thereof, on the diegetic surface of the documented footage. Window panes of public transport, wall graffiti and billboards turn to multiscreen with images of prime-time journalists sensationalizing incidents of moral policing, depicting couples in each other's exclusive company in a public space as sleazy crime. The film finds purpose in this bracketing of romantic intimacy with crime and scandal in a universe of moral anxiety and panic over change.

At first, we travel the moral landscape of societal censure of love and desire in small town India. But Paromita extends her argument by excavating close linkages of the Operation Majnu incident with the rumours and gossip around a mythical phenomenon

propagated by a conservative right-wing society. This notion that later came to be called "love jihad" is the recycling of a decades old moral panic over Hindu women eloping with Muslim men. Paromita interviews both local journalists and a Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) activist who claims that, "these Muslim men seduce Hindu women, impregnate them and have them run away from home". Paromita's voice from behind the camera probes the men, exposing to the viewer the unreasonable claims of a propaganda driven to incite communal hatred and violence in the name of women's honour. The documentary moves from capturing bawdy fictional narratives of illicit romances to scandal-driven television features and venomous right wing political propaganda. This strategic blending of fictional, televisual and documentary universes aptly underlines the phenomenon of love jihad, a part-fiction, part-media construction of a devious manifestation of moral panic, often communally colored, in the Indian context.

Morality TV works like a montage. Fragments of diverse stories connect with each other as Paromita speaks to some victims, perpetrators, news stringers and audiences of "Operation Majnu". She also weaves together other stories that made similar headlines on national news channels around the time of the Meerut incident. The sting operation on senior actor Shakti Kapoor propositioning a struggling new actress and reality TV star and dancer Rakhi Sawant being forcibly kissed without consent by popular Punjabi singer Mika at a private party, photos and videos of which circulated via the same media networks are also recalled in excerpts in the film. Paromita tries to place the discourse of love jihad within the narratives of morality and sexual promiscuity, a genre that the Indian media continues to be obsessed with. Maybe it is the layered complexities of issues such as this, that makes Paromita's camera swing between verité imagery, different generic strategies like noir, comedy etc. to uncover the unsaid. In an interview with the online



Morality TV aur Loving Jehad Ek Manohar Kahani (2007)

feminist magazine *The Ladies Finger*, Vohra said: “When I landed in Meerut, the first thing that hit me was that these stories about romancing young couples were reported by crime reporters, which was in itself curious – the location of love under crime. As I began talking to them and watching my own taped news material closely, I realized the way these stories were reported, the language that was used, the framework of storytelling, all of it belonged to the same universe of *Manohar Kahaaniyaan*. *Manohar Kahaaniyaan* is a genre of stories that has always been popular up North but exists in some form everywhere – rather morally grounded pulp fiction where ‘forbidden relationships’ would always have a bad end. The news sting operations were connected to the gaze in that language and that choice of story. This was the narrative that was thrust upon these young couples, such that every relationship was squeezed into an illicit frame and all love was depicted as sleazy.”

The documentary uses fiction strategically to trouble the documented images. Through electronic soundtracks that mimic the background scores of crime-thrillers, and neon-lit shots of the town at night, Paromita

references the aesthetics and generic accentuations of local magazines and novels carrying detailed fictional pieces on illicit relationships ending in doom. We also hear from the authors of these literatures, small-time novelists willing to make a buck off of scandal, titillating the audiences under the claims of exposing tabooed romantic affairs. One of them even says, “I let the public know what’s in store for them if they get involved in sexual relationships before or outside of wedlock”.

One of the last sequences in the film travels to an upper-middle class suburb in Meerut where Paromita interviews young college-going women. They approve of love, but not of its public expression. They feel that their families know best and that they couldn’t love someone their parents don’t approve of. Paromita asks one of the girls what her idea of romance is. She smiles shyly, lingers on a thought and shakes her head in giggles. She’s unsure of the camera and of being asked to spell-out her own desires, something “good girls” from “good families” are not supposed to do. The camera cuts to an Archies gift shop where two young boys are busy hunting for greeting cards. “Does your girlfriend

A film by Paromita Vohra



Morality TV aur Loving JEHAD

Ek Manohar Kahani



Producer PSBT **Director** Paromita Vohra
Camera Avijit Mukul Kishore **Editing** Sankalp Meshram
Sound Samina Mishra **Music** Chirantan Bhatt
Narrator Lovleen Mishra



Morality TV

study in the same class as you”, Paromita asks. The boy nods and asks her if she’d like to see the girl’s photograph which he carries in his pocket. “I chanced upon my girlfriend when I accidentally dialled a wrong number once, I’ve never met her but we always talk on the phone”, says the other boy. “How can you be in love with someone you’ve never met?”, Paromita asks. “Love is love”, the boy sheepishly replies. “I don’t care who she is or what she looks like, I will always love her”.

