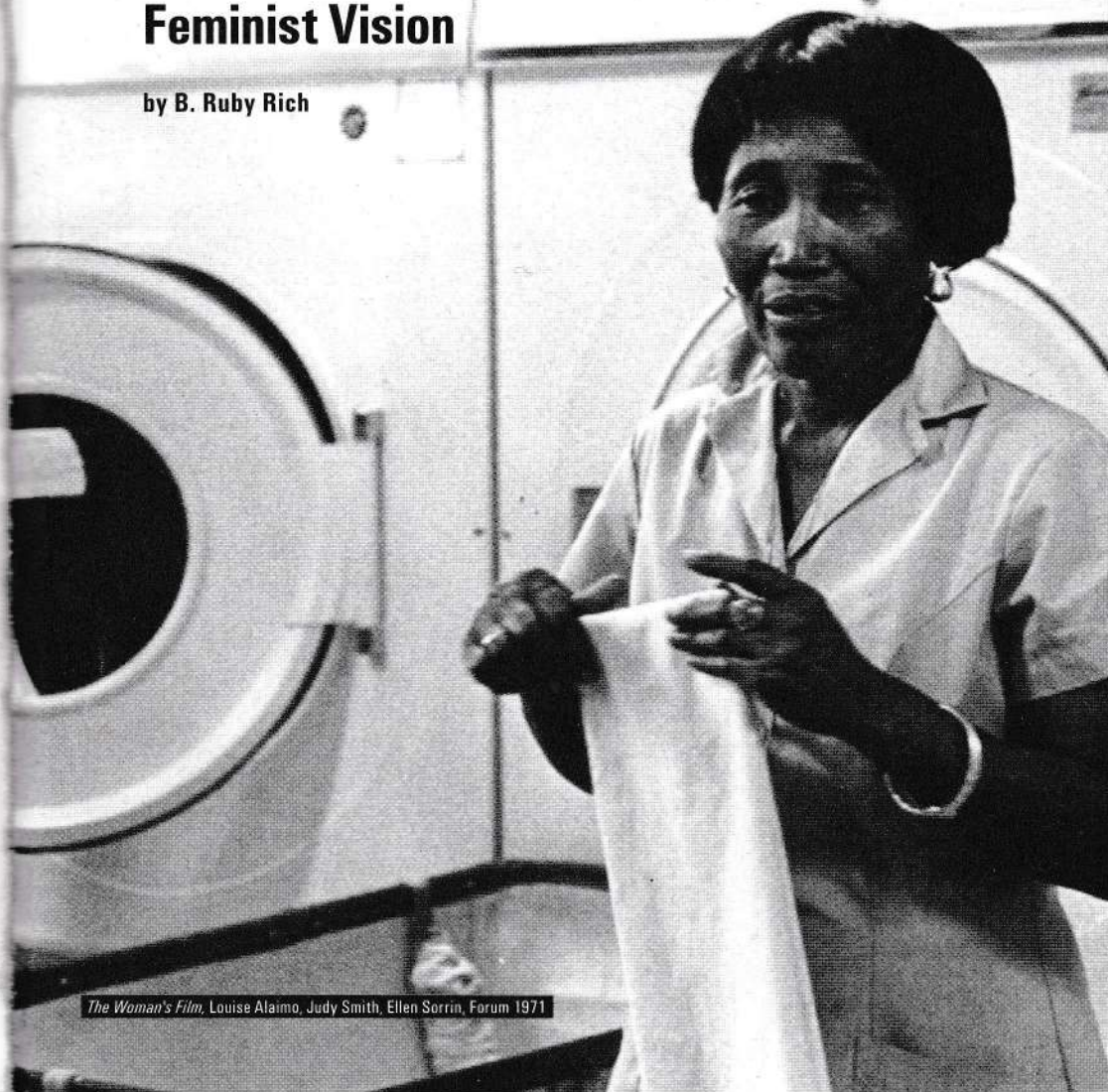


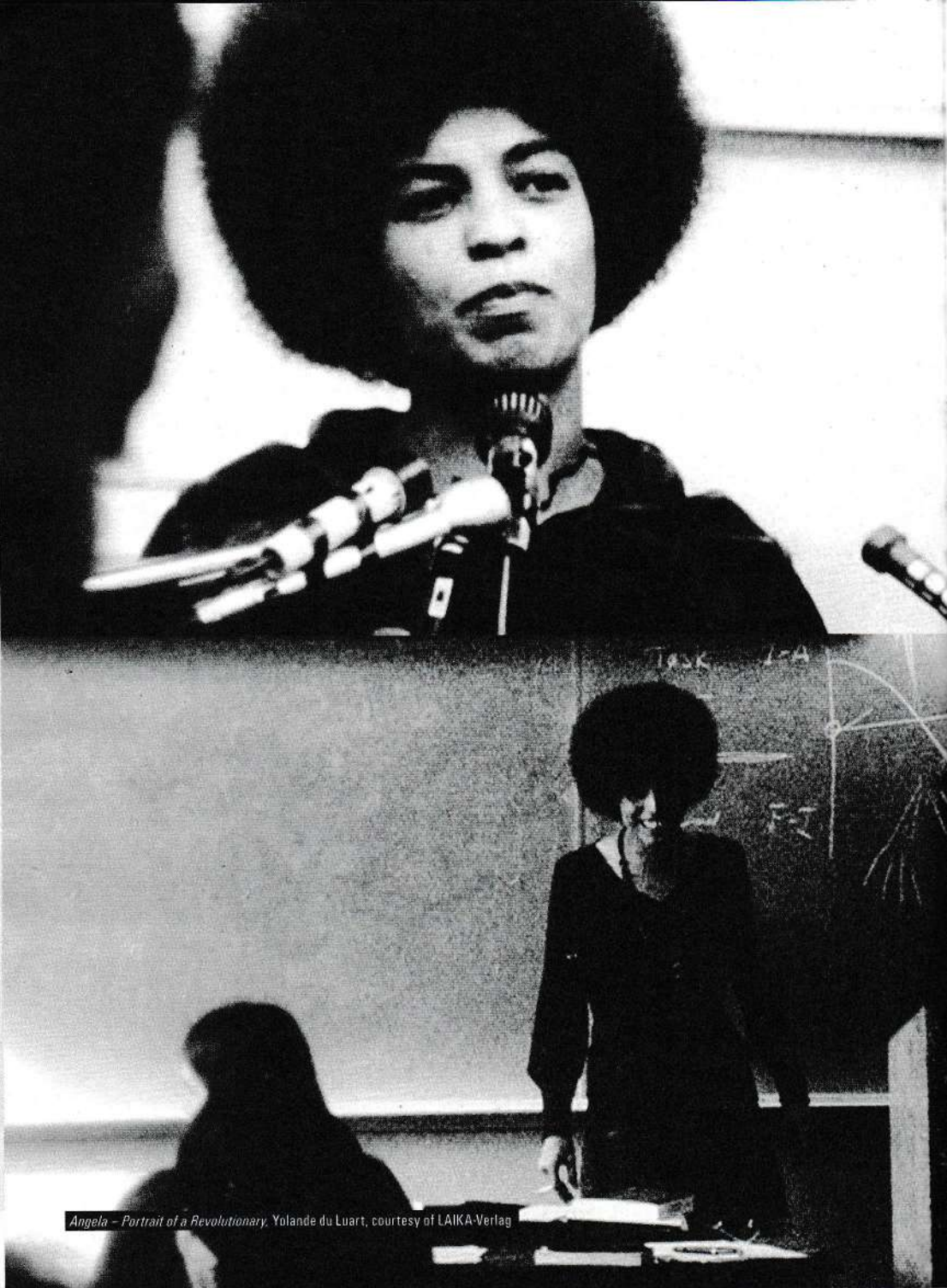
# After Optimism: For The Forum at Fifty

## The Banner of a Feminist Vision

by B. Ruby Rich



*The Woman's Film*, Louise Alaimo, Judy Smith, Ellen Sorrin, Forum 1971



Angela - Portrait of a Revolutionary, Yolande du Luart, courtesy of LAIKA-Verlag

"... it's so great to have women filming us because they're using technical equipment, until I saw it with my own eyes, I thought something men were born with..."

Unnamed speaker in *The Woman's Film*.

