



INDEPENDENT FEMALE FILMMAKERS

A CHRONICLE THROUGH INTERVIEWS,
PROFILES, AND MANIFESTOS

EDITED BY MICHELE MEEK



A **Focal Press** Book

ROUTLEDGE


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INTRODUCTION

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In January 1982, *The Independent Film & Video Monthly* featured a report from the second International Women Filmmakers Symposium at the Directors Guild of America (DGA) with the headline “Independent by Default—or by Choice.” Writer Marion Cajori states, “With very few exceptions, women had turned to independent production as a way out of long and frustrating years of work without being given any opportunity within the Hollywood system.” Yet, in the article, these same women filmmakers express that staying independent “offers more freedom and control over the quality of work, not to mention the possibility of actually practicing one’s craft.”

Therein lies the irony inherent in independent female filmmaking—it offers more “freedom” and creative “control,” but the path to be independent is not always explicitly chosen. Major Hollywood studios—who greenlight and fund most popular films—have been accused of “systematic discrimination” against women and people of color who pursue directorial roles.¹ For the women filmmakers in this book, *Independent Female Filmmakers: A Chronicle through Interviews, Profiles, and Manifestos*, discrimination took various forms—Director Cheryl Dunye’s landmark NEA-funded film *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) was lambasted by Republicans in the US Congress for its depiction of lesbian sexuality; and Director and former DGA President Martha Coolidge recalls how she was told she could not obtain a producing credit (which not only meant more prestige but also more money) on some projects simply because she was a woman. Many of the women in this compilation turned to television to continue earning their living as directors and writers, and several—some by choice and others by necessity—became authors, teachers, or professors while pursuing their directorial careers.

Institutional bias has had a direct impact on the budgets, genres, and scales of the projects that women direct, as evidenced by the interviews in this collection. When asked in her 1981 *Independent* interview (republished in this compilation) what she might do with more resources, filmmaker Ericka Beckman responds, “It’s impossible

to say now, because the ideas are now coming up reduced, so the time seems to have passed.”² Similarly, in a discussion of why independent female filmmakers stay independent or move to television, Coolidge states, “you’re not offered [projects] like men.”³ Many women in this collection articulate that funding challenges kept them from directing features more steadily. Director Maria Maggenti states that it took her six years to fund her second film even after the success of her debut feature *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995). When women do make films, they also seem to be held to higher standards—several women in this compilation mention how hard it is for women to “fail.” Maggenti states, “a woman who doesn’t succeed at every attempt that she is making is rarely given another chance,”⁴ while for men, as Coolidge states, just one success “would carry them through more okay movies. And, you know, another successful movie and that man would have a career.”⁵ When asked how racism and sexism affect her work, Filmmaker Julie Dash replies, “Simply by limiting the options available to me for the completion of my projects.”⁶

By this point, the statistics of women in media are well documented and widely reported—thanks to the studies overseen by Dr. Martha Lauzen and the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, Dr. Stacy Smith and the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at USC Annenberg, and the Geena Davis Institute. Their studies have demonstrated the paltry numbers of women both behind and in front of the camera. For example, Dr. Smith found that although women comprised nearly a third of the directors of short films featured at the top 10 worldwide film festivals in 2010–2014, their numbers drop substantially for features⁷—women directed only four percent of the top-grossing movies from 2007 to 2017.⁸ Such numbers are equally troubling for people of color—of the 1,100 popular films in 2007–2017, only five percent of directors were Black and only three percent were Asian or Asian American.

These numbers are disturbing, and they have not changed much in the past several decades. Dr. Lauzen directs annual studies to measure the rates of women directors, writers, producers, editors, and cinematographers in both the top 500 grossing films as well as in the independent film industry. In her historical comparisons, she found that the number of women directors of independent features screened at major film festivals changed from 24 percent in 2008–2009 to 29 percent in 2017–2018.⁹ In looking at Hollywood, Dr. Lauzen found that women directed only 18 percent of the top 250 grossing films, a statistic that has changed by only one percentage point in nearly two decades since 1998.¹⁰

