
Nontheatrical Media

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Madeline Anderson's thirty-minute documentary *I Am Somebody* (1969) is about an African American female hospital workers' strike in Charleston, South Carolina. Anderson shot the film on 16mm and showed it to striking workers in nontheatrical settings after its completion. Its production, exhibition, and reception history suggests some of the complexities at play when considering the categorization of nontheatrical material. According to Anderson, "In the criticisms and analyses of the film by some white feminists during the 1970s, *I Am Somebody* was not regarded as a feminist film. To me, the importance of the film was not its classification, however; it is a film made by a black woman for and about black women."¹ Both a documentary film and a nontheatrical film, a film made independently by an African American woman about working African American women and a film about class and class struggle, *I Am Somebody* did not express concerns shared or even recognized by a decidedly more privileged, white feminist agenda. Its intersectionality—including its categorization, since it is discussed almost exclusively as a documentary film even though it is most certainly also a nontheatrical film—makes *I Am Somebody* a complicated object, both at the time of its original circulation and now.²

From home movies to industrial films, from 16mm animated films that traveled the festival circuit to experimental video, from educational films to student films, from films made by and for churches to propaganda films produced on behalf of governments, and, yes, to documentaries, too, nontheatrical media has been produced and consumed in a wide array of contexts over the past century. These works might have been screened for as limited an audience as that found in a private home or as far-reaching as that garnered by a national television broadcast or a sponsored distribution chain. Nontheatrical media was and continues to be made largely outside of the corporate environment of major film

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studios and commercial producers more generally. For this reason, more women, relatively speaking, have had opportunities to participate in nontheatrical media making than in the more financially high-stakes commercial media industries, which have long been and continue to be male dominated. Though nontheatrical films and video were certainly still produced by and for circulation in the patriarchal and white-dominant (at least in the Western world) societies in which they were made, considering the universe of theatrical film is illustrative by way of comparison: in Hollywood only two women, Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino, directed films for the major studios between the 1930s and the 1960s. Since nontheatrical filmmaking has always been decentralized and its production and exhibition often unorthodox (ground-up or even do-it-yourself), the roster of female makers—including women of color, lesbians, and trans women—in a comparable time period, for example, is extensive by comparison. Nontheatrical media studies is, for this reason and many others, a rich and still relatively under-explored area for feminist scholars, including those outside of media studies—in history, anthropology, or American studies, for example—who have rarely looked to media of this sort. Nontheatrical media is a strategic object of study that can be used to reconceptualize and expand our understanding of feminist film and media history—indeed, gender histories more broadly.

Since nontheatrical works have long been the bastard stepchildren of scholarly film and media studies, which have privileged commercial, theatrical works above all else, it is not surprising that the move to take this media seriously emerged in large part from a conference that set out to disturb scholarly norms by creating a space for showing and discussing neglected works: the pioneering Orphan Film Symposium, which Dan Streible and his colleagues began at the University of South Carolina in 1999. Perusing past programs for the symposium, one immediately sees evidence of inclusivity and interest in the universe outside mainstream narrative cinema: a 1999 panel on “Rediscovering Oscar Micheaux,” a 2001 showing of Fox Movietone footage of women aviators from the late 1920s, a 2002 panel focused on the films and audio work of Zora Neale Hurston, and so on.³ This conference has inspired countless articles, dissertations, books, and curated screenings, while also creating a space for considerations of all manner of marginal media, including feminist and women-authored media. The Orphan Film Symposium provided my own entrée into the nontheatrical universe. It is where I first seriously considered the richness of educational films and the delightful small-gauge films of feminist film champion Helen Hill (one of many talented contemporary nontheatrical media makers showcased at the symposium over

the years), and where I first encountered a like-minded group of archivists and scholars who believe that there is value in taking nontheatrical film seriously.⁴

To date, feminist film history has largely focused on commercial feature filmmaking and documentary filmmaking, the latter of which often intersects with nontheatrical film in a fashion that has not been rendered particularly visible, as is the case with *I Am Somebody*. Because nontheatrical media is itself a marginalized category, explicitly feminist scholarship has sometimes taken a back seat to the larger mission of establishing and legitimizing the broader field. In my own coedited collection *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* (2012), there are plenty of feminist contributors, but no explicitly feminist topics across the twenty-two chapters.⁵ My contribution to that book focused on race relations films targeted at Black male youth in the late 1960s, a subject to which I recently returned (in a collaboration with Allyson Nadia Field) with a feminist focus on the film *Felicia* (2016) about a young woman of color growing up in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in the 1960s.⁶ Other recent anthologies of scholarship on nontheatrical media are similarly spotty with regard to feminist approaches. Heide Solbrig's work on affirmative action videos produced by and for the Bell System in the 1970s and early 1980s is the sole essay to engage with a feminist subject in Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau's *Films That Work* (2009).⁷ Stephen Groening's chapter on women workers and 1920s Western Union Training films in Haidee Wasson and Charles Acland's *Useful Cinema* (2011) is likewise the lone feminist entry in a much longer edited collection.⁸