The year 1971 was a turning point, an impeccable post-68 timing, it marks the definitive beginning of 1970s film culture, an age of cinematic invention and political activism. How fitting that this moment is the origin of the Forum, the moment when it broke away from post-World-War-2 moorings and the generals' notion of culture and crossed the decades into a new conception of cinema. Its origin moment shared, in the United States, the Pacific Film Archive (the BAMPFA today) began showing films that same year, based on the model of the Cinematheque Française; the seventies were the entry point of an entire generation into serious film viewing, curators and academic study.

In the Federal Republic of Germany, as elsewhere, politics were shifting, both to the left and right. In 1970, the Baader Meinhof Group (Army Faction) had formed and began a campaign of bombings and kidnappings, but also the year in which Ulrike Meinhof's first (and last) film *Bambule* (directed by Eberhard Itzenplitz, written by Meinhof) scheduled television broadcast was canceled, she went underground but the link between radical politics and filmmaking is there, already present, prescient. And the film focused on a detention center, a theme that would be revisited a decade later by Swedish feminist director Zetterling.

In the United States, this was the time of Newsreel collectives making films in support of the much-anticipated "revolution" but also women out of the frame for far too long in agency in these new representations.

1 This was one of many such U.S. documentaries: Geri Anderson, *I Am Somebody* (1970), Geri Anderson and James Klein, *Growing up Female* (1971).



Eine Prämie für Irene (A Bonus for Irene), Helke Sander

mitting their lack of education, they speak with piercing intelligence about their place in society and the odds against them, and about the collective project of making films.

Chanting "Stop the war/On the poor" on the picket line, then shifting to political analysis in consciousness-raising groups, the film mixes pop music, photographs, observational footage, and direct address, all spun into a black and white text full of energy and hope and, yes, dancing in the streets. Its montages of women at work would seemingly inspire the related tracking shots of alienated labor in the landmark film by Lizzie Borden, *Born in Flames* – also shown in the Forum, in 1983 – with its rough-hewn shooting, donated film stock, and collective action, this time mixing documentary into a hybrid of radical narrative and sexual vision.

Not all of the radical U.S. documentaries of that moment were feminist, certainly, nor made

by women. Hardly. It's wonderful to see Mike Grey and Howard Alk's *The Murder of Fred Hampton* restored to a central position in non-fiction history, a reminder that DIY documentary like this was the only way to transmit information in the pre-cable/internet universe of monopoly television. And a reminder, too, that the Newsreel influence was regional and fruitful: Out of this moment arose Chicago's Kartemquin Films, today's powerful center for committed, community-driven, and highly professional documentaries (Kartemquin's cofounder Gordon Quinn remembers hiding then-Panther Bobby Roth, afraid he'd be killed).

In Berlin, Helke Sander carried the banner of a feminist vision, both in filmmaking and criticism. In 1971, the Forum showed her first film, *A Bonus for Irene* (*Eine Prämie für Irene*). What a discovery! With this addition, it begins to feel as if women are talking to each other across

the oceans, finding their voices in a monic convergence of outrage. As she next, better known film, *The All Around Personality – Redupers* (*Die Allseitige Persönlichkeit – Redupers*), Sander deploys hybrid documentary-fiction form to capture women's lives, both in the workplace and home, without erasing an emergent femininity. In fact, through the whole of the film, it's unclear which woman is speaking the clear message: we all are. Irene, a beautiful heroine, celebrated by her coworkers and children, despised by her bosses and rude neighbors. Sander clearly limns the dissettled habits that feminism in that moment was initiating. No wonder she'd go on to edit the feminist film journal *Frauen und Film*.

A perfect match for these 1971 works is the year's Forum film by Constanze Azzori,  *appunti di Anna Azzori / Uno specchio nel tempo* (*The Notes of Anna Azzori that Travels through Time*), which refashions documentary footage into a fierce meditation on past and present and gender relations. The material, the film *Anna* made during the 1970s by Italian director Alberto Grifi and actor Sarchielli, documents a few months in the life of Anna Azzori, a homeless pregnant woman who is rescued/exploited by filmmakers (a quote of a subject so they can be "like Zavena" direct quote).