Despite overwhelming odds against women’s making movies, many have persisted, as demonstrated by this compilation. But as the wide-ranging impact of sexual harassment and gender and race imbalance in the industry comes to light,¹¹ we must ask ourselves—how many of these and other equally talented female filmmakers might have become as secured in their positions in the filmmaking canon as their male counterparts if it weren’t for unchecked biases? As Filmmaker Lizzie Borden states in her interview, “I’ve seen amazing films by women around the world while traveling with *Born in Flames* and realized that nobody will see or even count them.”¹²

Writer Lili Loofbourow in her article “The Male Glance” in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* details how film and television critics view and analyze male versus

female work, arguing that the “male glance” is “the narrative corollary to the male gaze”—the way media made by or about men/boys receives more attention and praise than media made by or about women/girls. She argues, “The effects are poisonous and cumulative and have resulted in an absolutely massive talent drain. We’ve been hemorrhaging great work for decades, partly because we were so bad at seeing it.”¹³ Maggenti, in her interview for this compilation, states how Loofbourow’s essay resonated as “significant” to her, because, as she says,

I recognized so profoundly the ways in which women who work in the art of storytelling are not paid attention to, and when you’re not paid attention to and when you’re not taken seriously, it is harder and harder to get your work done.¹⁴

In other words, it is not only Hollywood who should be called out for discriminating against female filmmakers.

At the time of this writing, the University of Mississippi Press’s *Conversations with Filmmakers* series features books of interviews with 108 filmmakers—only seven of whom are women.¹⁵ So not only have female filmmakers faced intense discrimination throughout their careers, but they also then continue to meet such obstacles in how their work is received and remembered—even by academic publishers. I believe that, as scholars and critics, we must de-emphasize “auteur” filmmaking, as traditionally represented by a collection of feature films. Many of the women featured in this compilation have had what one might call “eclectic” film careers spanning genres, lengths, and forms—documentary, narrative, “experimental,” features, shorts, television, and web series. Their careers often include long gaps or several for-hire projects in between their own creative projects. Although today’s market for television offers some women greater funding opportunities and creative control, it still does not come with the cachet of feature film directing. I see no reason to continue such a misperception of their work. If we think that these women filmmakers have worked “in the margins,” it is we who have kept them there.

I believe it is on us as scholars, writers, teachers, and film fans, to contemplate, teach, write about, and promote the indisputable legacy of these women’s films. Otherwise, we are further perpetuating deep-seated industry sexism and racism. These women’s films, in other words, should be on our syllabi. They should be included in our research. Their films should be screened in our festivals and events. Their “lesser known” works should be distributed and widely available. Books and biographies should be written about them and with them. These women should be invited to speak at our universities and organizations, and they should be fairly compensated to do so.

In addition to highlighting women filmmakers, my aim in putting together this compilation is to highlight the archives of *The Independent Film & Video Monthly*. As a print publication from 1976 to 2006 and continued since then as an online publication at www.independent-magazine.org, *The Independent* has often focused on the alternative, activist, and grassroots filmmaker. Over the years, the publication has been instrumental in drawing attention to independent film—and it gave voice to

filmmakers like Coolidge, Rainer, and Minh-ha and prominent scholars like Judith Halberstam and Laura Marks early in their careers.

As a filmmaker, film entrepreneur, and film journalist in the late 1990s, I became a regular reader of *The Independent Film & Video Monthly* and then later a more active participant—an “Online Independents” article in the May 1998 issue highlighted my company NewEnglandFilm.com; I wrote for the magazine in the 2000s; and I was elected to the Board of its parent organization, the Association of Independent Video & Filmmakers (AIVF) where I served from 2004 to 2005. As you can read more about in Erin Trahan’s chapter in this collection about the history of *The Independent*, in 2007, I formed a team to launch a new 501(c)(3) called Independent Media Publications when the AIVF folded, in order to acquire and preserve the archives of the magazine and continue its publication online. The print archives of *The Independent*, I knew then as I know now, constitute an absolutely integral historical record of independent filmmaking from the 1970s to the early 2000s. I encourage you to explore and reference those archives yourself at <http://independent-magazine.org/archives/> thanks to our partnership with University of Massachusetts, Amherst Libraries and the Internet Archive.