The field, however, is rapidly expanding, and new archival and scholarly work has great potential to engage more directly with feminist methodologies and subjects. With approaches ranging from studies of representation, authorship, production, reception, exhibition, and distribution, each offering novel perspectives and contextual opportunities—for example, consider a nontheatrical social guidance film being shown in a church, or a sex or driver's educational film being shown in a classroom, or an activist video about sexual abuse circulating online—it seems likely that feminist inquiry into nontheatrical media will explode in the years to come. Much of this scholarship requires collaboration between researchers and archives, and that spirit of collaboration will continue to enrich the field as archives make their nontheatrical film holdings accessible to researchers and the general public.

Some of the most recent feminist scholarship about nontheatrical media revolves around female authorship, such as Kimberly Tarr's 2012 essay on Adelaide Pearson's amateur travelogue films (which reside in the Northeast

Historic Films Archive) and Martin Johnson's chapter on female itinerant filmmakers in *Main Street Movies: The History of Local Films in the United States* (2018).⁹ In 2016, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Digitizing Hidden Special Collections program funded "The Woman behind the Camera: Home Movies and Amateur Film by Women, 1925–1997," which will allow Northeast Historic Film, the Lesbian Home Movie Project, and the Chicago Film Archives to digitize and make accessible home movies and amateur film and video made by women.¹⁰ Research in the scholarly subset of home movies has, in fact, proven to be a robust area for intersectional studies of gender, race, class, and sexuality, as the groundbreaking work of Michelle Citron, Patricia Zimmermann, and Karen Ishizuka amply demonstrates.¹¹

In addition to considerations of female-authored nontheatrical media, the field requires further feminist theorization and historicization. As just a few examples of recent scholarship might suggest, there is a generous scope to the sub-discipline: Cara Caddoo's *Envisioning Freedom* (2014) uses the context of African American nontheatrical film circuits in the Southern United States, especially churches, to study the ways that Black film culture existed before and shifted during the Great Migration; Alexandra Juhasz's writing about AIDS documentaries considers technology and activism in digital spaces; Jennifer Horne's scholarship on women's clubs, the better films movement, and the belief in the social value of educational films demonstrates how women organized to influence both theatrical and nontheatrical films, exerting power, especially over youth, in ways that were socially acceptable; Katie Day Good writes about the role that (largely female) teachers played in bringing "new media" into the classroom in the first half of the twentieth century; Sharon Thompson's recent work makes a case for the ways that lesbian home movies reveal a previously unseen representation of lesbian life in twentieth-century media, which in a theatrical context erased their existence altogether; and the entire second issue of *Feminist Media Histories*, edited by Laura Isabel Serna, focuses on useful media, including Roxanne Samer's article about the National Women's Film Circuit, a 1970s lesbian feminist distribution system, and Tanya Goldman's profile of Lee Dick, a 1940s female nonfiction film director and producer.¹²

The second wave feminist mantra "the personal is political" is illuminating with regard to nontheatrical media, not just in relation to nonfiction films such as Madeline Anderson's *I Am Somebody*, but especially in relation to home movies and experimental film and videography. The latter is an area that has benefited from recent academic attention in feminist film journals such as *Camera Obscura*, which typically publish very little scholarship on nontheatrical

forms; for example, Marusya Bociurkiw's work on Canadian feminist video collectives and Ros Murray's on French feminist video collectives.¹³ Part of what I anticipate seeing in years to come is a version of what happened with the study of theatrical film when scholars started documenting the women who worked in the film industry, both in front of and behind the camera.

As film and media studies continues to shift away from privileging the theatrical, more room will be created for the study of an array of feminist media and a consideration of the spaces in which this media was made and seen. Research required to advance feminist studies is decidedly more challenging in the nontheatrical universe than in the theatrical realm, since so little has been preserved that documents nontheatrical production, distribution, and reception.¹⁴ Getting access to nontheatrical media is not an insignificant challenge, given that much of it was, at least in the twentieth century, produced and distributed on what are now obsolete formats, and that it is currently made and circulates primarily in digital formats that may prove even more difficult to access in the future. Locating information about the producers, production, and circulation of nontheatrical media presents even greater challenges for anyone interested in the discipline. Home movies are, in some ways, the most elusive by virtue of their inherently private nature, but perhaps no less so than educational or industrial films, which sometimes bear little or no signs of who made them, and are rarely documented in terms of production or distribution history.