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the oceans, finding their voices in a global harmonic convergence of outrage. As she will in her next, better known film, *The All Around Reduced Personality – Redupers* (*Die allseitig reduzierte Persönlichkeit – Redupers*), Sander deploys an early hybrid documentary-fiction form here to picture women's lives, both in the workplace and at home, without erasing an emergent feminist subjectivity. In fact, through the whole beginning of the film, it's unclear which woman is Irene, sending the clear message: we all are. Irene is a fabulous heroine, celebrated by her coworkers and children, despised by her bosses and rules-abiding neighbors. Sander clearly limns the disruption of settled habits that feminism in that moment was initiating. No wonder she'd go on to found the feminist film journal *Frauen und Film* in 1974.

A perfect match for these 1971 works is this year's Forum film by Constanze Ruhm, *Gli appunti di Anna Azzori / Uno specchio che viaggia nel tempo* (*The Notes of Anna Azzori / A Mirror that Travels through Time*), which refashions early documentary footage into a fierce meditation on past and present and gender relations. Its source material, the film *Anna* made during 1972–75 by Italian director Alberto Grifi and actor Massimo Sarchielli, documents a few months in the life of Anna Azzori, a homeless pregnant drug addict who is rescued/exploited by filmmakers in need of a subject so they can be “like Zavattini” (yes, direct quote).

Had *Anna* been finished in 1971, it would surely have been critiqued by feminist critics. Instead, Ruhm uses it as archival footage to build their own remake, itself a form of haunting of the present by the past, and vice versa. The new film is a full-color riposte: a dozen women, auditioning for the original role, then positioned as multiples. Strength in numbers? Perhaps. But the effect is rather different: a set of doppelgangers with a single off-screen voice raised from the dead, intoning on the soundtrack like a dirge. Furthermore, the original material is not film at all, not even 16mm: named here as the “Vidigrafo,” it is early, messy video, the breakthrough portapak technology invented in the mid-sixties and destined to vanish into digital. In terms of feminist influence, *Gli appunti di Anna Azzori...* has echoes of Lynn Hershman-Leeson's work, as if her own feminist black-and-white video diaries were smashed together with her later tour de force, *Teknolust*, and its multiples.

The synchrony in *Gli appunti di Anna Azzori...* between image and medium has a powerful effect, especially in its glimpses of early documentary: a giant demo of women chanting “In the family, men are the bourgeoisie, women are the proletariat.” Squadrons of women hold up their fingers in the shape of a triangle to represent vaginas, chants against eviction are raised, Radio Daphne broadcasts, and there's even a quotation from pioneering Italian feminist Carla





Eine Prämie für Irene (A Bonus for Irene), Helke Sander

Lonzi.<sup>2</sup> It's a utopian vision. And a joyous voiceover, the woman's voice recalls she had so much fun as with feminism.

"We are the protagonists of our story"  
— Intertitle, *Gli appunti di Anna Azzor*

One surprising element that emerges in both the revivals and this new retrospective is the remarkable power that black-and-white footage has for the viewer of 2020. Or, rather, it was merely standard. Everything was black and white, both 16mm films and photography. That was the dominant trope and the most accessible technology. It looked primitive then, and easily fit into the requisite for the "Imperfect Cinema" category of the time. In using the medium to the message, the aesthetic was the resources. Yet it was naturalized through a shared suspension of disbelief along with a mensurate belief that, despite its inherent racialism, black and white film presented a "real" representation, the more authentic

Black and white, too, was the dominant aesthetic in Germany itself back then, divided into East and West, meeting cinematically at the Berlin International Film Festival, fed culturally by the steady stream of grants to bring visiting artists to West Berlin with color film stock along for the ride.

Filmmaker/choreographer Yvonne Rainer was one such visitor. She came on a DAAD grant in 1976–77 and made a cameo appearance in skating in Ulrike Ottinger's wonderful cap *Madame X: Eine absolute Herrscherin* (*Absolute Ruler*). Rainer would go on to make *Journeys From Berlin/1971* (invoking the anniversary year in its title, but released in 1972, inspired by Ulrike Meinhof and the radical

2 For more on Lonzi, see: Claire Fontaine, "Lonzi," *e-flux* #47, September 2013. [www.e-flux.com/lonzi-s-legacy/](http://www.e-flux.com/lonzi-s-legacy/)

3 In this same era, in Cuba, a young filmmaker, Ana Mendieta, explored the circumstances of her death in post-production art projects, including a retrospective program at Telluride in 2013.