Despite its focus on marginalized filmmaking, I discovered in preparing this book that *The Independent’s* coverage still concentrated largely on white, male filmmakers, and women filmmakers were often periodically grouped together in shorter profile pieces.¹⁶ Quite embarrassingly, I discovered that when *The Independent* interviewed me in 2002 about Boston-area filmmaking, I too highlighted only examples of white, male directors—Brad Anderson, David Mamet, and the Farrelly brothers. As perhaps with any publication, a look back through its archives presents some astonishing omissions—there were no long interviews with or profiles of some of the most indisputably important independent female filmmakers in recent history, such as Ava Marie DuVernay, Sophia Coppola, or Kimberly Peirce, among others.

Nonetheless, the list of trailblazing female filmmakers who were featured by *The Independent* is abundant and still represents too many to fit into a book-length project. In order to retain as much of a first-person perspective of the filmmakers as possible, I narrowed the list to filmmakers who had either a longer Q&A interview or their own first-person essay in the original publication, which left out filmmakers like Debra Granik, Allison Anders, Lynne Sachs, and others. Focusing solely on female directors also caused me to omit noteworthy women producers like Effie Brown and cinematographers like Jessie Maple. This compilation also features exclusively filmmakers working within North America, which omitted numerous European filmmakers who might (and perhaps will in the future) fill their own compilation, such as Monika Treut, Christine Van Assche, Emma Hedditch, and Margarethe von Trotta, to name a few. Nonetheless, the women filmmakers featured here include a diverse range of ethnicities and nationalities, and many of them produced films outside North America—such as Minh-ha, Fox, and Mehta—in addition to maintaining their deep connections to North American cinema. Finally, two filmmakers—Karyn Kusama and Mira Nair—were ultimately omitted because we were unable to reach them (despite calls and emails to agents

