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ties that bind



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the psyche of feminist filmmaking
sydney, 1969 - 1989.

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Ties That Bind

The Psyche of Feminist Filmmaking

Sydney, 1969 - 1989

Felicity Collins

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Technology, Sydney

Certificate

I certify that this thesis has not already been submitted as part of candidature for any degree and is not being submitted as part of candidature for any other degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me and that any help that I have received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signature of Candidate

Selvicity Kuller
.....

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PREFACE

I take the Preface as an opportunity to define the subject and scope of the thesis, to indicate how it took shape, and to situate it in relation to my previous writings on Australian, independent, and feminist cinema.

My purpose in this thesis has been to track the psyche of a Sydney milieu - identified since the late 1970s as 'independent feminist filmmaking'. The focus of my research is the constellation of women who were attracted to both the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) and to independent filmmaking in Sydney from 1969-1989. At the core of this milieu was the Sydney Women's Film Group (SWFG), which was formed directly out of the WLM's publications group, Words For Women. In 1978, the Feminist Film Workers (FFW) constituted itself (as a closed group) from within the SWFG to concentrate on a range of activities to promote a specifically *feminist* cinema.

A number of institutions were crucial to the ethos and identity of the SWFG/FFW - most importantly the Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative (formally established out of the Ubu film group in 1969) and its monthly publication, *Filmnews*. The State-funded institutions most important in terms of financing independent feminist filmmaking were: the Experimental Film and Television Fund (EFTVF) from 1970-78; the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTVS) from 1974; the Women's Film Fund (WFF) from 1976-1987; and the Creative Development Branch (CDB) of the Australian Film Commission (AFC) from 1978-1989.

The imbrication of independent feminist filmmaking with the above institutions, organisations and groups has been substantially documented in the 1987 publication *Don't Shoot Darling! Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia* (Annette Blonski, Barbara Creed and Freda Freiberg, eds). My research is indebted to this publication for its pathbreaking work of mapping the institutional histories, personalities and bodies of film which define the milieu.

Unlike *Don't Shoot Darling!*, this thesis takes 'feminist' rather than 'women's' independent filmmaking as its terrain. My interest is in the binding tensions between Woman/Activist/Artist/Mother in the arena of independent filmmaking: the shift in the mid 1970s from a women's liberationist to a feminist perspective was an enactment of the conflicting relations between

'woman/mother' and 'feminist/activist/artist' in the milieu's psyche. This thesis is about the constellation of politicised baby boomers who took as their project the explication and exploration, in cinematic form, of those tensions .

Martha Ansara's personal statement written for *Don't Shoot Darling!* in 1987, is a revealing sketch of what drew the politicised psyche to the imaginal world of the cinema ("to see the light") rather than to the *realpolitik* of the femocracy:

Maya Deren ... said that cameras do not make films; rather the filmmaker makes a film with her flexible body and her imaginative mind. Brian Probyn showed me how a cinematographer depends on her own eyes - to observe physically and psychologically - to see the light. My mother taught me the value to an artist of mastery of craft and the place of technical exercises. Tom Cowan once reminded me that a filmmaker has something in common with the priest or a communist. Ho Chi Minh made the American Declaration of Independence relevant to the modern world: 'All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free.' Dr Helen Caldicott warns us to get our priorities straight. The Cuban cinema inspires us to enjoy ourselves. And Mao Tse Tung put it in a nutshell: 'Dare To Struggle. Dare To Win.' (Ansara, 1987: 181)

The milieu of politicised filmmaking that emerged from the WLM was a *revolutionary* one. The revolutionary ideal of the WLM was defined by Ann Curthoys and Lyndall Ryan in a paper delivered to a women's liberation conference held in Sydney in January 1971:

[...] we see women's liberation as working for revolution, but not the sort of revolution which is an event that takes two or three days, in which there is shooting and hanging. 'It will be a long, drawn out process in which new people will be created, capable of renovating society so that the revolution will not replace one elite with another, but rather will create a new anti-authoritarian society, with new anti-authoritarian people who in their turn will reorganise the society so that it will become a non-alienated human society, free from war, hunger and exploitation.' These words of Rudi Dutschke are about the closest we have heard to the ideal some of us are seeking. Susan Sontag has stated the problem even more bluntly. For her revolution

means 'not only creating political and economic justice but releasing and validating personal, as well as social, energies of all kinds, including erotic ones'. (see Curthoys, 1988: 11)

The mobilising force of personal and erotic energies in attracting women to the WLM and to filmmaking posed a central difficulty for the research and writing of this thesis. In my previous writing on independent cinema (see Collins 1983a, 1984, 1987b) I performed historical analyses of the ideology and rhetoric of film institutions, leaving out the stories of passionately felt commitments, rivalries, triumphs, and failures that I was privy to while I was doing my research. I became vividly aware of the distinct personalities of Sydney film scenes, however, I tried in my writing to 'rise above' such knowledge which I considered 'too personal'.

When I embarked on the research for this thesis I felt immense inertia at the prospect of writing in the same vein as my previous work. This resistance to the thesis did not shift until Susan Dermody suggested in July 1991 that what I was interested in - in the stories I'd come across in the files of the Women's Film Fund - was the psyche of a milieu. This suggestion was the key that unlocked the thesis.