The camera finally takes us back to the public parks one last time, only now there are no people around, no police and no camera crews. An old Hindi film song about young love erupts in the background as the camera zooms in on scores of love-notes scribbled onto benches and trees by young lovers, residue from clandestine meetings away from the prying eyes of a divided society. In these parting shots, Paromita captures the innocence of young love in small town India, an image that the morality TVs would never show us.

The Lightning Testimonies: Fragments of Trauma and Women’s Resistance

The documentary form, along with its claim to truth, has been institutionalized as a recounting and reconstruction of histories. While most documentaries through the 80s and 90s, when taking up gender injustice, employed facts and figures, official numbers, certified archives or expert analysis to build a narrative, some attempted at mobilizing community memory and oral histories to tell stories of oppression and violence. *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007), a multichannel video art installation by Amar Kanwar, having travelled 16 countries, continues to be displayed across noted gallery spaces. More than a decade and a half since it opened for viewing, Kanwar’s installation continues to evoke interest. Kanwar and his team explore the decades-long histories of gendered violence in the Indian subcontinent by focusing on women’s narratives that have long remained missing from official and bureaucratic enquiries in national history.

Kanwar changes track from the traditional methods of accessing accounts of gendered violence. He uses silence, memory, images, often of objects and spaces, and illustrations across eight screens mounted on the four walls of the exhibition spaces he displays the work in.

The Lightning Testimonies gathers its materials from Punjab during partition in 1947, the Bangladeshi War of Independence in the 70s, ethnic violence in Gujarat in 2002, the horrific anti-Dalit violence in Kharlainji in 2006, and the state repression by the armed forces in Nagaland, Manipur, and Kashmir across the past three decades. The viewer is shown what's left after the gruesome incidents, lives marred with trauma and whatever little else has survived these histories.

Amar Kanwar's journey through different decades of the changing landscape of documentary practice has been experimental in its formal innovations. Having been trained at the Jamia Millia Islamia's Mass Communication department, Kanwar began by making short documentaries on issues like health, minimum wages, maternity benefits etc. till he found conventional film practice too expensive to sustain for long. After quitting his research at the People's Science Institute in the 80s, Kanwar found contact with the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha, led by the iconic trade union leader Shankar Guha Niyogi. Before Kanwar could reach Bhilai, to film the mass movement against land grab by corporate industrialists, Niyogi was assassinated. Kanwar later used a recording of Niyogi's and visuals of the site of crime to make a witness account film that people from the movement could continue to add to. And so, Kanwar began his experiments with documenting narratives of social injustice and finding experimental methods to show them in unconventional ways. Kanwar's trilogy, *A Season Outside* (1997), *A Night of Prophecy* (2002) and *To Remember* (2003) also experiment with the traditional language of documentary to chart the troubled histories of the Indian subcontinent.

Kanwar's *Lightning Testimonies* is often screened in large dark projection rooms where the viewers are offered to either be seated in the middle of, or walk around, the room as simultaneous projections on multiple screens surround them. Each screen displays a different region, a tragedy now in the past, but where trauma remains in the residues. Images either change every few seconds or linger for longer durations. On one screen comes the text "I haven't forgotten" as the camera narrows in on an unnamed Manipuri woman's face. On the screen next to it, a still photograph of an old wall in tatters flashes repeatedly as the text says, "looking for a Muslim village or Muslim women". Another screen on the wall across from these, shows an old woman in the village of Thangjam Manorama, tortured, raped and killed, sitting silently at a wooden yarn, sewing a shawl in memory of her daughter.