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One surprising element that emerges from both the revivals and this new retrospective film is the remarkable power that black-and-white footage has for the viewer of 2020. Originally, it was merely standard. Everything was black and white, both 16mm films and photography. That was the dominant trope and the only accessible technology. It looked primitive, back then, and easily fit into the requisite formula of Julio García Espinosa's theoretically powerful "Imperfect Cinema" category of the time, matching the medium to the message, the aesthetic to the resources. Yet it was naturalized through a shared suspension of disbelief along with a commensurate belief that, despite its inherent unnaturalness, black and white film presented the more "real" representation, the more authentic life.

Black and white, too, was the state of Germany itself back then, divided into East and West, meeting cinematically at the Berlinale and fed culturally by the steady stream of DAAD grants to bring visiting artists to West Berlin – with color film stock along for the ride.

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tics of the day, her father's own anarchist past, the psychoanalytic concerns of New York and Berlin intellectuals, and her stay in the city.<sup>3</sup> Rainer cast, among others, Berliner-by-choice Cynthia Beatt in that film.

Beatt would go on to collaborate with Tilda Swinton in later years, including their *Cycling the Frame* (1988) and *Invisible Frame* (2009), a set of films that traced the line of the former Berlin Wall before and long after its demolition. Back at the Berlinale in 1986, Tilda Swinton came for Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*, her first feature film, her first time at the festival (if not yet at the Forum). Friendships burgeoned. Berlin was a crucible of film invention, a place to be inspired; if Oberhausen or Munich were the cradle of the New German Cinema, "West Berlin" was an almost magical locale where cinema could be reinvented. It was a destination for artists, attracting nomads in search of new film languages and subjects. West Berlin's status in 1949–1990 – as the place where the Federal Republic of Germany and German Democratic Republic met and where ideologies, east and west, lapped up against each other – made the Forum the beating heart of its cinematic essence.

2 For more on Lonzi, see: Claire Fontaine, "We Are All Clitoridian Women: Notes on Carla Lonzi's Legacy," September 2013, *e-flux* #47. [www.e-flux.com/journal/47/60057/we-are-all-clitoridian-women-notes-on-carla-lonzi-s-legacy/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/47/60057/we-are-all-clitoridian-women-notes-on-carla-lonzi-s-legacy/)

3 In this same era, in Cuba, a young filmmaker was making her own hybrid documentary/fiction feature: Sara Gomez's *De cierta manera (One Way or Another)* did not show at the Forum, to my knowledge, due to the circumstances of her death in post-production and its delayed release; though I selected it as my choice for a retrospective program at Telluride in 2013.

Feminism was written into the lifeblood of German cinema in those days. Besides Sander's work, there were such important pioneering filmmakers as Margarethe von Trotta who appears at the Forum and Berlinale throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. Her *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* (*The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*) (1975) was a revelation, *Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages* (*The Second Awakening of Christa Klages*) in 1988 became a bible for feminist political action (well, for me at least), and her *Die bleierne Zeit* (*Marianne & Juliane*) in 1981 supplied a much-needed gendering to Red Army Faction history.

Ulrike Ottinger's *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* (*One Way Ticket/Portrait of A Woman Drinker*), released in 1979 but surely conceived a year earlier when Patricia Highsmith journeyed to Berlin to head up the Berlinale jury of 1978 and became famously and drunkenly besotted with Ottinger's star and then-partner, Tabea Blumenschein. The film's chorus of three female functionaries, aptly named Social Question, Accurate Statistics, and Common Sense, offer up a commentary steeped in the language of social control as Ottinger's characters go on to break every rule.

