

**FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY AS CONTENT AND METHOD IN  
JANE BRAKHAGE AND CREATIVE WORK SINCE: MENSES,  
DYKETACTICS, WOMEN'S RITES, AND PSYCHOSYNTHESIS.**

**A COMPOSITE CREATIVE WORK FOR AN M.A. IN FILM**

**BY**

**BARBARA HAMMER  
DECEMBER, 1975**

Feminist phenomenology is explicit both in content and methodology in the five films that make up my composite creative work. The personal is political. A statement from the women's movement. An affirmation that everything a person does, thinks or is has overtones and ramifications that extend beyond her/him to the general condition of humanity. In the five films I have created for my M.A. in film I have worked from the premise that the personal will spread like a wave created by a stone in a pond into the political/universal. I have explored five different possibilities in content and method to make my female sensibility universally relevant. I will discuss the content of each film and explain how the personal is relevant to all women and how the particular method of making the film can be seen also from a feminist context. The films are: Jane Brakhage (1973), Menses (1974), Dyketactics (1974), Women's Rites (1975), and Psychosynthesis (1975).

Consciousness raising, women sharing together life experiences, is the base of the feminist political movement in the United States. Women bond together when they share feelings and events for they find in each other a common level of experience. Although Jane Brakhage would not call herself a feminist two years ago when I made the film, she talks and shares in the manner as if she were and Jane Brakhage the film is an example of one side of a female dialogue. Much of the content as well as the form of the film is available as shared experience and so is like consciousness raising. Jane speaks her personal and intimate thoughts, her philosophy of life and by being honest and specific she strikes an understanding that is universal to a female audience.

I film Jane in her log cabin home in Rawlinsville, Colorado. There, she speaks of motherhood and the damage to her body that ensued due to the rapid

succession of five pregnancies, her relationship to the natural world via her personal experiences with varieties of birds, her dog dictionary, her difficulty of growing up female in conformist America, art and isolation. I film Jane hooking a rug, making yogurt, digging in her greenhouse (which she built on top of her house roof), feeding birds while hanging out the wash. The environment is Jane's. She built the addition to the cabin by design, she was the first to climb the mountain facing her kitchen, she is the strong woman who holds the family together through rituals of storytelling and sharing. Jane's pioneer spirit, at once hard and intractable, is also softened by a care for living things. She is the unity of the strong and the compassionate. She is complete, a woman, and I am another woman shooting her in her home, asking her questions, getting to know. The focus on the woman's environment and the intimate beginnings of friendship are the basis of the female sensibility I tap as method for this film.

In Menses the content is the personal phenomenon of menstruation known to everywoman. The ritualistic acts of exorcism as well as the satiric take-off from the hygienic health films make a humorous film uniting the audience through laughter. The political and universal relevancies of the film come from taking a highly-charged and supposedly secret bodily function propagan-dized as being wonderful and charming and exposing it in a new light as seen by some women: a nuisance, a pain, an anger. Menses is my and my friends personal reaction to the Walt Disney type of so-called educational film shown to prepubescent adolescent girls in the closed-off walls of a hushed and secret auditorium. In those films it was lace and daisies and muted whispers that surrounded the flow. What a farce. To carry a rag between one's legs, to stuff cotton cylinders into a private perfect body opening, to say it was a distinguishing event. The lie. The lie. The lie. The lie of the screen,

the lie of Modess Incorporated propaganda. It was no fun. It was discomfort. It was womanly and we could talk and scream and play and boast. It was no secret. It could be filmed in consumer heartland, Payless Drug; it could be exhibitionistic and free and wild, nude women dripping blood in Tilden Park high over the intellectual playground of the state. It could be collective, each woman planning her own interpretation of rage, chagrin, humor, pathos, bathos, whatever the menses meant to her within the over-all satiric and painted nature of film. And I could shape and form and find the unifier, the pubic triangle and the egg oval and the color red. And each of the women was a part of me and it was not necessary that my particular body and face be screen present for the personal was our personal and the content thus, universally accessible to all women.

The method of Menses: a slumber party, thirteen women, an 18th century book on the "curse", Pliny's statement that the touch of a menstruating woman will turn a mare's milk sour, will curdle blood, will cause flowers to wilt. The oppression of historical mistakes and the release of female imagery making the new herstory. We sat in a circle and related our feelings about our own menstruation, how it was explained to us, what we each felt about our monthly cycle. Each woman then created her particular scenario for the film. This non-hierarchical method of working is particular to feminism. There is no separation between scriptwriter and actor, where the content is evoked in consciousness raising talks. Many women have told me they can identify with the content and method of the film and that they find it pertinent to their lives.

Dyketactics is a film about women loving and is in content feminist and explicit about bonding women. There are women bonding together through eating,

bathing, playing, washing hair, chanting, reading poetry, making love. It is an erotic film as well of sensuality and sexuality shot in a subjective and feminine manner of closeness, of touch to show the tenderness of women loving. In this film as well as Menses the content and method are closely intertwined.

