

STUDY GUIDE

FEM CRIT

CONTENTS

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Footnotes | 2 |
| Questions | 3 |
| Additional Resources | 3 |
| Further Viewing | 3 |

CREDITS

Each of the seven films presented on the *Fem Crit* collection provocatively confront processes of gender identity construction. In complex, overlapping and deeply personal ways these films explore how the category of women is constructed in Canadian society. Skin colour, hair texture, biology and standards of beauty intersect within these films to reveal the complicated identities experienced by women. Any study of these works must then adequately address not only the pleasurable and artistic elements of these films but also their approaches to race, gender, sexuality and class in an equally integrated way.¹ These films also push beyond a film analysis that produces essentialized artistic meanings and instead engage a study of the relationship between filmmaker, viewer and the work produced. Over time and in different contexts these relationships change and so it becomes possible to revisit these works again and again to discern new themes. The themes of bodies, social control and definitions of women, and self-reflexive processes frame women's identity through the visual medium. Three films in this collection, Dawn Wilkinson's *Dandelions*, Kay Armatage's *Speakbody* and Sara Halprin's *Keltie's Beard* aptly illustrate these subjects.

In *Dandelions*, director Dawn Wilkinson uses images of herself in nature against an extremely intimate narrative to explore the complexities of black female identity in Canada. In her film, she traces the pain of this identity to the incessant interrogation of her birthplace. This painful question repeats in the film, expressing her feeling of its inescapability. Images of the director with dandelions in her hair in a rural Canadian field and on a Canadian beach are carefully framed. The film frame, like identity, can be constraining. The artist places herself in frame but in a context that contradicts external social forces framing her identity as a black woman. To "destabilize" this imposed identity, the director juxtaposes images of her own self-definition with her voiceover narrative description of her repeated encounters with attempts to define her. The notion of the "gaze" is invoked: the relationship between the director and those who define her -those who are watching her, including the audience for her film- is thus interrogated. The director herself laments on her inability to predict the audiences' reaction. Who will watch? What will they see? A complete and satisfying expression of her confusion conducted through imagery and narration is not, as she says in summary, something she can do. What she produces instead is an expression of the pain and confusion of understanding what it means to be a black Canadian woman.

Director Kay Armatage approaches the construction of gender and class in Canada in 1979 by turning her lens upon another complex issue affecting women and identity—abortion. Through the portrayal and layering of different women's voices narrating their personal experiences of abortion with the "images that I (the filmmaker) remember" this film also relates a deeply personal, exclusively female, experience. The profound impact of economics is introduced to compound the

concept of choice: “no money, no skills.” Faces are always only partially shown, or out of frame or out of focus. The effect here is that focus falls on the body, the woman’s biological body, which is the cause of concern for all the voices in the film. Once more the relationship between the viewer and the filmmaker and the film is opened up. It introduces us to the relationship between the film text and the subjectivity of the spectator.² The partial and out of focus faces can become familiar. The concerns can easily become one’s own: What does the body mean for identity? Where are the places that the pain of abortion is derived from? The questions Armatage raises about women’s bodies and reproductive choices remain highly relevant.

Sara Halprin’s *Kelti’s Beard* seems at first glance to be quite lighthearted. The form is aesthetically simple and framed around a single talking head, Kelti. This talking head is not simple, however, because it represents a direct challenge to the social construction of the category of woman. Through this talking head the view is made to reflect upon multiple sites of meaning. What are the standards of beauty for women? How significant are these standards to the social construction of identity? How are these standards maintained? As viewers we are forced to confront our own internalized standards of beauty, the significance we place on them and whether or not we can accept Kelti’s construction of her identity as a woman.

What each of these films from the *Fem Crit* collection share is that in the process of analysis one’s own identity and relationship to the film becomes foregrounded. While each filmmaker has revealed very personal stories, so to, the viewer must confront these works in very personal ways. While this process of reflection and self-reflexivity is complicated and difficult, it also introduces and represents a very productive and perhaps much more feminist mode of film analysis. Through studying these films, the process of analyzing film can be understood as more than a deconstruction of scenes and filmic techniques and instead become a method for personal and political engagement.