So many women made cinema then, traveling to Berlin and to the Forum to enlighten us, that it's impossible even to list them. There was a blossoming of female filmmaking in Eastern Europe especially, with Márta Mészáros, Lana Gogoberidze, and Agnieszka Holland (who is back this year, too) among others. The great masterpiece, Věra Chytilová's *Sedmikráska* (*Daisies*), made before the Forum even existed, haunts me still. And such energy in France: Agnès Varda, Annie Tresgot (in 1971), Chantal Akerman, and also in 1971, Sarah Maldoror came to the first Forum with her early *Monangambe* and returned the next year with *Sambizanga*, her greatest film. In 1983, Sally Potter brought her ex-

perimental masterpiece, *The Gold Diggers*, with collaborators Rose English and Lindsay Cooper and starring Julie Christie. Women directors flocked to Berlin and to the Forum, and they still do. Here's what I wrote, twenty years ago, about that key moment for women and film:

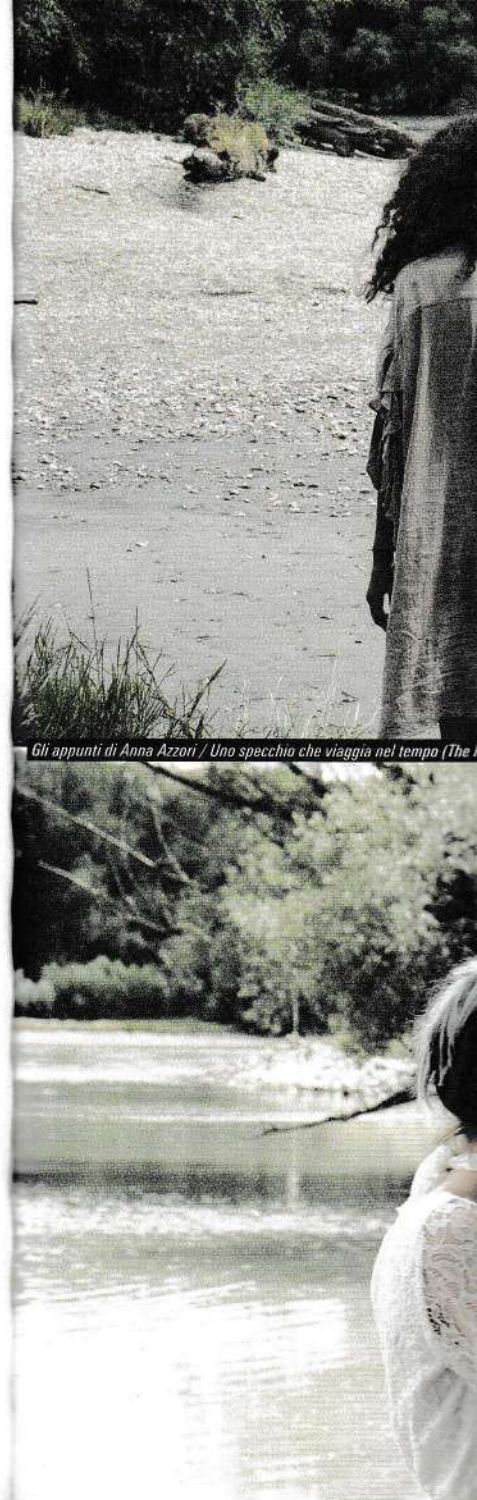
“... at the start of the 1970s [there] entered a feminist cinema. In place of the Fathers' bankruptcy of both form and content, there was a new and different energy: a cinema of immediacy and positive force now opposed the retreat into violence and the revival of a dead past that had become the dominant cinema's mainstays. In place of the Sons' increasing alienation and isolation, there was an entirely new sense of identification – with

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other women – and a corresponding commitment to communicate with this now-identifiable audience, a commitment that replaced, for feminist filmmakers, the elusive public ignored and quietly scorned by the male formalist filmmakers. Thus, from the start, its link to an evolving political movement gave feminist cinema a power and direction entirely unprecedented in independent filmmaking, bringing such traditional issues as theory/practice, aesthetics/meaning, process/representation into focus.”<sup>4</sup>

And today? Does cinema have the power it did back when the Forum was founded at a moment of crisis for the Berlinale, bequeathing it an in-

4 B. Ruby Rich, “Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement” (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 63.