The method was very personal and came about as a result of playing with images for amusement. Dyketactics began as an editing play of cuts from the color workprint of Women's Rites. I couldn't find a way to edit the ritual film; it seemed amorphous; it was shot too long ago (over a year and a half from the completion date). I began to cut short pieces of action and put them together kinaesthetically by images of touch. A woman combing hair, eating an apple, cleaning seeds from a cantaloupe, washing, touching feet to ground in dance, climbing, digging, stroking, bathing. Cut to touch. Cut to quick. See if it works. From 1200 feet of workprint the first two minutes of Dyketactics emerged. It was so fast, the images dense and overlaid, it was becoming a California film, a lesbian commercial. The second part of the film is direct and without superimpositions emphasizing the reality of explicit sensuality of women loving. I directed this to be shot intimately in my own home asking the camerawoman to stroke us and adore us as if she were caressing us with the camera. The movement of stroking then provides the continuity for the images of touch. The result is a sensual film that appeals through the sensate qualities of texture and intimacy to the sensuality of women universally.

I scored the sound track in an A,B,C,D, roll mix of a chime tone series I set up in play too on a Moog synthesizer. The effect of the sound mix is

cumulative like the imagery. Each tone series is slightly offset and then superimposed in mixing maximizing the growing intensity of the film.

Women's Rites, also called Truth is the Daughter of Time, is an autumnal ritual film of women preparing for the regeneration of the earth through the coming winter; it is the last of the harvest, the splendor of the colored trees, the celebration of play and dance in the last rays of a far-sinking sun. The women bath themselves to a chant preparing as the winter ahead prepared by cleaning the ground for the renewal of spring, the new growth, the changing woman. "No tribal rite has yet been recorded which attempts to keep winter from descending; on the contrary: the rites all prepare the community to endure, together with the rest of nature, the season of the terrible cold," writes Joseph Campbell in The Hero With A Thousand Faces (p. 384). So the women prepare and in the sound over the imagery we hear that their's is an unrecorded herstory and like that stream that flows through the festival grounds, the movement of women continues and at some future date (preparation for the community to endure) a herstory will be known for truth is the daughter of time. Each tree, each rite is a personal expression created by the participant, the actor, for the seasonal festival and so becomes universal and political to the "tribal" audience of the women's community. " . . . seasonal festivals open a larger horizon. As the individual is an organ of society, so is the tribe or city --- so is humanity entire --- only a phase of the mighty organism of the cosmos" writes Campbell in the same book (p. 384).

Women's Rites is feminist in method for the process was more important than the product. The imagery grew out of personal women's images shared in a Feminist Phenomenology class. As in Menses, I was more the facilitator than director. The film evolved through an outdoor camping weekend where we went

"on location" to witch's land in Northern California. There I was challenged by third world women. They felt like token representatives in the film and so image-making stopped for long political discussions and an eventual re-thinking of the implied racism. I decided to share the facilitating power with these women. So the process of filmmaking became more important than the actual shooting and follow through to the original plans and although these women walked out in protest the fact that the discussion was held and the power possibly shared contributes to the personal understanding of feminism that each woman is unique and equal and that we all have important contributions to make in the emerging women's culture.

Psychosynthesis is a very personal autobiographical film about the inner mind images of my sub-personalities. By exploring through extended daytime fantasies I was able to get in touch with four characters who are a part of me: the athlete (pink and ruled by the chest or lungs), baby (yellow and ruled by the tabla rosa large head), witch (green and ruled by the groin) and artist (all the light spectrum qualities inherent in emulsion-based film and ruled by the gut). Women watching the film usually recognize these as part of themselves or see other sub-personalities such as mother, sister, counselor, cowgirl. The imagery is "feeling imagery"; that is, it is imagery that conveys at a direct, gut-gripping level the feeling I want to express. I use no image that doesn't grab me in an emotional way and seem to ramify or enlarge upon the mood/tone/feeling I am making. If these images are true to my feelings then I find they are also true to the feelings of women generally. It is only when the images are remote, vague, too general that they lose their gripping power and are devoid of the personal and so have no way to reach universal recognition.

The evocation of the feeling images kinaesthetically derived from the encouragement of a feminist gestalt/psychosynthesis therapist, Dr. Betsy Belote,

and are a part of the feminist method of this film along with simultaneous experiencing, right brain thinking, and the experiencing of dreams in waking life. (For further explanation of these principles see the attached Appendix, "Use of Time in Women's Cinema", a lecture I gave at the San Francisco Art Institute which develops these and other cinematic principles at some length).

In all of these five films I was able to try in a different way and with varied content extending personal meaning to universal understanding. I have shown these films at numerous women's film viewings in the past year where I have been told the images have touched a great many women on a deep level of identification and understanding. That feedback I believe is the measure of the success of these films.

My continuing contribution as an independent feminist filmmaker will be another film which I hope will be both personal and universal: the spiritual quest of the female hero on her journey through life to learn the art of perception, or, how to see becomes how to be, or, how to be becomes being. A woman emerging will reflect my personal desire to move beyond the somewhat self-indulgent and ego-laden narcissism of my autobiographical documentaries to a more transcendent state of humility and compassion. The film will repeat various mythological discovery quest myths and center around the symbols and stories of the moon goddess. This film will develop slowly, will take its own space and time with dignity, and will have the full roundedness of control, pacing and preplanning. The content will incorporate female mythology with my personal experience. The method may be collective.

From all of these films I have learned more self-confidence and control of imagery, ability to carry through to completion a series of films, and a sense of the limitations of the short film. The Moon Goddess will be a long film reflecting the patience and care of the search and the nature of the quest.



PRICES OF RELEASE PRINTS:

<u>Jane Brakhage</u>	\$70.00
<u>Menses</u>	40.07
<u>Dyketactics</u>	37.72
<u>Women's Rites</u>	75.00
<u>Psychosynthesis</u>	75.00