¹ “(T)hose of us in film studies and women’s studies must constantly confront economics and issues of class in our film criticism as much as we analyze artistic constructions of race, gender, and sexuality.”: 56. Janell Hobson, “Viewing in the Dark: Toward a Black Feminist Approach to Film.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 30, No. 1/2 (2002): 45-59.

² Annette Kuhn, “The State of Film and Media Feminism.” *Signs* 30, No. 1 (2004): 1221-1230. (Quoting Metz).

QUESTIONS

1. In “A Peculiar Sensation: A Personal Genealogy of Korean American Women’s Cinema” Helen Lee writes about the complications of her identity as a Korean filmmaker. Referencing her article on *Sally’s Beauty Spot*, discuss the method she uses to express these complications. Compare and contrast this film to Sara Halprin’s *Keltie’s Beard*. How do these films address standards of beauty? What filmic techniques do they employ? As a viewer, compare your response to Sally with that of Keltie.
2. Lisa Hayes makes use of found footage in her film *Women Are Not Little Men*. How does this technique support the theme of her film? What other narrative or rhetorical techniques does the filmmaker use?
3. All seven of the films in this collection explore the differences between personal identity and socially ascribed identity. In other words, each director addresses the gap between the lived experiences of women and the way they are expected to behave, think and look. How do these films engage new or disrupted perspectives about the meaning of femininity, or what is considered appropriate behavior for a woman? As a viewer, which images or narratives ask you to rethink gender identity? List the themes you see as the most relevant throughout the films.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Armatage, Kay et al, (Eds.). *Gendering the Nation: Canadian Women’s Cinema*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

Carson, Diane et al, (Eds.). *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Hobson, Janell “Viewing in the Dark: Toward a Black Feminist Approach to Film.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 30, No. 1/2 (2002): 45-59.

Kuhn, Annette. “The State of Film and Media Feminism.” *Signs* 30, No. 1 (2004): 1221-1230.

Lee, Helen. “A Peculiar Sensation: A Personal Genealogy of Korean American Women’s Cinema.” *Cineaste* 23, No. 1 (1997): 36-39.
[Online]. Available: <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/koreancinema.html>

FURTHER VIEWING

Bowie: One in a Million. Janis Cole, 1999. 10:00. Canada. Distributed by CFMDC.

Division. Kika Thorne, 1991. 3:00. Canada. Distributed by CFMDC.

Mary Mary. Anna Gronau, 1989. 55:30. Canada. Distributed by CFMDC.

New Shoes: An Interview in Exactly 5 Minutes. Ann Marie Fleming, 1990. 5:00. Canada. Distributed by CFMDC.

STUDY GUIDE CREDITS

Study guide developed by Chantelle Oliver with Megan Boler from Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, copyright 2005.

Feel free to use and distribute but please credit the authors and CFMDC.

Megan Boler, Associate Professor at OISE, University of Toronto, teaches media studies, philosophy and feminist theory in education. She recently collaboratively produced a study guide to accompany *The Corporation* (dirs. Mark Achbar and J. Abbott 2003) and her current research is focused on digital dissent and online civic participation after September 11.

www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/tps/Boler/index.html

Chantelle Oliver is an M.A. student in the in Department of Sociology and Equity Studies at OISE, University of Toronto, with a research focus on feminist theories, popular culture, and postcolonial theory. She is also a film producer and director.

Editor: Megan Boler Ph.D.

Writer and Research: Chantelle Oliver

Proofreader: Ana Barajas

Study Guide Coordinators: Dr. Megan Boler, Deirdre Logue, and Ana Barajas

Project Coordinator: Lukas Blakk

Project Director: Deirdre Logue

Design: Lisa Kiss Design



Conseil des Arts
du Canada



torontoartscouncil
An arm's length body of the City of Toronto