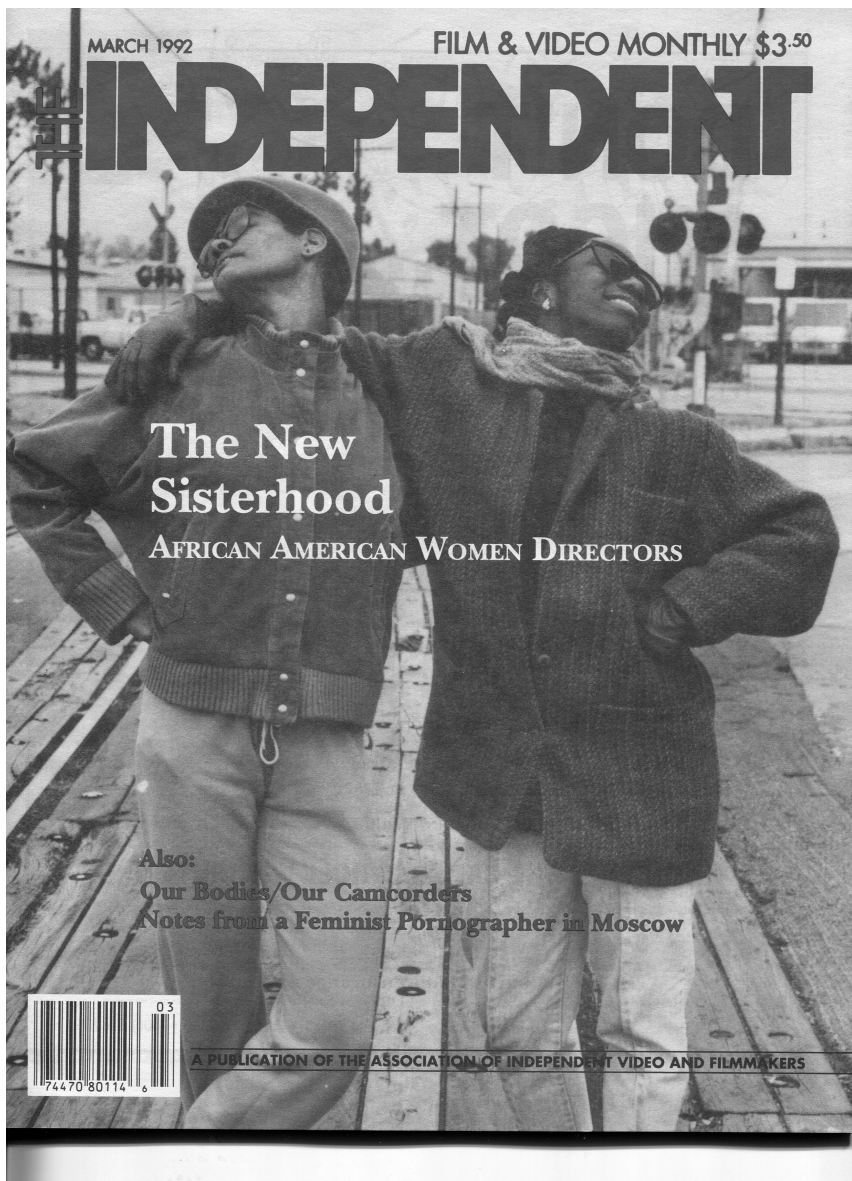


Figure 1.1 Cover stories in *The Independent* at times grouped women filmmakers together.
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and managers) to conduct a current interview. However, I did retain the chapter on Julie Dash despite our inability to reach her as well.¹⁷

Of course, to suggest that the curation of this book was solely objective would be untrue. Rather, my goal was to assemble a group of women filmmakers whose work was not only influential at the time, but also continues to resonate today. The women in this compilation in many ways make unlikely companions—Coolidge’s Hollywood films and leadership of the Director’s Guild of America, Annie Sprinkle’s sex-positive pornography, and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s ethnographic documentaries. However, together they highlight the depth and breadth of independent female filmmakers’ works, while also demonstrating how common themes often emerge through these disparate works. As Filmmaker Miranda July states in her essay in this book, it’s “vitally important that new kinds of people put themselves in charge of what is collected, displayed and remembered.”¹⁸ Here is one such collection.

This book includes 15 filmmaker chapters, presented alphabetically by their last names. Preceding those, Erin Trahan’s chapter “*The Independent Revolution*” provides a context and history of the AIVE, detailing how the organization originally conceived of the publication *The Independent Film & Video Monthly*, which was published in print from 1976 to 2006 and transformed into its online iteration in 2007.

Each of the filmmaker chapters includes a detailed biography, at least one historic interview, manifesto, or profile originally published in *The Independent Film & Video Monthly*, and, in nearly all cases, a current interview not previously published. All of the women filmmakers featured in this compilation can be considered “legendary” in that they broke gender, race, and sexuality barriers; influenced film movements; and presented some of the most innovative, unconventional, and even revolutionary films of their era. Borden made films about intersectionality before the term was coined, and Lisa Cholodenko depicted the fluidity of sexual desire at a time when sexuality was still largely viewed as binary. Filmmaker Annie Sprinkle became the first porn star to receive her Ph.D. and shifted the conversation about pornography, art, and sex positivity. Filmmakers Beckman and Yvonne Rainer broke the boundaries between art forms, integrating art and dance into their films. Minh-ha’s films have impacted feminist and post-colonial theory and transformed the fields of documentary and anthropology. Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) became the first feature-length narrative film written and directed by an African American woman to receive a general theatrical release. Dunye became the first Black lesbian woman to direct a feature film with *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), and Maggenti wrote and directed one of the first same-sex teen comedies. Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* (1996) became the first mainstream Indian film to feature a same-sex relationship. Coolidge not only broke into Hollywood filmmaking, but also served as the first (and thus far only) female President of the Directors Guild of America. July has challenged norms with her own films, while also assembling Joanie 4 Jackie, an archive of women-made videos between 1996 and 2007, now available through the Getty Institute. Barbara Kopple remains the only female director to win two Academy Awards for Best Feature Documentary—one for her film *Harlan County, USA* (1976) and another for *American Dream* (1990). In 2006, New York’s Museum

of Modern Art held a retrospective of Su Friedrich's work, acquiring seven films for their permanent collection. Jennifer Fox recently made it "through the eye of a needle"¹⁹ by, after decades of directing documentaries, shifting to writing and directing the Emmy Award-nominated narrative film *The Tale* (2018) starring Laura Dern. These women have been recognized for their pioneering work and have won awards for their films at the Emmys, Oscars, Sundance, and Cannes. They have directly impacted media history by challenging the status quo and making work that we should continue to watch, appreciate, support, and study. They are not only important *women* filmmakers, they are important filmmakers.

Many of the women in this book express the potential for increased opportunities and equal pay for women in the post-#MeToo era, but they also recognize the urgency to continue to advocate for equality, as Friedrich states, "The neglect and disparagement runs way too deep and does not change in six months."²⁰ But hope, we must, as Mehta says, "it's been a long time coming and I hope it sustains itself."²¹

So do I.