But this makes the work all the more important and exciting. My personal experience has been that every nontheatrical filmmaker, performer, or writer whom I have been able to track down has been both surprised by someone encountering their work and delighted that anyone would take the time to want to know more about it. There is a thrill of discovery in the nontheatrical universe—encountering a long forgotten or, more often than not, a never-before-appreciated work or maker, or a context in which that media was produced and shown that runs counter to the mainstream—that should be enticing to anyone interested in revising prevailing notions of moving image history, which is precisely what a feminist investigation into this territory promises to do. ■

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NOTES

1. Statement from Madeline Anderson on *I Am Somebody* (1969), *Signs*, <http://signsjournal.org/madeline-anderson-i-am-somebody-1969/>.
2. For relevant discussion of feminism, documentary, and the challenges of categorization and access see Shilyh Warren, "By, For, and About: The 'Real' Problem in the Feminist Film Movement," *Mediascape* (Fall 2008): http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Fallo8_Warren.html.
3. Complete Orphan Film Symposium programs are available at <https://www.nyu.edu/orphanfilm/>.
4. For more on Helen Hill see Dan Streible, "In Memoriam Helen Hill," *Film History* 19, no. 4 (2007): 438–41.
5. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, eds., *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
6. Marsha Gordon and Allyson Nadia Field, "The Other Side of the Tracks: Nontheatrical Film History, Pre-Rebellion Watts, and *Felicia*," *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 2 (February 2016): 1–24. The coedited essay collection *Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film* is under contract to Duke University Press.
7. Heide Solbrig, "The Personnel Is Political: Voice and Citizenship in Affirmative-Action Videos in the Bell System, 1970–1984," in *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, ed. Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 259–82.
8. Stephen Groening, "'We Can See Ourselves as Others See Us': Women Workers and Western Union's Training Films in the 1920s," in *Useful Cinema*, ed. Haidee Wasson and Charles Acland (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 34–58.
9. Kimberly Tarr, "Round the World and Back Again: Mapping the Cultural and Historic Significance of the Adelaide Pearson Film Collection," *Moving Image* 12, no. 2 (2012): 95–120; Martin Johnson, *Main Street Movies: The History of Local Films in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).
10. See <http://womanbehindthecamera.org/>.
11. Michelle Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Patricia Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995); Karen Ishizuka and Patricia Zimmermann, eds., *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
12. Cara Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2014); Alexandra Juhasz, "Digital AIDS Documentary: Webs, Rooms, Viruses, and Quilts," in *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*, ed. Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow (West Sussex, England: John Wiley and Sons, 2015); Jennifer Horne, "The Better Films Movement and the Very Notion of It," *Feminist Media Histories* 3, no. 4 (2017): 46–68; Katie Day Good, "Making Do with Media: Teachers, Technology, and Tactics of Media Use in American Classrooms, 1919–1946," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2016), 75–92; Sharon Thompson, "Urgent: The Lesbian Home Movie Project," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 19 (2015): 114–16; *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 2 (2015).

13. Marusya Bociurkiw, "Big Affect: The Ephemeral Archive of Second-Wave Feminist Video Collectives in Canada," *Camera Obscura* 31, no. 2 (2016): 5–33; Ros Murray, "Raised Fists: Politics, Technology, and Embodiment in 1970s French Feminist Video Collectives," *Camera Obscura* 31, no. 1 (2016): 93–121.

14. Important work has been done by archivists to save, make accessible, and provide information about nontheatrical films and filmmakers, including Geoff Alexander of the Academic Film Archive of North America (<http://www.afana.org/>), Skip Elsheimer of A/V Geeks (<http://www.avgeeks.com/wp2/>), Rick Prelinger of the University of California, Santa Cruz (<https://archive.org/details/prelinger>), Charles Tepperman on behalf of the Amateur Cinema Database (<http://www.amateurcinema.org/>), and Charles Acland through his Canadian Educational, Sponsored, and Industrial Film (CESIF) Project (<http://www.screenculture.org/cesif/about>). Other institutions, such as the Indiana University Libraries Special Collections (<https://libraries.indiana.edu/iulmia>), have also made significant efforts to make their nontheatrical film materials accessible online.