There is no speech or dialogue through most parts of the film. Only towards the end all, but one screen, go blank. And the hitherto soundscape that covered subtle ambient sounds and instrumental music, erupts in loud dialogue. Noted Manipuri stage actor Heisnam Sabitri plays the part of the protagonist in playwright Kanhailal's *Drapadi*, an adaptation based on a short story of the same name by the Bengali novelist Mahasweta Devi. Sabitri is a captivating presence in Kanwar's work, the only woman who speaks. She enacts the rage of the epic queen as she faces her oppressors who have raped her. She induces dread, shame and fear in them as she unclothes herself in a fit of manic rage mirroring the historical Manipuri mothers' protests in front of the army headquarters in Manipur, 2004. There are no subtitles to this clip. She performs the act in a language most viewers are not familiar with and yet the act of charged monologue binds the narratives of trauma with the decades old struggle for women's freedom in the subcontinent.

The visual imagery in *The Lightning Testimonies* moves from archival footage to text, still photographs, moving documented

images, dates, places and hand drawn illustrations. The attempt is not to recreate particular incidents but to use fragments of memory to put together the expanse of regions in the Indian subcontinent with its periodic severe flare ups of targeting women from marginalized caste, ethnicity and religious communities. In an interview at Tate Modern, Kanwar remarks on his work: “I have often been asked whether this is documentary, whether this is art, are you an activist, are you a visual artist, are you a filmmaker. I think it’s just simpler to say that I am responding... Within these eight projections is a constellation of a whole spectrum of stories, of experiences, of memories, of acts of sexual violence in the Indian subcontinent from 1947 to 2005-2006. The birth of India and Pakistan is linked to this horror and I think we need to understand this history in this particular way as well, through another lens. How do I tell this meaningfully, respectfully, what language is there to talk about this kind of pain? I didn’t want to get anybody to really articulate it. I felt that there must be another way for me to understand. You can find it in a mark, in a stone, in a tree, in a window. I felt it was important to put these eight projections together to see the similarities between something that happened in 1952 in Nagaland and something that happened in 2002 in Gujarat, which is in some way, just the way we live our lives. There are so many things happening at the same time and we make sense of it in bits and pieces.”

Kanwar poetically knits together the gendered landscape of trauma through visual and aural abstractions. But even with the fragmentary nature of narration, Kanwar doesn’t let the historic details be lost in prose. Names, places and details of the gendered violence establish the historical specificity of the incidents covered in the art piece as words, half sentences unite them in collective mourning and grief. Away from the mainstream representations of these historical events of violence that give no space to women’s voices and claim official “truths”, *The Lightning Testimonies* creates an intimate

space where these missing narratives unravel. But the film towards the end moves out of the experiences of suffering, emphasizing upon the possibility of resistance through Heisnam Sabitri’s performance from the play *Draupadi*. Unlike *Draupadi* of the epic tale of the Mahabharata, in Kanwar’s text, the imagination of the woman is not someone praying for divine male intervention but of a resilient fighter who will battle for transformation.

Conclusion

This paper spots the films discussed as examples of a gradual, yet significant transformation in the Indian documentary scenario at a particular juncture of the mid-to late aughts. These works, in the initial years of its release, departed from the conventional practice of the social issue documentaries of the 70s and 80s, and of the personal portrait films that the technological shifts of the 90s, coupled with an ever-expanding international festival circuit, brought about. These experimental documentaries have pushed us to think about issues differently as well as mapping individualized narratives through refreshing strategies. For example, Paromita Vohra’s *Morality T.V. aur Loving Jihad: Ek Manohar Kahani* unmasks the patriarchal communal propaganda through multiple screens and Amar Kanwar’s *The Lightning Testimonies* documents the expansive history of women’s oppression and resistance in the Indian subcontinent. But none of these films followed the older documentary model of problem-solving structure, yet invoking narratives of hope and resistance. But these works were also not limited by the fascination with unique individuals while sharing with us the intimate personal accounts which we otherwise usually disregard.

To sum up, the multiplicity of imagination in all these documentaries doesn’t simply attend to feminist issues, but also thoroughly questions the idea of “gendered reality”. A talking point across film networks even today in the times of short form content on



Morality TV aur Loving Jihad Ek Manohar Kahani (2007)

gender across social media, they continue to complicate and subvert the “truth” claim of the previous practices of the documentary genre. Today we see the proliferation of short video formats used to articulate gender issues across diverse online platforms. They draw from popular cinema, advertising, news programming, mainstream films to retailor the moving image itself. We could even argue that the experimental feminist documentaries of the early 2000s and their negotiations with the format after satellite television and new media technologies, are a precursor to today’s ever expanding digital image-culture in its multiplying intersections with gender.

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