I take the psyche of a milieu as the intersubjective realm of experience where precious beliefs are made and remade in conscious and unconscious ways in the interaction of socio-political and psychic realities. Morris Berman in *Coming To Our Senses* (1989) suggests that historiography in the modern period has lost the ability to include what it is that really matters to us in the retelling of the past:

The major obstacle to understanding the past ... is, curiously enough, the problem of living in the modern period itself, i.e., during the time in which history became a professional discipline, modeled along the lines of the natural sciences. Previous to this time, history was by and large a mode of storytelling. This is not to say that it was "merely" ... fiction.... It would be more accurate to say that it had a very different sense of what "the facts" were. In this mode, "the facts" were first and foremost what happened on a psychic and emotional level; indeed, if this got left out, it was fair to say that *nothing happened* - there was no story to tell. The essential truth was an interior one; to omit this was to give the reader, or listener, no significant information whatsoever. In the transition to modernity, this emphasis on interior knowing was severely attenuated. (Berman, 1989: 111)

When I sat down to write up my research into the psyche of feminist filmmaking (Sydney, 1969-89) I harboured an ambition to write "what happened on a psychic and emotional level". This desire to draw on "interior knowing" turned out to be more challenging than I had imagined, especially in the supremely rationalist form of the doctoral thesis. I had no model before me to show me how to proceed. My first inspiration came from chancing upon Dorothy Dinnerstein's 1976 account in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* of the psychological underpinnings of the madness of history in the nuclear age, and finding resonances of Dinnerstein's argument in Martha Ansara's narration of the personal history she brought with her when she arrived in Australia in the auspicious year of 1969 - the year of the first WLM meeting in Sydney; the year of the founding of the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op, and the year of the inaugural recommendation for a national film and television school, a film development corporation and an experimental film and television fund (see "Interim Report ... " 1969, in Moran and O'Regan, eds, 1985: 171-174).

The synchronicity between Ansara and Dinnerstein on the genesis of the New Left became my starting point. The thesis has no endpoint, only a series of returns to the very questions that initiated the attempt by a politically motivated constellation of women to escape institutionalised motherhood as their adult destiny.¹ *Ties That Bind* is my account of a milieu founded on a utopian faith that the world, and women's place in it, could be remade. The milieu's precious beliefs (and their cinematic projection), as well as the sacrifices and griefs exacted by the activist ethos, define the scope of this thesis.

St Kilda. 20 March 1995

¹ See Lesley Johnson (1993) for an eloquent interpretation of the ways in which, in the 1950s and early 1960s, youth as a period of 'growing up' was meant to have an *endpoint* in mature adulthood, which for women meant becoming wives and mother.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation (formerly Commission)
AFC	Australian Film Commission
AFI	Australian Film Institute
AFTVS	Australian Film and Television School
ATOM	Australian Teachers of Media
CDB	Creative Development Branch
CDF	Creative Development Fund
CO-OP	Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative
EFTVF	Experimental Film and Television Fund
FFW	Feminist Film Workers
IWY	International Women's Year (1975)
NSWIT	New South Wales Institute of Technology
OWA	Office of Women's Affairs
SBS	Special Broadcasting Services
SWFG	Sydney Women's Film Group
UTS	University of Technology, Sydney
WFF	Women's Film Fund
WFU	Women's Film Unit
WLM	Women's Liberation Movement

ABSTRACT

The purpose of my research for this thesis has been to investigate the psychic and emotional history of the milieu of independent, feminist filmmaking that began to form within the Women's Liberation Movement in Sydney in 1969. My interest in the psyche of the milieu has been two-fold: to explore the possibility of writing an interior or subjective history, not of an individual but of a political milieu; and to grapple with the trajectory of the utopian, activist politics of the 1970s into the 1980s.

I began my research by reading over five hundred funding applications from the files of the Women's Film Fund - an extensive archival record of the interaction between the funding femocracy and aspiring filmmakers. The building blocks of the thesis derived from interviews with founding members of the Sydney Women's Film Group (SWFG) and the Feminist Film Workers (FFW), and with former managers and Advisory Panel members of the Women's Film Fund. I consulted the SWFG and FFW records held (uncatalogued) by the National Film and Sound Archive, and I was given access to papers from the personal files of some of the filmmakers. I also viewed the body of films associated with the women's collections at the former Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative and the Women's Film Fund.

From 1969-89 there were three major reconfigurations in the psyche of the milieu. The 1960s liberationist ethos - characterised by energy, excitement and eros - was transformed into an ethic of duty, discipline and sacrifice in the late 1970s. In the 1980s, feminist activism reached a limit point which turned the milieu's attention to the psychic foundations of its own origins and to the question of what had been sacrificed in the formation of the feminist activist. This question haunts the films of the 1980s through the insistent figure of the maternal. The ties that bound this milieu to a luminous vision of the future had their origins in a deeply shadowed image of the immediate past. This psychic reality is a point of origin and return as the milieu continues to remake itself through the cinema, into the 1990s.