Gli appunti di Anna Azzori / Uno specchio che viaggia nel tempo (The Mirror)



appunti di Anna Azzori / *Uno specchio che viaggia nel tempo* (The Notes of Anna Azzori / *A Mirror that Travels through Time*), Constanze Ruhm © Katharina Müller





delible spirit of courage and invention? Earlier, both Weimar Germany and the Soviet Union had claimed film as a transformational medium; then it was hijacked by the Nazis for their own purposes; later, in reverse, it was reclaimed by Latin American insurgents battling dictatorships.

In Hong Kong, protesters have waved posters of Bruce Lee and his words, "Be like water." In contemporary Brazil, president and would-be dictator Jair Messias Bolsonaro has banned posters of Brazilian films from the walls of the agency that funded them. In the United States, people shrug and the Academy votes for monuments in the mold of past greatness, modeling Hollywood's 1970s more than an aesthetic and subject necessary for the twenty-first century.

Where, then, are the films that the crises of 2020 demand? Is the energy really only in episodic, streaming services filled with true-crime stories and mysteries, with frivolously captivating plots and high production values? What is today's corollary to past radicality? Hmmm, perhaps *Russian Doll*. Where is the #MeToo genre tuned to the indignities, crimes, and secrets of the past, tuned in to exposure and reputation, unafraid of anger, outrage, and retaliation? What will an American version of

*Parasite* look like, its underclass relocated to the tents and street encampments of San Francisco, its fancy house constructed in Malibu or the Hamptons?

And where is the evidence of *The Woman's Film* influence today? Rachel Lears's Netflix documentary *Knock Down the House* boosted the

spirits, for sure, with its inspiring look back at Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and her rise to prominence, but nobody would mistake its follow-the-babe luck for radical filmmaking. Same with the year before, when Betsy West and Julie Cohen's spirit-boosting doc, *RBG*, gave everyone an up-close look at the steeliness that is Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, may she live forever.

Both are bracingly fun – and normative – and documentary – but women are still starved for the imaginative fuel and visions of a future that must quickly, urgently, desperately, be fought for. If the old post-68 idea that form and content had to be equally radical to set off a revolution looks today, well, a bit *recherché*, its kernel of truth persists.

We are again in an era of film/tv/streaming hypnosis, bereft of agency, reduced especially as women to a role as consumers of utterly alienating image and story. It is this which must change: not another study about gender representation, please, but a massive injection of imagination and the money to put it on the screen. Agency, that's what's needed, not agents.

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With Cristina Nord as the head of the Forum and Stefanie Schulte Strathaus leading Forum Expanded, a leadership role continues for the Forum(s) in a world dominated by male festival leadership, where neither faux sexlessness ("I don't look at gender") nor earnest bioquotas (counting women and percentages) can compensate for the lack of a sense of cinema where women have a natural, unforced, and prominent place in its highest levels of innovation, purpose, and influence. Perhaps at the screenings and panel discussions on February 27, 2020, the Forum's audiences, filmmakers, scholars, and artists, all in dialogue, can chart a new path, perhaps even



Gli appunti di Anna Azzori / Uno specchio che viaggia nel tempo  
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one that is optimistic. Maybe it will be the women with iPhones who can create a new world, maybe, but only if they look up from their phones, unafraid, look each other in the eyes, talk back, student debt and gender violence and so on. It's a hard decision, and stage a cinematic revolution. It's not the last one. But we need it. I'm in a hurry.



*Gli appunti di Anna Azzori / Uno specchio che viaggia nel tempo (The Notes of Anna Azzori/A Mirror that Travels through Time), Constanze Ruhm*  
© Katharina Müller

one that is optimistic. Maybe it will be the young women with iPhones who can create a new space, maybe, but only if they look up from their devices, unafraid, look each other in the eyes, throw off student debt and gender violence and screen addiction, and stage a cinematic revolution. It won't look like the last one. But we need it. I hope they hurry.

» **B. Ruby Rich** is a writer, editor for Film Quarterly and Professor of Film and Digital Media at the University of California in Santa Cruz. Her publications include "New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut" (2013) and "Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement" (1998).

More information on the films of our anniversary programme can be found on pages 71 (*Angela – Portrait of a Revolutionary*), 73 (*The Woman's Film and A Bonus for Irene*) and 10 (*The Notes of Anna Azzori / A Mirror that Travels through Time*).