Notes

1. Kate Erbland, "Major Hollywood Studios 'Systematically Discriminated' Against Female Directors, EEOC Finds—Report," *indieWIRE* (February 15, 2017), www.indiewire.com/2017/02/major-hollywood-studios-discriminated-female-directors-eeoc-1201783475/. According to the EEOC, "systematic discrimination" is partially defined as "a pattern or practice, policy, or class case where the alleged discrimination has a broad impact on an industry, profession, company or geographic area." More information is available on their website under "systematic discrimination" at www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/systemic/index.cfm
2. Ardele Lister and Bill Jones. "Ericka Beckman." *The Independent Film & Video Monthly*, Summer 1981.
3. Martha Coolidge. Interviewed by Michele Meek on March 2, 2018.
4. Maria Maggenti. Interviewed by Amy Guth on March 22, 2018.
5. Martha Coolidge. Interviewed by Michele Meek on March 2, 2018.
6. Kwasi Harris. "New Images: An Interview With Julie Dash and Alile Sharon Larkin." *The Independent Film & Video Monthly*, December 1986.
7. The reasons for these are multi-faceted, of course, as Smith's study shows, but the most significant obstacles declared by participants are work/life balance (64 percent) and finance (61 percent). See "Gender & Short Films: Emerging Female Filmmakers and the Barriers Surrounding their Careers" (October 5, 2015), https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/10/MDSCI_LUNAFEST_Report.pdf
8. Dr. Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Dr. Katherine Pieper, "Inclusion in the Director's Chair?" (January 2018), <http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/inclusion-in-the-directors-chair-2007-2017.pdf>
9. Dr. Martha M. Lauzen, "Indie Women: Behind the Scenes Employment of Women in Independent Film, 2017–2018," (2018), https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2017-18_Indie_Women_Report.pdf
10. Dr. Martha M. Lauzen, "The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 100, 250, and 500 Films of 2017," (2018), https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2017_Celluloid_Ceiling_Report.pdf
11. Over 94 percent of 843 women in the entertainment industry recount experiencing sexual harassment and/or assault, according to a study conducted by *USA Today*

- (February 20, 2018), www.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2018/02/20/how-common-sexual-misconduct-hollywood/1083964001/
12. Lizzie Borden. Interviewed by Cynthia Felando on April 23, 2018.
 13. Lili Loofbourow, "The Male Glance," *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Spring 2018), www.vqronline.org/essays-articles/2018/03/male-glance, accessed on June 19, 2018.
 14. Maria Maggenti. Interviewed by Amy Guth on March 22, 2018.
 15. "Conversations With Filmmakers Series," *University of Mississippi Press*, www.upress.state.ms.us/search/series/6, accessed on August 1, 2018.
 16. "Film des Femmes: Women of the World" in December 1984; "Works by Women" in March 1985; "Speculations: Narrative Video by Women" in April 1985; "Unofficial Stories: Documentaries by Latinas and Latin American Women" in May 1989; "Subject to Change: Program of Works by Women of Color Challenges the Status Quo" in July 1990; "No Faking: New Feminist Works on Spectatorship, Pleasure, and the Female Body" in July 1990; "A Mirage in the Desert? African Women Directors at FESPACO" in November 1991; "Calling the Shots: Black Women Directors Take the Helm" in March 1992; "Some Like It Hot: The New Sapphic Cinema" in November 1992; "Buffalo Gals: Women's Videomaking Flourishes in Upstate New York" in October 1993; "Reel Women" in April 1995; "Women, Women Everywhere" in January/February 1998; "The List: Inspiring Films by Women Filmmakers" in March 2003; "The Women Behind the Camera" in March 2003; "Women in Film" in March 2004; "The Girl Team" in March 2004; and "Women on the Verge" in March 2005.
 17. Yvonne Rainer, also included in this book, declined to be interviewed, since she felt her writings and interviews with her from throughout her career provided enough information for the biography.
 18. Miranda July, "Let's Walk Together: Miranda July's Hand in Yours," *The Independent Film & Video Monthly* (July–August 2002).
 19. Jennifer Fox. Interviewed by Michele Meek on August 4, 2017.
 20. Su Friedrich. Interviewed by Erin Trahan on May 13, 2018.
 21. Deepa Mehta. Interviewed by Anna Sarkissian, June 2018.